

Writing is not Magic, it's Design



The designer's guide to writing
and supercharging creativity

João Batalheiro Ferreira

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it's Design**

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*“I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking,
what I’m looking at, what I see and
what it means.”*

Joan Didion

*“It’s not the writing part that’s hard.
What’s hard is sitting down to write.”*

Steven Pressfield

Introduction

A writing method for designers

Writing is intimidating, I get it. As designers, we spend our time developing ideas with visuals, not words. For us, writing is an afterthought, a chore we postpone, or a task we run away from and avoid. But what happens when you can't avoid it? When you must write something long and complex like a dissertation? Or when you strive to get a journaling habit going? Then, you struggle and suffer and succumb to procrastination. But you don't have to.

Designers often say they can't write because they're a "visual person". This is nonsense. You were not wired at birth to think in a certain way. The brain is a fantastically malleable organ. You can be a designer *and* be able to write, too. Just think of the written contributions of designers like Paul Rand, Paula Scher, Michael Bierut, Ellen Lupton, Manuel Lima, or Per Mollerup.

Forget about writing as the obscure art of a literary few. Anybody can write because writing is a skill. Like any other skill, you improve by learning the basics and practising. And the first step is changing how you think about writing.

Writing is a communication problem, not a set of conventions to follow. It's not about grammar or punctuation any more than architecture is about bricks. Writing is about ideas. The goal of writing is to **communicate ideas to other people using words**. This is true of a song lyric, a poem, an essay, a newsletter, a love letter, an article, a blog post, a piece

of copy, a dissertation, a novel, or a nonfiction book. Writing is about reaching someone else's mind, and sometimes their heart as well.

This is far less intimidating. Designers communicate ideas to other people all the time: A logo is designed to communicate a brand's identity, an ATM interface communicates the list of possible actions, and the shape of a door handle communicates if you should *push* or *pull*. Your design fails if people can't understand it. Writing also fails if it doesn't communicate clearly.

But here's the good news: if you learn to write with clarity and precision, a host of benefits follow like a cognitive army reinforcing your mental arsenal. To communicate ideas, you must first understand them deeply. Like Bob Dylan said: "I'll know my song well before I start singing." So, to reach other people's minds, we must first dive into our own.

Writing opens a door into the landscape of our thoughts. Finding the right words to express an idea means we must think the idea through. It doesn't matter if you're writing an academic paper, advertising copy, a diary entry, or a newsletter. If you can't explain something using words, you don't really understand it. And articulating an idea with words is part of understanding it. Writing and thinking are so entangled we don't know what comes first: the words or the thoughts.

About the book

Now that I have your attention, here's the deal:

I have been helping designers learn how to write for years, and I assure you anyone can do it. This book won't bag you a Nobel or a Pulitzer prize,* but it's not aiming for that. What it promises is straightforward: a practical writing method tailored for designers. The book offers advice to tackle any writing assignment or personal project. It won't delve into grammar conventions nor offer tips for ad copy, academia, or social media posts. The conventions of specific industries change, but good writing principles endure.

The book presents a four-step writing method created to align with how designers think. These steps guide you through the **mechanics** of writing: how to gather insights, combine ideas, master the building blocks of writing, and produce clear and precise prose that reaches other people. The book equips you with skills that grow into good writing habits, including:

- A complete method to manage the writing process from early ideas to polished prose;
- Techniques to overcome blank-page anxiety (or 'writer's block');
- How to connect ideas to generate new insights;
- Master the building blocks of writing: the *sentence* and the *paragraph*;
- How to edit your writing for clarity and precision.

* *If it does, please let me know about it*

Writing is a process you can learn, not a talent you're born with. It's not magic, it's design. You don't have to take my word for it; here's how Steven Pinker, a renowned cognitive psychologist and language expert, describes writing:

A coherent text is a designed object (...) like other designed objects, it comes about not by accident but by drafting a blueprint, attending to details and maintaining a sense of harmony and balance.

Let me put it another way: writing does not emerge in sudden bursts of literary inspiration; a text is carefully constructed with a purpose. You put it together piece by piece until it works. Learn how to craft a sentence and construct a paragraph, and you have the building blocks of writing at your disposal.

Writing is a craft you can master, like cooking or playing the piano. While the product of writing is impressive, each part of the writing process is remarkably simple. If you know how the parts stack up, the result may look like magic, but the process is anything but.

Read on if you want to develop an extra skill. Writing helps you learn faster, generate insights, and deepen your ideas. A designer who doesn't write has a creative disadvantage, like a race car driver unable to shift into sixth gear. Writing is the mechanism that shifts your thinking into sixth gear. This book shows you how.

Part I

Writing Process

The blank page

Modular writing

The four stages of writing

The blank page

You sit down to write. The sun is up, the coffee is brewed and steaming on your desk, you face the empty page on the screen. The cursor blinks in a stubborn rhythm, you notice it matches your heartbeat. Or is it the other way around? You write a sentence. Then you rewrite it, rearrange the words, change a verb. It's not quite there yet. The coffee is cold, you start again. You write a sentence, it sounds good! You move on to the next sentence but notice a repeated word, so you return to the first sentence and adjust it. It's lunchtime.

Sounds familiar? I see it all the time with my design students. Like most people who don't write for a living, designers fall into the perfect sentence trap: a cycle of writing and rewriting the same thing until they either give up or put it off to tomorrow. And who can blame them? Writing like this is like riding a bicycle while holding the brakes: slow, painful, and you arrive nowhere. No wonder most people put off writing until they are pinned down to the desk by a forceful deadline.

Imagine you're designing a chair. On day one of the project, you start building a final prototype and technical drawings to send out for production. Ridiculous, right? You can't just bypass the design process and begin at the end. When you start a project, you're not concerned with how perfect your design is. Most designers I know start by drawing tiny sketches on their notebooks, sometimes on a napkin. They don't worry about quality because these sketches are not for show.