Inspiring Writing in Art and Design: Taking a Line for a Write

By Pat Francis

Art and design students today face a wide range of writing tasks – from reflective or self-promotional pieces to reviews, essays and dissertations. For art and design students and staff disheartened by negative past experiences, this book encourages new creative approaches towards writing, integrating it into studio practice, and promoting the notion of ‘warm up’ preparations.

Written for both tutors and students, this very practical volume nurtures writing’s creative role in the process of art and design. It uses short exercises and creative writing techniques combined with the energy and liveliness of the workshop situation to help with academic issues in writing assignments.

About the author

Pat Francis is a sessional specialist writing tutor and dyslexia tutor, principally at the University for the Creative Arts. She freelances at the University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion and London College of Communication.
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Pat Francis
Right to write

Think write
Doodle write
Hear write
Talk write
See write
Draw write
Do write
Make write

Write about
Write in
Write through
Write on
Write below
Write round
Write right
Write wrong

Write
Write re-write
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Very many people have unwittingly contributed to this book over a period of years.

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This book is dedicated to R and S.
Résumé of the Book

- The Introduction gives a brief explanation.
- ‘Connecting Inspiration, Theory and Practice’ contains the ethos of the book.

The book is then split into three sections.

Section 1 is about Principles:
- this explains the methods and the ideas behind this book.

Section 2 is full of short and useful exercises I call Practicals:
- this has subsections so, if you are focused on a task, you can go to specific areas
- if not – dip in
- or take a title that intrigues you
- or start at the beginning and see where it takes you
- the early ones are warm ups and fun.

Section 3 is full of Examples

Here there are all sorts and styles of pieces of writing which explain or give further thoughts. They contain a lot of spin-off ideas and reflections, and this is where I have shown my methods of idea-generation and how my thoughts fly off at tangents. It also reveals how different styles of writing work in different ways. And I break lots of rules.

There is a short Conclusion, because every story has an end, but within which there also lies a beginning.

The Bibliography is subdivided so that you can find good books to help with writing, or the books that inspired me with ideas, and the reference books that help expand your knowledge of words and vocabulary.

The Index is the place to go if you want to go straight to specific points.

The Contents Pages help with the detailed listings of all theories, activities and examples.
Inspiring Writing in Art and Design: Taking a Line for a Write is a deliberate play on the words of Paul Klee who encouraged artists to take a line for a walk – getting them to loosen up their drawing and to observe what the line became and where it went.

Writing, too, can be seen as a process of the exploration of thought, through lines.

John Berger emphasizes the question and dialogue that lies at the heart of drawing:

Image-making begins with interrogating appearance and making marks. Every artist discovers that drawing – when it is an urgent activity – is a two-way process. To draw is not only to measure and put down, it is also to receive. (Berger 2005b: 77)

In taking two artists talking about drawing and using them as the first words in a book on writing, I am purposefully laying out my pitch.

The writing process parallels the stages of working in many of the arts. Just as rough sketches and doodles begin an art or design process, and are then backed by research, reflection and constant adjustment, so too the writing process. Practice involves a rehearsal of the parts of the whole; focusing, re-focusing, exploring points of view, talking writing, hearing writing and writing by doing. Writing may be a dialogue between writer and their thoughts through the medium of words written by the hand.

In the educational programmes for the visual arts there are a vast number of writing requirements, but students often feel that they enrolled to do their subject: to design, to draw, to make, but not to write. And then they find that they have to undertake a wide range of writing assignments. It could be said that visual students have a wider variety of writing tasks than those studying other subjects: they are required to be visual and verbal, whereas many other subjects just ask for the verbal. There is not much in terms of published practical help, and little that takes this visual preference into account.

The premise behind this book is that while there are many books on how to write academically in all subjects, and a few on how to write academically for art and design, they all take a similar approach: you have to be relatively confident in writing already, and also feel that academic writing is really the only sort of writing that counts.
This book offers a different focus. It uses ideas from **creative writing practice** which incorporate fun, exploration, experimentation, development, reflection, memory, experience, visual metaphors, and many other strategies.

Creative writing techniques lie nearer to the creative practices of the studio and therefore may be familiar and more approachable, and they also have profound implications for the academic writing styles often required in theory studies. The writing skills may build more incrementally towards the finished pieces, or may add depth and context and questioning, as Berger mentioned, to the process itself.

So this is a practical book. It does not dwell too long on theories behind why something is, or how something works; there are other books that do that.

This book presents a range of ideas to reflect on and to develop. It is based on activities that have worked with many different people on differing occasions and for vastly varying purposes. I was encouraged to compile it by a number of people: either those who had read all the theories and found no practical solutions, or those who found some of my methods helpful to them in unblocking their own, or others’, writing.

Much of the developmental work behind the practices put forward in this book came from working with individual dyslexic students. Many students responded, developed and contributed to the ideas shown to them. In workshops, the ideas have been presented to a wider audience of those who fear writing, as well as those looking for new approaches in their work.

It is hoped that this book will prove of use to students – working by themselves; to support tutors as a fund of ideas to help in their work with a range of students who struggle with writing; and to academic tutors – both theory and studio, who will find a number of strategies that they can use or adapt to their own subject and practice.

There are key principles behind the ideas presented: primarily, that writing needs to be **practised**, but that practice is both fun and creative, and also has a function in itself. In addition, the ideas that evolve throughout the practice can help **develop the skills** to meet the demands of the writing tasks. Underpinning these are that some writing tasks need to be **broken down** in order to clarify the focus, then the writing can be **built up** in a number of ways.

Research is a very loaded term in education today, but in this book it is used in the simple sense of the explorations, readings, interviews and reflections on material that writers need to do to inform their writing. It can vary in complexity, depth and originality at different stages of a course.
The book is split into three sections. Firstly, there are a number of short pieces, some formal, but many informal in form and content, and all about ideas and inspirations behind writing. The second section consists of ‘exercises’ – practical ideas for developing specific areas of writing. The third section shows some examples of writing that are presented with annotations to give further ideas, reflections on processes, and notes relating the principles to practice.

The layout of the book is varied according to what is being presented and to underline the overall themes that there are no rules, just possibilities.

This approach leads to an eclectic variety of styles of writing and this is deliberate in order to underpin the subject matter, and to show how different voices relate the author to the reader. The book is not an end in itself; it is intended as a point from which readers and writers can develop their own styles, ideas and preferences.
this book tells a story that is
playful
provocative
not definitive
suggestive
corrosive
melancholic
delightful
irrational
logical
decisive
whispering
elusive
illusory
contradictory
active
gestural
emotional
wistful

Fig. 1: Multi-faceted.
This section aims to connect the various threads of influence which inform the writing of this book. I have tried to justify my approach by supporting it with principles of learning, the embedding of skills, and creativity; but I do not want to dwell for too long on this – the important part is the getting on with it.

In underpinning the relationship of writing to reading, I have spent some time referring to the key writers who have inspired the writing approaches I advocate and who offer insights into the processes of writing.

**Writing and Learning**

Riding and Rayner (1998: 9) have created a simple visualization of a matrix for the determining of learning preferences. One dimension extends from the Verbalizer to the Imager, and the intersecting dimension, from Wholist to Analytic. How we prefer to process, organize, absorb and represent information determines where we see ourselves located on these. Many visual artists may gravitate to the wholistic / imager sector and many writers might locate themselves firmly in the analytic / verbal quadrant.

This way of representing the process of taking in information, and the method of organizing it, could also be used to explain the approaches to writing taken in this book. Many manuals of writing aimed at education concentrate on the form of the essay or dissertation. However, what this book concentrates on is the richer and broader range of writing activities that can surround the essay/dissertation. It also reflects on the folio of writing that could support the portfolio of work undertaken on the course as a whole, and which is more realistic for the range of writing that has to be produced in life. In addition to looking at a wide range of writing styles, this book aims to use creative strategies to underpin most of the practical exercises.

Sketching and doodling in writing, not just in visual work, and finding visual metaphors for ideas, which is proposed throughout this book, is related to the visual end of Riding and Rayner’s scale, whereas work on essays and dissertations is usually seen as purely in the realm of the verbal. The verbal end of the scale is often the frightening part for many reluctant/fearful writers and therefore, by approaching tasks from the preferred way of absorbing material, it is hoped that strategies will be strengthened and all areas of work will benefit.