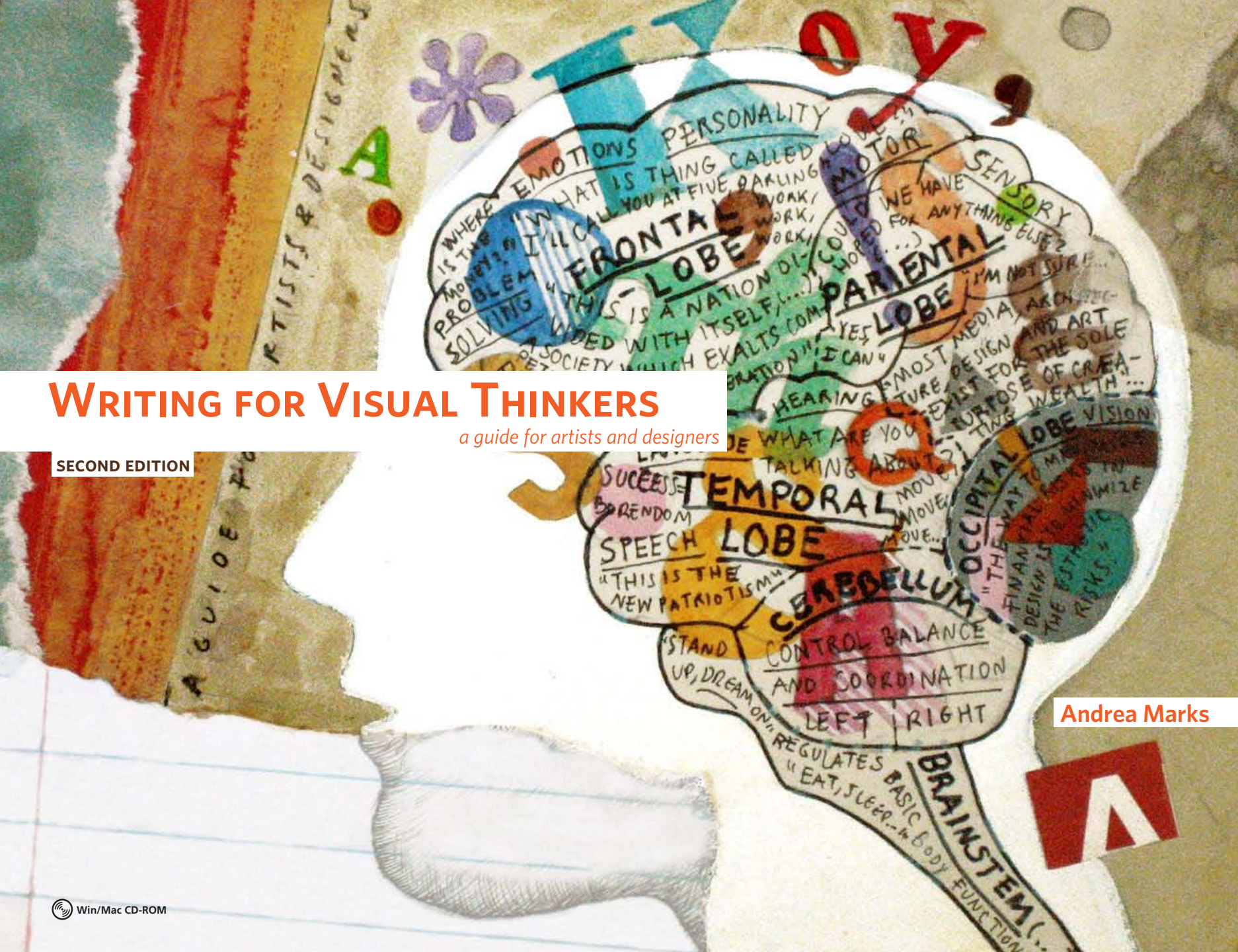


# WRITING FOR VISUAL THINKERS

*a guide for artists and designers*

SECOND EDITION

Andrea Marks



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*a guide for artists and designers*



VOICES THAT MATTER™

## WRITING FOR VISUAL THINKERS

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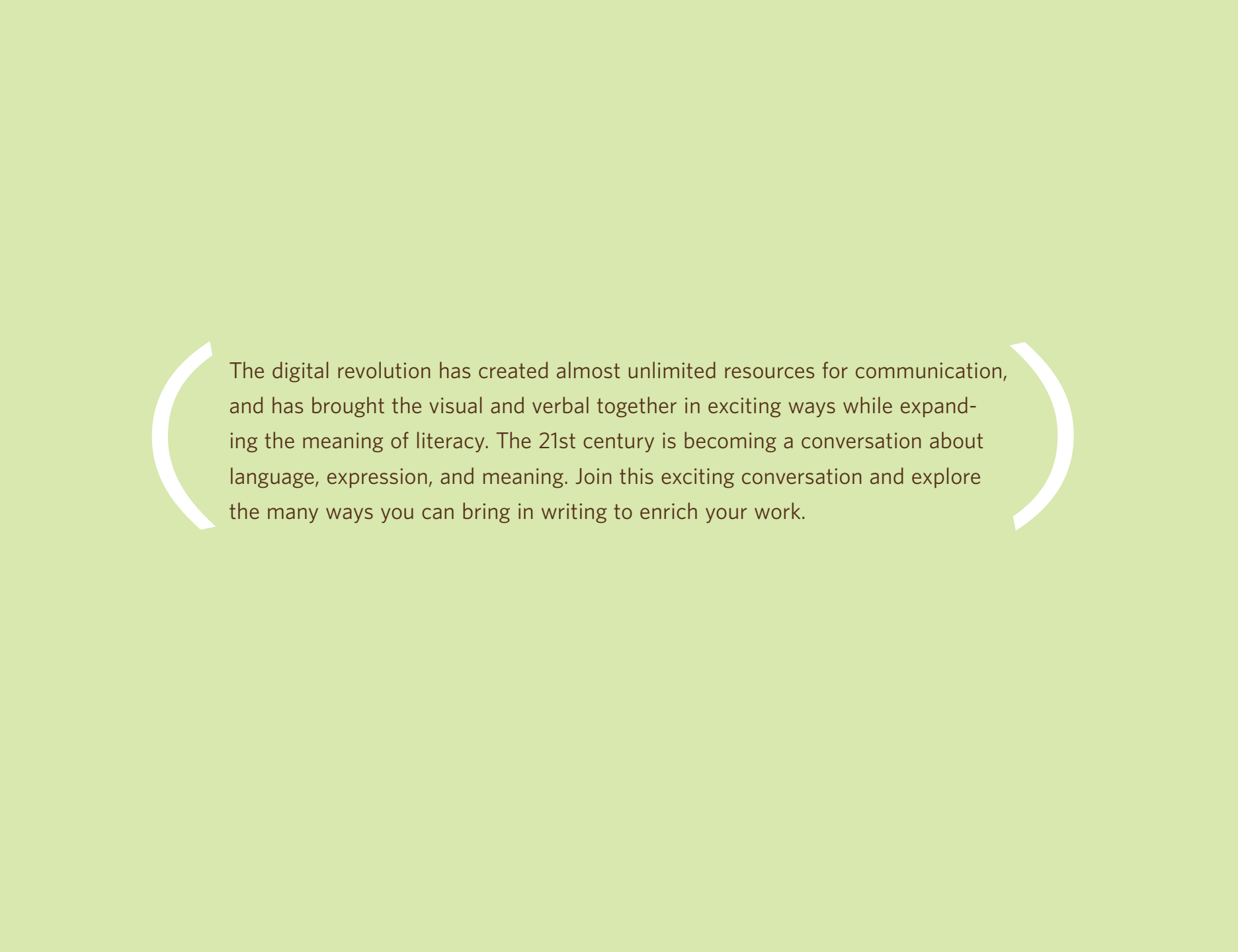
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To my students who have inspired me with their never-ending passion for design and writing: I thank you for your willingness to experiment with all kinds of writing in the classroom.



The digital revolution has created almost unlimited resources for communication, and has brought the visual and verbal together in exciting ways while expanding the meaning of literacy. The 21st century is becoming a conversation about language, expression, and meaning. Join this exciting conversation and explore the many ways you can bring in writing to enrich your work.



FOREWORD | RICHARD GREFÉ  
AIGA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The tradition of writing in the field of design—whether serving as criticism, personal expression or persuasion—is long and storied. The design profession would surely be diminished without those defining voices—Rand, Glaser, Lupton, Bierut, Heller, to name but a few—that continually remind us and the rest of the world why the work of designers is so important. The need for designers to be able to communicate not only visually but also verbally has only grown over the years, to the extent that no professional designer today can afford not to develop the necessary skills.

With *Writing for Visual Thinkers*, a new voice in design has emerged. Writer, designer and educator Andrea Marks skillfully imparts her knowledge about the unique ways in which designers see the world and shows us how we can translate our visual ideas into words that are just as compelling and thoughtful. AIGA, the professional association for design, eagerly supports this ambitious educational tool for designers and visual artists, with the hope that it will benefit readers in their career pursuits and personal growth, and create ever more unique and inspiring voices.

I can't think of a single well-known designer who doesn't write well. Try this exercise yourself: name five designers you admire. My list includes Paula Scher, Marian Bantjes, Stefan Sagmeister, Abbott Miller, and Maira Kalman. All these designers know how to use words, infusing their visual work with verbal energy and ideas as well as communicating about what they do to a variety of audiences. They all have published books or essays about their own work as well as about bigger issues in the world of design. They all know how to speak in public about what they do. They all use writing to conduct their daily business as well as to do something bigger: build the discourse of graphic design. They have taken part in an ongoing conversation about design that stretches back into history and pushes ahead toward the future. That conversation is constructed with words as well as with visual evidence.

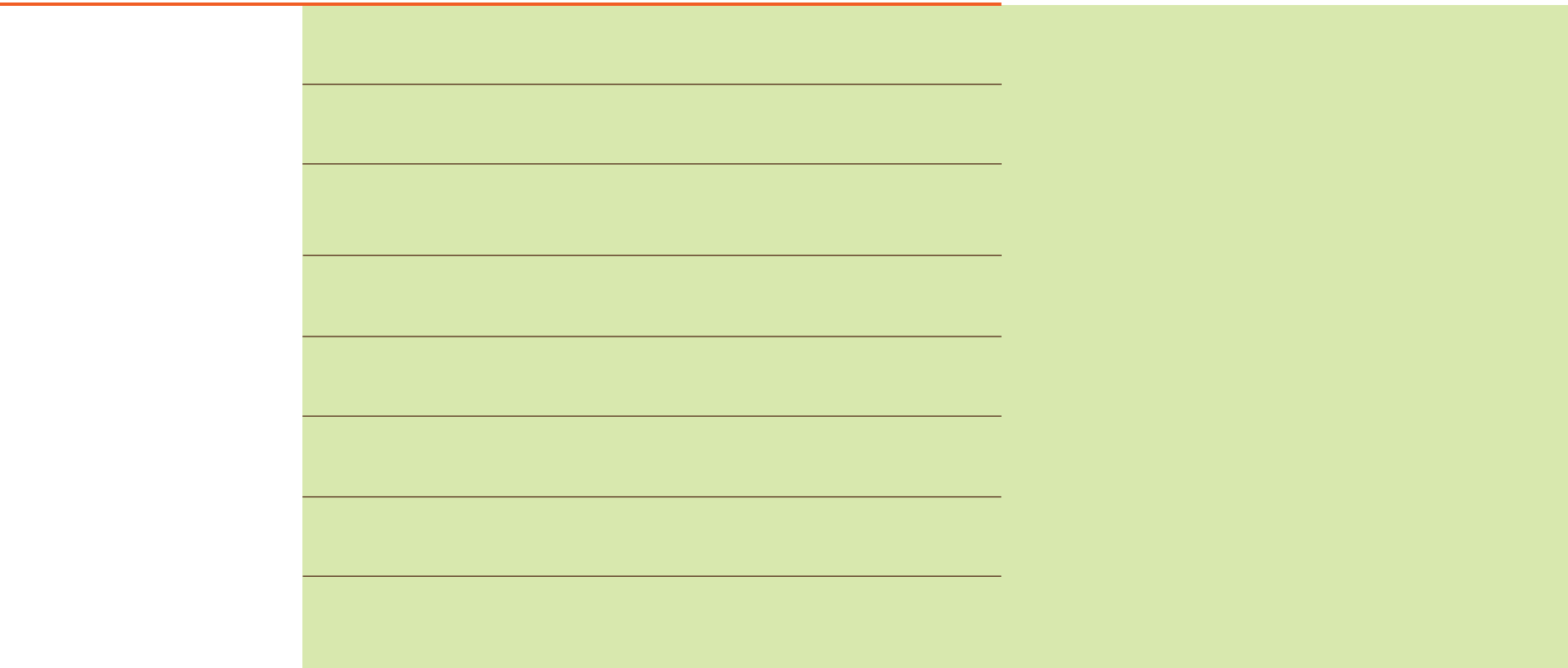
The same thought experiment would hold true for many other disciplines as well. Prominent surgeons, lawyers, architects, or filmmakers are likely to be strong writers, equipped to use words to discover ideas, hone their personal intelligence, and share their work with others. Writing can help anyone win friends and influence people. You can use words to get a job, apply for a grant, teach a class, win a competitive bid, or make a presentation. While you're at it, jump in and help build the discourse: publish a blog, review a font, or advocate for change.

Beyond its universal utility to any professional or creative undertaking, writing lies at the very heart of graphic design. Indeed, words are the designer's single most ubiquitous raw material. Nearly every graphic design task includes text somewhere in its development. Books, magazines, websites, branding, signage: designing these media requires shaping and understanding verbal content. Even a purportedly non-verbal icon system requires consideration of semantics and vocabulary.

Despite writing's huge importance to what we do, some designers approach the task with anxiety. Many of us associate writing with the drudgery of high school civics or college art history. What student hasn't padded out a research paper with big type and extra words in order to quickly get through an assignment? This mindset sees "the teacher" as one's ultimate audience. And how lame is that? Teachers are paid to read whatever drivel a student sends their way. In real life, readers must be wined and wooed before trudging willingly through any text.

I often hear students say, "I'm just not a writer." Alas, hiding from writing is no wise strategy in today's world. Frankly, if you can't write, you're not truly literate, because literacy requires the ability to generate text as well as to consume it. For those who remain afraid of this fundamental skill, *Writing for Visual Thinkers* will come as a warm and open-hearted invitation. This book is not a didactic, rule-mongering guide to grammar but rather an upbeat exploration of fun, engaging techniques for using words to unleash the powers of the mind. The book starts out with exercises for getting ideas; many of these involve working in relaxed group settings. This easy-going book carries the reader forward to more structured tasks, from revising an essay to publishing a zine. As author Andrea Marks explains, learning to write well will help you become a better visual thinker. Likewise, visual thinkers can blossom into fine writers, drawing on their sense of color, texture, and structural conciseness to craft sentences and paragraphs that use vivid, compact language to tell a story.





*Writing for Visual Thinkers* presents ideas and methods that can help visual thinkers become better writers. It covers topics such as 21st century literacy, the workings of the brain and its connection to creativity, and how to use writing in more pragmatic ways, including a list of resources pertinent to writing, art, and design. The book is not intended to cover traditional writing and grammar conventions, as many excellent books exist. (The latest edition of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, beautifully illustrated by [Maira Kalman](#), is a wonderful resource.) Instead, the goal of this book is to explore the potential of written communication as a way to better understand the process of visual communication.

*"The art of writing is the art of discovering what you believe."*

Gustave Flaubert

## CONTENTS

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1 The Writer's Toolbox 1

---

2 Thinking in Words and Pictures 39

---

3 Verbal and Visual Connections 59

---

4 Narrative Structures;  
Verbal and Visual Working Together 71

---

5 Writing and Editing in the 21st Century 83

---

6 Writing in Practice 99

---

Resources 124

Bibliography 125

---

See last page of this eBook for instructions  
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NARRATIVE STRUCTURES:  
VERBAL AND VISUAL WORKING TOGETHER



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How does the word “**narrative**” relate to both written and visual work? Narrative structures are embedded in a story to help give the story a framework. Narrative moves a person through a story in a pleasurable and compelling fashion. A narrative can be heard, as in a radio play; it can be watched, as in a film; it can be read, as in a novel; it can be danced to, as in a song; and even seen/read, as in a graphic novel. Narrative structures vary depending on the medium and the purpose. A traditional linear narrative structure typically depends on a page-to-page reading for comprehension. A nonlinear narrative allows for the reader to move independently throughout a piece, often creating new meanings from discovering connections. But they all share one important and all so human job: to tell us a story.

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# STORYTELLING

**Storytelling** is a core human experience. Stories help us see how others view the world and help us find meaning in our lives. They help us grieve, help us celebrate, console us, and reinvent us. They are used in school to teach, in business to improve work habits, and in entertainment to escape. Stories are the difference between pain and pleasure in any communication activity.

Storytelling began as an oral tradition, combining speech with gestures, expressions, and sometimes music to help storytellers remember the narrative. With the development of writing, stories could be not only documented and preserved, but further enriched with illustrations. Finding intersections in your visual and verbal work can strengthen both. Think of your next visual project as a story to be told.

**Jakob Trollbäck**, president and creative director of **Trollbäck + Company**, talks about his storytelling approach to visual problem solving in his article [“One Designer Shares: How to Use Design to Tell a Story.”](#) Trollbäck combines writing narratives and sketching in his process, whether creating a new company brand or an animation. He views “design as a language and as a way to communicate,” and begins many projects by picking up a pen and writing a script.

The script can help organize thoughts and reveal “the essence of your approach.” He asks questions such as “what’s the idea and philosophy of the approach?” The script helps determine the premise of the story, or as Trollbäck refers to it, the “plot” of the story. Next, he looks at adding the necessary elements to help give the story its richness. He calls this “setting the scene.” His list of places to find inspiration for these elements includes poems, movies, architecture, music, dance, anything that moves him. Trollbäck will often create a project for one medium, say, film, and then re-create the same story in another medium like print. This allows him to see how the message or story holds up.<sup>1</sup>

Approaching a visual project from a storytelling perspective can bring a unique richness to the final message. The following examples show how narrative structures appear in various media.

## Slide shows

When we think of slide software, we usually think about the countless slide presentations we have sat through with too much bulleted text, too many incomprehensible graphs, combined with clip art in a color that is difficult to read. In the hands of one who understands visual narrative, a [PowerPoint](#) (or [Keynote](#)) presentation can turbocharge a message. A picture is worth a thousand words. Some caveats apply, though...

According to [Edward Tufte](#), ([video](#)) slideware such as PowerPoint has forced a profusion of bad content upon unknowing and innocent audiences. In the article titled "[PowerPoint is Evil](#)," he states, "Rather than learning to write a report using sentences, children are being taught how to formulate client pitches and infomercials. Elementary school PowerPoint exercises (as seen in teacher guides and in student work posted on the Internet) typically consist of 10 to 20 words and a piece of clip art on each slide in a presentation of three to six slides—a total of perhaps 80 words (15 seconds of silent reading) for a week of work."<sup>2</sup> Tufte, author of the award-winning books *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, *Envisioning Information*, *Visual Explanations*, and his latest book, *Beautiful Evidence*, is a master at revealing how complex information (text and images) can in fact be both beautiful and meaningful. His argument is that software such as PowerPoint, when used without an understanding of narrative structures, image use, and typography, encourages presenters to create short, bulleted info bites, often at the cost of the content itself.

Fortunately, artists and designers are in a position to create both beautiful and meaningful electronic narrative presentations. As visual thinkers, their understanding of both the formal and theoretical framework of narrative structure puts them in a unique position to create powerful slide shows that make sense. Understanding text/image relationships (what is stated and how it looks) is key to helping an audience see the power in a visual narrative.

The musician and artist [David Byrne](#) ([video](#)) has been using [PowerPoint](#) as an art medium for several years. Byrne defends the software as "more than just a business tool—as a medium for art and theater."<sup>3</sup> His book *E.E.I. (Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information)* is a collection of images and essays packaged with a DVD of five of his visual/audio PowerPoint presentations. Byrne took advantage of what the software had to offer (automatic slide shows, simple transitions, symbols) and combined these with his own photographs and music. As Byrne notes, "Although I began by making fun of the medium, I soon realized I could actually create things that were beautiful. I could bend the program to my own whim and use it as an artistic agent."<sup>4</sup>

Think of a slide show like any multiple-page document. The slide show "Death by PowerPoint" does a great job of illustrating the dos and don'ts of slide presentations. There should be a clear introduction to the topic, supporting points, and a summary ending. Take advantage of what the medium has to offer (a simple but effective narrative structure, ease of combining words and images) and build a compelling story. Never forget that there is a person talking; remember the slide show is a complement to the script and shouldn't be the script.

Explore [slideshare.net's slidecasts](#) area for more examples of ways in which visual narratives are combined with audio podcasts. As well, a rich visual presentation such as [Al Gore's](#) documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* can help visual thinkers see relationships between the visual and the verbal. No matter what you think of his politics, the combination of verbal and visual in Gore's talk was compelling enough to both raise awareness of global warming and win the man a Nobel prize.



# IMAGE / TEXT NOVELS

A typical novel is usually printed in black and white, with little to no imagery: think of paperbacks that smell like newsprint and contain pages of justified text. Yet more and more examples can be seen of novels, both fiction and nonfiction, that push the boundaries of text and images in unconventional ways.

The book *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* is a unique novel that offers a visually rich, hybrid narrative. Author **Steve Tomasula** and illustrator **Stephen Farrell** use an exquisite array of visual concepts to illustrate the unique storyline. Another novel that does this in a more subtle way is the book *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Throughout the novel, the author intersperses devices such as black-and-white photographs, video stills, typographic experiments, graphic elements, and even blank pages to emphasize the poignant narrative of a child's reality following 9/11.

Graphic designer, book artist, and performer **Warren Lehrer** is internationally known for his many books that incorporate text and imagery. These include *Versations*, *I Mean You Know*, *French Fries*, *Nicky D. from L.I.C.*, *Crossing the BLVD: Strangers*, *Neighbors*, *Aliens in a New America*, and his latest book *The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley: a life in books*. Lehrer has been influential in crossing boundaries among words, design, art, and performance in both fictional and documentary narratives. His lectures are a combination of visual presentation and theater performance. As Lehrer says, "I'm interested in re-evaluating the rote way we tend to use language, the more pedestrian way we go about writing... I compose text and stories and when it is put into book form, I use typography as the vehicle to see that text realized so it becomes a composition."<sup>5</sup>



Crossing the BLVD, 2003



French Fries, 1984

## Hypertext fiction

Non-traditional ways of reading, such as hypertext fiction, allow the reader to move through the narrative structure however they choose. Click on one link and you might end up rescuing people, but click on another link, you might fight in a battle. In essence, readers choose their own path in the narrative. An example of this in book form is the “Choose Your Own Adventure” series, in which the reader chooses a particular page and creates a new narrative.

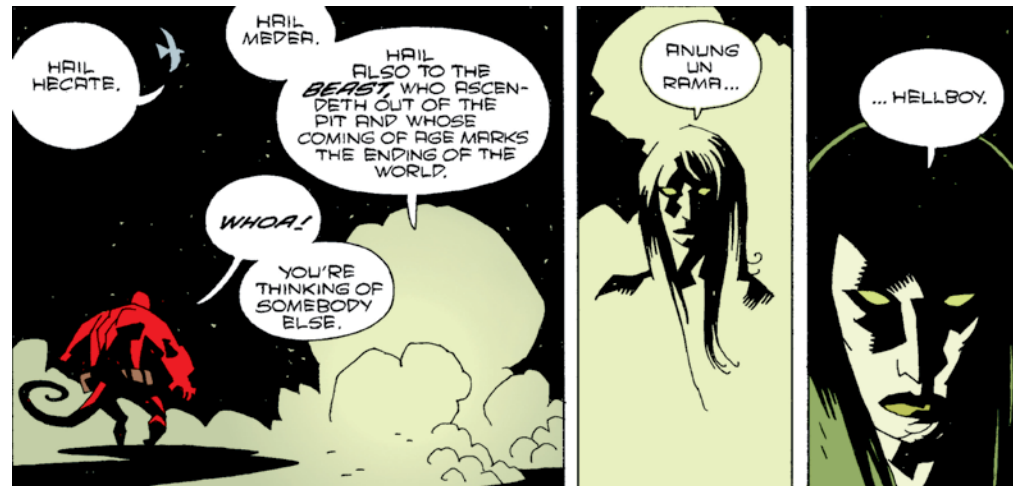
Storyspace and HyperCard, two early hypertext programs, paved the way for more complex interactive environments. The use of hypermedia today extends far beyond these early programs, into stories, games, the Internet, art, and design. The hypertext fiction book *Grammatron*, by the artist and writer Mark Amerika, became a landmark cyber-novel and was one of the first pieces of Internet art to be accepted into the 2000 Whitney Biennial.<sup>6</sup>

*Image from graphic novel  
Wake the Devil, of the Hell-  
boy series by Mike Mignola.*

## Graphic novels / Comics

The term “graphic novel” typically refers to a comic-book-style story with an extended narrative, bound into a book form. This visual art form evolved from traditional comics, and over the past 10-15 years has become somewhat of a cult genre.

The graphic novel is a powerful visual storytelling medium, with its use of iconic visual language, hand-written type, and diverse sequencing of narratives. Graphic novels can help visual thinkers interpret and explore subject matter from historic to fantastical in new ways with few restrictions. They utilize literary devices such as symbolism, simile, allegory, and metaphor just as traditional books do, but their unique nature asks the reader to dig a little deeper into interpreting the story.



In 1969, the author [John Updike](#) (who was interested in becoming a cartoonist as a child) was giving a lecture addressing various new ways a novel might be presented. He stated: “I see no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic strip novel masterpiece”.<sup>7</sup>

While Updike’s lone genius theory has been realized in such masterpieces like [Art Spiegelman’s \*Maus\*](#), more often graphic novels are group efforts, just as plays and films are. For example, the noir take on [Batman](#), [The Long Halloween](#), sports an almost film-length credit list: it’s written by [Jeph Loeb](#), drawn by [Tim Sale](#), has colors by [Gregory Wright](#), letters by [Richard Starkings](#) and [Comicroft](#), and thanks the creator of [Batman](#), [Bob Kane](#).

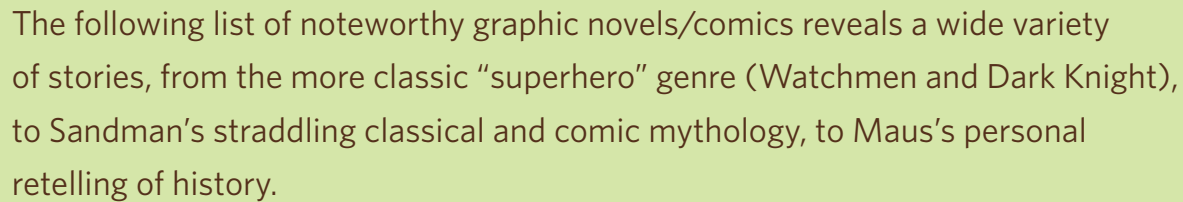
While many are quick to write off comics as foolish escapism, a new breed of comics has emerged that tells powerful personal narratives. In [Art Spiegelman’s \*Maus\*](#), we see a child of Holocaust survivors come to understand both his parents’ eccentricities and their nightmarish past, told visually with Jews portrayed as mice and Germans as cats.

This visualization doesn’t soften the all-too-familiar stories of gas chambers and mass burial, but rather the use of familiar childhood symbols increases the dread and horror.

The simple drawings of [Marjane Satrapi’s \*Persepolis\*](#) ([video](#)) allows us to place ourselves in the story of a rock-and-roll girl growing up in Iran during the Islamic revolution. Their abstract nature somehow allows us to relate to something alien to Western culture.

Even superheroes have grown up in modern graphic novels; [Alan Moore’s \*Watchmen\*](#) ([video](#)) looks at psychosis as a source of “dressing up to fight crime” and represents it visually in Rorschach’s ink-blot mask.

One of the best ways to learn about comics is to read the bestselling book [Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art](#) by [Scott McCloud](#). In this over 200 page black- and-white comic book, McCloud cleverly illustrates and analyzes the history of narrative structures and how words and pictures work together to communicate ideas.



The following list of noteworthy graphic novels/comics reveals a wide variety of stories, from the more classic “superhero” genre (Watchmen and Dark Knight), to Sandman’s straddling classical and comic mythology, to Maus’s personal retelling of history.

***Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*** by Art Spiegelman (1992 Pulitzer Prize Winner)

***Watchmen*** by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

***The Dark Knight Returns*** by Frank Miller

***Bone: One Volume Edition*** by Jeff Smith

***The Sandman*** by Neil Gaiman

***Palestine, Safe Area Goražde, The Fixer*** by Joe Sacco

***Persepolis*** by Marjane Satrapi

***American Born Chinese*** by Gene Luen Yang

***Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*** by Chris Ware (video)

***Fun Home; a family tragicomic*** by Alison Bechdel

***Understanding Comics*** by Scott McCloud

***Zap Comix, Keep On Truckin’*** by R Crumb

***American Splendor*** by Harvey Pekar

***Hellboy*** by Mike Mignola

*With so many exciting examples in our image/text-rich culture, now is a great time to explore narrative structures and how the visual and verbal work together. The interesting visual-verbal connections in presentations, illustrated novels, interactive stories, and highly visual graphic novels add richness to the ways we communicate. Working with a visual project as a narrative strengthens both your verbal and your visual thinking. So, think about your next project as a story and explore the many ways it can be told.*

---

**Internet narrative**

The Internet is a perfect tool to explore a narrative structure. Each time you click on a website or a link, you have created a path or thread. Create a short written narrative based on the last 10 links or sites you visited on the Internet. How could you write a story based on the order of your exploration?

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**Look at a picture**

Find an image with people in it and think about what they see when they are looking outside the frame of the picture. This forces you to write from a different point of view.

---

**Making marks**

Find an existing artifact that contains writing (for example, an old phone book or a brown grocery bag) and make marks (visual, words) over the existing text to create a new visual piece.

---

**Open the mystery drawer**

Everyone has a drawer (usually in the kitchen) filled with random objects such as keys, pennies, old batteries, birthday candles, matchbooks, and tape. Determine the order the objects seem to have been added to the drawer and base a narrative on that.

---

**Find five quotes**

Find five quotes that inspire you about art or design. Next, write a one-page story and insert these quotes within the story, as part of the narrative. This can be a personal narrative, fiction, or a combination. Place quote marks around the quotes, but it is not necessary to include who said the quote within the story. (The citation can be placed at the very end of your story.)



