AMBIGRAMS REVEALED

A Graphic Designer’s Guide To Creating Typographic Art Using Optical Illusions, Symmetry, and Visual Perception

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction
- v

## A Word from the Judges
- Nikita Prokhorov .................................................. 2
- John Langdon ......................................................... 11
- Scott Kim ............................................................ 23
- Maggie Macnab ....................................................... 35
- Cheryl Savala .......................................................... 43

## Case Studies
- 1 / John Langdon – Syzygy ......................................... 54
- 2 / Cleber Faria – History ............................................ 57
- 3 / Daniel Dostal – Wishmaster .................................. 60
- 4 / Elwin Gill – San Diego ........................................... 64
- 5 / Mark Palmer – Shark Attack .................................. 68
- 6 / Nicholas Gilbert – Dirty/Clean ................................. 72
- 7 / Carl “COSM” Mehling – Tempt ................................ 76
- 8 / Seb Lester – Heaven In Blazing Sunshine ................. 80
- 9 / Martijn Slegers – Mystery Gift ................................. 84
- 10 / NAGFA – King Fisher ........................................... 88
- 11 / Clayton Mabey – John Langdon/Scott Kim ............... 92
- 12 / Jen Winklepleck – Unseen .................................... 96
- 13 / Bastian Pinnenberg – Snapstar ............................... 100
- 14 / Eugene Uymatiao – Turn of Phrase ......................... 104
- 15 / Kai Hammond – Alphabet ..................................... 108

## Ambigram Showcase
- 113

## Top Ten Tips for Creating Ambigrams
- 155

## Resources
- 157

## Credits
- 159
INTRODUCTION

Great discoveries usually happen by accident, and my ambigram discovery was no exception. I was sitting in a bookstore with a randomly selected book, *Angels & Demons*, by Dan Brown when I stumbled upon my very first ambigram (*Figure I.1*). The rest of the book ceased to exist as the next hour was spent with pencil and paper in hand in an attempt to figure out just how this typographic design worked. Although that attempt was not successful, giving up was not in my nature: I spent weeks researching and sketching before I created my first ambigram (*Figure I.2*). As raw as it was aesthetically, it was an ambigram: fairly legible, readable, and when rotated 180 degrees, it read the same. I was ecstatic, knowing that I had found a new artistic addiction that would not end with just one ambigram.

EXPLORING THE AMBIGRAM WORLD

The discovery of John Langdon and Scott Kim’s work opened up a completely new world for me. My ambigram research led me to learn about fellow ambigram artists, such as NAGFA, Douglas Hofstadter, Bastian Pinnenberg, and many others. I decided to start an ambigram blog called Ambiblog to bring all the artists and knowledge together under one virtual roof. Shortly thereafter, Mark Hunter (the owner of ambigram.com) contacted me and asked if I wanted to write and design for ambigram.com. We began running monthly contests, conducting interviews, and posting ambigram-relevant content, trying to connect designers from every corner of the world. Ambigram.com became the largest and most popular online portal for ambigrammists, and I realized how international, diverse, and talented that community was.

WHAT’S IN AMBIGRAMS REVEALED?

Being connected to ambigram artists worldwide, it was only natural to consider the opportunity to showcase international talent that had never been published! Although artists like John Langdon, Scott Kim, and Douglas Hofstadter had published their individual work, a book featuring ambigrams from all over the world did not exist. The idea for *Ambigrams Revealed*
was born—a book featuring several hundred unique ambigrams from around the world (Figure I.3), case studies that explored the process of ambigram design, and a panel of judges (experts in the ambigram and design fields) who would share their thoughts on ambigrams, as well as comment on the entries received. A “Call to Enter” was posted on ambigram.com, as well as on Facebook and other social media websites. Over 500 entries were submitted! The judges were asked to select ambigrams for different sections of the book: a case study section, which would feature process write-ups and sketches from the artists, and a showcase section, which would showcase several hundred unique entries. Along with the writing from several of the judges, this book would truly be one of a kind.

**WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

This book is intended for everyone. If you are an ambigrammist, you’ll discover amazing new work and be able to connect with fellow artists (via their email or website). If you are a graphic designer, you’ll love the typography and illustration. If you have never heard of ambigrams, you’ll be amazed at the talent and creativity revealed in this art form. Regardless of which category you are part of, you’ll find yourself flipping through the pages of this book for inspiration over and over again.

The writings and ambigrams that you’ll see on the subsequent pages are a culmination of several years of writing, research, and design. This book is an international showcase of talent and a testament to the ambigram as an art form that pulls you in and does not let you go. You will get a glimpse inside the minds of different ambigrammists and learn how they think and work. Above all, after reading this book, you’ll know what it takes to design an ambigram, and undoubtedly, will start sketching long before you get to the last page.

That being said, the time has come to turn the page and discover ambigrams for yourself. Enjoy the journey and the experience!
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TOP TEN TIPS FOR CREATING AMBIGRAMS
Creating ambigrams is such a flexible art form that it’s difficult to narrow down exact steps. And the more you read about ambigrammists and their styles, the more you’ll realize that each ambigram is unique and that the design process is very personal for each designer. You too will need to develop, define, and refine your own process. However, the following ten tips from the pros will help you get started.

1. **Choices, choices.** The success of your ambigram begins with word choice and letter-form analysis. Keep in mind that not every word can become a good ambigram.

2. **Research.** Before you start creating ambigrams, learn about graphic design, typography, and color. Go to libraries and old bookstores to search for visual inspiration. Visit museums and art galleries. Use various online resources, some of which you will find on the next page. And, of course, research ambigrams to see what has and hasn’t been done.

3. **Simplicity is key.** At first, learn how to make a legible and readable ambigram from simple words. Then apply various typographic styles to it so you can learn how they affect the legibility of your ambigram. As your skills improve, progress to more complex words.

4. **Sketch, sketch, and sketch some more.** If you want to create a truly unique ambigram, paper and pencil should be your starting point. Experimenting with different letter combinations and ratios on paper is the only way to account for all possibilities.

5. **Function first, style second.** The style of the ambigram manifests itself throughout the development process and should never be set in stone beforehand. When you base your ambigram on an existing style from the beginning (be it a certain typography style or even an existing typeface), you trap yourself in a corner if the chosen word requires extensive letter manipulation.

6. **Consistency.** Use a consistent lettering style, letter spacing, and letter heights to achieve readability. Strive to find letter shapes that are clear and unambiguous. If a particular letter shape just isn’t working, consider using an alternate form of the letter.

7. **Don’t be predictable.** If your ambigram contains predictable letter combinations, take the time to explore other solutions. Context is important, so explore various letter combinations with respect to their location within the word. Even if a certain combination may not work within one word, it may work in a future ambigram. Some letter flips are unavoidable, whereas others offer a lot of flexibility.

8. **Colors, textures, and flourishes—oh my!** Only after your design works in black and white should you consider adding color, outlines, shading, and other graphic embellishments.

9. **Take your time.** Spend a lot of time on research and sketching. Don’t be in a hurry to jump on the computer to digitize your work because that is probably the last 5 percent of the process. The initial 95 percent of the ambigram design process is research, sketching, and exploration.

10. **What does that ambigram say?** You already know what your ambigram says, so you are not the best judge of its legibility. Show your ambigram to other people to see if they can read it.
RESOURCES
This resources list contains information relevant to ambigrams, typography, lettering, and graphic design. At the time of the development and publication of this book, all the resource URLs were functional.

**RESEARCH**

- **www.ambigramsrevealed.com.** This is the companion website for *Ambigrams Revealed*. You will be able to find submission samples and ambigram-related quotes from the participants.

- **www.ambigram.com.** Ambigram.com is the biggest online community for ambigram-mists and ambigram admirers. Here you can find interviews with artists, ambigram challenges, and other ambigram information.

- **tdc.org.** The Type Directors Club is an international organization that focuses on print and digital typography.

- **www.howdesign.com.** HOW magazine is one of the premiere graphic design magazines in the world.

- **www.cmykmag.com.** CMYK is a design magazine that showcases diverse design work ranging from students to professional designers and design firms.

- **www.typophile.com.** Typophile is a free forum that promotes discussions on anything and everything typography related.

- **ilovetypography.com.** I Love Typography is the brain child of John Boardley who is a British-born designer living in Vietnam. In his own words, “This site aims to make the subject more accessible and to bring the study of typography to the masses.”

- **www.lettercult.com.** LetterCult showcases amazing custom-lettering work from designers around the world.

- **typedia.com.** Typedia is an online community dedicated to the classification of typefaces, as well as educating people about typography.

- **www.dailytype.ru.** Daily Type is curated by several Russian type designers. They focus on the creation of original typefaces, as well as the process behind it.

- **www.typographyserved.com.** Typography Served features top work in categories such as typeface design, lettering, illustrated typography, or any piece with a strong typographic treatment. It is a Behance served website: Behance is the leading online platform to showcase and discover creative work.

- **www.typographica.org.** Typographica is a website that reviews typefaces and type books.

**SOFTWARE**

- **Inkscape.org.** Inkscape is a free, downloadable, vector drawing program available for Mac and Windows. It has similar capabilities to Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw, and Freehand.

- **Lynda.com.** This website contains video-based software tutorials for various software programs, including Illustrator, Photoshop, and CorelDraw.