

# Getting art and design students to write by stealth (Paper)

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Abstract

**‘Multiplication is vexation, / Division is as bad; / The Rule of Three doth puzzle me, / And Practice drives me mad.’** (Traditional nursery rhyme)

Getting art and design students to write by stealth.

How can we stop some student reflective essay writing becoming a laborious, descriptive, chronological route-march through events, without critical insight or applicable awareness?

In my experience, many UK university art and design students tend to agonise about the writing of traditional, reflective essays at the expense of productive analysis of the studio practice which should be the driver of the writing in the first place. My research indicates that this may be because they have residual respect for essays even if they dislike writing them. The tail is wagging the dog.

This paper discusses an essay project in which my graphic design undergraduates were asked to produce a manifesto to summarise their emerging studio practice. The manifesto could only have three words and one image, and had to fit an equilateral triangle template. Students had to think about dividing their practice into three - and, if this were not possible or desirable, could the words (even the relative size of the words, perhaps) minimise readers’ reductive assumptions? How could three words do justice to their practice? They had to consider consistency and tone of voice - much more prominent given the focus on the words; they had to consider which word should come first; should a word come first? If so, how might that be shown? Should the words stand alone, or be read in sequence...in one direction only, or might content be enhanced (or diluted) via multiple readings? Should the image explain the words, or draw them together, or act as a fourth word, or as some sort of determinative, perhaps a determinative which could have a different agency with different words? How might image orientation affect meaning? Could the image reduce the significance of the three words, perhaps introducing some welcome ambiguity or double meaning? Most of these considerations were either new to students or had unfamiliar emphasis.

There were many gratifyingly thoughtful and imaginative manifestos produced, and interesting vocabulary and word / image combinations. The best students analysed their studio practice well at the outset and understood it better at the end. The essay had clearly worked - most likely because the students didn’t realise they’d written one.

Keywords: Form, focus, diffusion, applicability

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are bound to be exceptions, but I’m sure that legions of art and design university tutors sometimes despair at their students’ essays. When they are bad, they – the essays – tend to be

descriptive, superficially and unnecessarily plotting the characteristics of a piece of work instead of telling us *why* it might look like it does, *why* it might be successful (or not), *why* it might be worth analysing in the first place, and *why* any analysis might help the students' practice.

But it is tempting to think that art and design students often feel they are doing essays because they have to, and not because they think essays are useful – a different spin on “essential”: according to the Open University, essays are “very important” because they “deepen” learning, enabling refinement of thought and assessment of progress [1]. So, essays have a function, yet in a recent straw-poll of nearly 60 final year graphic design undergraduates which I conducted in 2014 at a major UK art and design university, only one student claimed to be looking forward to the dissertation (and I'm not entirely sure that there wasn't any bravado in his claim). However, art and design students often have ambivalent – and thus complex – views about writing. In a recent tick box questionnaire survey I conducted with 32 final year graphic design undergraduates at Coventry University's School of Art and Design, UK, 34% confessed to hating writing, but 37% to loving it; 41% felt that their design portfolio gave them self-respect, and only 28% that writing did this; yet only 44% felt that writing would help their job prospects, against 88% who felt that writing was another way of communicating and thus part of graphic design. These results are neither consistent nor conclusive.

If the picture is confused and not as black-and-white as we might frequently think it is, perhaps it's just the idea of essays which is the problem. Even the word “essay” can be unpopular with my students, although more palliative alternatives such as reflective report or extended analysis are sometimes treated with a mix of disdain and suspicion and the dissertation, with its connotations of length and depth, with some horror. But if the main point of writing essays is missed, then whatever respect students might have for writing them is actually wasted, and the tail is wagging the dog because the essays' functions are smothered by their reputation: are students too scared to engage with them? We either need to find an alternative or to be prepared to invest more in getting the gems out of the process. In my own research, I have also found that radical new forms of writing can be a stimulating experience for students, but that the benefits can become quarantined within the experience because of its very difference. Perhaps a less immediately satisfying writing assignment will create gaps, frustrations and ambiguities which can be productively articulated through careful and insistent mining.

The title of this paper refers to the difficulty children have with maths – for which, in this context, read “essays” – the sometime mystical, spiritual and beguiling properties of the number “three”, which I hope might be readily transferable to the domain of words, and, in a play on words, the difficulty students have in pinning down just what their practice is, and its strengths and weaknesses.

## **METHOD**

The three-word manifesto (“essay”) was the fifth and final project of five one-week projects in the first module undertaken by new entrant Graphic Design undergraduates in Coventry University’s School of Art and Design, UK. Immediately before the launch of this fifth project, the students had formative critiques of the fourth and previous project (logo designs), in which they were asked to evaluate each other’s logo project in around 25 written words, finally summarising their view of each of three logos in just one word.

These critiques were followed by a lecture on a range of manifestos including NASA, Karl Lagerfeld, *Adbusters*, Dada and both the 1964 and 2001 *First Things First* manifestos. The aim of the lecture was to see the extent to which declared intent was matched by the final design / manifestation, because the frequent and significant mismatch between these two is a regular phenomenon of both student and professional graphic design, and can be addressed by critical reflection on the work. In the three-word manifesto project, launched later that same day, students had to consider the work that they had done in the previous four projects in the module, and to consolidate their learning to make a manifesto which combined text and image to summarise their style critically. They had to provide a rationale for their manifestos, which formed the basis for subsequent tutorials.

Students were given a template for their work. This was an equilateral triangle, with three dummy words in place (they simply had to replace these with their own, retaining font and style) and a space in the middle for an image, which they had to include. Students were given prompts on the brief in the form of questions, not because they might not have thought of these possibilities but because they might have thought them out of bounds. The questions were:

1. How might you divide you and your creative practice up into three?
2. What tone of voice do you want (modest, exclusive, mysterious, dramatic, e.g.)?
3. Do you want verbs, adjectives, adverbs, nouns...some kind of mixture?
4. Do you want your words to stand alone, or to combine, or both?
5. Does the image explain the words, or act as a fourth word; or does it draw the words together?
6. Have you thought of other meanings the words might have...double-meanings, jargon, e.g.?
7. Which is the first word...how would we know...does it matter...does the image tell us?

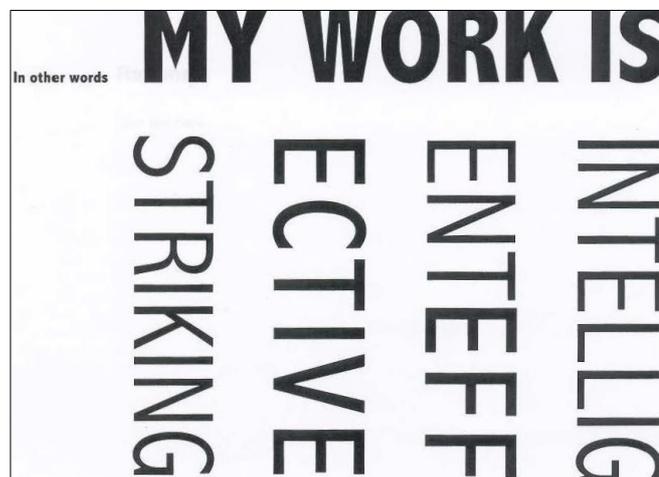
I wanted these questions to engage the students and to make them curious enough to think through the implications and possibilities of each. Accordingly, I varied the format of the questions so that they did not become repetitive, making sure that on the actual brief they only occupied a maximum of one line each. I felt that this was important because, as in the short story, some contemporary micro- and flash-fiction and social media writing, it provided a focus on visual form. This focus might resonate with art and design students: for example, Tonfoni sees her visual writing as “akin to creating a drawing or painting and designing a structure” [2]. It is a key way in which the short story engages readers – for Bayley, short story writers are “conscious of form” [3] – and form can also inspire, amplifying and extending meaning which might otherwise be diminished by the short story’s shortness: for example, Leith sees six-word sagas such as Hemingway’s bulging “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” as nurturing “incredible inventiveness” [4]. Clearly, in a three-word essay, meaning also needs to be

amplified and extended, whether by choice of words (this would involve size and shape of the words as well as their content), combination of words (this would involve register of the words as well as their size, shape and content), use of image, layout or any combination of the above. It is not fanciful to see the three-word essay in the same light as six-word sagas, tweets or contemporary micro- and flash-fiction such as Hershman's 2012 *I am a Camera*, which is only 158 words in two almost equal paragraphs.

There were just three learning outcomes in the module:

1. Undertake applicable research and demonstrate an awareness of factors affecting handling and success of visual communication;
2. Use self-evaluation / reflective practice strategies to monitor feedback and progress on design assignments and identify fruitful links between emerging practice and thinking;
3. Express ideas and solve problems in non-verbal ways using elements of visual language (in terms of their provenance, application and usefulness, together with their associated metaphors) within a variety of drawn, new media, print and lens-based images.

The language and content of these outcomes is consistent with much university documentation because the outcomes need to be comprehensive and watertight. However, in keeping with the ethos of the brief and the questions, I decided to summarise the outcomes at the foot of the brief in a way which could also be seen as an example of a manifesto as alluded to in the lecture and required in this project; that is: taking something elusive and complex and finding one word for it.



**Figure 1**

Part of manifesto brief showing Learning Outcomes reduced to one word each

This appeared on the brief right after the outcomes (above) were set out in full. In keeping with the questions' and the short story's foci on form, outlined above, I made the one-word outcomes into a block, with a small, introductory lead-in line which was aimed at transferring the impersonal phrasing of the outcomes into something which might resonate with the students.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

As well as answering the learning outcomes, which also served as assessment criteria for the manifesto and the other four projects in the module, the students' manifestos had to relate to their future plans as designers and how they saw themselves developing. This was important because the manifestos proved to be good diagnostic tools and were intended to lead into one-to-one Academic Pastoral Tutorials (APTs) between tutor and student, at which all the work was discussed and assessed. If it is accepted that to be able to analyse one's own practice and that of others is good practice, and that an inadequate analysis which is couched in the right form is both bad and deceptive (because its shortcomings might be dressed convincingly well), then an analysis (like the three-word manifesto) which falls short because its inadequacies are clear – too few words, the wrong words, difficulty with image integration, possible misreading, struggles with shape and template – is effective. It is effective if its frustrating gaps – which are like Huckin's collaborative, almost rhetorical silences [5] – can be broken in the identification and explanation process (the function of the rationale and APTs).

Another critical factor was the timing of the manifestos, because they occurred in the fifth week of the module and also of the first term. This week had become identified as a week in which many students in the past had withdrawn, and the reflective, diagnostic aspect of the manifestos was put to work to reverse this trend. The manifestos thus addressed both academic and pastoral issues.

A small selection of the manifestos is shown below, with the main points emerging from the rationales and APTs discussed.

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**Figure 2**

This student said that graphic design impacts on people all the time, “even when they don't know it”, a fairly standard insight into the psychology of persuasion, but a clever – even waspish – one when it could be argued that a tutor assessing the work was unaware of the work's capability until some later date or eventuality. The student believed that imagination was a form of visualising, which at least offers a definite working definition of a difficult and endlessly contested term. The student also felt that modern graphic design is precise and sharp, but this could be in both formal and functional terms: formal = clean lines, functional = unambiguous message, even if achieved with messy design. There is

a diffusion of meaning here, and overlap, with a hint of the flipped classroom were the student to play it that way in the APT.

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**Figure 3**

This student explained each of the words in sequence, clockwise from top-left “Open-Minded”, which is at least logical, familiar and predictable enough to licence speculation as to whether a better sequence might not be possible. The student has not prescribed an unusual sequence, and has thus not risked driving meaning into a cul-de-sac – the short story’s interpretive potential is still honoured. The student believes that risk-taking relates to being open-minded, because the student declared a willingness to be *led* outside any comfort zone but did not confess to *actively* leaving any comfort zone: a subtle but vital distinction. There is a risk in being led, but there’s no responsibility for result if one is led, so...risk is diminished: it’s sophistic, verging on the disingenuous, but certainly engaging. “Unanticipated” was seen as the mismatch between the work that was envisaged and the work that was produced: the student also felt that this mismatch allowed peer opinions / feedback to take the work in unexpected directions, and this leads us back to risk-taking and abdication of responsibility for definitively unyielding meaning.

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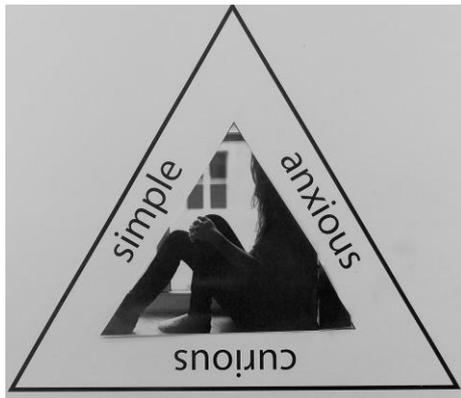


**Figure 4**

By contrast, this student declared that “I am not the same as my work; I am very quiet [...] and my work tends to attempt to push boundaries [...] I suppose that it is me pushing the inner me that people never really see out in the world, it is a way of me showing who I am without being obvious”. This difference (which could be as sophistic and disingenuous as in Figure 3), between the inner and the

outer, might seem more evident when “controlled” and “direct” are juxtaposed with such a vibrant, exuberant – yet ambiguous – image. But the image gives the difference an expression with which we might take issue (pointing us back towards disingenuity), and thus concretising the thought: a good example of the clipped forms of the short essay diffusing meaning (when enlisting the services of the short story’s characteristics, as outlined above). The student also declared a very pragmatic view of design’s function, a dislike of design that “doesn’t do anything”. This was claimed in the use of “apropos” to flag up relevance. “Apropos”, although absolutely correct here, is nonetheless an unusual word and in this way jars with the other two, arousing our curiosity because of this jarring and because we feel that we know what it means and want to be sure that the writer is using it in the same way that we understand it. We are thus drawn into the debate. Perhaps the student used the word because it is more like “direct” in length, and this connection was better than a connection with “controlled”, which a longer word like “appropriate” might create. This argument is strengthened by the student using capitals only, because visual distinctions between words are diminished without ascenders and descenders and as a result length becomes a much bigger player.

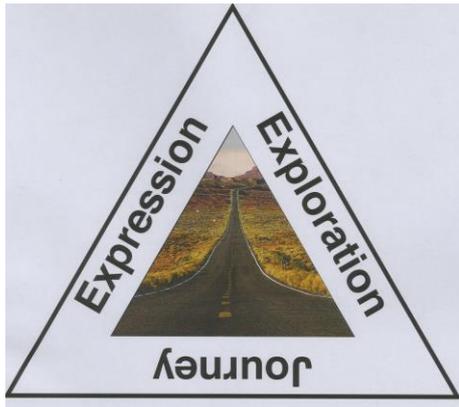
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**Figure 5**

Using a classic image of anxiety, the kind of image found in campaign posters, this student confessed to being a “simple person [who does not like] complications”. Arguing that “simple” can be “sophisticated”, the student the confessed that “anxiety of change” drives simplicity, because the student finds change “chaotic”. Not only could this drive a fertile debate about the nature of creativity and creative practice, but the final confession is the most fascinating: “I am a very curious person and often test myself [by] putting myself in situations that make me anxious”. This furthers the debate about creativity and inspiration, but it also questions what anxiety and curiosity might mean and might have meant before the creative process began for this particular student: there is therefore the potential to investigate the “before” and “after”.

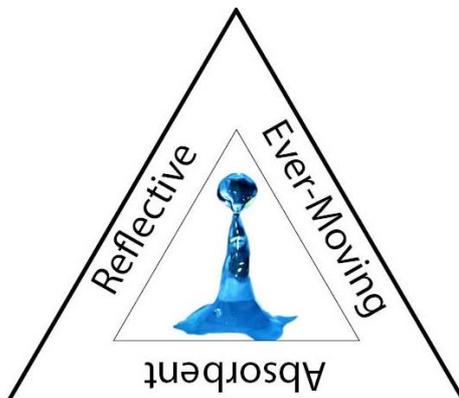
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**Figure 6**

In this manifesto's rationale, the student starts by claiming that "self-expression" is "key" (and not "expression", because, in an echo of the focus on form, "self-expression" may have been too tight for the space, thus undermining the very premise of "self"). The student then asserts that art and design offers the chance to "express ourselves in ways which words could never describe". Having thus set out words' limitations, the student goes on to underscore how valuable "individual style" is, although it is not mentioned in the manifesto; so...words have *some* power, then: the power to prompt thought even when they are not actually present. However, the student then surprises us by saying that "in all honesty I hope to never find my style as it is the journey that defines us, not the destination" (although the open road does suggest a destination in *mind*, if not in *actuality*, a bit like "individual style"). The journey / destination expression is not original, but it's a mature concession for a new undergraduate and, crucially, was not conceded in the essay but in the discussion afterwards instead – a good example of the articulate gap.

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**Figure 7**

This example is perhaps (superficially, at any rate) more prosaic than some of the others discussed above, making no grandiose claims about innovation or creativity but showing instead a disarming candour. The student has used water as an illustration (although it's hard to make it out as water: it was identified as water in the discussions afterwards), and simply said that "water often relates to my work style, as I feel my work is often influenced and therefore "Ever-Moving' like water ripples". But water ripples move outwards from disturbances in the surface, and in creative practice terms might suggest impact and resonance. Consider, as well, that no creative practice can legitimately claim to be without

influence (even if such influence is minimal, ontologically debatable and / or ignored – in which case it is tacitly acknowledged, not unlike ontological arguments for God’s existence); then concede that this student turns a mature and conciliatory face towards the conflicting pressures of the “unpredictable” creative process [6]. It is not just the diffidence which is unsettling: the student’s comments in the last part of the rationale are equally enigmatic: “I am reflective when it comes to feedback [...] and the ‘absorbent’ aspect of my work relates back to the two other words also, as I absorb information and take in critique much like a water droplet on a surface”. Unequivocal and honest...or mistaken science and disingenuity shrouded in lyrical expression? A droplet – not a drop, but a droplet, a diminutive, vulnerable piece of water reaching out for our understanding and succour...like Thomas’s “cloudlets” in *Adlestrop* [7] – how does a droplet absorb? Does it absorb? Or does it observe? A great play on words, perhaps – are we actually being fooled?

## CONCLUSION

We could be starting from a position where we assume that art and design students do not enjoy or value writing, even though they may be good at it. In fact, this is probably unwise because the picture is more complex, and there are dangers in making broad assumptions. It could just be that the idea of writing an *essay* is unattractive, but there are dangers in just dumping the traditional essay in favour of radical new projects because these kinds of projects can, in my experience, be so absorbing that they become self-referential, preventing any benefits bleeding into other areas. The point of writing an essay must be kept in mind, and projects which do this must be found and piloted.

This paper considered a three-word manifesto essay (which, incidentally, many colleagues did not consider an essay: this is understandable in basic length terms, but the project’s overall yield matched what one might hope from an essay). The crucial parts of this project were twofold: firstly, that it chimed with the students’ discipline, and secondly, that there was a mechanism in place to make sense of the inevitable gaps, frustrations and shortcomings that such a short essay would produce. Without this latter part, I’d agree that it wasn’t much of an essay. However, in the same way that a humanities essay might be discussed with a future exam in mind, these short essays were discussed with student achievement and practice applicability in mind.

The essays threw up interesting issues: disingenuity and sophism; notions of creativity; diffusion of meaning; pedagogic interactivity; subtlety; mature and informed abdication of responsibility for potentially crippling definitiveness; visual sensibility; development of practice; the power of the unwritten; the articulate gap; managing the creative process; having the last laugh. The three-word essay manifestos did not do this alone – they needed the next stage. But would these fascinating issues have come to light without the unusual form of the initial essay brief, which seduced the students? I doubt it.

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