The instructional method I have used in this book consists of narrative text supplemented by examples. Examples are often in the form of scenarios, such as a marketing situation or a school writing assignment, followed by a sample response, and rounded out by comments. Names of firms used in the scenarios are fictitious, except when otherwise stated. Because the design professions are made up overwhelmingly of small firms, many of the examples are geared to modest-sized practices.

Writing should work for you and not against you. For that to happen, certain forms of style, grammar, and syntax (defined as "the due arrangement of word forms to show their mutual relations in the sentence") are known to communicate well, whereas other forms are known to fail. In my years of work with architectural and other design firms, as well as with students, I have come to recognize the difference.

Know your recipient. The nation's most successful firms got there in large part because they deliberately research their clients, then address them in ways that engage the client's personality and temperament. And the best firms carry this off without diluting their own integrity.

Always define to yourself in advance exactly the point or points you want to make, and why. This is a fail-safe method to successful communication. Do this, and the rest will flow easily through your fingers into your keyboard and out to your audience.

Finally, be aware that corporate and public facility clients are consistently appalled by the turgid quality of writing delivered by designers who want to do business with them. So are discriminating deans at the professional design schools, who worry about the level of writing they see among students and faculty. And the general public continues to wonder why designers, when they write and talk, do not make more sense.

This book is your chance to reverse course, and do yourself some good.

Principles of Writing for Impact

The eight principles of good writing that comprise this chapter are designed more as a guide to good writing than as a formula approach. The chapter covers hurdles and pitfalls that may obscure your meaning, trespass on the grounds of political correctness, or yield to the temptation to be clever or elegant but not clear.

Every age has its values and its standards. This is as true for writing as it is for sports, nutrition, ethics, and design. The nineteenth-century guide to letter writing cited in the Introduction stated that letters had to be clear, correct, complete, courteous, concise, conversational, and considerate. These are still excellent guides and, given the evolution of writing technology, far-sighted. You can apply them today not only to letters but also to all the other end products of a designer's and student's day-to-day output. Especially "courteous." Courtesy, in the old-fashioned sense of elaborate greeting and sumptuous valediction—the French until recently favored the delectable ending "please accept the assurance of my most distinguished sentiments"—is today more restrained, especially in the case of e-mail, as we shall see in chapter 11.

The aim of the eight principles is to serve as an alert for bad sentence forms that obscure your meaning, for word choices that don't fit the level of understanding of your receiver, for human touches that will enhance understanding, and, last but not least, to highlight the advantage of writers who know precisely what they want to say. Beware of the albatross carried by anyone who is ready to write but isn't clear as to the message.

1. Write as You Would Talk

Many people talk with comfort but freeze when compelled to write. There's an odd but widely held perception that writing is different from speech, that a certain formality is required that differentiates writing from speech. As an editor, I had a letter from an author some years ago who, having told me in one-syllable phrases by phone that his article would be late, followed it up with a letter that included this: "the eventuality of [the article] getting to you in time is problematical." Another writer, urging architects to aspire to greater public respect, wrote that "architects must increase their upward migration capabilities." The perception that writing is somehow different from talking is more at the root of pompous, hard-to-grasp language than nearly any other cause.

Read this example from actual project correspondence.

> Implementation of the construction program's first phase will be initiated as soon as proper authorization is received.

No professional would talk this way to another professional. You have to read it twice before the sun of meaning pokes through the clouds. The project manager is merely writing—after perhaps having raised the subject verbally—to say that work will go ahead as soon as a written okay arrives.

Try fixing the sentence, then compare it with a suggested solution. Don't, however, go to the lengths that the brilliant verbal stylist, the late architect William Caudill, might have gone ("Say 'frog'; we'll jump").

> We'll start construction as soon as authorized.

2. Keep Sentences Short

Great eighteenth-century writers often rolled out page-long sentences. It was an era when readers had time to plow through such prose. It was hard to write and authors honed it to a fine skill. Nor are today's design professionals in the business of emulating the multipage literary stream-of-consciousness excursions of a James Joyce. The goal today is to keep sentences short. It's easier to make a point clearly if you try not to exceed eighteen words per sentence (this sentence has seventeen words). Avoid cramming in too many ideas—one idea per sentence is plenty.

Read the following example from a proposal.

> Our multi-disciplinary team offers not only capabilities in space programming, site planning, architectural design, structural, mechanical, and electrical engineering, but also provides services in the areas of financial feasibility studies and environmental assessment, as well as in the administration of the construction contract and in the development of post-occupancy monitoring systems, all of which are critical elements in the successful implementation of a viable construction program.

Here the meaning is hidden in a jungle of verbiage. Try to pinpoint the several ideas, and make each one into a separate sentence. One solution:

> Our multi-disciplinary team offers these services:
> - Space programming, site planning, architectural design including construction contract administration, as well as structural, mechanical, and electrical engineering.
> - Financial feasibility studies and environmental assessments.
> - Development of post-occupancy monitoring systems.
>
> These services are critical to a viable construction program.

3. Shun Jargon or "Designer-Babble"

Do not confuse jargon with technical terminology. Every profession has its terminology, a kind of shorthand that allows its members to talk with one another without defining every word. Designer-babble is different. Not only does it use technical terms with audiences that do not understand them; it invents words and phrases that confuse the public and may cause even hip professionals to run to the lexicon or throw up their hands in despair. As David Chappell said, jargon "tends to be the last resort of those with nothing much to say."

Acceptable are technical terms such as "decibel," "BTU," "lumens," or "pediment." Each describes an object, standard, or condition that could not be stated differently without a long description.

On the other hand, terms such as "space modality," projects that are "either investigative or accommodative," "iconicity," and "contrapuntal juxtaposition" are at best a pernicious effort to invent new terms in hope that they will enter the common language, or are at worst a futile self-indulgence on the part of their inventor.

For examples of unavoidable technical or design terms, see the following list:

ashlar	honeycombing	plenum
brownfield	Howe truss	purlin
BTU	hypocaust	quoin
caisson	impluvium	rafter
camber	isometric,	register (as an hvac
capital	axonometric	component)
CFC	joist	repoussé
chlorosulphonated	King post truss	reverberation time
polyethylene	layer (as in CAD)	seismic code
CMU	linenfold	shear
corbel	lintel	shim
decibel	lumens	slump
egg-and-dart	mimbar	spandrel (historical,
elevation	mitigation	contemporary
emission	module	meanings)
emissivity	narthex	torchère
English, Flemish, Dutch	oculus	Vierendeel truss
bond	overmantel	VOC
entourage	parging	voussoir, keystone
glulam	parti	web, flange
hacking	pediment	withe

Now read the following sentence from a building review.

> Colliding volumes provided a convincing contemporary interpretation of spatial transparency, as extrapolated by an axiomatic juxtaposition of superficial tension.

A thought appears to be fighting to break through, but the rest is conjecture. Perhaps the author had in mind the notion that two intersecting building parts were glass-faced so you could see through them (that's the first part of the sentence). The second part is anyone's guess, but it possibly carried the idea that when next to each other, the same two buildings had a bigger impact than when alone. But who can tell?

Here are some other examples of designer-babble. Chapter 7 contains suggested solutions to three examples.

They are articulating their experiential experience. *(refers to a house client)*
Justifying [the result] by their contrapuntal juxtaposition. *(description of a design)*
Formal strategies are consistent. . . . The detailing ethic is the same—it's for ever. *(description of a design)*
Projects are either investigative or accommodative. *(profile of a firm)*
To maintain its cultural, social and moral value in the face of the media, architecture can no longer rely on its imagery, iconicity alone . . . *(excerpt from text accompanying an architect's submittal to a major international competition)*
Activating axiomatic topologies of non-nomadic tribal elements . . . have been interpreted within the archaeological context of the site . . . *(comment by design award judge)*

4. Be Specific

On-line communication and the precision of the computer have little tolerance for the loose and the imprecise. An on-line search can be prolonged indefinitely by not being specific enough. But the need for precision isn't limited to the on-line message; it is a key ingredient of clear communication in any medium. Don't write "bring to reality" when you mean "build"; say "partition," not "divider element"; when discussing a building's security system, someone who might break in is an "intruder," not an "unauthorized level of access person." Avoid inexact space wasters such as "interesting," "impressive," "basically," and "situation"—as in "interview situation." They are filler words and, unless defined, add nothing to your message. Note that use of a vague term where a specific one would work better often stems from vagueness of thought, and in such cases if the thought can be sharpened the words will come. As Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux wrote, "It is easy to state clearly that which is clearly understood."

Consider the following sentence from a proposal introduction.

The self-contained instructional space—a splendid teaching medium for a specific objective—is simply inadequate for other tasks.

Work on the term "self-contained instructional space," then compare your answer with a solution, below.

The enclosed classroom, superb for some types of instruction, simply won't work for other tasks.

5. Keep It Simple

Along with being specific you need to keep your writing simple. Today's client has neither the time nor the patience to wade through seas of murky prose. Whenever construction carries on after strikes by the electrician and sheet metal trades, don't write the client that "circumstances now allow for an effec-

tuation of a resumption of construction." Or why take up space with "optimum" when "best" will do? Here are some other dos and don'ts.

Don't use: optimum, initiate, implement, aspirations, maximum, utilize.
Do use: best, start, carry out, hopes, most, use.

Reluctance to engage expert consultants is often considered under contemporary management practices to be an inefficient utilization of resources.

Fix the above example from a marketing letter. See how your own wording compares with this solution.

It pays to use consultants.

Or, in a lighter vein,

"If you have a dog, why bark?"

On occasion, local groups of design professionals agree to write and circulate to clients—especially inexperienced clients—guides to various aspects of the design and construction process. In 1996 the Boston Society of Architects and DPIC, a liability insurance group, prepared a lucid series of such booklets. Topics included fast-track scheduling, value engineering, and the handling of Requests for Information (RFIs) during construction. See the following good excerpt from these documents.

WHAT EVERY OWNER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT RFIs

When a contractor has a question about the plans or specifications for a project, a request for information (RFI) is submitted to the architect or engineer who created the document. The design professional reviews the RFI and responds to the contractor with the requested additional information or a clarification. The RFI process is a normal and necessary element of the construction phase of a project. It allows the design professional to fine-tune the construction documents by providing answers to reasonable questions from the contractor. When used by competent and well-meaning parties for its intended purpose, the procedure works very well.

Abuse of the Process
The abuse or excessive use of RFIs is another story. Increasingly, some contractors generate unnecessary RFIs at the drop of a hard hat, often when a simple review of the construction documents and other available data would reveal the required information. A contractor who uses the RFI process in this manner is really attempting to unfairly shift its responsibility for thorough document review to the architect or engineer.

Unnecessary RFIs can result from a variety of factors. By far, the most ominous is the contractor who intentionally abuses the RFI process in order to pave the way for claims for extras and delays.

If the contractor is in a severe time or money squeeze, he or she may look to the RFI process for financial salvation. The desperate contractor may attempt to build a case for extras and delays by issuing urgent RFIs for every reason he or she can invent. By the end of the project, the total number of RFIs (legitimate and otherwise) may reach into the hundreds or even thousands.

In so doing, the contractor buries the design professional in paper and forces him or her into "unacceptably" long response times. (The infamous Denver Airport project, for instance, reportedly had over 12,000 RFIs filed—many of which were later deemed unnecessary.) This then gives the contractor the pretext to later sue the owner for delays and extras, citing the designer as the cause of the problem. The Germans have a word for it: papierkrieg. It means "paper war' or the art of obfuscation by bureaucracy. That's exactly what happens when the use of RFIs is allowed to get out of hand.


I often look back at material written by myself and members of my family in grade school and wonder at the frank, uncomplicated expression of thoughts. So, when in the spring of 1997 I was invited to view an exhibit of written work and sketches by a group of third-grade children, I hurried over. The show was put on under New York City's architecture-in-the-schools program, sponsored by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the New York Foundation for Architecture. I looked to see whether perhaps the next generation knows something that we have managed to unlearn.

I wasn't disappointed. Look at the illustration opposite, sample result of an assignment in which the teacher asked the children to describe a building and what architects do. Note the student's simplicity of language and ability to convey a flood of meaning in very few words.

6. Use the Active Sentence Form

The men and women who teach creative writing in our colleges dwell heavily on the need to use active verb forms to grab and retain the reader's interest. "Jack loves Jane" sparkles; the passive form "Jane is loved by Jack" is dull. The same good advice holds true when design professionals and students write. Apply this advice consistently, and you'll greatly sharpen your impact, as you can see in these before and after examples.

> It is intended that AutoCAD Release 14 will be utilized and files plotted to devices using Windows NT Print Manager drivers.
> (from a proposal letter)
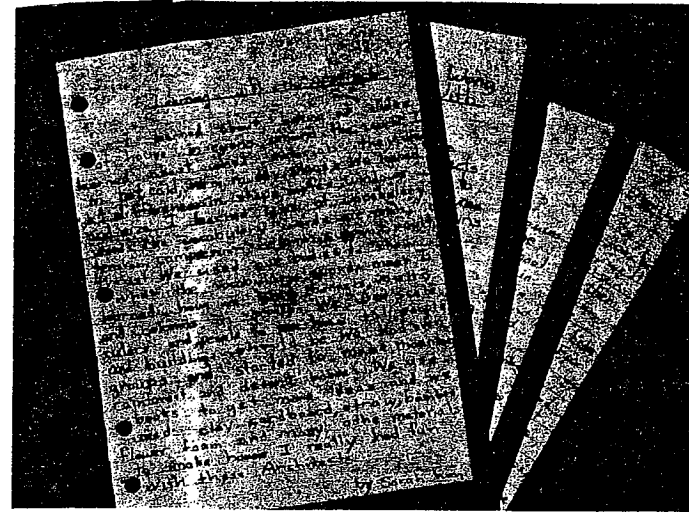
Children who write get to the point fast and express it in simple terms. This example is from an assignment to third-grade children as part of New York City's architecture-in-the-schools program. Reproduced with permission.

Try turning this sentence around, then check your result with the new version.

> We intend to use AutoCAD Release 14 and to plot files to devices using Windows NT Print Manager drivers.

7. Don't Forget People

We are a people-focused culture. The general media have boosted sales for years by casting their stories around an individual. *People* magazine made an instant hit by focusing its entire contents on people. The professional design media are now taking their cue from this universal trait of human nature, and more and more of their articles, even cover stories, dwell on the personality and performance of designers and their colleagues.

If you intend to capture the interest of a selection committee or a powerful patron, you need to mix in with your writing a generous dusting of human references. Clients are more likely to identify with a message if it is styled with people involved, rather than as a dry-as-dust task by an anonymous presence. Avoid this example from a firm's quarterly newsletter.

> Past costs and schedules on similar projects are analyzed in order to achieve viable final cost estimates and realistic completion dates.

Try the following instead.

> Our firm's cost estimators under Jane Vega analyze past projects to arrive at realistic final cost estimates for your project. Oscar Choudhury and his project managers review previous job schedules to come up with a feasible schedule for our clients.

8. Know What You Want to Say

A virtually foolproof technique for clear writing is to decide first what you want to say. What is your basic message? Write it down in a single sentence (see some examples below). Test the sentence on colleagues. Break it into its several parts. Show these as a bulleted list—a progression of points. Is the progression logical? Will the link from one bulleted item to the next be clear to the reader or listener? Then start to write.

TYPICAL BASIC SENTENCES

Town's fitness center is designed as community magnet for citizens and
    visitors.
4000-student high school is made friendlier by division into eight "houses."
Partner's long-term musical experience enhances firm's qualifications to
    design drama school.
Computerized animation lets you judge the landscape design at various
    phases of plant growth.
Some designers stretch the stylistic envelope; others follow trends.

Gender-Neutral Language

Thirty years ago, anyone who read a report or a pile of project correspondence would have been forgiven for thinking that the design professions consisted entirely of men. The truth was quite different. More and more women were graduating from the professional design schools, working as designers and, in due course, principals in firms and as teachers and deans in the schools, staffing private-sector and public agency facilities organizations, working on construction in the field, and serving as members of selection committees.

Yet the written record shows little evidence of this. The language was still peppered with references to *he, his, him, draftsman, workman*. Designers, partners, school board members, hospital administrators, construction workers, and contractors still were referred to as though such jobs were solely in the province of men.

In the late 1960s—a turbulent era in this country in many ways—the consciousness finally broke through that language has to reflect reality, and the reality was that women in growing numbers were working in the design and building industry as active players.

The path to gender-neutral language was anything but smooth. Some of the media rapidly established writing guidelines that reflected the new reality; others ignored the problem. Three directions emerged:

Ignore the situation and cover yourself with a statement along the lines that "for simplicity's sake we will use male terminology, with the understanding that this also encompasses females." That is clearly a cop-out and has virtually disappeared over the years.

Every time you are faced with a situation where the possessive form *he/his/him* arises, write *he/she, his/her, him/her* (or even *s/he, her/him,* etc.). This shows good intention, but it is clumsy. Some writers (and speakers) to this day try to compensate for past sins by using the term *she* on all occasions, but this is no better than using *he*. This problem wasn't always so. Some years ago, then Princeton University provost and now Harvard president Dr. Neil Rudenstine,

an English scholar, told me that in Saxon days there was a word that meant *he or she*—an all-gender singular form of the personal pronoun. It atrophied and died. What a pity!

Work around the problem in ways shown below. Opt for a vocabulary that does away with gender-specific references: for instance, make a list of words that through long usage have acquired a male-only or female-only implication, then replace them with words that are gender-neutral.

manpower	*use* workers, human resources
mankind	*use* humanity
manmade	*use* built, synthetic, manufactured
man-sized	*use* large, husky
man-hours	*use* staff hours, hours
manhole	*use* access hole
councilman	*use* council member
fireman	*use* firefighter
eight-man board	*use* eight-member board
salesman	*use* sales representative
cameraman	*use* camera operator
workman	*use* laborer, carpenter, etc.
draftsman	*use* drafting staff (less good: drafter)

(A common point of contention is use of the word "chair" to describe a chairman or chairwoman. I am always embarrassed to hear a person introduced or referred to as a piece of furniture. One is either a chairman or a chairwoman. If you don't know, use "chairperson.")

Often, gender language carries with it a note of condescension, which you should avoid or rephrase when writing.

career girl	*use* architect, designer, engineer
male nurse	*use* nurse
policewoman	*use* police officer
the fair sex	*use* women
lady of the house	*use* head of household

At times, when use of the singular throws up hurdles, you can draw on a virtue of English grammar that allows you to use the plural. Look at these examples:

The designer sometimes takes his work home with him.
Try: Designers sometimes take their work home with them.

The designer should then turn on her computer.
Try: Designers should then turn on their computers.

Every employee must turn in his time-card.
Try: All employees must turn in their time-cards.

Avoid becoming paranoid over the issue of gender. Indications are that writers in the new generation aren't as skittish as those who grew up a generation or more ago. Potentially elegant sentences have been butchered on the altar of gender-neutral prose. We read of congresspersons (better: "members of Congress"). Twenty years ago a judge reportedly denied a change of name to a Ms. Cooperman (to Cooperperson) on the grounds that it set a precedent that might lead to a Jackson changing the name to Jackchild, Manning to Peopling, and Carmen to Carpersons.

Partners in design firms and agencies should set a clear policy in the matter of gender-neutral writing. Check first if there is a problem by reviewing samples of recent correspondence, project reports, and brochures. If revisions are in order, develop, circulate, and enforce a simple document based on some of the foregoing suggestions.

When to Break the Rules

A well-traveled anecdote involves Marcel Breuer, who was asked by a residential client couple to work out even minute details, to the point of selecting and placing every lamp and ashtray. A year later, while visiting the town, he called and was asked to dinner. Looking around, he was flabbergasted to find everything—table lamps, ashtrays, pencil racks, magazine stacks—in precisely the spots where he had placed them. All spontaneity had been lost. Lesson: Breuer had placed the items as suggestions; the owners were meant to feel free to change or move them around.

Similarly, when writing, do not let rules or guidelines get in the way of spontaneous expression. If a snappy word, turn of phrase, or rearrangement of material strikes your fancy and in your view adds to the strength or sparkle of your message, trust your intuition and go for it. Mozart was able to rise above the restrictions of classical form; why shouldn't you?

For an example of this, see the marketing letter, pages 44–46.

Think of the principles and suggestions in this chapter as guidelines, not as rules. The intent is to trigger in your mind an attitude, rather than to think of suggested practices as dogma. With practice, these guidelines will become second nature.
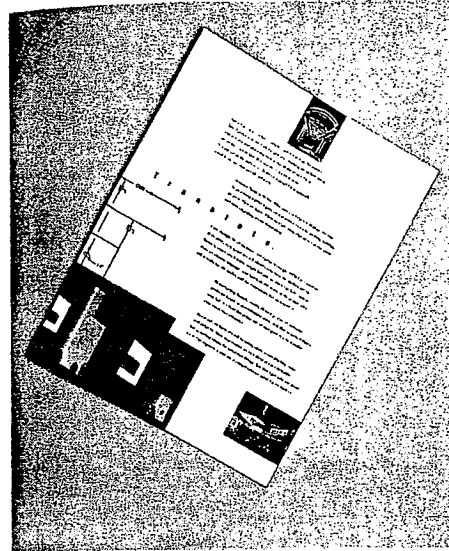
Page from 8-page brochure by Symmes Maini & McKee Associates (above left) expounds theme of listening to owners, then translating program into design. Half of the 26 pages in Walker Group/CNI's spiral-bound brochure (above right) include foldouts. Cut-out pocket in back is for single project fact sheets.
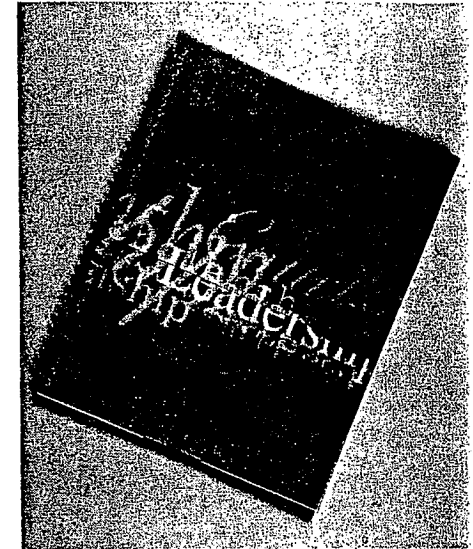
Pages from Walker brochure (below left and right) zero in on two of the attributes the environmental design firm wishes to impress upon clients—marksmanship (instinct, skill, patience, courage) and leadership. Illustrations are small, in line with current usage.