source of income. Because many of the essays in the Reader refer directly and indirectly to these circumstances, it would have been helpful for the editors to more clearly delineate this broader landscape of contemporary graphic design practice and the position they see the anthology occupying within it.

If these seem like indictments, I should clarify that they are intended as observations—not just for the editors of the Reader but for all of us who write about graphic design and, indeed, those of us with decision-making power in publishing houses. In any case, Triggs and Atzmon have accomplished a great deal with this anthology, which I expect will be consulted extensively by designers, educators, and researchers alike.


Alice Twemlow


Being a visual person or a verbal person is usually presented as a choice. Not so, for writer and instructor Natalia Ilyin: She believes that design and writing are part of the self-same scheme of systemized mark-making and are driven by the same human urge to communicate and preserve. As design students the world over can attest, we should not assume that these skills have always been taught in parallel. Design students get admitted into college on the strength of a visual body of work; they then are asked to write a lucid, rigorously argued, historically informed, deeply researched and footnoted 10,000-word dissertation that makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge. Space and time are rarely allotted in design curricula to teach the mechanics, let alone the art, of writing; the discipline implicitly assumes that students learned how to write somewhere else, at some other time. Many students get overwhelmed and despondent when facing writing assignments. Many tutors get overwhelmed and despondent when teaching them. Ilyin’s book provides both groups with much-needed reassurance and hope.

Ilyin offers a method by which designers can approach writing in the same ways that they approach designing. By presenting writing in terms of its systems and structures, and by outlining a set of practical mapping and diagramming tools, Ilyin wants to help designers to ease into, or refine, their writing practices and, in effect, to understand and engage more fully in the design of writing.

Based on the logic that designers use diagrams as part of their working process, to “explain their imagined future to the producers of that future,” she argues that the diagram is “the designer’s edge” when it comes to writing. (50) “Using diagram is natural to designers,” Ilyin says. “It allows you to […] sketch imagined connections and relationships in all directions. It’s the tool for the mind that doesn’t run on a linear track.” (51)

Her recommended multi-step process begins with mind-mapping—a means of dumping onto the page all one’s initial thoughts about the topic at hand and then of indicating the associative connections between them. Next, she advises identifying the most important or powerful ideas within this network, which become “hubs,” and then clustering related ideas around them to create what she terms a “rich club.” This cluster becomes the tight constellation of core ideas at the heart of a piece of writing. Ilyin goes on to offer a choice of three diagrammatic systems, each suited to a different kind of essay writing. The first and simplest is the rooted tree diagram—the best choice for a classic, five-paragraph, hierarchical, three-pronged-argument type of essay, in which ideas are firmly penned into their appropriate paragraphs. The next option allows for a more open and discursive approach to essay writing, where “smaller ideas can rub up against larger scale ideas and then again against tiny thoughts.” For this essay, Ilyin suggests picturing the floor plan of a house, where each room is a small yet interdependent argument, and the writer then takes the reader on a
guided tour of this house, explaining how each room
argument relates to the next. A third option, when
embarking on a longer piece of writing, is to combine
the tree and the house models to make what Ilyin
calls a “caravan of tiny houses,” each with its own in-
ternal argumentation, but connected in a linear struc-
ture, and all headed for the same destination.

Ilyin’s book is its own caravan of chapters. The first few tiny houses contain very clear expli-
cations of the building blocks of writing—marks,
signs, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and para-
graphs. The middle section introduces the method
diagramming one’s thinking, and the last five
chapters each deal with different types or modes of
writing, such as academic writing, letter writing,
and copywriting.

Where, then, is this book-caravan headed? Al-
though it is purportedly for all designers who have a
vague idea that they should write better, the book
feels far more successful as a textbook for students
who must write better. That working designers would
or could put their client work aside and sit down to
tackle one of Ilyin’s timed writing exercises (25 of
which punctuate the book)—for example, writing a
“flipped rooted tree” essay, with the title “Is Design
Art?”—is hard to imagine. Easier to imagine is that a
design student, who might like a formula to lean on,
would find this book very helpful. Similarly, and
perhaps more importantly, many tutors out there
who are a bit fuzzy on their predicates and serial
commas, or who are searching for alternative assign-
ments to such stodgy scholarly staples as the liter-
ature review (or as Ilyin suggests, an annotated bibliog-
ography), would find beneficial. They no doubt
would enjoy reading this book as much as I did,
densely packed as it is with excellent counsel, com-
municated in an engagingly informal, second-person
mode of address and peppered with personal anec-
dotes and often laugh-out-loud humorous asides.
Readers might feel as though they are one of Ilyin’s
fortunate students, sitting with her in her office for
a tutorial. Among the many sage pieces of advice:
“When you learn to write well you enter into life
more deeply, because you can think a problem
through, make a point, trace an experience, invent
a world—and communicate it”; (xx) “rewriting shows
respect for your reader”; (3) “writing well courts
risk.”; (4) She suggests that writers, before handing
in their work, reread it at least three times: once for
paragraphing, once for grammar, and once for punc-
tuation. She points to the importance of knowing
your audience: “the tone of a piece of writing de-
dpends on the relationship you have with your reader
and on the purpose of your piece.” (94) Another nice
touch is the thoughtfully annotated illustrations
(compiled by Robert Baxter), which detail the finer
points of such typographical obscurities as “Blisym-
bols,” the history of flowcharts, and the Reed Kellogg
system of sentence diagramming, among others.

Ilyin’s method is not the only approach. It also is
possible to begin a writing project not with a dia-
gram, but with a research question. Although there is
less emphasis is given to the unexpected benefits of
the motivations, methods, and mess that drive, and
derive from, research, the book’s emphasis on writing
and its structure results in a pleasing sense of clarity
and abstraction, which will appeal to “the designer
who’d like to write.” (p. xix)