

## THE DRIVER ASKED (ON WRITING AND DESIGN)

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1. How to know what will make an account ring true is a primary challenge that the writer faces. There are infinite ways to tell the same story honestly. This is why I make the case that it is worth considering the challenge of writing nonfiction as a design problem, for the manner through which the writer tells the story affects the impact of the work. When I say *design*, I am not talking about patterns or pictures, but rather, systems that must be devised or augmented to make a story necessary.
2. Aristotle noted the significance of careful word choice, or diction, in delivering emotional language to great effect. One of my favorite examples of the ways voice carries an argument is in the essay “Aeropagitica” by the seventeenth-century English iconoclast, John Milton. In it he playfully exposes the contradictions between the authority of the church and king. The essay is a polemic against royal control of printing licenses. It is an argument against censorship. Milton insists that a person could not be of abiding faith without having read works that contradicted their own beliefs. He knew that faith could not be found through an expressed devotion to the king or to God only, who were not the same despite political attempts to make them seem so. In this conflict between approaches to faith, Milton insisted that the responsibility of the faithful reader was to have courage.
3. The American essayist, John McPhee, once suggested that part of the process of writing nonfiction can be mechanical, for the act of storytelling is also a pursuit of form. The form of a work, the shape of its content, depends on what is being said. But simple calculations about the arrangement of ideas are not enough to deliver a story. The writer must have the courage to show necessity, as the irreplaceable writer James Baldwin reminded us, though it’s impossible to say how much. One must play around with it, as the painter, Ben Shahn, noted, “Who knows when a trenchant line becomes a human face?”
4. It’s also important to consider how form can serve the creation of habits: perhaps modes of engagement and criticism, without defaulting to the worship of God or king, you know, those ancient ways of thinking about who matters most in a story.
5. Because I am, by nature, a serious person, I’ve spent much attention in my writing life focused on what I have been denied. Sometimes this approach has been useful. But there are times when it is not prudent to remain preoccupied with one’s personal past. I am reminded of this as I try to find enjoyment in the face of inevitable obstacles.
6. But here we are, in an ongoing state of emergency, made plain through the frequency with which people choose violence over conversation to resolve disputes. Despite this, let’s imagine, for a moment, that we should be optimistic about the future. As we look forward, we will acquire experiences that testify to our endurance. To make sense of absurdities, we will engage with others in play.
7. Play is voluntary, a kind of recreation that gives us pleasure. It allows us to choose how we participate, how we express our values. Without play, we become subject to obligations alone, which may be defined by other people’s whims or values. Thus, play is also political. When we play in our writing, we extend an invitation for enjoyment to others. We make it possible for the reader to win. Play is also an engagement with strategy—for the sake of building competency. It expands our facilities of recognition, collaboration, affirmation, and the expansion of the self within a system of constraints that are also recognizable to others.

8. One does not have to be conscripted to a game to play it, as play can exist outside a game or any other structure that prioritizes outcomes. Play is a way to practice our engagement with conflict, a way to pursue victories that are generally small and un-injuring. It allows for the sensation of contest, but with the goal of returning to a baseline where all can reengage. In a game, one chooses their opponents, while in life, one may be surprised by those they must confront. Thankfully, a game prepares us to move past real conflicts, and to learn that no single outcome is inevitable.
9. The practices of writing nonfiction and design intersect most productively in the pursuit of necessity. A design is a plan that reckons with limitations. Nonfiction is the depiction of actual incidents, objects, and persons engaged in experiences that are verifiable. These are also limitations. Both the designer and the writer must face constraints. In the game of depiction, they are kindred practices.
10. This brief essay is a provocation. It is composed of ideas and materials. It is also a progression of imaginative gestures linked together by detail, anecdote, story, or exhortation. As an object, it represents the intersecting remains of organic and technological processes. A work such as this might also be composed of breath or air. Light may be ignited in it or in its reflection, no matter how dim.
11. At a recent dinner with a friend, I spoke about the kinds of subjects my students write about. He said, "Aren't all essays political these days?" I said, "No. Essays have gotten very personal." But then I had to correct myself by acknowledging that the personal is often the locus from which the political emanates. Still, it's obvious that that binary is too simple. I blame this misperception on linear time. Linear time makes us obsessed with outcomes like the meaning, the lesson, or the end of the quest. One could say this is also the case with necessity. For instance, the passenger wants to go somewhere remarkable but does not know where that is. *Where are we headed?* The driver asks. The passenger doesn't know what to say in response.
12. A writer might want to show others through language the look and function of parts of the world, each an infinity unto itself. In a similar way, a designer might want to show others through visual cues what worlds might be possible. To what ends am I inviting this comparison? Well, both practices require courage.
13. Courage might look like inventing a school of expression. The Bauhaus school was founded in Germany in 1917 with the hope of teaching students to make functional designs that also represented their personal point of view. Its architect and founder, Walter Gropius, wrote about holding such convictions as a teacher, "Our guiding principle was that artistic design is neither an intellectual nor material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life." Another teacher from the Bauhaus, the German-born artist and educator, Josef Albers, was influential in creating studio programs for visual artists in the United States. His pedagogy engaged a sense of play that can be recognized in experiments with color. He wondered: how might a color's proximity to other colors change the experience of looking at it? The way to play was to cut colored paper into three sizes of squares and stack them so that all centers aligned. The result? The surprise of connection, if not complementarity.
14. Though the Nazi's forced the Bauhaus school to close in 1933, Albers emigrated to the U.S. and continued his work as a teacher. Throughout his life, Albers maintained a commitment to exploration, which is also reflected in the appreciation he expressed for the nonspecialist. He says, "Many of the most important discoveries have been made by amateurs—innovations are initially rejected by the experts—pioneers are very often non-professionals, or they often begin outside the profession." I found Albers's perspective encouraging, as I am one of those who admires the hard work of beginning.

15. As a teacher of writing, I often have strong opinions about what I read. I am most compelled by work written by people who want to learn. Through their attention, these writers show us how the process of observing a subject might impact our understanding of it. The most generous writers also write for nonexperts, an expression of care toward the unknown reader. In much the same way, designers can make a representation clearly visible to others. As the graphic designer Saul Bass once said, “Design is thinking made visual.”
16. The creative practices of writing and design require one to work with the physical world and its expression in matter and energy. Both achieve coherency through a manipulation of associations. The writer engages their audience through their voice, a signature that can only be heard through the perspective of the “I.”
17. Let’s consider the perspective of Ukrainian-Jewish-Australian essayist Maria Tumarkin, who says: “I’ve been interested in works that drain every last triumphalist note out of the experience of staying alive.” Tumarkin is ambivalent about the impact of trauma and its reverberations, as she explains the ways it is undertold to preserve the comfort of its witnesses. She says, that as a reader, she is drawn to “Works that thwart the inspirational vibe, written in full knowledge that there are always others, kin and strangers, who didn’t/don’t/won’t/can’t make it; that surviving is often closer to death than to life; that bearing witness to the demise of another or to your own near-miss is part torture, part self-mutiny, and it does not end. What doesn’t kill you doesn’t necessarily make you anything.” Without the narratives of overcoming, we must face the losses that compound with time. Tumarkin is clear, “It’s not enough to make it to the other side of trauma; it’s barely a start.” This is what I call having a perspective and demonstrating a point of inflection.
18. The Argentinian master of all forms, Jorge Luis Borges, introduces us to Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return in his essay “Circular Time,” and he suggests that there is no new experience. All leads to what has happened before. As a philosophical postulate, he is pointing to a great bleakness: the impossibility of doing any original work. But this is only true in an environment where originality is prized over community. Inherent in Borges’s interpretation of Nietzsche is that there is (a) no future and (b) no possible novelty. What if the lack of possibilities is a wonderful thing? The impact of these ideas may be different for the writer than for the philosopher, as the material world always holds evidence that there is, indeed, a story before the story. It waits for us.
19. *Where are we headed?* The driver asked. The passenger said take me someplace remarkable. The driver had to decide what remarkable meant. It was a burden. The driver said, *Listen, I don’t think I’m the one for this.* The passenger knew differently. This driver was the only one who could. And yet, there could be another, if one could imagine it. There were so many ways this story could go. Technically, not even the car was necessary.