Foreword
The Craft of Words (in two parts) covers the role of words as a design element.

Part one (this book) explores the craft of words at a macro level, considering how words can help set a tone and voice, as well as establish and reinforce the personality of a brand. Part two (published separately) examines words at a micro level, showcasing how words can also satisfy a functional requirement by aiding and improving design interactions.

At both levels – macro and micro – words can, when used in a considered manner as a part of the design process (indeed as another, core design element), aid and improve the user experience leaving users delighted and happy. Given the power words can exert, it’s important to give some thought to them, to see them as an element with the power to fundamentally alter and improve a piece of design, and to consider them at the heart of the communication process.

As our industry has matured, it’s no surprise to see companies celebrated for their design-centred approach beginning to put words front and centre as an integral part of their design process, recognising the part that language plays at a deep-seated, human level as a core part in a holistic communication strategy.

Companies like Apple eschew technical terminology in favour of language that connects with users at a deep, emotional level. Where others might focus on technical specifications, bombarding users with a barrage of dull facts, Apple embraces a more human approach. The results are memorable, iconic expressions – carefully
designed phrases – that live on, long after the products are gone. Apple: “1,000 songs in your pocket.” The competition: “A large storage capacity and a compact design.” We all know the product.

Companies like MailChimp have even gone so far as to build entire resources to ensure that the words and language they use are clearly conveyed to the company's various partners and stakeholders. MailChimp's Voice and Tone clearly underlines the company's understanding of the importance of... well... voice and tone. As they put it:

"Before you write content for MailChimp, it’s important to think about our readers. Though our voice doesn’t change, our tone adapts to our users’ feelings. This interactive guide will show you how that works."

MailChimp's Voice and Tone web site underlines the importance of words as a design element.
We can all learn from examples like these which highlight the importance of language and the craft of words as another, carefully considered facet of design. At every layer of the design experience – from the jokes that MailChimp’s mascot Freddie uses (“They’re simply a layer of humor. Be funny!”); to the content of the company newsletter (“Be casual, and have a sense of humor.”); to the language used on Twitter and Facebook (“Delight our followers.”) – it’s clear that the craft of words forms an integral part of MailChimp’s design vocabulary, helping to shape its brand.

As designers we’re used to the idea of gathering visual inspiration when we embark on a project. These visual palettes or moodboards help us to shape a design’s look and feel. They help us centre in on our creative vision. In much the same way as we gather visual inspiration at the outset of our process, we might also begin to consider gathering verbal inspiration when we embark on a project. These verbal palettes or wordboards can help us define a design’s tone and voice and, as we’ll see shortly, are every bit as important as look and feel.

Words are critical to communication. When used well, words amplify the message, moving beyond merely conveying information and serving a function, towards improving communication and delighting our users. In this short book we put words front and centre, highlighting their power and encouraging you to consider them as an integral part of your design process at the heart of what you do.
As Rudyard Kipling put it:

“Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.”

We couldn’t agree more and, on that high note, let’s get started.
Words as a design element

As designers we’re expected to be familiar with visual grammar and the various fundamental visual underpinnings of our craft – point, line, plane – the building blocks with which we create visual systems. However, words, the very fabric of the web, are an often overlooked element. It’s ironic, really, because words and how we use language can often make or break a design.
Words and language – like the other visual and formal elements at our disposal – involve problem solving, planning and organisation. Verbal communication goes hand-in-hand with visual communication. They are intertwined. Both play a fundamental role in the communication process. Both lie at the heart of what we call design.

When we shape a message verbally or visually, we choose the most appropriate elements to use, and consider how best to put these together to successfully communicate our thoughts and ideas. Both verbal and visual characteristics play a critical role in the communication process.

When we marry all of the design elements at our disposal – words and form – we achieve more than the sum of the parts. The verbal and visual design elements come together to amplify meaning.

Design is an umbrella that encompasses many connected areas. As our profession grows and matures, we begin to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the many and varied disciplines that we can use at the service of design: visual grammar; semiotics; language; psychology... the list goes on.

Words, when considered as a design element, play a crucial role in shaping our emotional perception and they solidify the aspects a visual design vocabulary hints at. When considering the role of words as a building block of our design process, it’s evident that design is more than a purely visual pursuit.
What happens when our visual layer isn’t available, for example for a visually impaired user using a screen reader? Do words then become the design? Even visually unclothed, the words we choose as designers paint a picture in the mind. Of course, the formal design decisions we make – our use of typography, hierarchy, colour and layout – enhance these words; but, at the level of the words themselves our message and meaning should still remain.

Working on the web, we understand the importance of reading content and searching for meaning to craft semantic markup, but what of the words themselves, before we even get to that point? Much has been written on content strategy, not least by Erin Kissane and Karen McGrane for A Book Apart. Their books, *The Elements of Content Strategy* and *Content Strategy for Mobile* respectively, are a sound investment offering an insight into the role of words – and content – as an integral part of the design process.

To embark on a sound footing, we need to start with the content. Effective content strategy is about creating structured, reusable, platform-independent content, loaded with semantic metadata. It’s a hard task getting this right, however: it’s only the beginning. Where content strategy concentrates on structure and utility, it doesn’t always concern itself with topics much more subtle: tone and voice.
Tone and voice

From a distance, we can look down on the wider expanse of words and consider macrocopy. What tone and voice do our words possess? What tone are we adopting? What voice are we using? What message are we trying to convey?
These are questions every designer should consider at the outset of every project. Though you might inherit or commission content, as a designer you should have an appreciation of the language the project at hand requires and, if possible, offer guidance and direction to ensure it is fit for purpose.

Businesses are like people: they have values and personalities, which are reflected in the tone of voice you choose – and your words shape this tone.

In addition to satisfying a functional requirement, macrocopy expresses brand values. Words are an important element in a well-designed brand. Look closely and you’ll find numerous examples of companies – both small and large – that choose a tone and voice carefully to express their brand message. In order to convey this message, however, it’s important to consider the values that underpin the brand you’re shaping.

**Defining core values**

To successfully tell an honest story you need to know what your, or your clients’ values are. These core values are the foundation on which you can build trust and engagement, but how do you identify them?

At the beginning of the design process, we need some introspection. We need to look inwards and undertake a thorough appraisal of what’s really important, which will shape the message we are communicating. By interrogating your, or your clients’
values and beliefs at the outset, you can start to establish the values that matter, and identify which ones might underpin the message you are trying to convey.

Values are inherently subjective and difficult to pin down, but there are many common motivators that we might identify. Ask yourself, if you could pick only three values from the diagram below, which would you choose? These are the values that define your brand.

These are just a few values; there are many more. In our postgraduate teaching we use Nesta's excellent Creative Enterprise Toolkit to help start-ups define their core values.
To achieve any measure of success, your message must be perceived as being authentic and honest. Regardless of your values, being true to them is the only sustainable way to act. As Nesta put it in the Creative Enterprise Toolkit: “If you act in a way that conflicts with the values that your customers understand, this could have significant consequences, and even result in a backlash.”

Once your values are defined, you transmit them through what you communicate. This runs through any output you produce, from an official press release right down to the way you answer the phone.

Without knowing your values you can not know what to say.
These outputs, these messages, are received by your audience and the values you communicate are decoded and interpreted by your recipients. Your audience’s interpretation of the values will inevitably be balanced against how you wish to be perceived. The closer the projected values and the perceived values align, the better. The key ingredient is honesty. Everyone appreciates an honest discourse, regardless of whether or not we agree with the values in question.

There’s no rule that states all organisations should be warm and fuzzy – that approach doesn’t suit everyone. Perhaps an organisation’s core values are at the opposite end of the cuddly scale and its focus is on the ruthless acquisition of money. That’s fine. If these are the organisation’s core values you have a responsibility as a designer to communicate them clearly, and not pretend that the values are something else. We can achieve this through the language we use, and we can help our clients and ourselves to communicate honestly, which will in turn gain us trust and loyalty.

At the simplest level we might consider a continuum as follows:

Defining where an organisation sits on the continuum can help shape the types of words we use and the tone of voice we choose.
An important point is that this continuum isn't about good versus evil, as some might interpret it. Though there has been a tendency in recent years to adopt a friendly, personal tone of voice in an attempt to suggest goodness or friendliness, for many organisations this might be misguided. A corporate, neutral tone does not imply evil. All it indicates is a different set of values or drivers.

At the outset of a project we need to define what our content communicates. Is the tone of voice friendly, suggesting an individual or tight-knit organisation? Or is it more formal, expressive of a larger organisation, perhaps a little more corporate?

This continuum, however, only sets one aspect of the tone. In reality the picture is a little more complex. Anyone who's ever played Dungeons & Dragons knows that there is more than one ability to define on your character sheet; by combining your scores for strength, constitution, dexterity, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma you can build up a truly complex character.

In his excellent book Lovemarks, Kevin Roberts (CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi) explores “the future beyond brands”. Roberts argues that all brands fall somewhere on the Lovemarks matrix, two axes measuring love and respect. His ideas are neatly encapsulated in the following diagram, which offers a succinct way of illustrating the complexity of brand values:
It helps to clarify Roberts’ ideas by considering a couple of familiar examples of companies, and identifying where they sit on this matrix. Apple, a company with a loyal and devoted following, sits comfortably in the top-right, lovemarks quadrant; Dell, on the other hand, sits in the top-left brands quadrant – while it might have solid brand respect, it sits lower on the love axis.

Some are happy to occupy the bottom-left, comfortable to position themselves as products or commodities and nothing more. Mellow Bird’s instant coffee, for those lucky enough to have tasted it, has no aspirations to become the next Illy.
Put some thought into where your brand is positioned, as this will shape the tone and voice, amplifying and clearly expressing your brand values.

**Establishing a brand dictionary**

Mark Shaw, author of *Copywriting*, suggests developing a “word bank” and “brand dictionary” at the beginning of the design process to define tone and voice. As Shaw puts it, “These tools can help you and your team to maintain consistency, especially where a campaign has a number of different elements, or might continue over an extended period of time.”

A collection of evocative words that establish your brand's personality, a word bank helps to establish a clear tone and voice. Think of it as a moodboard for words. The words you choose, as Shaw highlights, while functionally similar, are emotionally distinct: Start or begin? Purchase or buy? Complete or finish? Identifying word flavours helps to define tone and voice, and can pave the way towards the development of a brand dictionary, encapsulating the language of your design. Consider two examples: smart and Mercedes-Benz (both, coincidentally, owned by the same parent company, Daimler AG). Both create compact cars, both position themselves differently, thanks in a large part to the words they use.
smart defines its proposition as follows: “The smart fortwo is the ideal choice for urban mobility. It is quite simply more manoeuvrable, more agile, safer and more environmentally friendly.” Taking this as an indication, smart’s brand dictionary might include the following words: manoeuvrable; agile; dynamic; expressive; assertive; and effortless.

The words Mercedes-Benz uses are a little different: “The A-Class: a radical piece of automotive engineering designed to breathe new life into the compact segment.” The Mercedes-Benz brand dictionary could comprise words like: engineering; aerodynamics; efficiency; uncompromising; stylish; and engaging.

The words used to describe the products shape our perception. Two similar products can be positioned in very different corners, and can be given very different personalities by choosing just the right words.
Words in action

Let’s take a look at some real examples and consider how the words the different organisations use, at a macrocopy, tone and voice level, help to shape and define the brand message each is communicating. We’ve chosen three different organisations – from private and public sectors, and from small to large – to explore how a focus on well-chosen words helps to convey their respective values clearly.
Hiut Denim

*Hiut*, an artisanal manufacturer of jeans, clearly states its mission is to reinvigorate a once vibrant local clothing industry, expressed in passionate terms: “Our town is making jeans again.” The company summarises this core value in one of its first stories on its website:

> “Cardigan is a small town of 4,000 good people. 400 of them used to make jeans. They made 35,000 pairs a week. For three decades. Then one day the factory closed. It left town. But all that skill and knowhow remained. Without any way of showing the world what they could do.

> That’s why we have started The Hiut Denim Company. To bring manufacturing back home. To use all that skill on our doorstep. And to breathe new life into our town.”

Founded by David and Clare Hieatt, Hiut’s mission is conveyed in straightforward, no-nonsense language. The brand’s core is defined by a tone of voice which reflects the ethos and opinions of passionate individuals, communicating their core values clearly and directly.

This tone, this voice, is a reflection of their past experience. In 1995, the Hieatts founded Howies, a company that started small, like Hiut, before being swallowed up by a larger company with very different motivations. Hiut’s voice reflects a return to the core values that underpinned Howies before its values took a different trajectory, driven by a multinational conglomerate. As such, Hiut’s
voice is distinctly personal, honest and sincere, suggesting hard-fought lessons learned in the trenches of life.

The language the Hieatts use genuinely conveys their passion for being in it for the long haul. As they put it:

“We make jeans. That’s it. Nothing else. No distractions. Nothing to steal our focus. No kidding ourselves that we can be good at everything. No trying to conquer the whole world. We just do our best to conquer our bit of it. So each day we come in and make the best jeans we know how. Use the best quality denims. Cut them with an expert eye.”

With just a handful of products, Hiut already has a passionate following, a testament to its clearly communicated position within the marketplace. They’re “doing one thing well” and it’s paying off.
GitHub

GitHub’s mission is succinctly defined: “Build software better, together” – four words that paint a very clear picture of the company’s vision, one centred around building better software by enabling seamless collaboration.

Born out of the ethos of the open source movement, the language GitHub uses reflects this culture completely, embracing a spirit of openness and collaboration. GitHub is a facilitator and it wears these credentials proudly on its sleeve. The company states:

“GitHub is the best place to share code with friends, co-workers, classmates, and complete strangers. Over two million people use GitHub to build amazing things together.”

The spirit of being part of a shared endeavour flavours the entire site. Originally founded by Tom Preston-Werner, Chris Wanstrath and P J Hyett to simplify sharing code, GitHub has grown into the largest code host in the world. Although the organisation is large and rapidly growing, it still features a distinctly human – well, Octocat – voice.

This human voice is evident throughout, despite the fact that the site's subject matter is inherently complex, which could easily lead to a very dry and uninspiring reading experience. GitHub is a master of explaining topics which are complicated, while remaining casual and friendly.
Explaining the version control system Git, which lies at the heart of the company, the help page reads:

“At the heart of GitHub is an open source version control system (VCS) called Git. Created by the same dudes that created Linux, Git is responsible for everything GitHub related that happens locally on your computer.”

By using “dudes”, for example, GitHub paints a friendly and, importantly, inclusive picture. By remaining approachable and casual, the journey from novice to expert is simplified, with language acting as an important facilitator.
GOV.UK

GOV.UK, on the other hand, adopts a different tone, one which echoes the information-focused nature of the content, that of a government portal for citizens. This content – and the language used – is at the opposite end of the spectrum to brands like Hiut or GitHub. The craft of words here establishes a tone of voice that is serious and aims to build trust with the site’s users.

Adopting a neutral tone, it conveys the necessary information with the minimum of distraction:

“GOV.UK is the best place to find government services and information. It’s a simpler, clearer and faster way to get what you need from the government.”

The emphasis is on presenting a helpful face to government (no easy task when governments are typically seen as faceless). The language is clear and focused, and simple to understand. Describing its “simple navigation” the site states:

“We use clear and simple headings and descriptions like ‘MOT and vehicle insurance’ or ‘Imports and exports’. And we always show you where you are, so you can quickly explore a category.”
This focus on directness is highlighted front and centre on the site’s tour page, which offers an insight into the philosophy behind the language the site uses. Under a heading of “Plain and direct language”, the site states:

“We’ve made sure that everything on GOV.UK has been written simply and directly, so that it’s usable and accessible by everyone. That means short, engaging pieces of writing that avoid unnecessary jargon.”

Describing “words to avoid”, the style guide states:

“We lose trust from our users if we write government ‘buzzwords’ and jargon[…] or empty, meaningless text. We need to be specific, use plain English and be very clear about what we are doing.”

This is a refreshing example of a government organisation eschewing doubleplusungood governmentspeak in favour of language which is inclusive and which builds up trust.

To ensure that this approach is consistent and open, the Government Digital Service published its comprehensive style guide, intended to give clear guidance on content decisions. This guide – which we would urge any designer working with content to read – is a part of a larger document on design principles, itself
described by Tim O'Reilly (founder of O'Reilly Media and Internet Giant™) as among the most significant design guidelines since the original Macintosh Human Interface Guidelines. High praise indeed.
A well-tailored suit

In each of the three examples, the tone of voice is carefully chosen, reflecting and amplifying the brand, capturing its essence and conveying it in language that’s appropriate. In each case the designers use language that fits the content and its message like a glove.

As a designer, perhaps aided by a copywriter, your responsibility is to clearly identify the tone of voice required for the task at hand, cutting the cloth and fitting it like a Savile Row tailor. Words require work, just like any other design element – put them to good use and you’ll find them a powerful weapon in your design arsenal.
Language is a lubricant

Whatever your message, you need to ensure you’re communicating it correctly. Established norms of written communication – such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalisation – all exist to aid understanding and to ease the process of communication. In short: it is polite to write well.
Standards are established to make life less complicated and to improve the running of day-to-day operations. To successfully convey a brand’s values and capture its tone of voice and essence, you need to become a master of the craft of writing.

Mastery – you’ll be unsurprised to discover – comes with practice. Putting some care into your writing and treating it seriously as an important design element will move your design along considerably.

There are two key ingredients to mastering the art of writing, namely writing and reading. It might sound obvious, but to improve your craft of words you need to start using words. A great way to nurture this craft is to practise writing, whether privately, in a journal or notebook, or publicly, via the web. The more you practise writing, the better you will become – it really is that simple. Reading also plays a part. By reading others’ writing you’ll soon discern patterns and discover ways of expressing specific sentiments, extending your palette considerably.

Much like reading the rules of a new board game before playing it, reading books on style and grammar – the rules for the game of writing – can be hard for the impatient, who, in the headlong dash to get started, would rather just roll the dice and get on with it. There are many helpful books, however, which offer advice on the fine art of writing that we would recommend you read before rushing in.

Even if you only managed an E in your A-level English Literature (like one of the authors of this book), you can learn to write properly if you apply yourself later in life. Words lie at the heart of what we do on the web and if you don’t know the difference
between it’s and its, then Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* is the book for you.

Truss writes in an easy, conversational manner, in a book that is both witty and entertaining (albeit, as its title clearly states, zero tolerant in approach). An impassioned guide to perfect punctuation, this book is for anyone who cares about the art of effective writing (we hope that includes you, now you have read this book).

Of course, like in any field of study, there are opposing viewpoints and some feel that Truss is “the worst kind of intolerant prescriptivist grammar bully.” If you’d care for a contrasting opinion, one that argues Truss’s zero tolerance approach is profoundly flawed, we would highly recommend David Crystal’s lively and humorous *The Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate, Shot, and Left*.

If you’re looking to level up, look no further than Strunk and White’s celebrated *The Elements of Style*. Although published half a century ago, this small but weighty tome can be found, heavily thumbed, on many writers’ desks to this very day. As the Boston Globe put it: “No book in shorter space, with fewer words, will help any writer more than this persistent little volume.”

Of course, in the wonderful world of the web, there are many resources focused on writing for this specific medium. We recommend bookmarking: the *Chicago Manual of Style Online*; the *Guardian’s style guide*; and the *Economist’s style guide*. These welcome additions to the canon of language-related knowledge offer insights into editorial style, in addition to publishing practices for the digital age.
The message is simple: learn the rules of writing and try to follow them (at the very least until you have mastered the fine art of language). Following conventions when writing will make people around you happier, much like the convention of washing regularly and using deodorant makes them happier.
Words enhance communication

Writing is a craft that needs to be respected.
As designers we sometimes relegate the importance of words, and delegate the responsibility of writing to anyone but ourselves. We’ll argue that the client should provide the content, and even if they’re not writers we take the content given to us and pour it into the containers we’ve created without giving it much thought. This approach is far from ideal, however, and fails to maximise the opportunities that carefully chosen words can offer.

We need to consider words as an essential part of the design process. As we’ve demonstrated throughout this short book, words can shape our users’ perceptions and can play as important a role as the many other fundamental underpinnings of our craft. Whether these words are in the service of a small company, passionately focused on rekindling a community, or a government organisation working hard to reframe itself in a more accessible manner, words remain at the heart of the solution.

When we understand the values and the messages we are trying to convey, words can play a powerful role in shaping and amplifying these values and giving our messages richer form. Our job as designers is to communicate effectively and to do this with the maximum of impact, as such, an understanding of language and how it shapes meaning is critical.

Like any art, learning to write takes hard work and practice. It’s just like learning a musical instrument: the more you put in, the more you get out. You don’t need to be an archetypal whiskey-soaked writer huddled in a windswept house by the sea to succeed. Learning to write comes, like any skill, with practice.
Practice makes perfect

If we’re lucky enough to take on a project where content is deemed important enough to have a dedicated professional copywriter working alongside the designer, we’re on dry land. As we all know, projects vary in scope and budget, and there’s not always room for a professional writer on your team. This should not mean that the words get overlooked, however; it’s your role as a designer to become at the very least proficient, if not a master, in the art of writing.

By getting into the habit of writing, you will inevitably get better at it. As we’ve mentioned earlier, one way to improve your writing is to establish a journal, a place where you can write and reflect on your work. It doesn’t have to be online, it doesn’t even have to be public, but what it will prove is that with time, the act of writing will sharpen your thinking and – as if by magic – make you a better designer.

As Malcolm Gladwell famously put it, the key to success is simple: just put 10,000 hours of practice in and you’re all set. Though Gladwell is often cited as the source of this rule, he in fact quotes noted neurologist Daniel Levitin, who states:

“The emerging picture from such studies is that 10,000 hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert – in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals and what have you, this number comes up again and again. Of course, this doesn’t address
why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do. But no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery.”

As designers we are communicators. It’s important, worthwhile and rewarding to gain an understanding of how language shapes our perception of the world around us. We have a very powerful and remarkable tool at our disposal – language – and it’s our choice what to do with it, and our responsibility to use it well.
Resources

There are many great publications, both offline and online, to begin your adventure into the wonderful world of words. We’ve included a few below to start you on your journey. Godspeed!
Printed publications

- Bill Bryson: *Troublesome Words*
- David Crystal: *The Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate, Shot, and Left*
- Erin Kissane: *The Elements of Content Strategy*
- Noah Lukeman: *The Art of Punctuation*
- Andrew Maslen: *Write to Sell: The Ultimate Guide to Great Copywriting*
- Karen McGrane: *Content Strategy for Mobile*
- Kevin Roberts: *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*
- Mark Shaw: *Copywriting: Successful Writing for Design, Advertising and Marketing*
- William Strunk Jr and E B White: *The Elements of Style*
- Lynne Truss: *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*

Web-based publications

- *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*
- *The Guardian’s style guide*
- *The Economist’s style guide*