Working With Letterhead

Let's face it—we take letterhead for granted. An envelope arrives in the morning post, we briefly scan the return address and our course of action is determined: most letters are deposited into the trash with little thought and less dignity. We generally hold on to the letters out of a sense of pragmatism. Bills, notes from work or letters from a loved one avoid an ignominious end in the circular file because we recognize the importance of the contents by associating the name of the sender, or possibly the shape of the envelope, with some important message or act ("Do I want to keep my car").

Your task is, in part, to create a message that might hopefully stand out from the piles of missives flooding the mailbags and boxes of the world. It may not be as grandiose as it sounds, nor may it appear to be as glamorous as task as say, designing a glossy 100 page magazine chock full of the latest slick fashions from Milan, but your's is arguably a more important—and certainly more common—task.

Let's work with an example I brought up in a class: that of a lawyer (incidentally, I promise to refrain from making any more harsh comments about lawyers for at least 5 more lines). If you're interested in becoming a lawyer yourself, or you're charged with the task of creating a stationary system for a law office, think of the message you'd like to convey. If your client frequently practices litigation, it's safe to say that she want to send a message of professional conduct and formality.

With this in mind, we'll look at a sample of what probably won't work—the letterhead from hell:

Lauren Patríce
Attorney at Law
666 Lane 'O Death
Rustbelt, PA 17777
(215) 867-5309

What's wrong with this? Is it safe to say that this might not be the best way of expressing a sense of professionalism?

We'll start with the layout. There's nothing inherently wrong with a centered address. And our intrepid attorney won't be turned to stone for using a couple of different typefaces in her letterhead. In fact, the average citizen will take merely has to look at the word "attorney" to know that something serious and probably unwanted has arrived with the junk mail.

But what is we have a more sophisticated reader, say an informed citizen or a colleague? What message does this letter head really convey? "Whoo-hoo, I just found the clip art on my $400 PC! Look at what I can do!" Remember that most headings involve the use of a logo, but it should look professional. This screams "amateur!" It says that Lauren probably doesn't have her own practice, but rather occupies a closet graciously donated to her by a small collection agency.

The clip art and the name set in a rather frivolous typeface aren't going to inspire sentiments of concern or respect from peers, clients and consumers. So how can we go about saving Lauren's career before she becomes the laughing-stock of the legal community?

For one thing, we need to create a stationary system that is profes-

Baskerville
Bodoni
Bookman
Copperplate
Trajan

sional and effective, not something that will promote mockery and defiance. We want to produce something tasteful, something that says "I mean business."

We can start by setting up the page itself. I'll show you some catchy ways of setting up letters and business cards later on, but as a lawyer, Lauren would be best served by something more traditional, which means we'll probably work from the left hand corner.

Once we've established some sense of page design, we'll spec' our type and paper. The original logo used Times and Lydian. Times is a decent font, but a bit plain. Lydian may be an attractive font, but it's just not going to send a good message. We might consider typefaces that appear to be chiseled or embossed on a brass plate. There are several possible candidates to the left. Copperplate and Trajan should be limited to a headline, for obvious reasons.

Here are some possible solutions for Ms. Patrice's typographical problems:

Lauren Patrice
Attorney at Law
666 Lane O' Death
Rustbelt, PA 17777
(412) 867-5309

Trajan is deliberately reminiscent of the carved letters on Roman public buildings, and this in turn also hints at the historical and linguistic roots of our legal system. Bodoni is also a decent choice: distinctive enough to break the stranglehold of the ubiquitous Times family, but it's reasonably restrained.

I've used an example of the heading with a left justification, but there are other possibilities, provided that you maintain some degree of consistency. For example, we could keep the justification while achieving a different visual effect by separating Lauren's name and profession from the remainder of the information. For instance,

Lauren Patrice
Attorney at Law

666 Lane 0' Death
Rustbelt, PA 17777
(412) 867-5309

So What do You Expect from Us?

This assignment actually consists of three parts: a project brief, the stationary package itself, and a personal reflection on the process of designing the stationary package. You need to be able to identify the needs and characteristics of your client and her/his/their potential customers or viewers. You need to be responsive to those needs, and to produce a viable product. Finally, you need to look back on the experience and discuss your own triumphs and travails.

Part: The Project Brief. This is often provided to the artist. Unfortunately, you probably will have to develop your own. The best approach is to identify a potential client (I have indicated that I would prefer a "real world" client, but you may create your own), and consider their needs. In order to accomplish this, as the following questions:

1. Who is the sender?

2. What is the purpose?

3. Who is the target audience?

4. What is the message?

5. What is the format?

While the ***sender*** is generally obvious (the client), you have to consider the full range of the sender's needs. These constitute the ***purpose***—to sell? To impress? However, the ***target audience*** (viewers) is also important. What are their needs, goals and desires? The ***message*** will also shape the message in relation to the sender, purpose and audience, and the ***format*** in turn shapes each of the others.

A stationary package is a surprisingly difficult format, as a business letterhead can contain a large amount of information compressed into a terse heading and logo.

Your project brief should identify the sender and discuss their identity. You should also identify the sender's purpose: are they trying to convey the image of a company that is impervious to fads, or as a flexible corporation that is capable of retooling its image to meet contemporary needs? As the target audience is crucial to honing your overall message, you should also identify the needs and nature of the viewers, and discuss the ways in which these considerations shaped your message.

Your project brief should also discuss your choice of font, paper and color. In essence, you will combine a technical discussion of how you're going to solve a problem, with a philosophical one: what is the nature of the problem.

Part 2: The Stationary Package. Your objective is to create a stationary package using InDesign or, if you have it, Quark Express. Don't try to use a standard word processor, as the formatting tools are simply inadequate for the task.

The design parameters are as follows:

- A business card (2" x 3.5") of a larger card that can neatly fold to this size

- Stationary (8.5" x 11")

- Envelope (9.5" x 4.125")

Your project must also conform to the following principles:

- It must be a complete system: in other words, the various typo graphical and compositional elements should display thought and consistency.
- You should pay close attention to your use of paper stock. You should recognize the importance of typeface and design hierarchy.
- You should design and implement a basic logo (if you use and existing company, don't "borrow" that company's logo, unless you have permission and/or they're using you as cheap labor).

Part 3: Reflection. The primary goal of the reflection is to let you show me what you've learned. Ideally, your portfolio will show a mastery of the material we've discussed in class or encountered in our reading.

This is an opportunity for you to evaluate your progress. To accomplish this, you should try to integrate the following into your reflection:

- What did you learn? Choose 3 or more of the most important things that you learned from this project.
- Eschew feeling for analysis. What did you learn? This is at least as important as what you did. What are you still struggling with?
- Support—provide evidence and solid examples.
- Grammar and paragraph structure are important. Your reflection should follow a logical trajectory.
- What do you believe that you can improve? What needs to be improved?
- The reflection should be around 400-500 words.

Do You Have Any Suggestions About a Process?

Graphic design shares many similarities with professional writ-ing. Both are intensely individualistic enterprises, yet each involves a great deal of collaboration. And like writers, each graphic artist goes through a unique creative process. Much of this is obviously dictated by the nature of the task: most of my work involved relatively little creativity, but many other creative designers find them-selves bearing the brunt of the work not only in implementing the final project, but also in the inception and drafting of a design.

Your task is to emulate the latter. The benefit of this process is that you will have a considerable amount of control over the project. The drawback is that you're also going to bear the responsibility for the entire design process, from the nascent stages to the final proofs.

The most logical process will follow these steps:

- **Identify task** (client, audience, purpose).
- **Ponder the design problem** (reflect on the task, consider limitations and promises of the media).
- **Project brief** (organize the information from steps 1 and 2 into a coherent scheme. Explicitly identify client needs and goals, viewers and the nature of the medium).
- **Sketches/thumbnails** (relatively simple pencil or ink

Identification of task

Design problem

Project brief

Sketches/thumbnails
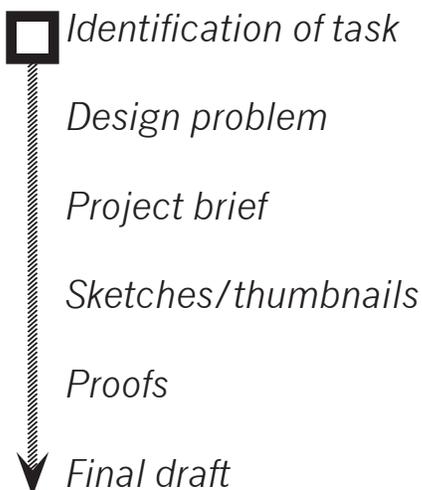
Proofs

Final draft

drawings that allow you to easily design a page).
- ***Proofs*** (full page printouts of the project)
- ***Final draft*** (the final documents using the appropriate media).

Are There Any Other Restrictions?

Yes, there are. You should use no more than 2 typefaces in your design, and you should limit yourself to black and 2 colors, should you wish to use color. You should also generally adhere to the design parameters laid out in *Before and After Page Design* and *The Non-Designer's Design Book*.

So What Formatting Should We Use?

Use the formatting described in the chapter on stationary sys-tems in *Before and After Page Design*. The general samples in the book are useful, and I have a large number of samples which I will share with you this week. At the very least, you must choose a consistent approach—i.e. using the same logo and typeface in all 3 forms of stationary.

Use some common sense, and think about the primary function of letterhead: to communicate effectively. The best ways of effectively communicating through stationary involve using a system. An intelligent use of hierarchy, alignment and repetition can make the difference between an effective letter and a mediocre sheet of paper,
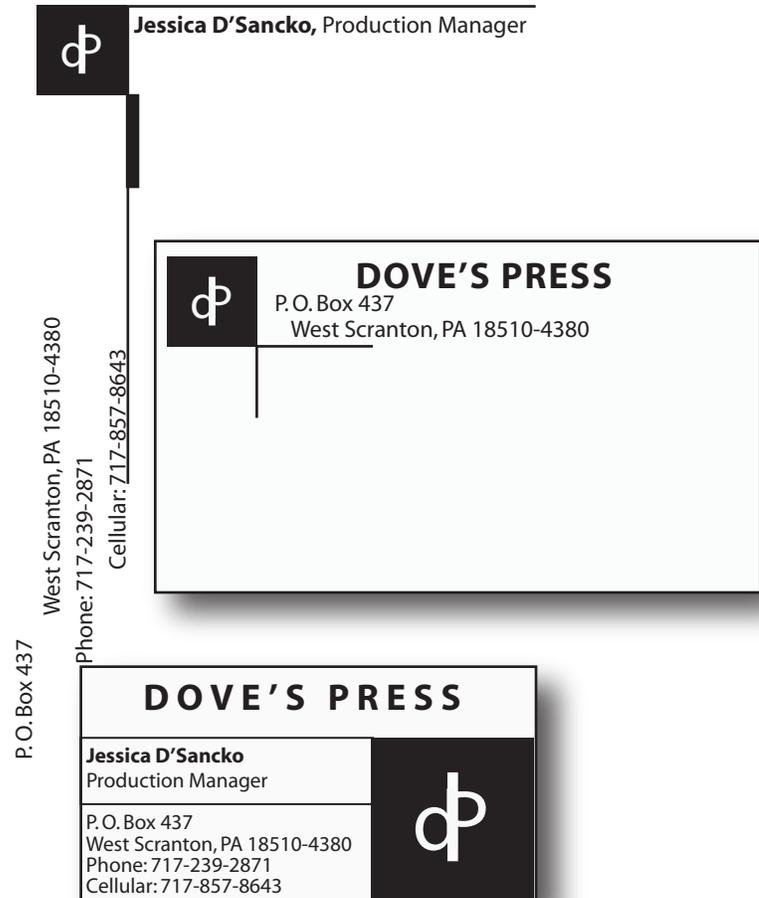
While essays and books often adhere to a system of consistent margins such as the MLA and APA's fixed 1" margins, practical and aesthetic considerations mandate that we use asymmetrical margins with envelopes and letterhead. John McWade advocates the following layout:

Margins

Design space

2"

Letter space

1"

1.75"   1"
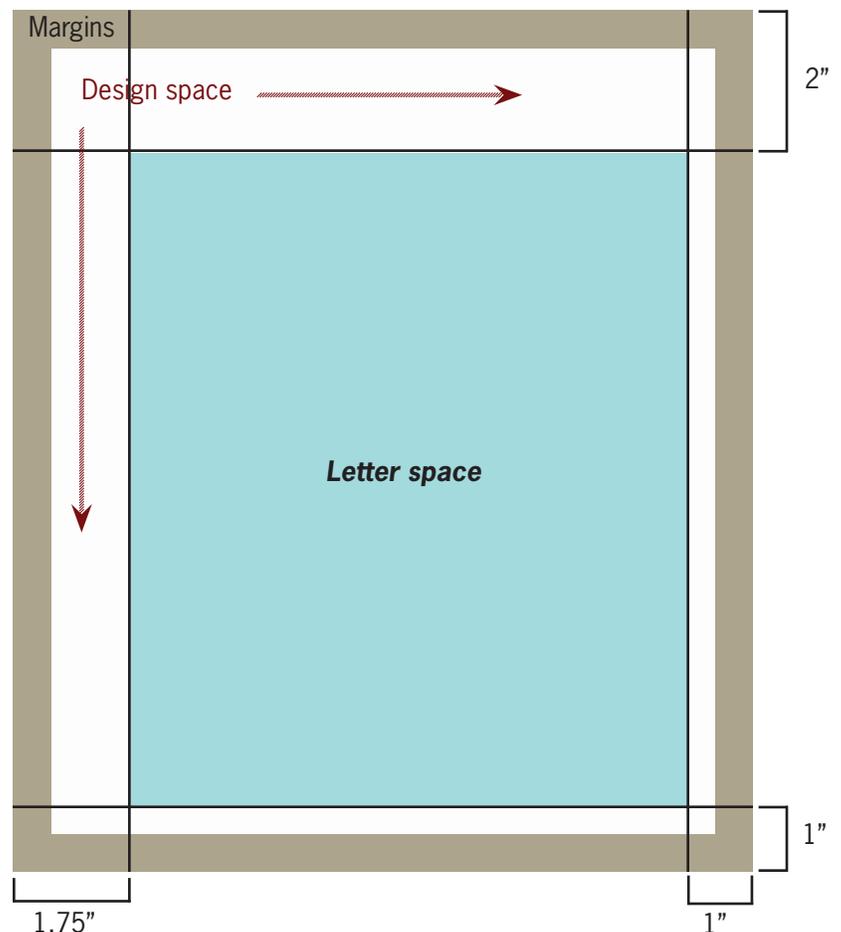
Envelopes also utilize an asymmetrical layout, for obvious reasons. Of the three, business cards alone can use a symmetrical design.

Your text has some excellent examples (5 to be exact), but there are some effective alternatives. For example, you can use the top and left margins simultaneously:

DOVE'S PRESS

Jessica D'Sancko, Production Manager

dP

P. O. Box 437   West Scranton, PA 18510-4380   Phone: 717-239-2871   Cellular: 717-857-8643

DOVE'S PRESS

dP

P. O. Box 437
West Scranton, PA 18510-4380

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dP

I Include this information because you're likely to encounter striking and effective designs that don't "play by the rules." However, I'd like you to be able to design a page using effective basic design, before you plumb the depths of unique design.

One last thing: the business card can printing on both sides. This might help your goal of creating an interesting design.