

Editor's Letter

Writing tends to be underappreciated in the design professions. This is partly due to the importance of spatial information—traditionally visualized through hand-drawn graphics and now with computer-aided 2D and 3D modeling. Yet writing is a lasting and powerful form of communication, capable of enhancing design thinking, advancing careers, and influencing public policy on pressing social, economic, and environmental issues.

Nevertheless, writing remains a secondary or even tertiary priority in many accredited landscape architecture education programs.

A Frameworks Institute report (funded by the ASLA, CLARB, LAF, LAAB, and CELA), which examined how landscape architecture is perceived by other disciplines and the public, recommended several strategies for effective communication with clients and other audiences (Hendricks et al., 2019): “Landscape architects face notable challenges in communicating the importance of their work to members of the public” (37). “Increased public awareness and visibility of landscape architecture can increase the field’s role in future and ongoing projects” (9). These observations also apply to communicating with elected officials and other policymakers.

The Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB) recently added “Research and Innovation” as a standard for MLA program accreditation (LAAB, 2021). Emphasizing research and creative, independent thinking within graduate education is essential. But acquiring familiarity with research and scholarship principles and mastering the craft of effective writing could be learning goals for all landscape architecture students.

Research articles and literature reviews in *Landscape Journal* create new knowledge and synthesize existing knowledge. A third genre, the critical essay, critiques the state of current knowledge, conceptual frameworks, or research methodologies while pro-

posing (one hopes) better alternatives. The essay has an interesting international history, primarily in Britain and in the United States, but also prominently in Spain, France, and Canada (Gerould, 1935). While essays are more subjective than either research or review articles, they are a serious form of scholarly writing.

But why are “theory” essays in the design disciplines often so difficult to read?

“Academic” writing can easily devolve into long-winded discourse. Complex writing (intended to impress other academic theorists, perhaps) often includes rhetorical flourishes embedded in compound sentences. Writing on landscape urbanism, for example, has been famously nebulous, leading critics to lampoon the discourse and even launch an online “Landscape Urbanism Bullshit Generator.” Essays that make grand declarations and sweeping generalizations must have credible evidence, sound reasoning, and unambiguous writing. Otherwise, they may be rightly faulted for invoking “. . . dubious philosophy, unhelpful imagery and obscurantist language” (Thompson, 2012, 24).

Theoretical essays submitted to *Landscape Journal* must pose a defensible proposition and make a convincing argument. Supporting evidence may come from the scholarly literature or, potentially, from professional practice. Scholarly essays acknowledge competing perspectives and critique them fairly. The astronomer Carl Sagan, reflecting on unethical politicians, developed a “baloney” detection kit—a set of rules for analyzing flawed arguments. Common transgressions include errors of omission (cherry-picking facts) and errors of commission (making things up).

Critical theory essays have an especially high threshold for evidence, reasoning, and writing quality. Boldly stating one’s opinion without attention to

these elements is far too common in design discourse. Manuscripts that take this approach are easily identified during the editorial review process and inevitably rejected.

This illustrates—even in the design disciplines—the importance of critical reasoning and the craft of writing effectively.

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