

# “What's the Brief?": building a discourse around the graphic design brief

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## Introduction

“What's the brief?” is an everyday question within the graphic design process. Moreover, the concept and importance of a design brief is overtly understood well beyond design practice itself—especially among stakeholders who work with designers and clients who commission design services. Indeed, a design brief is often an assumed and expected physical or metaphoric artefact for guiding the creative process. When a brief is lacking, incomplete or unclear, it can render an already ambiguous graphic design process and discipline even more fraught with misinterpretation.

Nevertheless, even in wider design discourse, there appears to be little research on design briefs and the briefing process (Jones and Askland; Paton and Dorst). It seems astonishing that, even in Peter Phillips 2014 edition of *Creating the Perfect Design Brief*, he feels compelled to comment that “there are still no books available about design briefs” and that the topic is only “vaguely” covered within design education (21). While Phillips’ assertion is debatable if one draws purely from online vernacular sources or professional guides, it is supported by the lack of scholarly attention paid to the design brief.

Graphic design briefs *are* often mentioned within design books, journals and online sources. However, this article argues that the format, function and use of such briefs are largely assumed and rarely identified and studied. Even within the broader field of design research the tendency appears to be to default to “the design brief” as an assumed shorthand, supporting Phillips’ argument about the nebulous nature of the

topic. As this article contextualises, this is further problematised by insufficient attention cast on graphic design itself as a specific discipline.

This article emerges from a wider, multi-stage creative practice study into graphic design practice, that used experimental performative design research methods to investigate graphic designers' professional relationships with stakeholders (Meron, *Strangely*). The article engages with specific outcomes from that study that relate to the design brief. The article also explores existing literature and research and argues for academics, the design industry, and educationalists, to focus closer attention on the design brief. It concludes by suggesting that experimental and collaborative design methods offer potential for future research into the design brief.

## **Contextualising the design brief**

It is critical to differentiate the graphic design brief from the operational briefs of architectural design (Blyth and Worthington; Khan) or those used in technical practices such as software development or IT systems design, which have extensive industry-formalised briefing practices and models such as the waterfall system (Petersen et al.) or more modern processes such as Agile (Martin). Software development and other technical design briefs are necessarily more formulaically structured than graphic design briefs. Their requirements are generally empirically and mechanistically located, and often mission critical. In contrast, the conceptual nature of creative briefs in graphic design creates the potential for them to be arbitrarily interpreted.

Even in wider design discourse, there appears to be little consistency about the form that a brief takes. Some sources indicate that a brief only requires one page (Elebute; Nov and Jones) or even a single line of text (Jones and Askland). At other times briefs are described as complex, high-level documents embedded within processes which designers respond to with the aim of producing end products to satisfy clients' requirements (Ambrose; Patterson and Saville). Ashby and Johnson (40) refer to the design brief as a "solution neutral" statement, the aim being to avoid preconceptions or the narrowing of the creative possibilities of a project. Others describe a consultative (Walsh), collaborative and stakeholder-inclusive process (Phillips).

## **The scholarly brief**

Within scholarly design research, briefs inevitably manifest as an assumed artefact or process within each project; but the reason for their use or antecedents for chosen formats are rarely addressed. For example, in “Creativity in the Design Process” (Dorst and Cross) some elements of the design brief are described. The authors also describe at what stage of the investigation the brief is introduced and present a partial example of the brief. However, there is no explanation of the form of the brief or the reasons behind it. They simply describe it as being typical for the design medium, adding that its use was considered a critical part of addressing the design problem. In a separate study within advertising (Johar et al.), researchers even admit that the omission of crucial elements from the brief—normally present in professional practice—had a detrimental effect on their results. Such examples indicate the importance of briefs for the design process, yet further illustrating the omission of direct engagement with the brief within the research design, methodology and methods.

One exception comes from a study amongst business students (Sadowska and Laffy) that used the design brief as a pedagogical tool and indicates that interaction with, and changes to, elements of a design brief impact the overall learning process of participants, with the brief functioning as a trigger for that process. Such acknowledgement of the agency of a design brief affirms its importance for professional designers (Koslow et al.; Phillips). This use of a brief as a research device informed my use of it as a reflective and motivational conduit when studying graphic designers’ perceptions of stakeholders and this will be discussed shortly.

## **The Professional Brief**

Professionally, the brief is a key method of communication between designers and stakeholders, serving numerous functions including: outlining creative requirements, audience and project scope; confirming project requirements; and assigning and documenting roles, procedures, methods and approval processes. The format of design briefs varies from complex multi-page procedural documents (Patterson and

Saville; Ambrose) produced by marketing departments and sent to graphic design agencies, to simple statements (Jones and Askland; Elebute) from small to medium-sized businesses. These can be described as the initial proposition of the design brief, with following interactions comprising the ongoing briefing process.

However, research points to many concerns about the lack of adequate briefing information (Koslow, Sasser and Riordan). It has been noted (Murray) that, despite its centrality to graphic design, the briefing process rarely lives up to designers' expectations or requirements, with the approach itself often haphazard. This reinforces the necessarily adaptive, flexible and compromise requiring nature of professional graphic design practice, referred to by design researchers (Cross; Paton and Dorst). However, rather than these adaptive and flexible designer abilities being lauded as design attributes, such traits are often perceived by professional practitioners as unequal (Benson and Dresdow), having evolved by imposition by stakeholders, rather than being embraced by graphic designers as positive designer skill-sets.

### **The Indeterminate Brief**

With insufficient attention cast on graphic design as a specific scholarly discipline (Walker; Jacobs; Heller, *Education*), there is even less research on the briefing process within graphic design practice (Cumming). Literature from professional practice on the creation and function of graphic design briefs is often formulaic (Phillips) and fractured. It spans professional design bodies, to templates from mass-market printers (Kwik Kopy), to marketing-driven and brand-development approaches, in-house style guides and instructional YouTube videos (David). A particularly clear summary comes from Britain's Design Council. This example describes the importance of a good design brief, its requirements, and carries a broad checklist that includes the company background, project aims and target audience. It even includes stylistic tips such as "don't be afraid to use emotive language in a brief if you think it will generate a shared passion about the project" (Design Council). From a subjective perspective, these sources appear to contain sensible professional advice. However, with little scholarly research on the topic, how can we know that,

for example, using emotive language best informs the design process? Why might this be helpful and desirable (or otherwise) for designers?

These varied approaches highlight the indeterminate treatment of the design brief. Nevertheless, the very existence of such diverse methods communicates a pattern of acknowledgement of the criticality of the brief, as well as the desire, by professional bodies, commentators, and suppliers, to ensure that both designers and stakeholders engage effectively with the briefing process. Thus, with such a pedagogic gap in graphic design discourse, scholarly research into the design brief has potential to inform vernacular and formal educational resources.

## **Researching the design brief**

The research study from which this article emerges (Meron, *Strangely*) yielded outcomes from face-to-face interviews with eleven (deidentified) graphic designers about their perceptions of design practice, with particular regard to their professional relationships with other creative stakeholders. The study also surveyed online discussions from graphic design forums and blog posts. This first stage of research uncovered feelings of lacking organisational gravitas, creative ownership, professional confidence, and design legitimacy among the designers in relation to stakeholders. A significant causal factor pointed to practitioners' perceptions of lacking direct access to and involvement with key sources of creative inspiration and information; one specific area being the design brief.

It was a discovery that was reproduced thematically during the second stage of the research. This stage repurposed performative design research methods to intervene in graphic designers' resistance to research (Roberts, et al), with the goal of bypassing practitioners' tendency to portray their everyday practices using formulaic professionalised answers (Dorland, *View*). In aiming to understand graphic designers' underlying motivations, this method replaced the graphic designer participants with trained actors, who re-performed narratives from the online discussions and designer interviews during a series of performance workshops. Performative methodologies were used as design thinking methods to defamiliarise the graphic design process, thereby enabling previously unacknowledged aspects of

the design process to be unveiled, identified and analysed. Such defamiliarisation repurposes methods used in creative practice, including design thinking (Bell, Blythe and Sengers), with performative elements drawing on ethnography (Eisner) and experimental design (Seago and Dunne).

Binding these two stages of research study together was a Performative Design Brief—a physical document combining narratives from the online discussions and the designer interviews. For the second stage, this brief was given to a professional theatre director to use as material for a “script” to motivate the actors.

In addition to identifying unequal access to the creative process as a potential point of friction, this study yielded outcomes suggesting that designers were especially frustrated when the design brief was unclear, insufficiently detailed, or even missing completely. The performative methodology enabled a refractive approach, using performative metaphor and theatre to defamiliarise graphic design practice, portraying the process through a third-party theatrical prism. This intervened in graphic designers’ habitual communication patterns (Dorland, *The View*). Thus, combining traditional design research methods with experimental interdisciplinary ones, enabled outcomes that might not otherwise have emerged. It is an example of engaging with the fluid, hybrid (Heller, *Teaching*), and often elusive practices (van der Waarde) of graphic design.

## **Format, Function and Use**

A study (Paton and Dorst) among professional graphic designers attempts to dissect practitioners’ perceptions of different aspects of briefing as a process of ‘framing’. Building on the broader theories of design researchers such as Nigel Cross, Bryan Lawson and Donald Schön, Paton and Dorst suggest that most of the designers preferred a collaborative briefing process where both they and client stakeholders were directly involved, without intermediaries. This concurs with the desire, from many graphic designers that I interviewed, for unobstructed engagement with the brief. Moreover, narratives from the online discussions that I investigated suggest that the lack of clear frameworks for graphic design briefs is a hotly debated topic, as are perceptions of stakeholder belligerence or misunderstanding. For example, in a

discussion from Graphic Design Forums designer experiences range from only ever receiving informal verbal instructions—“Basically, we’ve been handed design work and they tell us “We need this by EOD”” (VFernandes)—to feeling obligated to pressure stakeholders to provide a brief—“Put the burden on them to flesh out the details of a real brief and provide comprehensive material input” (HotButton) —to resignation to an apparent futility of gaining adequate design briefs from stakeholders because— “they will most likely never change” (KitchWitch). Such negative assumptions support Koslow, et al.’s. assertion that the absence of a comprehensive brief is the most “terrifying” thing for practitioners (9).

Thus, practitioners’ frustrations with stakeholders can become unproductive when there is an inadequate design brief, or if the creative requirements of a brief are otherwise removed from the direct orbit of graphic designers. This further informs a narrative of graphic designers perceiving some stakeholders as gatekeepers of the design brief. For example, one interviewed designer believed that stakeholders ‘don’t really understand the process’ (Patricia). Another interviewee suggested that disorganised briefs could be avoided by involving designers early in the process, ensuring that practitioners had direct access to the client as a creative source, rather than having to circumnavigate stakeholders (Marcus). Such perceptions appeared to reinforce beliefs among these practitioners that they lack design capital within the creative process.

These perceptions of gatekeeping of the design brief support suggestions of designers responding negatively when stakeholders approach the design process from a different perspective (Wall and Callister), if stakeholders assume a managerial position (Jacobs) and, in particular, if stakeholders are inexperienced in working with designers (Banks et al.; Holzmann and Golan). With such little clarity in the design briefing process, future research may consider comparisons with industries with more formalised briefing processes, established professional statuses, or more linear histories. Indeed, the uneven historical development of graphic design (Frascara; Julier and Narotzky) may influence the inconsistency of its briefing process.

## Inconsistency as Research Opportunity

The inconsistent state of the graphic design brief is reflective of the broader profession that it resides within. Graphic design as a profession remains fluid and inconsistent (Dorland, *Tell Me*; Jacobs), with even its own practitioners unable to agree on its parameters or even what to call the practice (Meron, *Terminology*).

Pedagogically, graphic design is still emerging as an independent discipline (Cabianca; Davis), struggling to gain capital outside of existing and broader creative practices (Poynor; Triggs). The inherent interdisciplinarity (Harland) and intangibility of graphic design also impacts the difficulty of engaging with the briefing process. Indeed, graphic design's practices have been described as "somewhere between science and superstition (or fact and anecdote)" (Heller, *Teaching* par. 3). With such obstacles rendering the discipline fractured (Ambrose et al.), it is understandable that stakeholders might find engaging productively with graphic design briefs challenging. This can become problematic, with inadequate stakeholder affinity or understanding of design issues potentially leading to creative discord (Banks et al.; Holzmann and Golan).

Identifying potentially problematic and haphazard aspects of the design brief and process also presents opportunities to add value to research into broader relationships between graphic designers and stakeholders. It suggests a practical area of study with which scholarly research on collaborative design approaches might intersect with professional graphic design practice. Indeed, recent research suggests that collaborative approaches offer both process and educational advantages, particularly in the area of persona development, having the ability to discover the "real" brief (Taffe 394).

Thus, framing the brief as a collaborative, educative and negotiative process may allow creative professionals to elucidate and manage the disparate parts of a design process, such as timeframes, stakeholders, and task responsibilities, as well as the cost implications of stakeholder actions such as unscheduled amendments. It can encourage the formalisation of incomplete vernacular briefs, as well as allow for the influence of diverse briefing methods, such as the one-page creative brief of advertising agencies, or more formal project management practices, while allowing

for some of the fluidity of more agile approaches: acknowledging that changes may be required, while keeping all parties informed and involved.

In turn, collaborative approaches may contribute towards enabling the value of contributions from both graphic designers and stakeholders and it seems beneficial to look towards design research methodologies that promote collaborative pathways. Mark Steen, for example, argues for Co-design as a form of design thinking for enabling stakeholders to combine knowledge with negotiation to implement change (27). Collaborative design methods have also been advocated for use between designers and users, with stakeholders on shared projects, and with external collaborators (Binder and Brandt). Others have argued that Co-design methods facilitate stakeholder collaboration “across and within institutional structures” while challenging existing power relations, albeit leaving structural changes largely unaffected (Farr 637).

The challenge for collaborative design research, is to seek opportunities and methodologies to conduct design brief research within a graphic design process that often appears amorphous, while also manifesting complex designer—stakeholder dynamics. Doubly so, when the research focus—the graphic design brief—often appears as nebulous an entity as the practice it emerges from.

## Conclusion

The research discussed in this article suggests that graphic designers distrust a creative process that itself symbolises an inconsistent, reactive and often accidental historical development of their profession and pedagogy. Reflecting this, the graphic design brief emerges almost as a metaphor for this process. The lack of overt discussion about the format, scope and process of the brief feeds into the wider framework of graphic design’s struggle to become an independent scholarly discipline. This, in turn, potentially undermines the professional authority of graphic design practice that some of its practitioners believe is deficient.

Ultimately, the brief and its processes must become research-informed parts of graphic design pedagogy. Embracing the brief as a pedagogical, generative and inseparable part of the design process can inform the discourse within education,

adding scholarly value to practice and potentially resulting in increased agency for practitioners.

The chameleon-like nature of graphic design's constant adaptation to ever-changing industry requirements makes research into the role and influences of its briefing process challenging. Thus, it also follows that the graphic design brief is unlikely to quickly become as formalised a document or process as those from other disciplines. But these are challenges that scholars and professionals must surely embrace, if pedagogy is to gain the research evidence to influence practice. As this article argues, the often obfuscated practices and inherent interdisciplinarity of graphic design benefit from experimental research methods, while graphic designers appear responsive to inclusive approaches. Thus, performative methods appear effective as tools of discovery and collaborative methodologies offer hope for organisational intervention.

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