

**On Language:**  
**A Letter to all Professionals in the**  
**Graphic Communication Profession**  
*(Written in 2008 from a book published in 2000)*

from

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Dear colleagues from around the country and the world,

I've written this piece several years ago and now wish to share it broadly.

I am addressing the issue of how to better promote our industry and graphic arts academic programs. There is continuing concern about how to get more students interested in studying what we teach, how to attract more employees to our field, and how to get parents to understand what we are preparing young people for in the way of careers.

I have been professing for years to my colleagues in education and industry, at meetings, in articles and other publications that we are our own worst enemy in the way we promote ourselves. We are good technicians but as a group we are not good scholars nor are we good marketers. When are we going to stop using words such as "print shop", "craft", "craftsmen", "trade" and related descriptors in referring to who we are and what we do?

To expand upon this I refer you to a passage in my book, *Understanding Graphic Communication*, published by PIA/GATFPpress. This is not to promote the book but it is to merely make my point. The entire book was written to demonstrate the power and potency of our profession. However, the section on "language" is particularly relevant to the points I am making about communicating our image.

**From: "Understanding Graphic Communication,"**  
**(PIA/GATFPpress, 2000), pp. 140-142.**

**On Language**

The way one talks about oneself establishes an image that is difficult to change. One would think that an industry as concerned about its image as the printing industry would be sensitive to how it "speaks" about itself. Those in the printing industry and, worse, those in printing education are as responsible as anyone for a poor image that has placed printing near the bottom of the list of favorable occupations for young people seeking careers.

Many people on all levels of the printing industry from line workers to presidents and from educators to association executives, speak about the industry in ways that project an image of the industry as it was in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s or even earlier. It seems ridiculous to refer to an industry involved in computer applications, satellite transmission, integrated systems, and digital imaging as being made up of "shops." Yet, reference to "shops" is pervasive in industry publications and even in speeches given to industry groups. Indeed, I have heard graphic arts educators at conferences use such references. Reference to printing companies as shops, should be stopped

immediately. There used to be "print shops" when there were also butcher shops, bakeshops, shoe (maker) shops, and fish shops. The printing shop was merely one of the many shops serving the needs of small communities or neighborhoods.

We also often hear reference to the use of the words "house" and "room" as in "printing house" or "pressroom." These words date back to when the typical "print shop" was located in a building that also served as a house where the printer lived, and the presses were located in one room of the house; hence, the word "pressroom." Today we have printing plants or companies (not print shops or houses) that are made-up of departments such as prepress or premedia departments, press departments, and finishing departments.

Prepress departments, though becoming obsolete, often included "image assembly." Yet for decades the archaic term "stripping" was used for image assembly and not descriptive of what image assembly came to involve. Typesetting too is nearly obsolete as a printing company department. However, prior to its near demise typesetting became an imagesetting operation including the composition of not only but pictorial graphics as well. In fact, the entirety of copy preparation (we used to call it paste-up), imagesetting (we used to call it typesetting), scanning (we used to call it camera work), image assembly (we used to call it stripping), and platemaking is now taking place in electronic imaging or electronic pre-press departments. Preflighting, digital proofing, file management, and workflow management are now all relevant descriptors of what we do in prepress.

While the reference to "industry" is still appropriate, the printing industry is rapidly becoming a profession as it moves from craft to manufacturing, and now toward service. An industry is typically equated with mostly manufacturing whereas a profession provides mostly services. For example, lawyers, doctors, engineers, educators, and other service providers are part of a profession. Hence, when referring to the printing industry, or graphic communication profession, those in the field should replace the use of the word "craft" with "skill" because "craft" is equated with an individual's ability that may differ from the ability of others practicing the same "craft." A "skill" is more equated with a standard operating procedure that can be learned and practiced with near equal efficiency by a group of individuals.

The word "trade" as related to graphic communication should be changed to "occupation" or "profession." The term "trade" is analogous to "craft" and "craftsman" in the way that "occupation" or "profession" is analogous to "skill" and "technician." Likewise, reference to "trade house" as a supplier of color separations and other related prepress services should be changed to "prepress vendor" or "service bureau." Though today the service bureau is nearly obsolete. These are more contemporary references that better describe the services provided.

The printing industry has long used expressions in a sexist mode. For example, we often hear reference to a pressman, craftsman, and foreman whereas more appropriate expressions are press operator, technician, and manager or supervisor as a growing number of practitioners in the field are women. The most current references to those who prepare material for our field and those who produce print media are "content creators" and "service providers."

As we look to the products and services of our industry becoming less ink on paper and more use of alternative imaging methods, we may want to replace the use of the word "printing" with an alternative, more encompassing descriptor, such as "imaging." Presently, the words "printing", "graphic arts", and "graphic communication" are used interchangeably with reference to "graphic communication" growing in popularity. Perhaps the combined words "printing and imaging" is an appropriate transitory reference.

The point behind this treatise on language is to encourage discussing and describing the printing, graphic arts, or graphic communication field in ways that adequately reflect a modern image of an industry or profession ready to serve the contemporary communication needs of society. Read the two statements that follow and determine the one that best reflects the image most deserving of our industry today.

### Statement "A"

Consider a job in the printing trade. There are many printing shops or houses in which you can develop craftsmanship and become a pressman. Maybe you will someday become a pressroom foreman.

### Statement "B"

Consider a profession or occupation in graphic communication. There are many companies in which you can become an expert in electronic and digital imaging or imaging sciences. Maybe you will someday become a technical specialist or department manager.

## **One Last Point on Language**

The preoccupation with referring to our industry incorrectly is so ingrained that I cannot even convince those who opt to use the reference "graphic communications" that they are grammatically incorrect in pluralizing the word "communication." Where's the scholarship? Where's the intellectual behavior? Where's the critical thinking? Do people study Biology or Biologies, Math or Maths, Chemistry or Chemistries, Industrial Technology or Industrial Technologies, Graphic Design or Graphic Designs, Engineering or Engineerings, Architecture or Architectures. Is it the Steel industry or the Steels industry. Is the person doing my taxes in the Accounting field or the Accountings field. I can go on. It just so happens that Graphic Communication is merely one of the Communications disciplines with include Speech Communication, Organizational Communication, Small Group Communication, Non-verbal Communication, and so on. Collectively they are "Communications." However, individually they are "Communication" disciplines. For the sake of good scholarship, clear communication, and mere grammatical accuracy, I suggest that all academic departments, programs, and industry organizations that refer to "Graphic Communications," drop the "s" immediately in all future titling and correspondence.

If anyone believes that I am wrong, I would sure like to know the reason.

All of us in the position of developing and leading our profession should become sensitive to every aspect of correctness possible. We will falter from time to time, but those of us in education and research must portray ideal conditions realizing that the professional population at large may fall a bit short of the ideal.

Anyway, on the "communication" vs. "communications" issue, it may make absolutely no difference to anyone other than scholars who are committed to accuracy. The real issue is that one is correct and one is incorrect. And as we attempt to move our discipline to be equated with other academic disciplines on the highest order, those of us in education—K through 12, college, and graduate school--should be committed to accuracy. If we are not, someone somewhere will eventually catch us.

Here's an analogy (perhaps a bad one). In the grand scheme of things did it really matter in the 1980s that Dan Quail spelled "potatoe" when the correct spelling is "potato"? This was a big deal in the press when it occurred. Perhaps it did matter to Quail when he was caught. Maybe it was just an indication of his carelessness that might have been carried over to larger issues had he been elected president.

One might argue that, sure it's plural because there are many ways to communicate graphically. There's television, there's movies, there's video games, etc. One can even argue that using one's eyes is graphic communication. One might even argue that thinking is a form of graphic communication because we think in images. So, if this is all true than everything is graphic communication. If everything is graphic communication then the term has no specific meaning. We could just as well call the discipline "Living." However, you and I know that we do not define our discipline in this broad way. We define it specifically to the point of distinguishing it from graphic design--a big bone of contention in education, isn't it? Hence, my argument is that we in the profession know specifically what we are referring to and it is a singular expression.

I hope that all of you "listening in" take my points seriously. They are a first step in portraying an image of who we are and what we do in a way that will convey a positive vision to high school counselors, parents, and most important to prospective students and graphic communication employees.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hank R. Lee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.