

## **Pedagogy Proceedings from the College English Association's 2017 Conference: Islands**

### **Narrative Theory: A Bridge between Two Departmental Islands**

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#### **Susanna's Island: General Education**

The authors have worked together (Angie in graphic design and Susanna in general education, teaching English-related courses) at Kendall College of Art and Design (KCAD), in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for over a decade. For a good portion of that time, KCAD has been revising its General Education program. The new program is being rolled out this fall, and the two of us served on the General Education committee that birthed a new concept for general education at the college. As part of that birthing process, we came to understand how much our disciplines have to do with each other. In fact, one of the new tracks (much like a minor) in our GE curriculum is in “narrative studies,” along with tracks in cultural studies and philosophy. Our committee decided that these three areas would have the most resonance with our students, all of whom major in art- and design-related fields.

But perhaps none will have more resonance than narrative studies. The word *narrative* and the concept of *storytelling* are now common in many fields—not just literary studies, but

fields as distinct as medicine, business, and design. As a person who regularly teaches both the construction of narratives and the analysis of them, I was intrigued to learn how much my colleagues in graphic design discussed the ideas surrounding storytelling and narrative technique. As Angie and I talked, we decided we needed to do more to bridge the often-troubling gap between the work students do in their general education courses and that which they do in their graphic design major. Too often it seems to these students that their “academic” and “studio” studies (the terms we tend to use at Kendall) are indeed like two islands with no clear bridge in between. We wondered how we could demonstrate more powerfully the ways in which both we and our students could make and support effective bridges.

Recognizing that discussion of narrative existed in both “halves” of students’ college lives, we wondered how we could make even more *direct* connections by bringing some literature and literary analysis directly into the design classroom—in this case, Angie’s Advertising Design studio course. We wanted to see how this experiment might affect graphic design students’ learning. And, as a more long-term goal, we wanted to think about how we might try to bridge these disciplinary islands, too, through our roles as faculty members.

We planned two lunch-hour sessions that would achieve the following outcomes: students would (1) appreciate humans’ inextricable and constant relationships with stories (appreciating that we tell them constantly, consume them, make them when they’re only suggested, and so on); (2) identify common elements of narrative structure and observe how they might be manipulated for effect; (3) observe how narrative strategies operate in visual stories,

particularly ads—both print and time-based; and (4) identify appropriate narrative examples of their own to share with the class.

During the first session, students were invited to make a brief inventory of all the stories they had told, consumed, and/or experienced over the past day. Then we viewed two clips: (1) Jonathan Gottshall’s “Storytelling Animal” Ted Talk, in which he describes his notion of *homo fictus*, which is the idea that humans are hardwired for story—that we don’t just *like* them, we can’t *live* without them; and (2) J.J. Abrams’s Ted Talk about storytelling and his idea of the “mystery box” that is a part of effective stories—the conflict or “itchy piece” that sets them in motion and creates their energy.

We reviewed the parts of traditional narrative structure (i.e., exposition, rising action, climax/epiphany, falling action, and resolution) but encouraged students to consider structure not as, say, a brick building but as a dynamic roller coaster, which would move their audience through an energetic experience. We viewed an opening from a James Bond film as one example of an obvious departure from traditional structure, the story beginning—as so many Bond films do—in *media res*. And we concluded our first session by reading aloud a very short story called “Ramona” by Sarah Gerkenmeyer—a brief coming of age story featuring a first-person narrator reflecting on her teenage friendship with a girl, Ramona, who had an unusual medical ailment. That story suited our purposes because it was short, used first-person narration in an interesting way, was visceral, and demonstrated a way to depart from traditional structure.

During our second 40-minute session, we reviewed narrative structure briefly and then—given some helpful feedback from Angie after the first session—focused on two key narrative strategies that I thought might have particular resonance for visual communications: (1) the power of withholding information to allow the audience to participate and “complete” the communication, and (2) the idea that good stories often defeat audience’s expectations. Both “withholding” and “defeating expectations,” we observed, could give a certain “energy” to stories. I showed some ads that I believed provided that kind of “roller coaster” energy/experience and then students showed the examples they had brought. Most of them had brought video advertisements, and—as a group—we discussed the various narrative strategies that each example had used. After that, Angie guided students through the rest of the experience.

## **Angie’s Island: Graphic Design**

As Susanna mentioned, the practice of graphic design uses stories to connect audiences to ideas, products, brands, experiences, and more. There is a lot of buzz in my industry about “telling great stories” and “having compelling narratives,” but as an educator, I’ve found that there aren’t nearly enough tools to help students of graphic design learn how to tell stories effectively. I was truly curious to see if our experiment would make a difference in the diversity of approaches my students would apply to their ideation process and if it would help them learn how to think more strategically about how to tell the story as they considered the visual direction, the voice, and the experience of their ad campaigns.

After Susanna completed her second lecture, I asked my students to consider a few things about storytelling related directly to advertising and what they were going to undertake with their project. I asked them to do some research and then tell me what they thought the story was of the brand and product they had chosen to advertise, what place the product held in people's lives, and what kinds of problems it solved for those people. Afterward, they had to analyze this information to determine what kind of story they wanted their ad campaign to tell about the brand and product, what designers sometimes call the "key message." In my experience, asking them to do this type of research and contemplation almost *always* leads to them *telling better stories* in their work.

The part I really needed Susanna's help and expertise with was helping them to see new ways to *tell those stories better*. My discipline has many tools with which to tell a story and an infinite number of ways they can apply these tools conceptually and compositionally. Yet having so many possibilities can lead to decision making issues during the concepting process, as students tend to wander aimlessly as they explore different methods for executing their story, many times wandering too far away or running out of ideas and turning to safe, cliché, and expected approaches. My hope was that by expanding their toolbox to include the tools of narrative discourse, students would be given a more defined and structured way to explore ideas, and it would help keep them on a path that stays true to the story they want to tell.

Once the students had defined the direction of their campaign by determining the broad, general story they wanted to tell, they applied that message to a range of ideas in small, quick, informal "thumbnail" sketches ([Fig. 1](#)).

For our experiment, I also provided them with an extra thumbnail sheet that specifically directed them to come up with concepts using the narrative tools and techniques Susanna had provided to them, to see how they might apply those techniques ([Fig. 2](#)).

They eventually chose their best ideas, translated them to full-page sketches with more detail as to both the visual and messaging approach, and then presented their rough sketches and a visual “mood board” to the entire class for critique and help in determining the final direction for their ad. Once the final story and its narrative technique were chosen, the students then moved to the computer to explore how the story would be executed and brought to life visually.

To demonstrate the results of our experiment, I’ve chosen seven examples from my class, each of whom used one of the narrative techniques Susanna taught them and applied it to their concept, rough, and final ad design (see [Appendix B](#)).

The first two represent story arc and structure. For graphic design students, the exposition might be beginning of the story in an ad, before we are even introduced to the problem or the product, and the conflict or tension point would be the consumer’s problem, something the advertised product or service could potentially solve for the consumer. The climax or resolution occurs when the product demonstrates its ability to solve the problem, and the falling action is the action or next step the designer wants the consumer to take after engaging with the ad.

Bob’s ad is for Pioneer DJ and the story he wants it to tell is about how Pioneer DJ equipment is the industry standard for performing live ([Fig. 3](#) and [Fig. 4](#)).

His final ad concept presents the story's exposition by presenting the moments right up until the product will be demonstrated ([Fig. 5](#)).

Karina's ad for Canon Cameras presents the climax—a demonstration of how the product solves the problem—and the ad is also an example of defeating the audience's expectations by being about a camera rather than what the headline might lead you to believe the ad is about ([Fig. 6](#) and [Fig. 7](#)).

A question or statement is on one page, and then the reader is surprised by turning the page to see that the ad is for Canon and, further, that one of the control features of the camera has solved the problems associated with low-quality cell-phone camera photos ([Fig. 8](#)).

The last few examples represent some of the other narrative techniques they learned. One of the problems I often see is that students tend to only think of presenting narratives chronologically—sometimes including a lot of dull facts that simply “dump” the content on the reader without thought to effect. Frequently, students devote too little thought to the readers' experiences with the narrative and productive ways to shape those experiences through the ad's purposeful arrangement. To them, the concept of “structure” connotes a tall, immobile building rather than the roller coaster Susanna described to them that might offer its audience more of an “experience.”

Megan's ad is for Post-It notes and tells the story of how the product helps set ideas free ([Fig. 9](#) and [Fig. 10](#)).

Her ad depicts an energetic experience, which is arranged so that you feel the chaos of a swarm of ideas during the creative process, and then you turn the page and the chaos is gone and a solution stands alone. It also is a good example of beginning *in media res* because you enter the story in the middle of the chaos of the creative process, something all people in my industry can relate to ([Fig. 11](#)).

In Alyssa's ad for Lokai bracelets, the story is about how the bracelets remind you to stay centered and balanced within your busy life ([Fig. 12](#) and [Fig. 13](#)).

Her billboard creates an experience by seeing the product and feeling the moment from a first-person point of view ([Fig. 14](#)).

Her print ad presents a juxtaposition, which defeats expectations by presenting an upside-down view as a visual representation of staying grounded ([Fig. 15](#)).

Mandy's ad for SmartWool socks invites audience participation by not showing them the entire story ([Fig. 16](#) and [Fig. 17](#)).

It asks them to imagine how much further and longer they could go in their outdoor athletic endeavors if they used the product ([Fig. 18](#)).

Finally, Brent wanted his ad for Doc Martens boots to tell the story of a boot that makes its wearers feel strong and to allow them to confidently express themselves so that they can stand up for something they believe in ([Fig. 19](#) and [Fig. 20](#)).



His ad creates interest by withholding information and asking the viewer to read into the photograph by imagining that someone in the crowd of protestors is wearing the product. It also defeats expectations of what you might expect to see in an ad for a fashion-related product (Fig. 21).

In the end, the objective of narrative in any media, in words or in images, is the same—to entertain, elicit an emotional or behavioral response, to engage and have an impact, and to provide meaning and create relationships. Whatever the medium, Susanna and I agree that building a bridge between what she teaches in her English-related courses and what I teach in my design courses helped to clarify for students the range of options open to them and prompted them to come up with more creative ways to present effective, engaging final pieces to their audience. In addition, we hope that the experience demonstrated to students the vital bridges among the components of their college curriculum that all-too-often feel to them more like islands.

## Appendix A

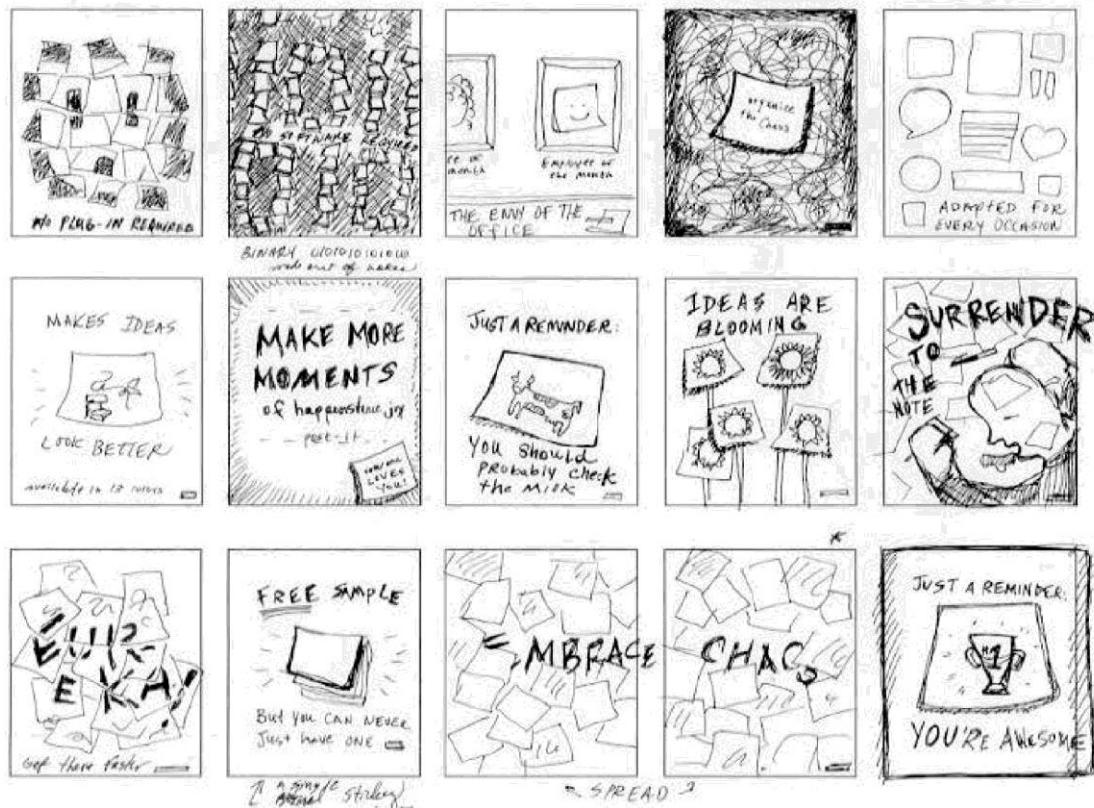


Figure 1: Megan's general thumbnails for Post-It Notes ad campaign, used with permission by Megan Crouch, 2017

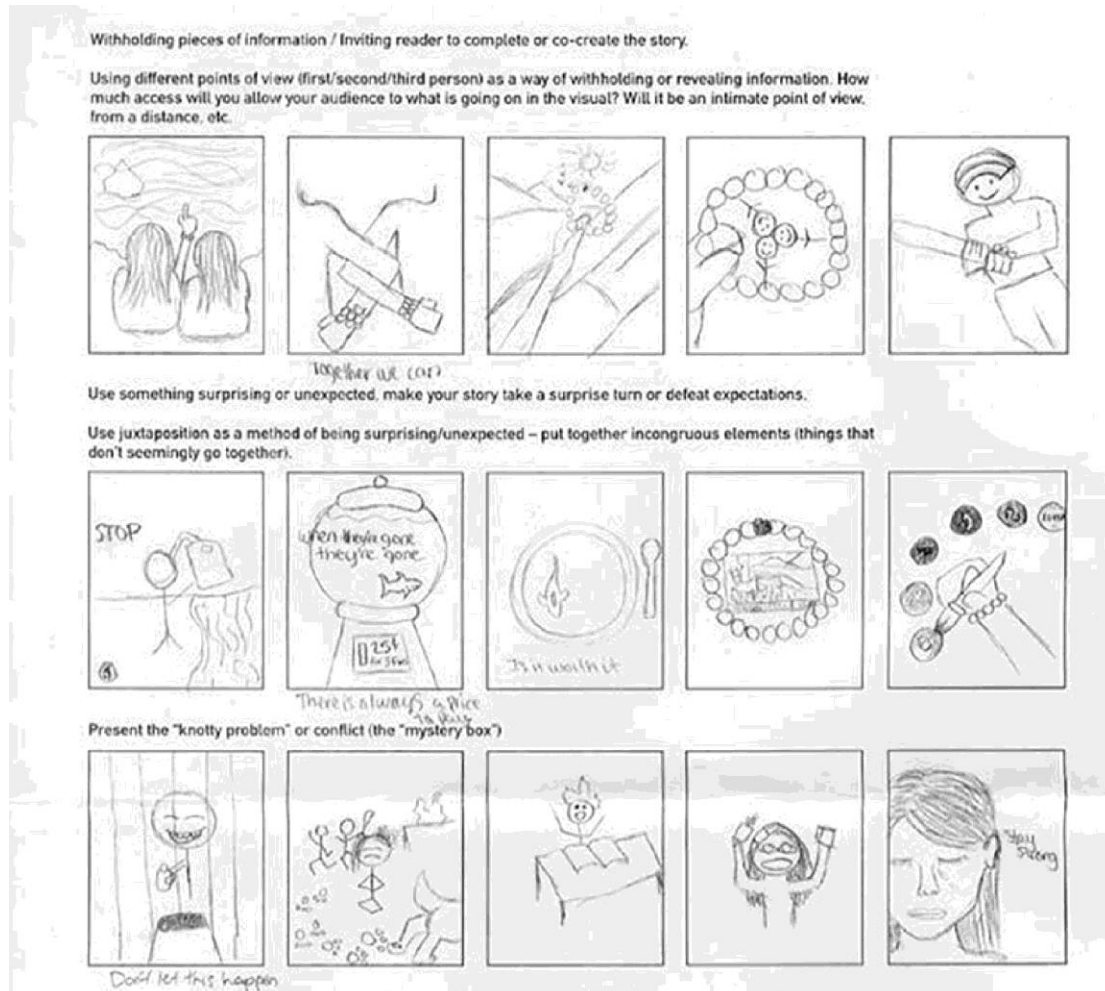


Figure 2: Alyssa's thumbnails directed toward specific narrative techniques, used with permission by Alyssa Johnson, 2017

## Appendix B



Figure 3: Bob's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for Pioneer DJ ad, used with permission by Bob Vanderzwaag, 2017





Figure 4: Bob's roughs and mood board for Pioneer DJ ad campaign, used with permission by Bob Vanderzwaag, 2017



Figure 5: One ad example from Bob's Pioneer DJ ad campaign, used with permission by Bob Vanderzwaag, 2017



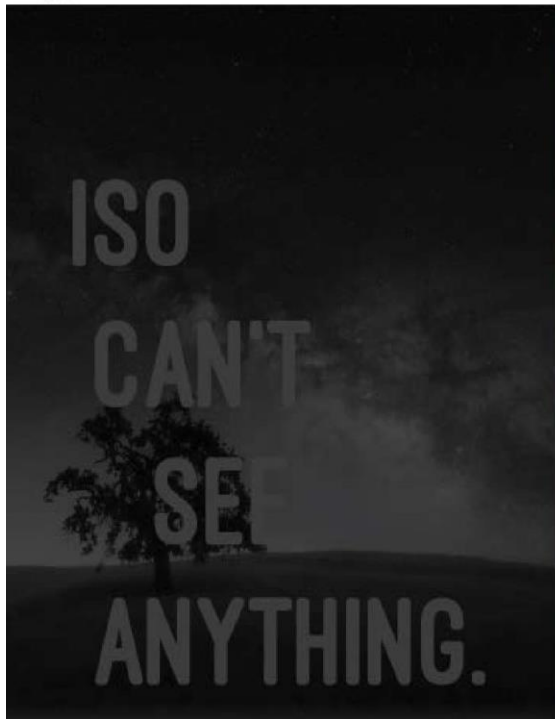
Figure 6: Karina's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for Canon ad campaign, used with permission by Karina Lopez, 2017



Figure 7: Karina's roughs and mood board for Canon ad campaign, used with permission by Karina Lopez, 2017



First page



Turn to next page



Figure 8: One ad example from Karina's Canon ad campaign, used with permission by Karina Lopez, 2017



Figure 9: Megan's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for Post-It Notes ad campaign, used with permission by Megan Crouch, 2017



Figure 10: Megan's roughs and mood board for Post-It Notes ad campaign, used with permission by Megan Crouch, 2017

First page (full spread)



Turn to next page (single)



Figure 11: One ad example from Megan's Post-It Notes ad campaign, used with permission by Megan Crouch, 2017





Figure 12: Alyssa's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for Lokai Bracelets ad campaign, used with permission by Alyssa Johnson, 2017



Figure 13: Alyssa's roughs and mood board for Lokai Bracelets ad campaign, used with permission by Alyssa Johnson, 2017



Figure 14: First ad example from Alyssa's Lokai Bracelets ad campaign, used with permission by Alyssa Johnson, 2017

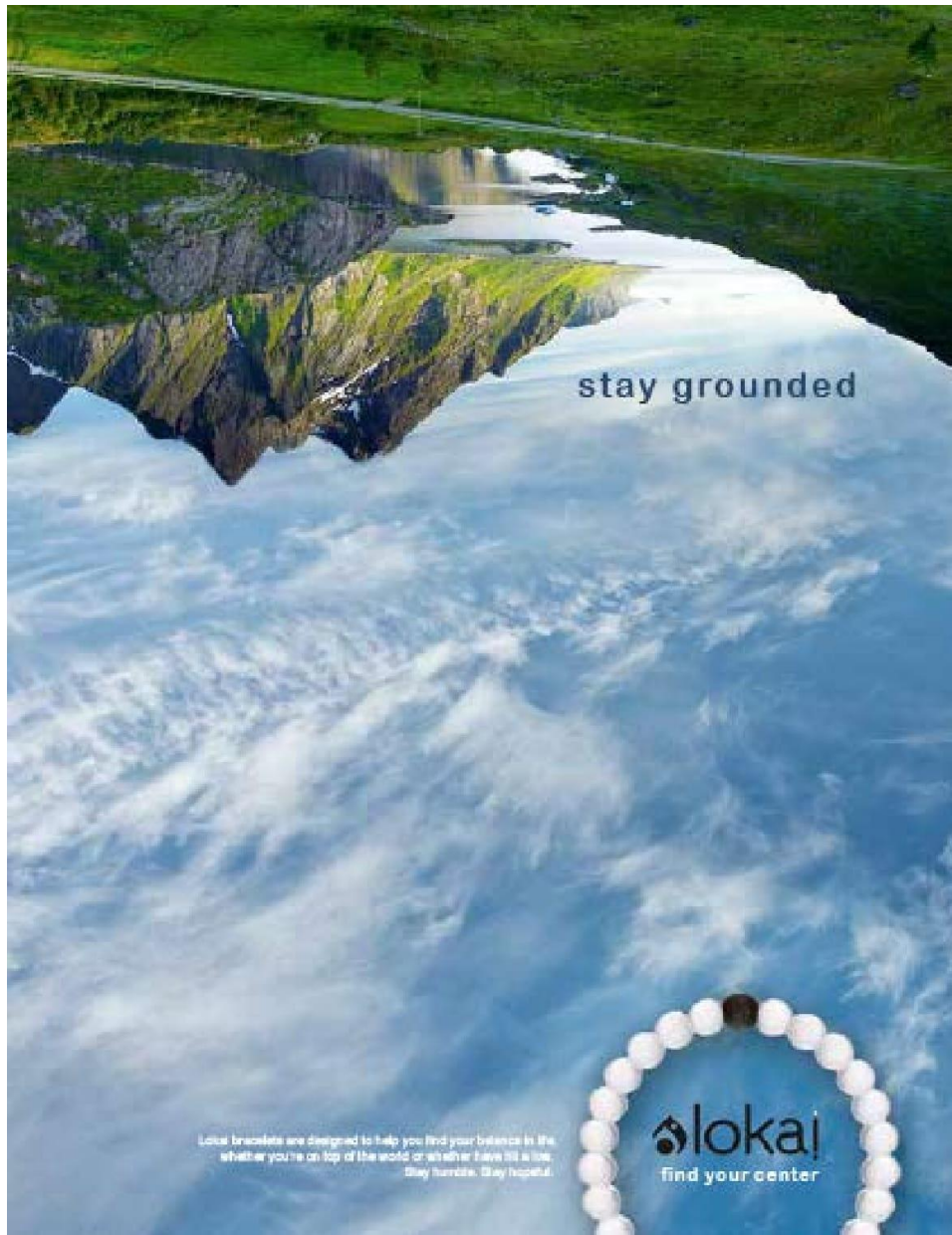


Figure 15: Second ad example from Alyssa's Lokai Bracelets ad campaign, used with permission by Alyssa Johnson, 2017





Figure 16: Mandy's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for SmartWool ad campaign, used with permission by Amanda Collins, 2017





Figure 17: Mandy's roughs and mood board for SmartWool ad campaign, used with permission by Amanda Collins, 2017

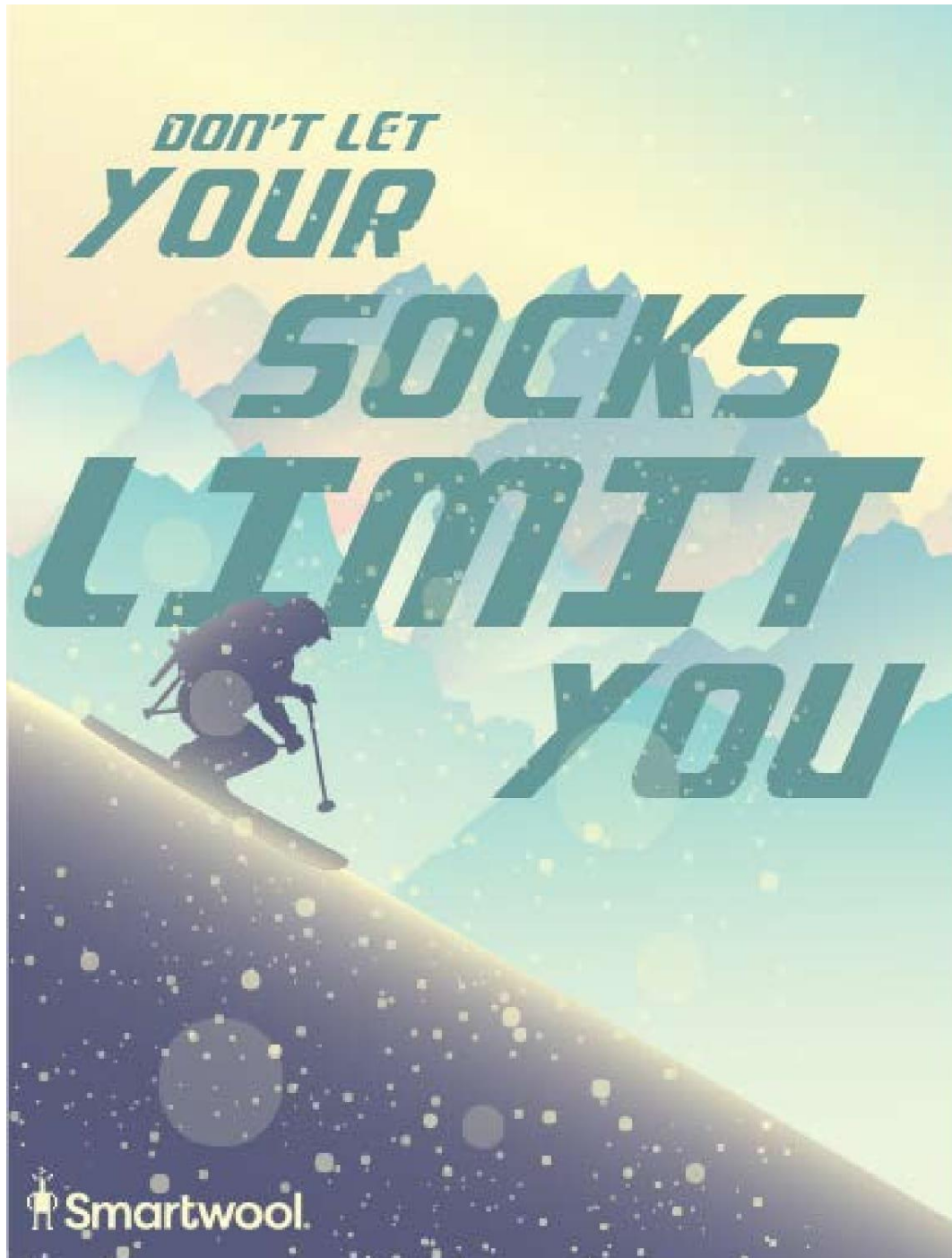


Figure 18: One ad example from Mandy's SmartWool ad campaign, used with permission by Amanda Collins, 2017

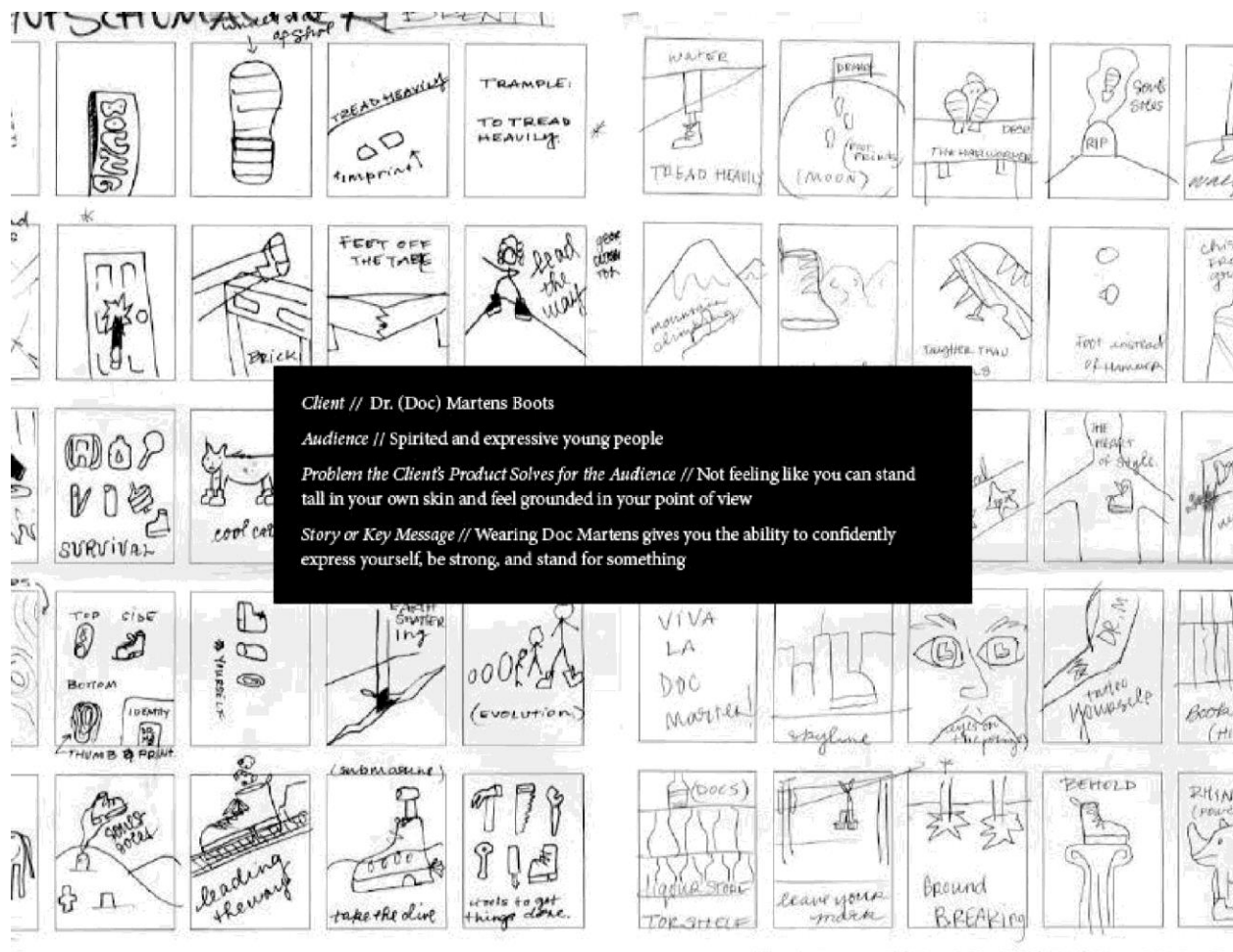


Figure 19: Brent's thumbnails and details from the creative brief for Doc Martens ad campaign, used with permission by Brent Schumacher, 2017



Figure 20: Brent's roughs and mood board for Doc Martens ad campaign, used with permission by Brent Schumacher, 2017



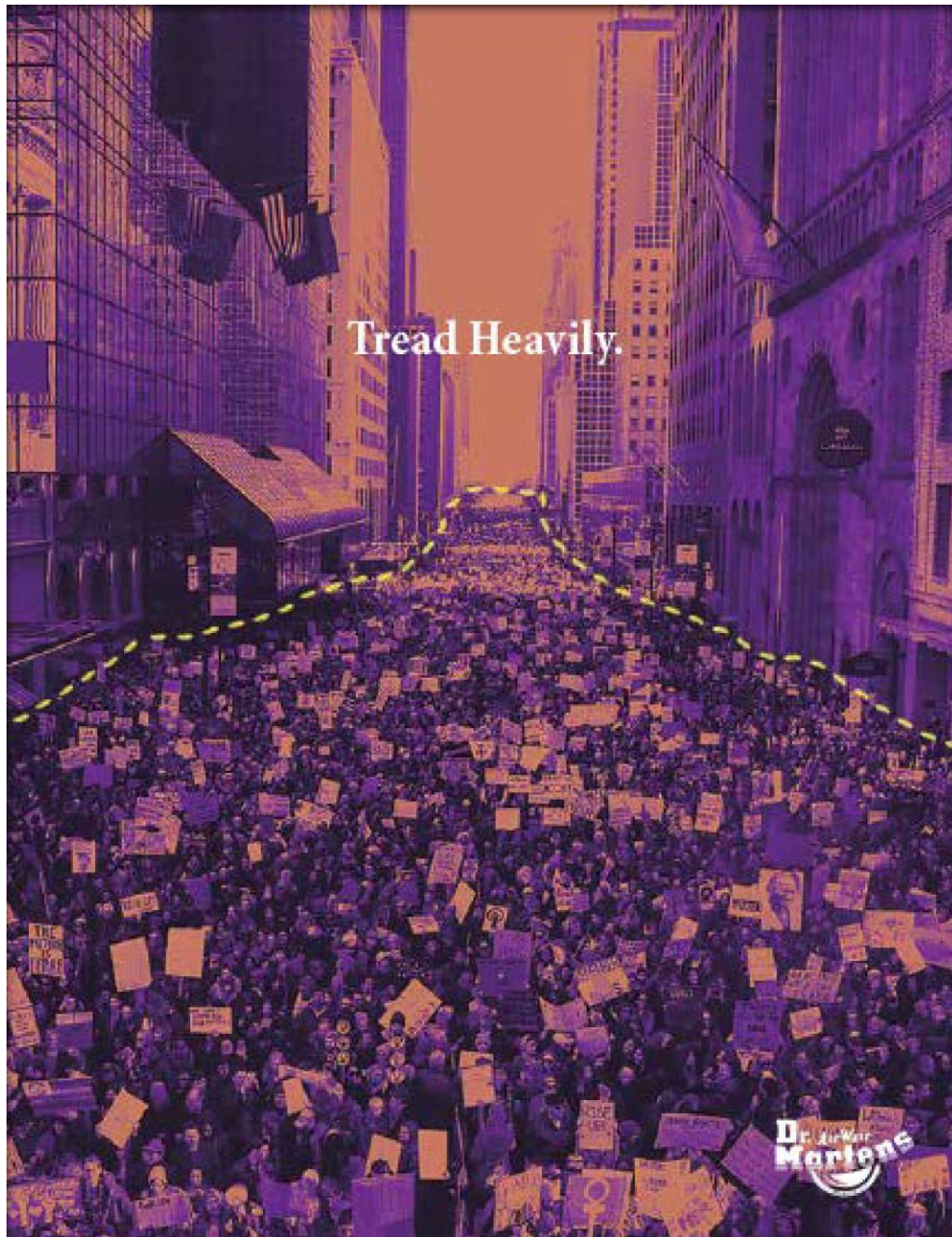


Figure 21: One ad example from Brent's Doc Martens ad campaign, used with permission by Brent Schumacher, 2017

## Works Cited

Gerkenmeyer, Sarah. "Ramona." *American Short Fiction*, 1 April 2014.

<http://americanshortfiction.org/2014/04/01/ramona/>, Accessed 6 June 2017.