Fakes:

An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts

David Shields & Matthew Vollmer

Introduction

Learning How to Fake It:
A Brief (and Therefore Woefully Incomplete) Guide
to the Manufacture and Distribution of Fraudulent Artifacts

A JUSTIFICATION

Future anthropologists may formulate a multitude of claims about what defines our present age (that we were more connected or more disconnected, more distracted or more attentive, more liberated or more bureaucratized), but one assessment seems certain: that we will be known as the first era to become enslaved by our information—and by the devices that deliver it. Though we might be quick to identify as our tyrants the monitors and mobile devices into whose screens we so worshipfully stare, other, more subtle mechanisms have claimed a far wider empire: those being the genres and linguistic forms that structure our information. Genres dictate the shape, sound, and appearance of our information; genres set parameters, define boundaries, establish limitations.

In short: genres tell our words—and therefore us—what to do.

Texts, tweets, status updates, blogs, itineraries, instructions, lectures, permit forms, advertisements, primers, catalogs, comment cards, letters of recommendation and complaint, end-of-year reports, accidentally forwarded e-mail, traffic updates, greeting cards, insurance claims, and message board comments: each one of these categories represents a distinct space in which a particular type of communication event takes place; each one dictates that the language residing within must behave in particular ways and pre-scripted patterns. Thus, language becomes codified, confined, and restricted. And because whatever happens to language happens to us, we, too, become restrained. We find ourselves held against our will, hostages to five-paragraph essays, medical forms, reports, and worksheets. Thwarted by instructions, story problems, and analyses, we are bound by credit card contracts, rental agreements, liens, loans, and wills. We sign on the dotted line without reading the fine print. We agree, in our impatience to click ever forward, to terms and conditions with which we may or may not agree.

But now imagine this: our oft-repressed language staging a rebellion. What would such an event look like? What if, in addition to relaying information, the language within one of

these forms swerved, digressed, became elevated, and began to do something spectacular? What if the language within these forms enacted a giddy and imaginative revenge? What if, as we read through an index, catalog, disclaimer, or personal ad, we suddenly awoke to the story it was telling? Would not the thing—the artifact—come alive in a new and exciting way?

We—the authors of this manual, and the curators of the artifacts that follow—believe that it would. We believe in revival: that language can transform even the most lifeless of genres and therefore has the power to resurrect the soul, or whatever it is inside us that might otherwise wither, if not for the life-giving and life-sustaining energy of art. And so we ask you, whoever you might be, to join us in the reading, celebrating, and continued production of the joyous falsifications and fraudulent artifacts contained herein.

WHAT EXACTLY *IS* A "FRAUDULENT ARTIFACT"?

For our purposes, a fraudulent artifact is a text purporting to be a particular form of writing—a journal entry, a note, a yearbook letter, an e-mail, a transcript of a speech, a grocery list, a musical score, a screenplay—which also tells a story, stirs thought and emotion, inspires inquiry, initiates action, and/or calls into question that which is—or has purported to be—real. We use the word "purporting" because who is to say a text, even a fake one, is not what it *purports* to be? For example, is Daniel Orozco's "Officers Weep" not a series of police blotters? Yes it is. And yet: no it is not. Daniel Orozco, the author, is not a real policeman. Therefore, one could say that the "blotters" he's composed are not "real." And yet they appear to be. They persist in our imagination in ways that regular police blotters probably would not. They seem, as their obligatory notations morph into impassioned descriptions, like the best damn police blotters ever written.

Perhaps "fraudulent" is not an entirely suitable adjective. A fraudulent artifact takes a received form and infuses it with a story (possibly with characters, setting, surprising details, and a fast-beating heart in conflict with itself), and thus creates an object that is more "authentic" than the original upon which it was based—an object that becomes, in comparison to its original, archetypal. Perhaps we should have come up with a different name for these artifacts. Maybe we should have called them "classic" or "exemplary" or even "exquisite." In the end, though, we liked the idea of fraud. We like the idea of supporting artists for whom deception is the name of the game. There's a sort of honesty there, in the idea of "fraudulent artifact." A self-reflexivity. A confessional aspect that we find intriguing and real.

THE FIRST STEP: CHOOSE A FORM/GENRE

Each forgery—each fraudulent document—is different and, as such, will dictate its own terms, its own boundaries, limitations, margins, fonts, and layouts. It will be up to you—the forger—to know and learn the conventions of the form you choose. But first things first: begin by choosing a particular form or genre. Look to the following list for help.

Grocery list	Epistle	Report
Blog	Phone text	White paper
E-mail	Yearbook signatures	Recommendation letter
Poem	Sympathy card	Captain's log
Post-It	Web site	Phone call transcription
Complaint letter	Instructions	Diary entry
Apology	Police report	Prescription/ doctor's assessment
Love letter	Prophecy	Readers Write section of magazine
Breakup letter	Editorial	Epitaph
Op-ed	Product warning	School journal
Article	Lesson book	Receipt
Advertisement	Self-help	School essay
Political speech	Recipe	Song lyrics
Personal ad	Devotional	Catalog
Artwork tag	Ancient text	Screenplay
Label	Writing on bathroom wall	Postcard
Ingredient list	Comedy roast	Fortune
Play	Brochure	Biography
Sermon	Obituary	Dream journal
Billboard	Wedding announcement	Eviction notice
Print ad	Birth announcement	Ticket
Internet banner	Will and testament	Album insert
Spam	Congratulatory card	Baby book
Online chat	Birthday card	Memory book
YouTube comment	Get well card	Family genealogy
Inspirational poster	License/ID/passport	Medical history
Facebook post (with comments)	TV transcript	Fieldwork report
Twitter feed	Voicemail transcript	Tattoo
Newsletter	Menu	Review
Transcript of dictation	Tabloid article	Fan page
Encyclopedia entry	Future news story	"To do" list
PowerPoint	Speech	
Informational video	Board game rules	
Eulogy	Flyer	

IDENTIFY THE CONVENTIONS

An artifact, by definition, is an object—or in our case, a *text*—that has been constructed by a human being. As such, every artifact rises out of a series of decisions on the part of its maker. To choose one thing and not another in building an object is to hold fast to one idea of how it should be made (and how it should exist) while discarding others. If the "made thing" serves a purpose—if others recognize its necessity and decide to reproduce the object for themselves—some if not most of these original choices in the construction of the thing are sure to be replicated. In this way, over time, the artifact may change, but essential parts remain: a shelter, for instance, whether it be lean-to, pueblo, or chalet, may not have carpet or curtains or windows or chimneys, but it will surely have walls, an entrance, a roof. The made thing might be said to have a set of conventions—that is, qualities that set it apart as *that kind of thing*.

Thus, a reader comes to expect certain kinds of written artifacts to behave in particular ways. In order to create an authentic artifact, a fabricator must know the rules by which the artifact—again, in our case, a particular text—operates. A story problem may unfold in any number of ways, but it will no doubt present its reader with both a story and a problem. The prose of a newsletter might be said to frequently display a jaunty, freewheeling quality. Instructions may involve a series of terse commands. A letter will begin with a salutation. A diary will be written in first person, a contributor's note in third.

It is important to know and memorize the rules, not only because it will help you construct the sort of artifact you want to create, but because it will make the breaking of those rules that much more fun.

PAGE DESIGN AND LAYOUT:
ALLIES IN SUCCESSFUL DECEPTION

No matter what kind of artifact you're creating, you will need to study the layout of that particular artifact and replicate it. To pass inspection, your artifact should not only behave like an artifact, it should also *look* like an artifact. You are, in essence, making an ID card to fool a bouncer who's seen every version of fake ID the world has to offer. Therefore, you'd better look proper. If you're writing an auction catalog, as Charles McLeod does in "National Treasures," then take a look at an actual auction catalog and format your document accordingly. If you're spoofing an Amazon review, as Chris Bachelder does in "My Beard, Reviewed," consider including the stars that accompany those reviews (even if you have to use asterisks). If you're writing a series of profiles of fictional colleagues, consider using actual photographs. If you want your artifact to resemble a series of e-mails—like Robin Hemley's "Reply All," for instance—include the "to," "from," time signature, and subject lines.

In other words: if you want to enter the building, know the dress code.

BENDING AND/OR BREAKING THE RULES

Breaking and/or bending the rules is an essential though often perilous part of the process of constructing a fraudulent artifact. Breaking the rules involves risk. Risk produces tension. Tension produces energy. Energy produces momentum. And you don't want your artifact wasting away on a shelf. You want it to go places.

If you study enough templates, you will begin to see places in the text where liberties have—or could have been—taken. Where boundaries have shifted. Where digressions are made. Know the limitations, then redraw them while your reader isn't looking. And don't be afraid to imitate what's come before. Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" relays a series of instructions (many of which are counterintuitive); Donald Barthelme's "The Explanation" obscures as much as it reveals; Joseph Salvatore's "Practice Problem" is a story problem that seems like maybe it's had one too many drinks, but in doing so has achieved a florid and vigorous eloquence.

VOICE: THE KEY TO CREATING A COMPELLING ARTIFACT

Your artifact must reveal something about its maker—that is, its *purported* maker. The maker is and isn't you. You are not its creator as much as you are merely a conduit through which language passes, a DJ mashing up a hundred songs for a single epic dance-off. As such, your artifact will need a voice. It should, when played or read—not only to be heard but to be listened to—make a particular and captivating sound.

What do we mean by voice? We mean that the sound made by the words on the page, whether spoken aloud or heard in the reader's head, must contribute to a coherent and idiosyncratic song. Whether you know it or not, you are creating, when you create an artifact, music. Music is the by-product of any great textual artifact—especially fraudulent ones.

Would you rather bang on a piano or follow a deliberate melody, however faint, however simple, however elementary? Have you read and memorized the masters? Could you copy the sounds they make, the sounds they have been known to make? One would hope so. Look behind you. Ask yourself: who has come before? Might you replicate the elevated diction of the King James Bible? The sibilances of Sylvia Plath? The austerity of Lao Tzu? Steal from the masters—then tweak what you've stolen. Because even though there's a reason this stuff's been around for awhile, there's also a reason it can't simply be imitated. New times call for new forms, new words, and new sounds. And if you won't make them, who will?

A FINAL NOTE

This guide is incomplete. You knew that from the beginning (supposing you bothered to read the subtitle of this introduction) but we figured it was worth mentioning again. Even so, we hope it is a start. We hope that you will continue to support the creation of counterfeit texts, elaborate forgeries, and fraudulent artifacts, and that they will continue to beguile and sustain you.