Knock someone out with an incredible envelope

Custom envelopes are a great place to develop your layout skills

By James Dobson

I started doing custom envelopes about 20 years ago, for fun gifts for friends. Over the years, though, they have greatly influenced my signwriting. The envelopes are really just mini-signs—but with no design restraints other than the copy must be legible. They will make your signwriting design and layout skills stronger. You become better at prioritizing copy, choosing a primary focus point and eliminating pockets of negative space within the design. And they're great practice for lettering in general, particularly script.

People love 'em The other aspect is that people love receiving them! Many frame them and hang them on the wall. I've had postmen walk up long, unused driveways to personally deliver and congratulate the receiver. I've had to start sending the envelopes by registered post as occasionally they get stolen in transit.

By the way, they're entirely legal to do and I even have a letter from Australia Post stating this. So if you're addicted to lettering and design like me, read on and by all means give it a try—it's great fun and can really push your design skills!

I use the large A4 size pre-stamped envelopes (4-3/4-by-6-1/2-in.) because there is a large area on which to draw and the paper is heavier than the smaller sizes. I also know where the stamp is going to be.

Choose your weapons I use a variety of types of pencils and markers. I only use HB pencils because it causes you to become very familiar with what is possible with only one grade of lead, which is the most common type. You only need two black markers—one for the fine lines and one for the thicker lines and filling in. These are Artline 200 Series 0.4 fine and Artline 210 Series 0.6 medium for the thicker work.

The best colored pencils I've found are some of the cheapest—Faber Castell Classic Color. They cover really well and can be pushed on really hard without the lead breaking. They are also great for light shading and blends. The basic set is all I need. I hardly ever use the subtler pastel shades because of the weak contrast they provide.

Lay it out As in signwriting, the layout or compositional stage is usually the most important. This is the heart of the final product. I used to do rough pencil sketches first, but now I just do the layout very lightly on the envelope. The photo shows this first phase.

Next comes the outline stage, where we fine-tune the design. I only outline the larger secondary copy because filling in with the color around the letter invariably imposes on the letter face, and this can be corrected later as we fill in with the larger marker.
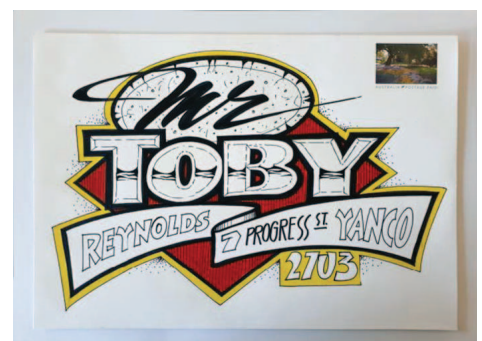
I like building up the colors from the background coming forward. This brings the design alive in stages so you can make minor adjustments as you go. I tend to outline most

No computer, no software—just good old fashioned drawing using a handful of colored pencils and a couple of markers.
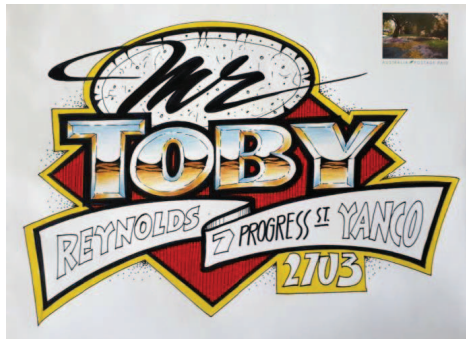
Start with a light pencil layout.

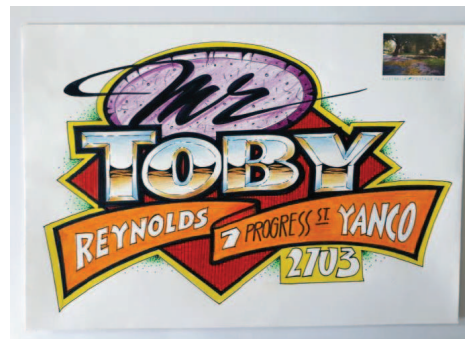**Using the markers,** add the black outlines and details.

Start building up the colors from background forward.

Begin the chrome effect with the sky blend first.

Next comes the horizon line and the brown blend.

Now add the purple and orange panels

of my stuff in yellow as it not only helps to tie all the design together, but also gives it a kind of vibrancy. Using colors with a high contrast will greatly help the strength of your design.

Throw in some chrome I love using the "chrome effect" for my primary copy on an envelope. It really pops and is quite easy to do once you understand the basics.

Here I've put in the blue sky blend first, which goes on the upper part and edges of the letter face. A little bit on the lower outer edges adds to the illusion.

I put the horizon line in with the marker then blend down with brown. A bit of brown is also put on the outer upper edges. Laying yellow over the brown will greatly improve the look of it as it is somehow flat and dead without it.

Next I add the purple in the top oval, keeping an upper left light source in mind. The orange is then laid down in the lower banner, slightly overlapping the outlined letter face so that there will be no white spots when we fill in with the black marker.

A light green is also lightly added on top of the small dots that I like to place in the apex points of the outline. This gives the design more depth and coherence.

Lastly the secondary copy is filled in and all the thicker black lines are gone over again so that the slightly overlapping color that occurs when we color in the panels and lettering is made black again. We can also correct small mistakes here as well.

Finish it off The final touch is a small white dot around the chrome lettering to give the illusion of a sort of wet-look shine. This is done with a Paper Mate Correction Pen.

You're probably wondering how long I spend on an envelope. They take me between 1 and 2 hours each. But I usually do several over a couple of days in between normal sign work.

I quite like lying in bed for a bit after I wake up and just running over the designs
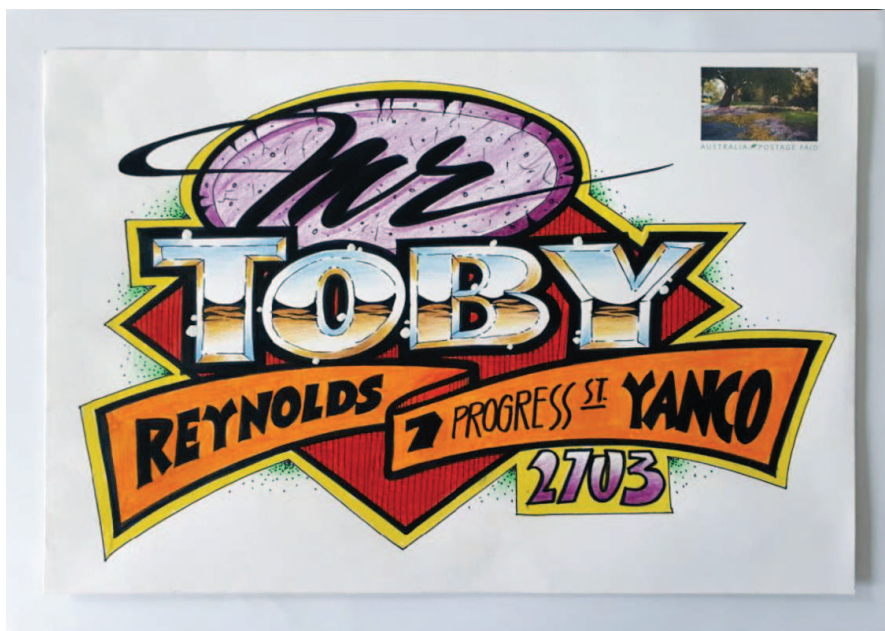
Add the last of the color on the secondary copy, then add the white highlights with the correction pen.

in my head—swapping out colors, letters, panel shapes, etc. I guess you could call it "signwriter's meditation."

So here's a great fun way to hone your layout and lettering skills and impress your friends. I know in this age of email, letters are sometime seen as a redundant and antiquated form of communication—but that is exactly what makes them unique. Signwriting is presently undergoing a resurgence because people see hand-done work as having more substance. The joy on people's faces when they receive these envelopes will show you that this is very true. Have fun doing your own! **SC**

James Dobson's shop is in Lake Macdonald, near Noosa in Queensland, Australia.

There's more on SignCraft.com: You'll see this article there with even more examples of James' incredible envelopes.