



The A-Z of writing

B-c

From B to c. Second in the series revisiting John Simmons' book *The Invisible Grail*. Follow it weekly for a workout in writing agility that will influence and improve your words for work. Next – C to d, published on Friday 24 April.

Before you begin, think about how you are going to grab your reader's attention. It might be a policy document or an email, the aim is the same – to persuade someone to read your words. Novelists know this and we can all learn from novelists, but I'm often puzzled why we are so reluctant to apply the lesson to our writing at work.

Here's the opening of Anthony Burgess's novel *Earthly Powers*:

"It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me."

Burgess is confronting this issue head on and saying, in effect, 'I know this game'. He's playing with his readers, expecting them to get the joke that he has written a first sentence with the deliberate aim of provoking us into paying attention. So many behavioural taboos broken in a few words – it sets a comic tone for the novel.

You, however, might be trying to persuade the Vice-Chancellor to adopt your proposal for a new department. A joke might not be the right way to start your proposal – but we need not rule it out straightaway. Consider alternatives in terms of content and style. Should you lead with an absolutely upfront

statement of your purpose in writing the paper? *We need it now*. Such a sentence conveys urgency and belief, the thought given added power by the few short words that express it. It's definitely not the tone of bureaucracy.

But it might not work. I accept that, because I don't know the paper you need to write. But you do. I'm just suggesting that your paper will have more chance of succeeding if it shows its intent from the very first words rather than an anodyne form of limbering up before getting to the point. *In this paper the department aims to provide evidence to establish the case that the university will benefit from a strategic approach to the challenging situation that currently faces higher education.*

In the original version of this B to c piece in *The Invisible Grail* I had used an example from Paul Auster's *True Tales of American Life*. I quoted a tragic tale. It now seems overwrought, which shows that times change, attitudes change and we always need to keep one thought ahead of the reader. To beckon the reader onwards. There are many ways to do this, and not every one will apply to every writing situation.

Think of your options. There will be a range of options if you allow yourself to go beyond the confines of the 'norm'. Is the norm ever good enough? What will be your tone?

“Is the norm ever good enough?”

Any of the following might work, but it's up to you to choose. You can make your first lines comic, tragic, historic, cryptic, poetic. Or even music. But it's always best not to sound bureaucratic.

With a new chapter released weekly, look out for the next in the series, C-d, arriving with you on Friday 24 April. Follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find your weekly dose of writing inspiration.

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