



The A-Z of writing

O-p

From O to p. Next in the series revisiting John Simmons' book [The Invisible Grail](#). Concise is good, precise is better: this is the mantra in O to p. Follow our weekly series for a workout in writing agility that will influence and improve your words for work. Next week – P to q, published on Friday 24 July.

Once I selected poems for all the members of the company where I was working. I invited them to live with the poem, reading it regularly, allowing meaning to inform them over time. I gave this poem by William Carlos Williams to the marketing director:

This is just to say

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox*

*and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast*

*Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold*

Amber told me that she read the poem every day after that. I had chosen poems to help people reflect – a quality we’ve rediscovered during the pandemic. The poem became a morning tonic. That was appropriate as Williams was a doctor who used to write his poems on prescription pads in between seeing patients. This helps to explain the brevity as well as the intensity of his poems.

Those are virtues to aim for in any kind of writing; I’m not talking only about poetry. There is an assumption that ‘concise is good’. Sometimes we need to challenge that and say ‘precise is better’. If we are to be precise, often we’ll need to use more words rather than fewer. I’ve come to suspect the cop-out that frequently accompanies the use of the phrase ‘less is more’. Minimalism in writing is not often exciting, nearly always cold and uninvolved; it can be Ronsseal irritating.

“Concise is good... precise is better.”

The real challenge is to use specific description well. ‘Plums are good’ is concise but not particularly enlightening. ‘I like the smooth skin of plums’ tells you a bit more. But the Williams poem tells you a lot more because it describes a scene and invites you into a situation through simple precise description. As a result, you have a picture of the plums in the icebox, you get a glimpse of the relationship that creates the situation, the bones of a story. Your imagination is then more than willing to colour in between the details, to flesh them out, to buff them **up**.

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

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