



The A-Z of writing

U-v

From U to v. The art of colloquialisms: can they work well? Next in the series revisiting John Simmons' book *The Invisible Grail*. Follow our weekly series for a workout in writing agility that will influence and improve your words for work. Next week – V to w, published on Friday 4 September.

Usually adverts come one at a time and are soon forgotten. But when I was first writing *The Invisible Grail*, back in 2002, I arrived at Covent Garden tube station to go to work and was met by a long vista of Orange posters. Across the tracks from the platform, there was a complete line of adverts for the mobile phone company. The quantity and the setting made them memorable. The ads showed photographs of 'ordinary people' of different ages living their own lifestyles, and different colloquial phrases came from the mouths of the people in the shots. The phrases were, in this order as you walked the length of the platform: oy oy, Eh up lad, yo, 'ello 'ello 'ello, ehoh, wotcha, hi, 'ello chuck.

The message was that Orange was for everyone. So they'd chosen colloquial English to get that across. I disliked the ads because they seemed a little patronising.

That's the danger of using the vernacular in your communication messages. It's very easy to hit a slightly off note. But the fact is that we are surrounded by everyday slang, code and street-talk, and most of that language has an energy and inventiveness that helps to refresh our view of life. But, as I put in *We, Me, Them & It*, 'the trouble with words is you never know whose mouths they've been in' – Dennis Potter.

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Dennis Potter

Marks & Spencer as the representative of middle England relaxed effortlessly into a poster that simply said 'Chill'. David Cameron lost credibility for many as prime minister when he described himself as 'chillaxed'. Phrases like 'sorted' slipped into the mainstream. Years later it rounded off an irritatingly repetitious series of security messages that went 'See it. Say it. Sorted.'

It's a mistake to resort to colloquialisms in an attempt to buy a bit of street-cred. It hardly ever sounds authentic and it opens the writer up to ridicule. There's no one better at exposing the ridiculous than Billy Connolly, the big yin. He's the best antidote to fakery because his humour is rooted in his ability to play with language. This is one of my favourites: 'That's what happens to songwriters when they die. They decompose.'

So I'm brought back to the memory of a tube station busker and a platform full of Orange ads. Still quite a connection but not a patch on Billy Connolly. We all sign off colloquially these days. 'Yours sincerely' is decomposing, replaced by emojis, lol or simply luv.

With a new chapter released weekly, look out for the next in the series, V-w, arriving with you on Friday 4 September. Follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find your weekly dose of writing inspiration.

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