



The A-Z of writing

V-w

From V to w. When you use quotations, don't just reach for the same old, same old. 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 – W to x, published on Friday 11 September.

Very few of you will have failed to notice that I like to use quotations. I like them for their own sake, because someone has said something enlightening, true or amusing, and also because they become part of the narrative argument. Last week I used the Dennis Potter quotation which, in a book, I'd adapted into many different variations, eg 'the trouble with words is that they don't always say what they mean'; 'the trouble with words is that they can run away with you'; 'the trouble with words is that they have a life of their own'.

I see quotations as a bit like the interchange stations on the tube. They allow you to continue your journey, while taking a short break, then heading off in a different direction. But you remain on the same journey.

'Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean where's it going to end?' Tom Stoppard
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead

Some quotations are seen as big landmarks, perceptions that you should stand and stare at in awe, opportunities to think about life, death and eternity, reflections to capture in a picture frame on the wall. I remember as a child being given for a school prize *Arthur Mee's book of everlasting things*. This weighty book came from the Victorian tradition of expecting culture to shape our moral sensibility. Take a great painting three times a day, an uplifting

quotation with your breakfast and afternoon tea, and the classical story in the evening after dinner. I'm less keen on these landmark quotations which are meant to give you guidance on life itself.

Abraham Lincoln, for example, wanted just such a quotation to give him regular sustenance. Apparently he admired these words that had been created for an eastern potentate: 'And this too shall pass away'. Lincoln cherished those words because you can read them in good times or bad. In times of triumph they would damp down pride. In times of affliction they would provide solace.

'I buy that' as the quotation might go, if it wasn't said by everyone. We demand individuality and memorability from our quotations. When you use them, use them to advance your argument not to put them in a picture frame. People need to see each quotation in a context that seems **new**.

“We demand individuality and memorability from our quotations.”

With a new chapter released weekly, look out for the next in the series, W-x, arriving with you on Friday 11 September. Follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find your weekly dose of writing inspiration.

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