



The A-Z of writing

“For writing to be effective it needs to be human, to connect us as humans. This is a time when we all need to be more aware of the potential of words – and to use them with greater joy.”

John Simmons,
Director and programme facilitator at Invisible Grail

In 2020, our colleague John Simmons revisited his book (and our namesake) *The Invisible Grail* to offer ideas that will help you find the words that will motivate, inspire and engage people in your writing. Brought together into one resource, here is the full A-z.

The Introduction

Two decades ago I wrote a book called *The Invisible Grail*. It was about writing better stories in and for organisations, because stories matter, they connect. The title is now adopted by us, a company whose aim is to improve leadership and communication in higher education, helping people align what they say and do with the very best of what their institutions stand for.

But the basic principles apply to any sector and any individual. Perhaps they have extra resonance in days of 'self-isolation' and 'social distancing' – words that are about keeping us apart when I want to bring us together. *Only connect.*

We all might have more need to write this year. Perhaps without face-to-face office distractions, forced into remote working, we will all realise the emotional connections made possible by writing.

So I thought this was a good moment to revisit the chapter in *The Invisible Grail* where I had set out thoughts on effective writing. For writing to be effective it needs to be human, to connect us as humans. This is a time when we all need to be more aware of the potential of words – and to use them with greater joy.

Joy? Yes, we need more of that. More hope, thoughtfulness, compassion too. Words, used well, are containers of compassion. They represent the choices we make, second by second. We choose words for their emotional effect, for their power to persuade, inform, entertain. The words we choose reflect who we are.

Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, remembered those who provided comfort in the camps. You can take away everything, he wrote, except "*the last of human freedoms – to choose our attitudes*".

I choose generosity and I offer words in that spirit, rather than leaden, mean-spirited words that weigh down our humanity. Feel the freedom of noticing and using words. Offer them to others as gifts not as self-centred transmissions.

So I will be revisiting *The Invisible Grail* chapter. I originally wrote it, because I believe in the creativity of constraints, by going from A to b, B to c, through the alphabet. And, at the time, while travelling on London Underground to work. The alphabetical constraint – start with a word beginning with the first letter, end with a word ending with the second – will still apply. Some sections will hardly change, perhaps a sign that the principle has stood the test of time. Others I will update. I hope you will find them useful.

A to b. Begin in the middle.

Any writer knows that it's not always easy to get started. Sometimes the world seems to be divided into writers and people who want to be writers. All of them might be struggling to get their first words down on the screen.

Part of the problem is that oh-so-familiar phrase 'begin at the beginning'. I hate the phrase. Whoever first said it was probably a fundamentalist, but how did God begin? Was he struck by light or by the need for light?

With any story, with any piece of writing, where is the real beginning? Realising the logical absurdity of that question, Laurence Sterne began his wonderfully absurd novel *Tristram Shandy* with the moment of his own conception:

*"Pray my dear, quoth my mother, have you forgot to wind up the clock? Good G**! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, - Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question! Pray, what was your father saying?
- Nothing."*

Begin at the beginning is impossible guidance. Sterne's joke is that his beginning was interrupted in the middle. My advice is 'begin in the middle'.

"My advice is 'begin in the middle'."

Notice how different writers start their work. Learn from great writers. Apply what you learn to the words you use for work, whether you're writing a proposal, an email, a blog or a report. Plunging your reader into the middle of things is the surest way to seize attention.

But care for your readers too. Having plunged them into deep water throw them the lifeline of words that will take them forward to meaning, to understand exactly where you and they are. There's a limit to the amount of surprise your reader can absorb.

B to c. Capture the attention of your reader.

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?

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.

C to d. Put your pen to paper and try automatic writing.

Coronavirus is right there at the forefront of our thinking, threatening to dominate everything we do. But can you force yourself to think new thoughts and write new words by plunging yourself into a period, say ten minutes, of automatic writing? That means just writing without thinking too restrictively, allowing your words to emerge unedited in a stream. Who knows what will emerge when you allow one word to follow on from another in a stream you don't attempt to channel through any of the normal ways of being. Being unconstrained is in a strange way a different form of constraint, you can burst free and unlock something surprising, something that had not previously occurred. Sitting on the tube originally, now a forbidden journey in times of isolation, and writing – perhaps the very place for random occurrences to happen along, for unbidden ideas to come whistling through a tunnel. Or perhaps to be held by a signal and sent away back up the track, even if that turns out not to be the track you came down originally. Because you let your pencil write and it keeps moving and the only discipline you impose is a physical one to keep the pencil moving across the paper, not the mental discipline to shape your thoughts into conventional coherence. What emerges might be gibberish but it can help release your mind and allow an essential element of chance and serendipity and metaphor into your words like a bluebell in the woods or a candle in the window at night or the joyful call of a song thrush. This is writing just for yourself not for wider publication, but you might just find the glint of gold in among the material you discard. And because that word here might never have been placed next to that word there, our emotions change a little and seize on the brightness that is peeking through, even if in the end all our thinking at the moment returns to that single word Covid.

“Being unconstrained is in a strange way a different form of constraint...”

D to e. Use poetry and rhythm for emphasis.

Do this, don't do that. Deadlines demand timely headlines. Alliteration and rhyme, the techniques of poetry, do we use them or abuse them? There has been much more awareness of poetry's relevance to our lives and language since I originally drew attention to poetry in *The Invisible Grail* twenty years ago. If the coronavirus crisis has taught us anything so far,

“Poetry is an invaluable source of emotional support in difficult times”

it is that poetry is a valuable source of emotional support in difficult times. And the absence of poetic awareness, not to mention common sense, has become more noticeable as world leaders have

struggled to pitch their language at an empathetic level. Perhaps the nadir came when President Trump wondered on television to his medical advisers whether an injection of detergent might clean out the lungs of the afflicted.

Let's stay with American presidents. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, George W Bush – perhaps the least poetic president in US history until Donald Trump set that bar even lower – discovered the pitfalls and benefits of striving for uplifting language. 'We're gonna get these folks,' his immediate response to that crisis, was homespun but lacking in gravitas. So, perhaps stung by criticism, he plunged into longer words and deeper trouble. He emerged with 'crusade' and 'infinite justice', more rousing but deeply offensive to Islam. The president's speech to Congress (apparently written by his aide Michael Gerson) managed to reach a higher level. For example:

**Our nation,
this generation,
will lift the dark threat of violence
from our people and our future.
We will rally the world to this cause
by our efforts, by our courage.
We will not tire.
We will not falter.
And we will not fail.**

I have split the text into lines to emphasise the influence of poetry and rhetoric. A beautiful simplicity of language, and repetition, the deliberate use of repetition. Look at the last two lines where the alliteration in the double 'f' of 'falter' and 'fail' is accentuated by the half-rhyme contained in those two

words. The echo of the first syllable of 'falter' allows the president, whether literally or metaphorically, to thump the podium on the last phrase.

E to f. Dodge boredom in lists.

Eggs over easy. Remembering business trips to the US and staying in hotels where they offered that almost endless list of American ways of having eggs for breakfast. This then extended beyond the egg to varieties of pancake, waffle or bread. It became a litany of luxury, the list itself sending a message that implied 'we have everything', comfort food and a message of comfort for American culture.

Lists can be useful and they need not be boring. In response to the Thursday evening applause for the NHS, I recently wrote the following:

So I applaud the health workers, but also the shop workers, the civil servants, the broadcasters, the bin men, the pharmacists, the farmers, the bakers, the fruit pickers, the deliverers, the booksellers, the scientists, the artists, the volunteers, all those working or not working, the family, my wife, my son and daughter, their partners and families, my grandchildren, my writer friends who are my extended family.

There is a rhythm that builds with a good list, like a flowing river, and it becomes particularly interesting when it develops eddies or tributaries that slightly change the river's flow. Lists interesting? Whoever heard of such a thing? In writing at work, for organisations, there is probably no technique used as boringly as the list. We've all sat in presentations where the next slide goes up and our hearts sink because it's yet another list, punctuated by bullet points.

In those cases the list is a lazy technique because the presenters are saying *blah blah blah* in their mind in between points, taking their focus off the individual words. It's a way to give the appearance of organised thought but often it is the appearance only. Lists need connections. One word needs to lead to another. One thought needs to follow another. Start, think, stop, write, edit, think again. Listen to the rise and fall of the moving flow you're creating in this growing list, revise it, go back and add in new elements, question, ask yourself, 'Could I change it? What if?'

F to g. Clarity in what your say.

F*** business.' At least Boris Johnson was clear when he uttered those words last year. More recently he's been pilloried for his lack of clarity, particularly by Matt Lucas's version of the PM's speech that, appropriately, 'went viral' a few days ago. It went viral because it was funny and true. These were the words spoken by Matt Lucas:

"So we are saying don't go to work go to work don't take public transport go to work don't go to work stay indoors if you can work from home go to work don't go to work go outside don't go outside and then we will or we won't... something or other."

In 20 seconds it summed up the confusion created by unclear language.

In times like these there is a first requirement to aim for clarity. "I hope I've made myself clear" has become another recognisable mantra associated with politicians who have failed to live up to their own hopes. During a time of anxiety, clarity provides certainty and calm. But clarity is always tough to achieve.

'Stay alert', replacing 'Stay at home', was not clear. I suspect the government was not striving for clarity but using a touch of ambiguity to signal a shift in its strategy. That shift is from the clear command tone of 'Stay at home', a government instruction, to the passing of responsibility to the audience of 'Stay alert'. The first uses authority, the second passes the buck, almost bringing us back to the first word of this piece with an accidental rhyme.

The political dividing line these days is not so much along class lines as the choice between community and individual responsibility. As ever our words betray our attitudes, inside or outside, whether you're staying at home or alert.

Language is a reflection and expression of changing social, cultural and moral debates, and all around us, through everyday language, we can see and hear those debates evolving.

G to h. All about headlines – how you can use them well (and avoid bad ones.)

Gotcha! is the headline many British people think of when headlines are mentioned. It appeared on the front page of the *Sun* during the Falklands War when the British navy sank the Argentinean ship, the *Belgrano*. At that time, it reflected the sense of triumphalism Margaret Thatcher had encouraged in the nation when she had proclaimed her own headline (Rejoice! Rejoice!) on the steps of 10 Downing Street after British troops' first success in the war.

We live in a headline age. People at work, obsessed by their own busyness, demand: 'Just give me the headlines'. Of course, we need to absorb information quickly and no one likes to waste time taking in unnecessary information. There's an art to writing the headline that will do the complete job: provide the reader with information and give your emotions a steer too.

It's an art that has not improved much over time. Looking at recent British press headlines I see 'Happy Monday' one week and 'Black Monday' another, mining a verbal seam that's close to exhaustion. The *Sun*, supposed masters of the form, on the day I write this (20 May) offers 'Araise Sir Tom' on its front page; which first leads you to jump on what seems a spelling mistake until the sub-heading informs you that it's about raising money for charity. A heavy dig in the ribs was needed to convey the meaning.

“Concentrate on the headline that will lead your reader most effectively to the story that follows after.”

Open up most in-house newspapers/communications and you'll find a whole rash of headlines that are bad tabloid imitations in the form of terrible puns. For me the pun in the headline should be a last resort. A pun rarely works when intended by the writer to be funny. It's easy to end up with the

meaning being hijacked by the pun, rather than the pun expressing the real meaning. Good headlines are distillations of meaning in a few words. Concentrate on the meaning. Concentrate on the headline that will lead your reader most effectively to the story that follows after.

Headlines are designed for that moment. Time might judge them more harshly. On the day that most UK papers had variants of 'First Virus Death', the *Daily Star* led with 'Life Found on Mars'. Strange times we're living through**h**.

H to i. Using metaphors to give your audience greater rein.

How do you make a thought more vivid? Metaphors are certainly one way to do it. Look up 'metaphor' in the dictionary and it will say something like 'figure of speech which points out a resemblance between things'. Dictionaries can sometimes just raise another question about meaning. This might be one of those times when the dictionary definition makes sense only when you see an example. Indeed, a metaphor might be needed.

The title 'The Invisible Grail', suggesting a journey or a quest, is a metaphor. The fact is, we all use metaphors all the time, almost without realising; we use them as crutches, as shafts of light, as pointers. And they are certainly not confined to the language of poets, though we can learn from poets because they use metaphors most vividly.

Sometimes we struggle to understand the meaning of poems because they use metaphors that are not literal or factual. That's OK – find the meaning that is deeper than a fact. How to read a poem? The American poet Billy Collins answered that question with these words of explanation to readers:

*'I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.'*

Keep your mind and your senses open and receptive. The first line of Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* seems to me a perfect metaphor for our times, when we all walk around with cameras in our pockets: "I am a camera with its shutter open."

Last week, running a Zoom seminar with a group of communicators in business and education, I got them to write metaphors about people they were missing at this time. That produced some powerful, emotional writing. I then asked them to write a one-line metaphor about a brand that they admired. Some interesting metaphors emerged:

Zoom is the first flat white of the day in that Soho café
Dunns (the baker) is my daily warm hug
Netflix is a sixth form common room with beanbags for lolling
Patagonia is a five-year-old discovering ice cream

Our minds are surprisingly receptive to this allusive form of description. Plain words, factual descriptions, do not always communicate effectively because they failed to connect to the imagination. Surely there is a lesson here for everyone writing for any kind of organisation. If you want to be more effective in the way you communicate with people, you need to tune in to their imaginations. Free your mind, use more metaphors, give greater rein to your audience's thinking. Adopt the spirit of Billy Collins. Allow your brain to waterski.

“If you want to be more effective in the way you communicate with people, you need to tune in to their imaginations.”

I to j. Do you use 'I', 'we', 'them' or 'it'?

It's all about choosing to be you.

I always prefer the first-person pronouns 'I' and 'we' to their third-person alternatives in the world of work. The alternatives might be 'the corporation', 'the company', 'the university', 'the organisation', 'the department' and so on. The alternatives are all relatively faceless but you could say they reflect the reality of working life. After all 'the government is committed to doing whatever it takes', 'London Underground apologises for the inconvenience caused', and 'the Minnesota Police Department has banned access to this site'. Who am I to speak to them? It seems like they're not really people – or not people you want to have a conversation with.

My view is that if you're employed by an organisation you should be allowed, indeed encouraged, to write on behalf of that organisation as 'I' or 'we'. Perhaps some years ago the situation would have been different, but the times have changed and we (as consumers) now generally accept the convention that we (as employees) will write as real people.

The Internet gave the extra push to the momentum that had been developing earlier this century. Far from adding to the dehumanisation of business language the Internet forced more and more companies to adopt conversational patterns of language, because effective communication is conducted as a dialogue. You are part of that dialogue and unless you join in, the website will not work. So, we need to speak to you. I like it like that. It helps me to feel that I am dealing with a person not a group. Every

organisation, every brand, is seen, heard, experienced through the individuals who represent it. There's no point in trying to hide those individuals behind a corporate screen.

Our words send signals, and there is a wide spectrum between formality and informality (the choice raised by the grammatical difference between first or third person). Last century communication at work would have favoured the formal, now we tend towards informality (that can be jarring in its own way). The crucial thing is to be as authentic as possible in your communication, to be yourself, true to your own personality. Which probably means not writing as if you're on *Love Island* nor as the last living representative of British Raj.

“The crucial thing is to be as authentic as possible in your communication, to be yourself, true to your own personality.”

J to k. Our attitudes shape the language we choose, and we need to be aware of that.

J*ust as English advances, other languages fight back. But the ground the other languages are fighting back on is increasingly English-held territory.*

When I wrote those words twenty years ago I was making a point about English as the global language – which I think is still true. I'm just uncomfortable with the imperialist tone of my original words, particularly in the context of recent events.

Those events were triggered by a brutal act recorded on a mobile phone – and the three words 'I can't breathe'. George Floyd's death led to outrage around the world and mass street protests even in a time of restricted movement. The anger was raw among black people – and many white people too. 'Black lives matter' to us all. Together we've got to come to a better understanding of our shared history. The images of the dismantling of the slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol were vivid. There is an unsettling history to face more honestly than we have done in the past. History shapes our attitudes and, therefore, the language we use – and we need to be aware of that, respecting other cultures and other languages.

On a very simple level I'm missing the habit of sitting in a coffee shop. My choice might have been an *espresso*, but I could have ordered a *latte* or *cappuccino*, a *macchiato*, *ristretto* or *mocha*, all served by a *barista*. Perhaps I

would have a *pain au raisin* or a *croissant* with my coffee? We trade in words internationally and, as with other areas of life, we happily cross borders, even linguistic ones. Let's be open to the joyful possibilities of sharing other languages. Those languages enhance and enrich my own. Let's move beyond colonialism. Language flows like lava, driven by old habits and new possibilities, by patterns and history, but also by accident, emotion and luck.

“We trade in words internationally and, as with other areas of life, we happily cross borders, even linguistic ones.”

K to I. Tapping into memory and imagination to create something new.

Kilimanjaro, Kyoto, K-2, K-9. Words that release different memories, mainly from childhood. Words that I had not been conscious of in recent times until I forced myself this morning to answer my own challenge: think of some words beginning with K. I could go on from there to explore the memories invoked by one of those words and it would become the starting point for a story.

Our imaginations are like sponges waiting for a little moisture to soften them into active use. Memory provides the moisture. It's hard to think of any imaginative writing that has not been sparked into being by memory. So my advice is simple for anyone wishing to practise writing skills. Follow the advice of Nabokov's title: *Speak Memory*. Memory does not recognise writer's block, it flows, and your words can flow with it. “Remember me!” speaks the ghost of Hamlet's father – meaning not just ‘use your memory to think of me’ but reassemble me into living form. It's a double meaning that I have remembered every time I use that word since I first heard that explanation of ‘re-member’. Our memories become real again, fleshed out, by the exercise of imagination. It was also used to talk about the opening of Shakespeare's Globe, but could equally and poignantly apply to any theatre at the moment wistfully longing to perform again before a live audience.

Take a childhood photograph and put yourself back into the time of that photograph. Were you the same person then? What were you feeling and thinking? Do we remember what really happened or are we just remembering what we think happened? Who knows? Do a piece of automatic writing (see [C-d](#), writing without stopping, without editing) and make your first words ‘I remember’. Remembering the past becomes a means of inventing the present and the future, and the only truth that matters is what seems to you to be true. Believe that you remember and you will.

L to m. How we listen to (and feel) words.

Let's linger a while with the beguiling sounds of words. Words are vessels containing meaning – ping the outside of the vessel and it suggests what might be inside. The first sentence above stretches out like a lazy afternoon with time to spare, gliding from one 'l' sound to another and softly sliding into 's' and 'w' sounds. The very word 'gliding' almost glistens with oil as it slips into the sentence, just as 'sliding' gently follows after. Perhaps they both need the sentence to end with a plop.

“Let's linger a while with the beguiling sounds of words.”

There are these words, of course, and 'plop' is one of them, which imitate sounds. Sometimes they come in compounds to indicate a musical aspect of sound, as used in many a pop song. *Splish-splash, I was taking a bath*, while listening to the *pitter-patter of the falling rain*. We use such words to help us with descriptions. I remember watching a TV interview with the novelist Geoff Ryman who was asked about a particular sentence he'd written in his book *Lust*. The sentence was: 'Barefoot, his wet feet made scrunching noises on the wet sand.' The interviewer asked him: 'Is the word 'scrunching' important?' Ryman replied: 'Oh yes, if it was just noises you wouldn't hear it.'

But although it's important to think of what we want readers to be hearing as well as seeing when we tell a story, I'm more interested in using the sounds of words to suggest meaning more subliminally. It's all a matter of listening. Hard sounds – 'b', 't', 'p' – are good for making hard, insistent points, not necessarily at the start of each word. *Black lives matter*. Softer sounds – 's', 'z', 'l', 'w' – insinuate themselves more subtly into our senses, although 's' can also hiss with passionate sibilance. Clustering a collection of 'c' and 'k' sounds can make a staccato start to kick open a conversation. But 'm' can be sensual – think how we use 'mmm' to indicate a coming tasty moment.

We need to learn to love listening, and listen to the inner meaning of words – meanings lodged in the sounds that make **them**.

M to n. We're all messengers for our organisations.

Messages are communicated through the words that we write. That message can be a simple instruction or a complex argument or, increasingly it seems, as 'key messages', meaning 'what I really want you to hear'. But as well as the message's intended meaning, we are sending other messages through the way we write: signals about who we are, what we are like, about our attitude and personality. This represents the writer's tone of voice.

Literary critics often comment about writers having 'a distinctive voice' or 'needing to find their own voice'. Writing for brands needs to be closer to speaking in our own voice than in an assumed, formal way of writing: we expect authenticity. Each of us has a way of speaking that is distinctive. We recognise familiar voices instantly on the telephone, for example. There are certain words or phrases that we use or avoid, others that we fall back on for ease; there are personal patterns to our speech, we place emphasis on certain words or syllables, accents shape the way we say things. This distinctiveness comes from the combination of influences that make us individual: our parents, schools, friends, the media, where we live, what we do, 'where we are from'. Above all, what we believe as people, the values that underlie our behaviour.

“If these values are shared by the individuals who represent the brand – if not, what are you doing there? – then the individuals should share a tone of voice.”

It's no different for companies, institutions or universities – 'brands' for short – except that we are talking about a collection of individuals rather than one person. But a brand, like an individual, has parentage, it lives in the context of ethical, educational, social influences. A brand's tone of voice springs out of its values. If these values are shared by the individuals who represent the brand – if not, what are you doing there? – then the individuals should share a tone of voice. That does not mean that everyone needs to write or speak the same, but there should be a common framework shaped by the brand's values. Within this framework individuals can write in ways that express their own individuality. If they do so, the writing will be more engaging and more effective because it will connect better with its readers. The communication works better than if people try to put on a 'posh telephone voice' – a personality and style that is alien.

N to o. Are your words clear? Are they truthful?

Nothing will come of nothing, as we know from *King Lear*. By this Lear meant that his daughter Cordelia would get no part of the inheritance if she refused to say what she believed would be false words. Of course, we're all on Cordelia's side. Her arguments are perfectly reasonable – how could she insist that her father was the sole focus of her love when she was about to marry a husband with a father's blessing? She was right to avoid bluster and bombast to cover insincerity. *Fake news*.

“We do language. That is how civilisations heal.”

Toni Morrison

Straight talking can get you into all sorts of problems. All Cordelia needed to do was flatter her father, use a few fine phrases as her sisters had already done and, with a click, the biggest part of the kingdom would be hers. But she balked at using the expected words because she would not really mean them. It's an important choice.

With issues of historic truth, justice and equality coming to the fore, the words of Toni Morrison have resonated with other writers: “We do language. That is how civilisations heal.” It might cost us, but honesty is the best policy. People imagine that brand consultants are unconcerned with the truth. Far from it. Our job is to find the truth, then present it as honestly as possible. But the truth can be uncomfortable as well as liberating.

When writing for a brand, straight talking pays dividends most of the time. Think hard about the words you use. Are they clear? Are they honest? Do they represent the real you? Straight talking does not mean being rude or arrogant, but writing in a way that connects to people. Use the techniques I've been writing about in [these chapters](#) to tell the truth well.

But it's not just about writing style: it's also about questioning the fundamental editorial principles behind the brand's writing. Don't hide behind the legal protection of disclaimers that force you towards innocuousness. After reading one bank's customer magazine, I noticed the small print that said:

This magazine is published as a customer service. The views expressed are those of individual contributors. Contributions published in this magazine are not intended to, and do not represent, professional advice on the subject matter dealt with. Where appropriate and necessary professional advice should be sought.

Which seems to be saying: 'Don't trust what you read here.' Too many of our corporate words are, to use one of the words of the moment, 'sanitised'. Wouldn't it be a better, bolder, more interesting magazine if it restated its editorial policy as:

This magazine is published for our customers. We ask individuals to write and we value their individuality. They have something to say – something that matters to them and to you – but they are always personal views not bank policy dictated from above. We believe this liberates them to write about subjects that interest them in ways that will really interest our customers.

Should the bank have changed its editorial policy? Yes. Too few risks are taken in business and with words. Did the bank change? **No.**

O to p. Concise is good, precise is better.

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.

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

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 Ronseal irritating.

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**.

P to q. Give clarity and grace to your writing. Use punctuation.

Punctuation is the cause of many problems. Some people get irritated by it because they see it as pedantry. Do they they do. It's not pedantry – it's fundamental to meaning. I liked the novelist Donna Tartt saying that she could happily spend a morning just moving a comma around.

There were periods in the 20th century when you needed to play with punctuation if you were to be considered a serious writer. Writers like James Joyce were interested in achieving a closer approximation of real thought processes through abandoning the normal rules of punctuation, to which Molly Bloom said yes yes yes. But something else happens that is interesting: new ambiguities are exposed through changes in punctuation. There is a pub game example: 'woman without her man is nothing.' Add punctuation of your choice. Do all the women do this? 'Woman. Without her, man is nothing.' Do all the men fail to spot the possibility at all?

It seems we're living in an age of short, sharp, punctuated messages. *Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.* When you saw this on the podium, the > sign became a visual equivalent of a full-stop. What happens when you read it without punctuation Or with commas replacing the full stops, Or with

question marks? *Stay home?* Punctuation changes meaning so you can use it creatively as part of your writing palette.

When writing for business, we need to be relatively strict about punctuation because a missed comma, full stop, apostrophe or question mark can change the meaning of what is read. Clarity needs to be a fundamental principle of business writing, even though we might want to do so much more. Establish clarity first; in doing so, you might find that you have gone a step beyond clarity towards grace. You need considered punctuation to achieve either clarity or grace. And you might even end up playing with punctuation to reinforce meaning, when you find yourself backed into a crowd and wanting to get out of the q...

“Establish clarity first; in doing so, you might find that you have gone a step beyond clarity towards grace.”

Q to r. Why should you use questions?

Questions can be very useful in helping you get started on a piece of writing. Why should this be so? Aren't questions inevitably a sign of some uncertainty? What if we want to give the impression that we are totally in control of our case? *Relax*. You can still be in control because the process of raising questions leads you to provide answers.

But why are you so desperate to appear in control anyway? 'Control' seems to have become a national obsession, and not a healthy one. The whole process of thinking something through with questions and answers is one that happens in our minds constantly. It's healthy to be quizzical.

Questions can be used as important turning points in any narrative or presentation. *But what do we need to do at this point?* The question means that the reader or listener joins you in thinking your thoughts. *What would I do in this situation?*

Perhaps the most famous question in our culture is: "To be or not to be?" After all, it is the existential question. We can all complete Hamlet's line, but it's worth a more intense study of the lines that follow it, to notice how Shakespeare goes on to explore the question – and others that arise. He sets out an extended argument over a number of lines, triggered by questions.

Of course, there are many different ways of asking a question. You can be aggressive or gently curious. When working with Lever Fabergé I was interested in what happened when I turned dry descriptions of new concepts from the factual language of market research into a whole series of questions

– and nothing but questions. One question led to another, forming a trail of enquiry that seemed to me to have the effect of being far more respectful to the ‘target consumer’.

Did it work? Did it create a new way of writing concepts? No, but that was not the intention. The intention was simply to open people’s minds to a different possibility. And that is an important aim for any writer.

R to s. Feel the rhythm of the words you use in your writing.

Rise to your feet and feel the words coursing through your veins. Sometimes it’s no bad thing to stand and read your words aloud. The sound of your words will tell you a lot – a stumble might point out the word you’re not sure about, a pause for breath might tell you when the sentence is too long. Of course, there is potential for embarrassment if you do this in public. But you can also listen to your words in your head and respond to their rhythm. It’s not fanciful to aim for your words to sing in your head so that your feelings can dance along with them.

“Rhythm is all around us, part of life, and therefore part of writing.”

Rhythm is all around us, part of life, and therefore part of writing. One of the reasons why I’ve always liked writing on trains is that the train’s rhythm provides a soundtrack for your words to play along with. When reading we respond to sound and rhythm, even if we don’t consciously acknowledge it. I’m a slow reader but a musical one. Words have their rhythm. Why be tone-deaf towards them?

I remember Tim Smit, founder of the amazing Eden Project in Cornwall, giving a talk. He spoke with infectious enthusiasm about catching the spirit of the samba jellyfish and using samba dancing as part of the induction for new people joining Eden. The samba jellyfish is a creature we can imitate in our childhood, but then it swims away out of our being. I wish I could dance. But I can in my head. And my words can dance straight off the page.

Some sentences have an easy lilt to them. When you write, your words can always be beautifully spoken in your head. You depend on no one else for their delivery. But you can give prompt cues to help your readers perform them as you would wish. Often these cues are punctuation marks – another reason why I believe punctuation is about creativity not pedantry (see P to q).

Sway. To high notes and low. Sometimes you can keep a steady rhythm swirling along but then, with a fingersnap, break it. We are talking of dance, we're talking of sound and song. Dancing with words. Now the words are not just heard inside your head but felt inside your body. Make short sharp quicksteps followed by long, languorous, slow stretches.

S to t. Pick words that challenge and surprise, 'like a slice of ginger in boiled rice'.

Short simple words are the demands of the modern chief executive. Short words suit swift actions. Simple words fit clear decisions. But it can be a boring, monotonous diet for those having to take these words in. Or for the Ronseal consumer – 'does what it says on the tin' ignores the transformative potential of the product and of words themselves.

That's why I value the occasional idiosyncratic word that can be like a slice of ginger in boiled rice. We need to savour words. I'm not advocating a return to Victorian propensities towards mellifluous concoctions of verbal superfluity. Let's simply aim for variety – but not of the *Good Old Days* kind, which used to recreate Victorian music hall linguistic excesses on the television of my childhood. The aim was to induce groans in the knowing audience, so be aware of the effect your words will have on those listening. Think carefully about your choice of words.

One relatively neglected aspect is the choice we have to use compound words. English seems to recognise these words less as we have moved further from the language's Germanic and Anglo-Saxon roots. One of the features of the earliest English poetry is the regular use of words like whaleroad as a figurative description of the sea. Words like meadhall, marshden, warcry, chainmail seem to emerge through Celtic mists. In those days they used to unlock their wordhoard in order to speak.

Let's not forget we also have access to a wordhoard and we need not use it for archaic purposes. Watergate has ever since inspired an endless succession of scandalgates. In a similar vein the popularity of hashtags on Twitter shows that we relish our ability to join words together for a cause #standupfortrees #raisethebat #writingcommunity. Without compound words like keyboard, notebook and download I would not have the linguistic bandwidth to write in a hitech age in lockdown. It seems to me clearly in the tradition of Mr Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby in *The Water Babies*.

These are inventions which linger in the memory. Perhaps we need to pursue this kind of verbal invention more frequently if we're to achieve what we might call **mindlift**.

T to u. An exercise to find your voice and boost your confidence.

Talking in someone else's voice – is it ventriloquism? Impressionism? If so, a kind of impressionism that has nothing to do with Monet. Ironically, since I've been writing about finding your own voice, let me suggest an exercise that aims to do that by casting off your own voice altogether.

In *We, me, them and it* I wrote about 'letting your twin brother have all the laughs'. The writer develops a persona that is close to the real self but is different in that it is a writer's persona. It exists slightly outside the person. Often you get a strange feeling reading something you have written and you ask yourself: 'Did I really write that?' I'm eerily aware, even as I write these words (written in their first form twenty years ago), that the same question will face me some months on from here as I read them in a different time and place. It's like a Russian *matryoshka* doll about time.

“Often you get a strange feeling reading something you have written and you ask yourself: 'Did I really write that?'.”

An exercise that has, at the very least, caused a lot of fun in workshops, is to get people to write a letter in the tone of voice of a well-known personality. Decide what the subject is going to be for the whole group: let's say a reply to a letter of complaint from a customer. Then assign a different personality to each of the participants: Boris Johnson, Jamie Oliver, Sandi Toksvig, Donald Trump, even the Queen. The letters written in response to this challenge show how perceptive people are and how easily understandable the whole concept of tone of voice is.

It's a bit of fun but there is also learning. What it does, when you then turn back to your own tone of voice, is to boost your confidence in the way you use words – and in the kinds of words, phrases and sentences that are really **you**.

U to v. The art of colloquialisms.

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.

“The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouths they've been in.”

Dennis Potter

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.

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.

V to w. When you use quotations, don't just reach for the same old, same old.

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.”

W to x. When it comes to names, gut feel accounts for a lot.

What's in a name?' goes the familiar quotation from *Romeo and Juliet*. Obviously quite a lot, as a name is the basis for our identities as individuals, brands or organisations. As Ruth Ozeki put it in her novel *My Year of Meats*:

"How can you say 'just a name'? Name is very first thing. Name is face to all the world."

It's hard to talk about the perils of naming in the 21st century without referring to the U.K.'s once-revered Post Office. Would a rose named Consignia smell as sweet? It might, but the [new Consignia](#) didn't have the same goodwill attached to it as the old Post Office, and the Consignia chairman was regretting this name change to his business within months of it happening.

The problem was that the name Post Office was invested with centuries of stories. Few brands have that kind of heritage. Although the reasons for the change were perfectly rational in a business context – this was a change to the holding company name, the name Post Office could not be registered for use internationally, the technological context in which the business operated had changed dramatically etc etc – these reasons were scorned aside by an emotional response from the general public. The public said we know the Post Office as a symbol of something good that we have valued and whose passing we regret. Everyone knew personal stories that were based around the idea of the Post Office as the heart of local communities. Here was a new name Consignia, which removed the experience from the individual and local to the impersonal and international.

But that was the strategy. Had the strategy been thought through? Had the rational been weighed properly against the emotional? When it comes to a name the emotional counts for a lot. Think of the emotion we put into naming a child. Naming a business, organisation or brand can involve emotion too, much as we try to approach it through a rational, strategic viewpoint.

“When it comes to a name the emotional counts for a lot.”

So in the end that gut feeling really matters. *I like/hate that name*. New brands are increasingly driven by business and legal necessities towards manufactured names. The need to register domain names on the Internet has added enormous complexity to the whole challenge. There are good solutions: Google, for example, suggests the spirit of searching and

serendipity which drives the Internet. There are also questionable solutions, many of them found to be good after deeper questioning, many based on Latinate inventions or rare letter combinations and sounding like high-scoring words in a game of Scrabble: Xanax, Uniq, Zaviva.

Actually that proves another point. You can get used to any name over time. Don't reject new names out of hand, you might just grow to love them. Many copiers followed after Xerox.

X to y. Why do many of our favourite words end in 'y'? Does yours?

Xerxes is a favourite name from my childhood reading. My imagination was stirred by tales of the ancient world. Perhaps that's why I quite like Xerox: it reminds me, deep down, of an almost legendary figure.

We all have favourite words as well as favourite names. In workshops I often ask people to think what their favourite word might be. This was spurred by a survey many years ago, which was aimed at finding out 'the nation's favourite word'. Bob Geldof launched it on a website and, some months and thousands of votes later, 'serendipity' was announced as the winner. I've probably used that word a few times in this book but I'm not sure if I would have done 10 years ago. Which reminds me that I really like 'probably'.

If the survey were to run again now, I wonder what the favourite word would be? What's yours?

Of course, the survey forced me to think of my own favourite word. I voted for 'Blimey' because it's a word with good memories from my childhood (an early example of 'expletive cheated' too). I like Blimey because you say it to express frustration but, having said it, there's no chance of any anger developing. It just makes you smile because actually you know it's quite silly.

My colleague Mark Griffiths voted for 'gravy' for his own reasons. I then came across a poem by Raymond Carver that seemed to support his case for gravy to be seen as a word meaning something special. He then kept the poem called *Gravy* taped to his desk. The first line is

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.

Serendipity. Probably. Gravy. What can I say? Does every favourite word end in 'y'? Why? Blimey.

Y to z. Ending on endings.

You have been with me on this point-to-point exploration for something like 25 steps now. So you know that we're nearing the end. And you've probably guessed that there's only one subject to end with: endings.

Each piece of writing needs its own properly considered ending. Endings are probably even more important than openings because they really are the last word, and you won't have a next sentence to come to your rescue if you get it

“Writing is thinking, it is a thought rather than just a technique that provides the completeness.”

wrong. What I have discovered by writing this series of pieces with fixed constraints – e.g. start with a word beginning with 'y' and finish with a word ending with 'z' – is that such discipline forces you to see each piece of writing as complete in itself. Think of everything you write as needing to have that same sense of completeness: you need to craft it, chisel it, shape it until it feels naturally complete. Because writing is thinking, it is a thought rather than just a technique that provides the completeness.

Good endings need a resonant thought. That thought can be underscored by technical detail: end with 'z', use alliteration, use balancing clauses. The rhyming couplet to close a scene in a play is a formal example:

*Cheerly to sea; the signs of war advance.
No king of England, if not king of France*

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

Perhaps all good endings have a feeling of inevitability about them too, which the rhyme provides in an obvious way. Although we're unlikely to find a writing situation that cries out for a rhyming couplet in our writing today. But we do need to build that sense of inevitability through the progression of thought captured in arresting language. We might not have known exactly where we were heading but it feels right once we are there.

Each day provides us with a new journey; so does each new piece of writing. We need to approach each journey as a voyage of discovery every bit as personally momentous as when Columbus embarked on a tiny ship and set sail for a part of the world previously unexplored by Europeans. What is waiting there for us? Think how the world was about to change, for good or bad, when Columbus headed westwards from Cadiz.

A series by John Simmons, revisiting the original A-Z from his book *The Invisible Grail*. Find the full [A-Z here](#), and follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find more writing inspiration.

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