

## Conference 2004: Writing Technique

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### *Good writing – we know it when we see it, but what is it and what drives it?*

By Annabel Schuler, Lecturer in Journalism, Waiariki Institute of Technology.

The terms “good writing” and “good writers” are widely used and are applied in a variety of situations. They glide easily off the tongue and can refer to anyone from a letter writing cousin who lives in the wilds of Nova Scotia to a columnist in the Sunday Star Times.

We say a book is well written and that translates to a jolly good read. We say an essay is well written and that translates to a respectable pass mark. We say a report is well written and that generally means the writer communicates well in the commercial world.

Scan the job advertisements and many include a criteria which looks for good written and verbal skills, ask an editor what he or she wants in a journalist and they will reply that among other things they want someone who is a “good writer” - someone who practices the art of good writing.

Most employers, tutors, academics and readers are able to recognize good writing intuitively when they see it. They have a set of criteria in their mind and they subconsciously measure a piece of writing against those criteria.

This paper will rewind that thought process for a few moments and analyse what it is that makes writing good, and what it is that good writers do to be good at their craft while others are inept and clumsy. Or is it simply “in the genes”?

The recorded definitions of good writing are partly subjective and partly tested and proven over time, but two common themes run through them.

One is that there are basic rules which are observed by all good writers. These can be taught and are quite prescriptive. The Treasury in Britain in the 1960s was concerned about the falling standards of official written English and asked the erudite Sir Edward Gowers to write a handbook. It was his job to cut through legal-ese, civil servant-ese, and any other form of -ese and bring back clear, simple written communication.

Gowers summed up the role of good writing as “an instrument for conveying ideas from one mind to another....the writer’s job is to make his reader apprehend his meaning readily and precisely.” He quoted Robert Louis Stevenson who said the difficulty was not to write, “but to write what you mean, not to just affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish”.  
(1)

While accepting that correct grammar and syntax as “rules” have their place in good writing, Gowers cautioned that one could no more write good English, than compose good music just by keeping to the rules. He said these rules were aids to writing intelligibly but it was the right choice of words which was the key to good writing. Then, he said, those right words had “the happy knack of arranging themselves”. (2)

New Zealand’s CK Stead puts his definition more poetically, “Good writing offers a grammatical dance, a verbal music.” (3)

The second theme is that the ability to write well is either born within a person or not, though it can also be driven by the forces of ego. George Orwell supported this view. The desire to

seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death and even to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood were all strong motives, he said. (4)

Robert Neale in his introduction to an anthology of Writers on Writing said, "Writing, to be any good at all, must call up something already in the writer, taking outward shape in response to some inward pressure." (5)

Most writers use, whether they are aware of it or not, **Standard English**, also known as **Standard Written English** or **SWE**, which is the form of English most widely accepted as being clear and proper. Publishers, writers, educators, and others have over the years developed a consensus on Standard English. It includes word choice, word order, punctuation, and spelling. (6)

A number of good writing internet websites provided by universities show the most common guidelines for good writing are:

- Know your audience/readers.
- Use words familiar to your readers and avoid unnecessary or potentially confusing jargon.
- Clarity. Be clear and to the point. Say what you mean as clearly as you can.
- Accuracy and completeness add to your credibility. Include all important details - no more and no less.
- Adopt an appropriate tone. Writing in a conversational style using simple words is usually the most effective way to communicate your message.
- Use an active rather than passive voice.
- Use short, simple words. Avoid wordiness. Use specific and concrete language. Avoid clichés. Strive for sentence variety.

In February 2005, 20 New Zealand journalism students were surveyed on what they believed constituted good writing. Eight said clarity was most important, followed by seven wanting good punctuation and grammar. Five said they felt good writing had to be interesting "making you want to read on", and there were four votes each for factual, informative and descriptive. The students also wanted to be convinced that a writer knew his/her topic, that there was interest at the start of the story, and that the sentences were short and concise. (7)

These views are echoed by American, Robert M Knight in *A Journalistic Approach to Good Writing*, who said as a journalism lecturer he spent more time teaching his students how to write than he did teaching them to be journalists. His basic guidelines for good writing are:

- Know who your audience is and write to it.
- Use nouns and verbs and cut down on the use of modifiers.
- Avoid clichés "like the plague". Be specific. Use colour when you can.
- Use the active voice, it is more honest.
- When all else fails write with energy. Convince the reader you are convinced.(8)

All these key indicators of good writing are summed up in **Model A** (see appendices). Views on good writing and good writing in journalism overlap and apply in general to most forms of writing for public consumption. A journalist would be expected to adhere to all the points laid out in **Model A** and add the refinements in **Model B**.

Many recognised British and American writers started their careers as journalists. One of these, Britain's Wynford Hicks defines journalistic writing as putting one word after another so that the reader gets the message, or the joke, goes on reading and comes back for more.

"Good writing is essential to journalism; without it, important news, intriguing stories, insight and analysis, gossip and opinion could not reach their potential audience". (9)

Hicks refers his readers to the Anglo-American tradition of journalism that good writing should mirror speech. He cites George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway as prime examples of this.

Orwell advises: "A scrupulous writer in every sentence he writes will ask himself at least four questions, thus 'What am I trying to say? What words will express this? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?' And he will probably ask himself two more: 'Could I have put it more simply? Have I said anything unavoidably ugly?' " (10)

The discipline of writing to space in newspapers challenged the young Rudyard Kipling who won a Nobel Prize for literature in 1907. Neale cites how Kipling bemoaned in his autobiography that newspaper space "limited his canvas" yet within these limitations he had to write "some sort of beginning, middle and end".

"My ordinary reporting, leader and note writing carried the same lesson which took me an impatient while to learn. Added to this I was almost nightly responsible for my output to visible and often brutally voluble critics at the Club. They were not concerned with my dreams. They wanted accuracy and interest, but most of all accuracy." (11)

This has not changed and still appears high on the list of basic requirements. Word economy taught Kipling it was necessary that every word should "tell, carry, weigh, taste and if needs were, smell".

The identification of news now re-told in well-written bulletins has changed little through the evolution of man. Newsmen Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel found that:

"Anthropologists, comparing notes on the world's few remaining primitive cultures discovered that from the most isolated tribal areas of Africa, to islands in the Pacific the native people shared essentially the same definition of what is news? They shared the same kind of gossip. They looked for the same qualities in the people they picked to gather and deliver their news. They wanted people, who could run swiftly over the next hill, accurately gather information, and engagingly retell it. Historians believe that the same basic news values have held constant through time." (12)

Kovach and Rosenstiel quote a US senator who said that during his five-and-a-half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi what he missed most was information "free, uncensored, undistorted, abundant information". He was missing what makes up the good and accurate content of daily journalism which feeds what is now called the Awareness Instinct. (13). A number of those qualities appear in good writing for journalism, **Model B**.

It is clear that writing has two hallmarks which make it "good", and good writing and good journalistic writing have much in common though good journalism goes some way further.

The first hallmark, contained in models A and B, demonstrates that great writers of English, such as William Hazlett, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, and Rudyard Kipling agree on the same basic rules - simple words, clarity, correct spelling and punctuation, appropriate sentence length, using the active rather than the passive voice, and lack of clichés and jargon.

They add to this a need to write and rewrite to hone and finely craft a piece of work. They expect the author to cast a very critical eye over his own work before passing it on to anyone else, and they expect a writer to always strive to do better. These are the technical requirements of good writing. They are basic, essential and as applicable today in general writing and journalism as they were at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second hallmark involves the writer, but is to some extent is out of that writer's hands. It is that intangible element which writers such as Goethe, H.L. Mencken, Maurice Shadbolt or CK Stead have identified over the years as an ability to breathe life into words. To make what Stead calls "verbal music" or to reveal "the spirit of a man" as William Strunk put it.

This cannot be taught or learned from a text book. It cannot be achieved by following a set of rules, or even by breaking them as the New Journalism does, but it cannot stand alone without the technical structure of rules and the conventions of good writing. The two hallmarks are distinctly different yet co-dependent in the execution of what we call simply, good writing.

William E Blundell may have given us one of the best descriptions of how this happens. He describes the "mean storyteller" as two people, acting alternately as he works.

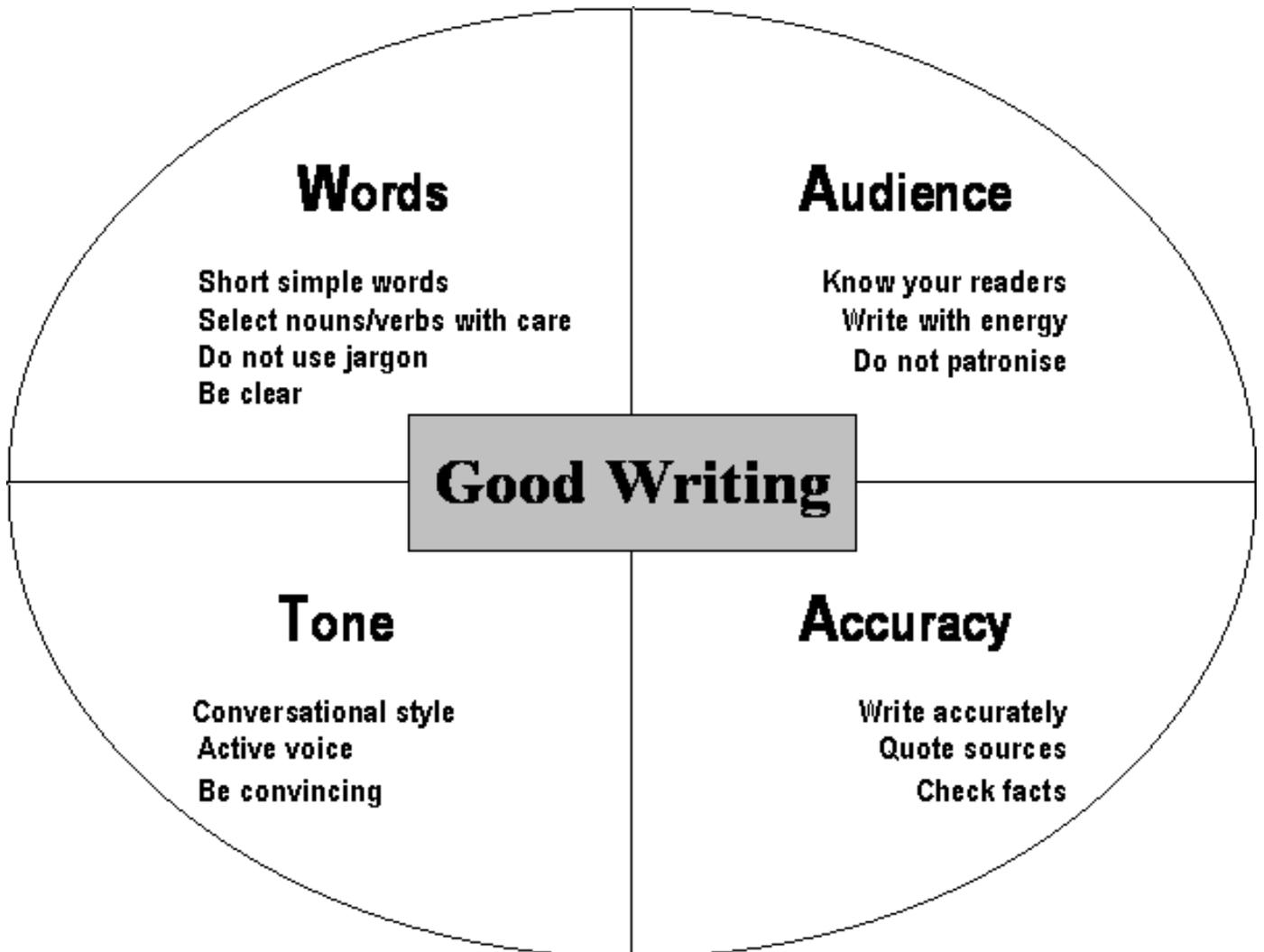
"The first is the sensitive artist-creator, the second a savage critic, who eradicates every weakness in the creation. He's cruel, derisive and obsessively demanding. He hoots at the writer's affectations and pretty turns of phrase, blisters him for cowardice when he uses soft, passive constructions or hedges on conclusions, challenges every point of logic, demands sound reasons for the presence of every character and fact and above all flagellates his victim for wordiness. He is a rotten S.O.B. worse than any editor who ever drew breathe, and he is the artist's best friend". (14)

Journalism trainers expect to build on a foundation of good writing. They expect that their students have passed through the primary and secondary school system and learned many of the basics of good writing before they arrive at journalism school.

Those 20 journalism students who were surveyed in early 2005 had no difficulty in analysing the elements of good writing. Unfortunately they are now finding it far more difficulty to deliver on their own wish-list. They know good writing when they see it but most are struggling hard to apply their own criteria when they attempt to write well. Many tertiary students need literacy remedial work before they can be move on to writing for a reason, never mind a living.

I, for one, am looking at instituting a new half session at the start of every day for which I may be taking the advice of children's books writer Martin Baynton, who suggests that **hearing** some good writing every day may improve a person's writing skills.(15) And his recommendation of good writing – a chapter or two of Winnie the Pooh!

## MODEL A



## MODEL B



### Personal drivers to good writing

- Ego ( confidence)
- Natural ability
- Desire to please
- Fame
- Make a difference
- Attachment

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