

Formidable Words: Robert Costa

The English language has always struck me as an exercise in futility and, can I say, formidable. We writers seem to flounder amongst its infinite complexity. We all know we must start a novel with a catchy first line "*We could just push them out of windows,*" says Leonie. "*Oh, I don't think so,*" says Chrissy. "*Everyone would say it was Russians.*" ...Margaret Atwood. Words come and go, always relying on the current fashion of the day. They may become too old to use or lose meaning as time progresses.

People have become equally complex. You have to ask yourself what words you will use, in what order and what to say. The last count was about 170000 words plus about 50000 obsolete ones. As we write, we begin to think about who will read these words. Will they understand? Do we need to keep things short? Are they stupid, simple, or complicated? I've come up with my definitions and guidelines.

I've always described my three kinds of target audiences for my writing as:

The ill-informed.

These are the easiest to communicate with through the written word. Whether treated with respect or not, they believe anything you say. With that comes great responsibility. They should never be patronised or belittled, but ideas should be explained vividly through simple words and pictures. After all, that's all they will understand. Don't waste your time with big words.

The moderately informed.

Maybe they think they know more than they do. In fact, I'm sure they do. Your writing should be simple but complex enough that they think they understand and are contributing to the conversation. Your writing should make sure they actually think they understand what you've written. Clarity is an illusion when writing for these types. Use big words; they will be impressed.

The overly informed.

These types are clearly the most complicated. Perhaps they know a lot but not about what you're trying to explain or say. Generally, you must up your writing game to ensure that what you write is above their intellectual ability to fathom what you are

trying to say. When they nod in understanding approval or give you a glowing review praising your work then you know you have achieved the desired result.

Ok, the above is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but not far off the truth!

So what kind are you?

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