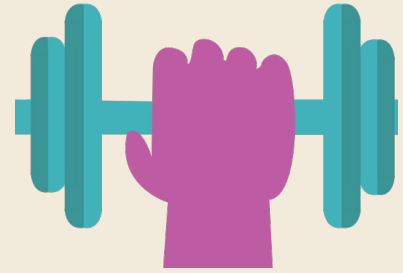


# Become a strong writer

Presented by: Hilary Bryan  
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Business writing can borrow from so many writing genres: poetry, fiction, academia, journalism, marketing and advertising. And yet it doesn't; it's stuck in a goo that readers have to wade through.

**Why?**

## Let's start with how many business writers think

Consciously or sub-consciously many writers write to give themselves status or to impress. They copy how others write and assume that's somehow professional.

Hear what Daniel Kahneman has to say:

**If you care about being thought credible and intelligent, do not use complex language where simpler language will do...couching familiar ideas in pretentious language is taken as a sign of poor intelligence and low credibility.**

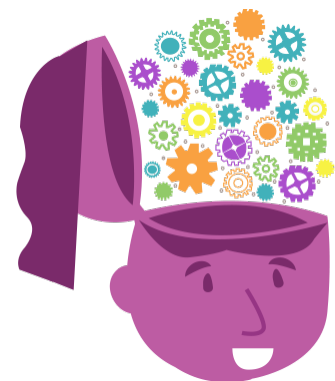
He's right. Let's add one more thing: it takes confidence to write simply. You're not worried about impressing anyone. You just want your writing to be memorable.

Steven Pinker adds another useful idea: we often suffer from the curse of knowledge and expertise. We know too much and want to include all the detail we've researched. But that detail may turn the reader's lights off.

## That's where neurobiology comes in

When we read clear, engaging and strong writing our brains release opioids that light up reward hot spots. It makes us feel good. MRI and similar machines have tracked our reward regions to show this happening.

But how do we turn on those strong writing reward lights? Here goes.



## Keep it as simple as ABC

This is the electricity that fuels the light that flashes our reward spots.

These are the basics:

- **Everyday words**
- **Short sentences**
- **Cut words that dim the lights**
- **Verbs not nouns**
- **Active voice.**

But there's a lot more.

## Paint a detailed picture

Be specific. Be vivid. Be strong. Specific words activate neurons in our brain, far more than general ones. More specific words and phrases help us taste, feel and see a glimmer of the real thing. Think about writing as if you're taking a picture of a scene. Then describe it.



| Original   | A more detailed picture  |
|--|--|
| Four long-standing staff members contemplated their future when the restructure was announced. | Alex, Rogan, Hemi and Alan, all in their walk shorts and sandals, sighed collectively as they stared into space and dreamed of their Super Gold cards. |

Another way to be more specific is to create a memorable phrase that sums up what you're saying.

Here are two great book titles:

- *The secret life of pronouns*
- *Influence is your super power*

Don't forget: *the tipping point, and black swans*.

Another technique is to repeat the same idea using different words. We're applying different brush strokes on the same canvas.

Here's an example:

*But it wasn't long before all those individual **co-operatives** realised they were better off **joining forces** and **sharing** their dairy expertise so **came together** to form one **co-operative** to represent the majority of the country's farmers. Fonterra advert.*

Or just repeat the same words:

*We've used **the best** data to produce **the best** options that will lead to **the best** results.*

## Build in surprise

We like certainty and to know what's likely to happen. Chip and Dan Heath quite rightly point out the sticking power of the unexpected. An easy way to do this is to ask questions.

### Why?

They light up interest and tell the reader: wake up – you might learn something. A one-word question can be a one-word paragraph.

A string of questions like this builds up the surprise.

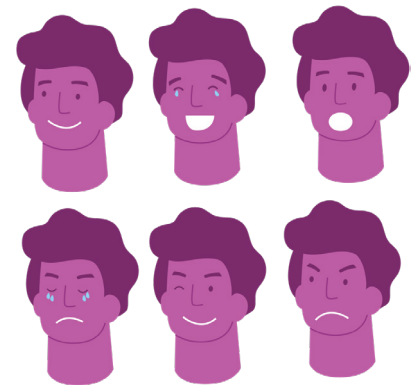
*What's the long-term strategy? Does it fit our reality? How will we know? When will we find out?*

## Fire up the pathos; dampen down the logos

Logic wins in business writing. Emotion often doesn't even start the race. But our brains process the emotional meaning of words within 200 milliseconds of reading – faster than we understand their meaning. Reason trails behind.

See the difference in these words.

| Everyday    | Emotional        |
|-------------|------------------|
| Concerned   | Alarmed          |
| Keen        | Bright-eyed      |
| Willing     | Ready for action |
| Fed up      | Exasperated      |
| Content     | Gleeful          |
| A good idea | A gem of an idea |
| Looking for | Yearning for     |



Then, we combine the immediate feeling and the thoughts that follow on to create meaning. This is where metaphor comes into its own.

| Everyday   | Metaphor   |
|--|--|
| There were so many people crowded into the emergency response room and no-one seemed to know who was who and who was doing what. | It was a zoo with all the cages open.  |
| The project failed to achieve its objectives.  | We sat in a train wreck careering off Wellington Harbour.  |
| Our engagement with stakeholders didn't elicit buy-in.   | We were blinking in the dark, so no-one blinked back.  |
| We've developed several new products but our customers didn't buy them.  | We lovingly planted five new flowers in our garden. But they all died. Nobody wanted to pick them. |

## Connect with people

We're human and want to connect.

We want to know about people and what they're thinking and what they're doing. Writing that includes people activates areas of our brains that interpret social signals. Those areas power up our reward circuits.

Pennebaker has researched how we use pronouns. (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* mentioned earlier.) He argues that using **I** is inward looking. This is counterintuitive. Surely, we give ourselves status by using **I**.

No.

The Fonterra advert quoted above starts like this:

*Let's go right back to the start.*

It's saying: come with me gentle reader. Let's, we, us, our, you, your: they're all powerful words that invite your reader into the conversation. It tells them you're writing for them and to them.

Talk directly to the reader. *How?* The imperative. Cut out all the unnecessary waffle and get to the point.

How about this from an Institute of Directors / Financial Markets Authority document for company directors?

### When you sign off financial statements

- *Read them.*
- *Make sure you're familiar with how to read the key statements – the balance sheet, income statement (profit and loss) and cash flow.*
- *Check financial statements are consistent with other documents management has produced.*
- *Check the disclosures: What are the most significant areas of judgment? Are these reasonable and clearly disclosed?*
- *Are there significant uncertainties about the on-going viability of the business that need to be disclosed?*
- *Do the maths, mistakes can creep in. It is not acceptable to be wise after the event.*

I hope you're not in any doubt!



## Tell a good story

MRI scans show that when we begin telling stories, listeners brains connect with ours. And then they connect with those all-important reward regions again.

Stories about people, with details about who they are, what they think, and what they do captivate readers. MRI scans show that when a story begins, our brains start to glow in a specific pattern. And that pattern matches the storyteller's exactly. You're in sync.

That's why they're great for business cases, bids and any time you want to influence your readers.

Back to the Fonterra advert again.

*Let's go right back to the start.*

*The first cows arrived in New Zealand in 1814, and they thrived in our beautiful environment. This meant the first generations of New Zealand dairy farmers were producing huge amounts of milk, butter, and cheese. So much that the individual farmers couldn't keep up.*

*They needed equipment to help them, so came together to pool their resources. They formed New Zealand's first dairy co-operative and those ingenious farmers in Otago could now export to Australia.*

*Then came refrigerated shipping. Now that group of farmers, and other groups like them, could send their fantastic dairy to the other side of the world.*

A classic storytelling structure is as follows:

### 1. Situation

B1 and B2 are having a birthday and are planning a surprise party.

### 2. Complication

But the teddies are planning a surprise party as well.

### 3. Question

So which party should everyone go to?

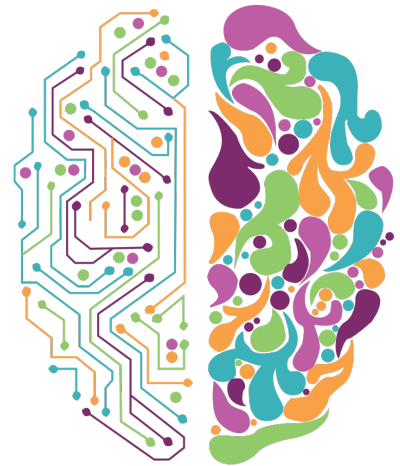
### 4. Answer

Combine the parties and have one big one instead.

Here's a fictional example based on this structure:

*Every morning Hemi and Myra each munch their way through two Weetbix and milk. If they hang around and smile a lot at the breakfast helpers, they get toast and honey as well. It's the usual start to the day at Lynch Road Primary, Porirua.*

*But donations to keep the breakfasts going are drying up. So, who'll pay to fill our kids' young tumms and set them up for a day of sums, stories and sports? That's why this government grant is essential.*



## Beg, borrow and steal

**Where from?** Two places: how you talk and the Ancient Greeks.

A basic principle of plain English is write like you talk, or more like you talk. And we talk in contractions don't we?

And the Ancient Greeks (and the Romans to be fair) knew their rhetoric. It's free for us to steal some of their basics and include them in our writing.

**We cooperate, we collect together, we coordinate.** (List of three with alliteration.)

**Woes unite foes.** (Simple rhyme.)

**Can we afford this project? Yes, if we transfer money from roads. Will it satisfy the cycling lobby? Yes, it's what they've been asking for. Will we upset the motorists? Not if we engage them early.** (Questions and answers.)

## You don't have to be Shakespeare...

**Shakespeare was not a genius. He was without the distant shadow of a doubt, the most wonderful writer who ever breathed. But not a genius. No angels handed him his lines, no fairies proofread for him. Instead, he learnt techniques, he learnt tricks and he learnt them well.**

**- Mark Forsyth**

So can we.

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# Thanks for coming!

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