

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



HOW TO WRITE WELL

“The Connell Guides are brief, attractive,
erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN
ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Tim de Lisle

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Introduction

Writing matters. We all do it, and we all admire it when it's done well. It doesn't just express us: it represents us. It is there, on someone else's screen, when we are not there. **Writing is the second most important thing we learn at school**, after how to get along with others – and it helps with that too.

When we are seven, writing is fun, absorbing, creative, like painting or dressing up. Somewhere along the steep ascent of the next ten years, that feeling can be lost, stifled by school or smothered by self-consciousness. **This slim volume aims to bring the fun back, by showing you simple ways to write better.** It's not the last word on the subject (nothing ever is); it's a quick guide, packed with tips picked up in my life as a writer and editor.

One reason why our love of writing wilts is that it doesn't get much watering. Teachers often have their eye on something else, and perhaps (whisper it) they were never taught to write well themselves. Writing is like dancing, in that you can tell instantly if someone is good at it. But it's also like driving, in that it can be taught. If you find it hard, you're in good company: even some famous writers rely rather too heavily on their editors.

Writing is not about being a genius; few people are. It's wonderful when you see it elevated to an art, but most of the time it's just a craft. The question isn't whether you are a born writer. It's whether there is a better writer inside you, waiting to get out.

Any writing, anywhere, can be good, bad, or somewhere in between. There are tweets that are beautifully composed and trilogies that are terrible. A line jotted inside a birthday card can be just right – warm, funny or loving. A three-word slogan can be inspired, as the Conservative Party famously showed in 1979 with “Labour isn't working”, or it can be drivel, as the Trainline booking service helpfully confirmed in 2016 with “i am train”.

Writing will help you cope with exams, but that's not really the point. It helps you cope with life. A well-written email can land you a job; a well-written text can seal a friendship or start a romance. All you need is an open mind, a supply of energy, and the desire to improve.

Books of advice on anything are apt to be irritating, and rare is the piece of writing about good writing that doesn't end up offering examples of bad writing itself. You probably know Murphy's Law, the pessimist's charter which states that whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. Writers of books like this mutter darkly about Murphy's lesser-known twin, Muphry's law, which states that anyone who criticises someone else's writing or editing will commit some howler of their own. Your job is to see if you can spot it; mine is to apologise in advance.

You can read the book from start to finish in a couple of hours, or you can just dip in. The contents are overleaf, and there's an index at the back. I hope you find it useful, and entertaining.

1. Be clear

If you can only be one thing, be clear. It sounds like a modest ambition, but we often fall short of it. Being clear means keeping things simple, or as simple as you can without misleading the reader.

One summer, nearly a lifetime ago, a leaflet dropped on the mat of every household in Britain. It brought news of something quietly revolutionary:

Your new National Health Service begins on 5th July. What is it? How do you get it?

It will provide you with all medical, dental and nursing care. Everyone – rich or poor, man, woman or child – can use it or any part of it. There are no charges, except for a few special items. There are no insurance qualifications. But it is not a “charity”. You are all paying for it, mainly as tax payers, and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness.

If medals were handed out for services to clarity, the anonymous authors of these words would have got one. They kept it magnificently simple. First, they announced the launch of an institution, in the plainest language, stating its name and giving its start date, and choosing “begin” rather than its pompous brother “commence”. Then they ask two questions: “What is it? How do you get it?” All the best questions are short, because then they are big and open, leaving room for many different answers.

And this even applies, as here, with a question you ask yourself. So far we’ve had three sentences, but only 16 words, none of them long, which is reassuring: it says the authors have nothing to hide.

The sentences that follow, giving the answers, are almost as short as the questions. The first sentence (“It will provide...”) sums up what the NHS offers, and the second spells out who can use it – everyone. The third says that nearly all of it is free; the fourth assures you that you don’t need insurance. The fifth sentence and the first half of the sixth show how the service is funded. **The paragraph finishes with the emotional impact that is the point of the whole exercise – peace of mind.**

All this is done calmly, crisply, with no fuss or grandstanding. Which is not to say that it’s flawless. A picky editor might quibble with “qualifications”, a word of five syllables in a paragraph where everything else has three at most: it would have been plainer and simpler as “You don’t need insurance”. And there’s another bum note in the quote marks around “charity”. The point being made here is straightforward – the NHS is not a charity – so there’s no need to complicate things. (Rule of thumb: save your quote marks for quoting.)

The “you” at the start of the last sentence could have been a “we”. (Another rule of thumb: don’t address your audience in the plural, as you’re trying to connect with each one of them. Jane Eyre didn’t say “Readers, I married him”.) And “mainly as tax payers” could have been just “through our taxes”. So

the last bit might have read like this:

...it is not a charity: we are all paying for it through our taxes, and it will make sure that when we are ill, we don't have money worries as well.

But the original paragraph is still immensely powerful. It contains only 88 words, just under ten per sentence. It conveys all the main points about the NHS. It is direct, helpful and down-to-earth. Written in 1948, it is way ahead of its time.

Don't try to look clever

Being clear means using words the reader will understand, which means using words you understand yourself. **Being clear is way better than being clever.** If you can be both at once, all the better; but it's not worth going out of your way to sound clever. A great TV critic, Nancy Banks-Smith, said, "We cannot put pen to paper without revealing something of ourselves." When we get caught trying to look clever, we just end up looking silly.

If the temptation persists, all you have to do is look the word up. Real writers have a dictionary to hand, and they're not fussed whether it's on paper or online, as long as it's authoritative. I use Dictionary.com, launched in 1995 (before Google) and based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary. If a word is too new for those august pages, it may well

WRITERS ON WRITING

A word after a word after a word is power.

Margaret Atwood

My task, by the power of the written word, is to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.

Joseph Conrad

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.*

Alexander Pope

Writing is the art of applying the ass to the seat.

Dorothy Parker

Substitute "damn" every time you're inclined to write "very"; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.

Mark Twain

This letter is longer than usual, because I've not had time to make it shorter.

Blaise Pascal

If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time – or the tools – to write. Simple as that.

Stephen King

have landed at urbandictionary.com, which is just as helpful and more likely to make you laugh.

One reason the NHS blurb worked was that it had a strong sense of its reader. It could be understood by anyone who was able to read, and by many who weren't, because the short sentences made it easy to read aloud to the illiterate. The authors didn't let their phrasing get in the way of their meaning. Consciously or not, they complied with a famous maxim coined two years earlier by George Orwell: "Good prose is like a windowpane."

Orwell believed, with a passion, that the powerful need to be straight with us. He would have groaned had he lived to hear Theresa May comment on the news that she was going to be Britain's prime minister. "I'm humbled," she said, when she meant the exact opposite – I'm honoured, I'm proud. And this was someone who had presented herself as straight-talking. In the heat of the moment, she forgot that clarity breeds credibility.

Even if you're not powerful, it's vital to say what you mean (unless you're cracking a joke). Just as sportsmen talk of treating the game with respect, so anybody who writes needs to respect the language. Ambiguity can be effective – especially in a song, or a poem – but it's a weapon to add to your arsenal after getting into the habit of being clear. **First learn the rules, then think about breaking them.** Even Andy Warhol, who became world-famous for churning out big bold screenprints of photos of celebrities, had taken the trouble to learn to draw.

YOUR TURN

Being as clear and direct as you can...

- a) *Invent a game and explain the rules*
or
- b) *Invent a job and apply for it*

BE PLAYFUL...

Treat this piece of advice with care: there is a time for play and it's probably not in the middle of an exam. But play is important, and it's a bigger thing than it may appear in the rear-view mirror. "Children learn through play," the pioneering musician Brian Eno said in the BBC's John Peel Lecture in 2015. "Adults play through art." And there's a lot of fun to be had in playing with words.

Take this poem by Brian Bilston, a mysterious character who has been called the Banksy of Twitter. He may be only a figment of his own imagination, but he makes thousands of people smile. While most of his poems are light entertainment, this one is playful to the point of being deadly serious.

Refugees

*They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way*

Now read the poem from the bottom to the top. It isn't word-perfect (the second-last line is missing an "as"). It's not even all that poetic. But it makes one point so strongly that it stays with you. Last time I looked, it had been re-tweeted 12,000 times.



2. Be concise

Brevity, Polonius says in *Hamlet*, is the soul of wit. It's a great line, coolly practising what it preaches (while also poking fun at Polonius himself, for banging on). You could take it further and say that **brevity is the soul of writing**. The words we write bite into our readers' time, so it is good manners not to be greedy. Waffle, while delicious for breakfast, is tiresome on the page, and readers, especially teachers and examiners, can spot it a mile off.

Every so often, someone somewhere launches a short-story competition in which the story has to be only six words long. The most famous example is thought to have been written by Ernest Hemingway:

For sale, baby shoes, never worn.

Whoever it's by, it could hardly be better. It has a twist, and uses it to do something Gustave Flaubert said writers longed for – **to move the stars to pity**.

Don't pad out your sentence

Twitter is sometimes dismissed as dumbed-down because of its 140-character limit. Yet that story would have fitted into a tweet, no trouble. Twitter forces us to do something we should be doing anyway as we write: to distil our thoughts. Sometimes this is just a matter of finding the right