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Art and nourishment or sweat and stench?

This photo can go either way ... some might see parallels with our writing sessions!

Building creativity into life while earning a crust—so many people yearn to find a balance. And so often it's the creativity that's left out, or we forget to look for it.

As usual, Sherryl and I are heading down different paths, but continue to bump into unexpected perspectives which we're keen to feed into our teaching. Look for the new sessions in our October newsletter.

We're preparing for our next Hong Kong trip, 14-28 November. We'll have firm session details in the next newsletter (early October).

We're already getting enquiries about whether we'll be running a Writing Challenge again. The answer is yes, and it will begin in October to finish just before we arrive in HK—see details on page 4.

Hope to catch up in person soon,

Susanna Bryceson & Sherryl Clark

STOP PRESS!

Sherryl and Susanna will be talking about "Overcoming Writer's Block" at a WiPS event at the Foreign Correspondents Centre, Tuesday 17 November, 6.30 pm. Details in our October issue.



Top photo: Wanchai Market

Above: Sherryl answering lots of questions at the Brisbane Writers Festival.

Page 2: Sherryl at the BWF doing an online session.

What are we up to now?

Sherryl: It's been a busy year, involving lots of travelling. Recently it was Children's Book Week in Australia, so I did several school visits, a session at the Melbourne Writers' Festival and three days of school visits in Canberra.

Then I flew to Brisbane and did four sessions at the Brisbane Writers Festival plus three bookshop visits. Phew!

I've also been blogging about the festivals—you can read my blog at www.sherrylclark.blogspot.com

Now I'm back in Melbourne, trying to catch up on some sleep, and totally engrossed in Val McDermid's new crime novel, *Fever of the Bone*.

Nothing like a great book for relaxing and putting your feet up.

Susanna: Life has changed dramatically in my office. I've enrolled in a couple of university subjects (botany and geology). It means I'm spending fewer days at the computer editing long texts, and instead am ploughing through textbooks as a student, rediscovering writing and drawing by hand.

At Victoria University, our rolling writers' festival in Melbourne's west has won the support of the local press, staff across the

huge university, local governments and residents. Managing it is like riding a baby rhino—I'm hoping it won't go feral.

We've begun to run short courses to enable people to kick-start their writing if they don't feel ready to take on our longer course. Not surprisingly, we're finding that all the topics people have enjoyed in Hong Kong are the ones they're signing up for here too.



WEBSITES

www.jakonrath.com/writers.htm has a free download of a very informative, no-nonsense book about called *The Newbies Guide to Publishing Book*.

If you're feeling the strain of writing and want some inspiration, try Kristi Holl at

<http://institutechildrenslit.net/Writers-First-Aid-blog/>

And if you would love a week in a writer's retreat to indulge in some focused writing and chilling out, try Olvar Wood in Queensland

www.olvarwood.com.au



CONSULTATIONS

One-on-one consultations have become a popular part of our Hong Kong trips and we'll be offering them again in November, for one or two-hour blocks.

These sessions have been used to discuss writing, book progress, synopses, website development, your marketing plans, and publication production issues.

Manuscript assessments

We've also been asked about full manuscript assessments and have completed some following our last visit.

These are by negotiation, so please let us know if you need assistance.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Where action is not king

It's generally accepted that fiction, non-fiction and poetry can borrow from each other. But can scientific writing offer anything to people other than scientists?

In my new studies, the lecturers talk to us about the importance of being able to write more than just dot points. I confess that when I began this course, I expected to learn a lot of facts but nothing about writing.

I've never intended scientific research to be a future pursuit, but rather thought I might use my new knowledge to continue to write for general audiences ... and to be honest, I've always thought that bald, raw, dry writing doesn't take much skill at all.

But now, while I've been fascinated by the subject matter, my brain has rebelled during the practical exercises in which we have to describe our specimens.

In all my work with technical writing, I've rarely come across text this dry, by which I mean 'devoid of emotion, action and variety in expression'.

Anyone who's had a writing session with me knows how I feel about the primacy of verbs—but in scientific description, often verbs are missing. For good reason too, as I can now report there's very little action in a Silurian coral fossil.

Precision of language

In this week's geology prac, we moved to describing rocks and lo! my meagre vocab was eclipsed by the richness of geological language. For example, did you know that rock surfaces can be metallic, translucent, pearly, iridescent, silky or fibrous? And the description is not just about colour and lustre, but also texture, shape and even about how the rock breaks.

I've found it takes intense concentration and verbal dexterity to describe a fossil or a rock so that it can be compared with another. You need to know your anterior, your posterior, your dorsal, ventral, endo and ecto.

Verbs schmerbs!

So much of this text is 'beyond the verb'. I've always suggested trying to picture the action you're describing. Here, it's not a case of visualising action but rather more zen-like, more here and now.

You need to look fully, slowly and intently at the inanimate thing right there before you. Once the available language is stripped down to plain instruction and factual description, it needs to be thought through even more meticulously. You can't fudge it with a smart metaphor.

I've developed a new respect for people who do this work. No wonder describing specimens can take such a long time—you can spend a month digging up fossils then the rest of the year in your lab detailing what you've found. It's easy to think 'dullsville', but how else do we know that something is a new species or not if we can't do it by comparing descriptions?

Maybe one day, photo records will replace these descriptions ... but until then, the basis of our scientific world relies on incredible accuracy with text.

In non-fiction writing classes we talk about ways to enrich your writing, for example by using fiction techniques, or poetic metaphor. I know that science writing is not known for its witty, luscious language, but I now think all writers can learn much from this kind of slow looking and hard thinking.

SB ∞

In one of my sessions this year at the YWCA, I'll be exploring new perspectives from far and wide for choosing the words to express yourself.



Writing funny

Lots of writers say, 'I'm not funny. I can't write humour.'

They especially feel that they can't write humour for kids. They look at the 'rude' books and think that's what kids want, but there are many different kinds of humour.

Sure, a few people have natural talent, but here's the secret: a lot of humorous writing is simply based on techniques. As our Comedy Writing teacher at Victoria University says, you don't have to be funny to write funny.

If you're the person who always forgets or ruins the punch-line when you tell a joke, never fear—writing is different. You've got plenty of time to get it right.

The book I recommend to students is *The Comic Toolbox* by John Vorhaus, but there are other good how-tos—it's a matter of finding the one that speaks to you.

This is a brief look at some of the techniques Vorhaus suggests.

Create a comic character

- ∞ This character sees the world differently from 'normal' people. Add exaggeration, flaws and likeability. Think of some great comic characters you love and work out what their E/F/L elements are.

Start with a funny title

- ∞ This promises fun and laughs. Expect to write 10 titles to even find one you like. Yes, we can't help thinking of that classic, *Bumageddon—The Final Pongflict*, but there are plenty of other clever examples, like Erma Bombeck's *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?*

Clash of context

- ∞ Put something or someone where they don't belong and see what happens. An obvious example is the 'Beverly Hillbillies' sitcom, where a hick farming family ends up rich in LA. A kid's example might be a tone-deaf child who ends up in the school choir and accidentally volunteers to sing a solo.



The wildly inappropriate response

- ∞ Pick a situation and work out what the logical response is, then go for the wildly inappropriate one.

One example might be a boy who is forced to join the school boxing team. A logical response is to ask his parents to get him out of it. A wildly inappropriate response is for him to turn up to training wearing a dress and high heels!

Create comic opposites

- ∞ Create two characters who are so different that they play off against each other.

The classic examples are 'The Odd Couple' sitcom with fastidious Felix and messy Oscar, and the movie 'Twins', in which the twins are tiny Danny DeVito and huge Arnold Schwarzenegger. Writers often choose siblings to be the opposites, but try some other combinations.

Telling the truth to comic effect

- ∞ This means stating the obvious in a funny way. For example, the kid who has just been caught misbehaving doesn't deny it. Instead he says, "OK, I'll see you in detention."

Telling a lie to comic effect

- ∞ This often involves exaggeration. For example, a teacher is late for class and a student says, 'If she takes any longer, we'll have graduated.'

Writing funny is not for everyone, but if you want to try, start with a story someone else has told you that made you laugh.

When you've honed it so that it's pacy rather than wordy, give it to a few different people to read and see if you get the reaction you want. And remember—a good how-to book can help you immensely.

SC ∞

Consider this text. I've highlighted the words and phrases that recur.

Amelie stood in the heart of the fire unable to escape. The blaze towered over her from every corner, imposing and menacing. It burned everything it touched, but she couldn't move and couldn't cry out. She wanted to run, wanted to find somewhere safe, but she was frozen in a sea of flames that cared nothing for what she wanted. It had its own plans, its own path, and Amelie was going to follow it regardless.

The repetition may be intended to set up a rhythm, but it can also slow the writing and become plodding. Let's tighten it up. (The sentences are numbered for reference.)

Sentence 1: Leave for now.

Sentence 2: 'imposing' is implied, and maybe we can leave out 'her'.

Sentence 3: take out the repetition and see if the sentence still works.

Sentence 4: same as sentence 3, but here we have 3 x 'she' and 3 x 'wanted'. Choose which ones you want to keep and eliminate the rest. This shortens the sentence and heightens the urgency.

Sentence 5: I'd be tempted to take out the repetition again, but equally, it's now the only time this form is used. As the story pace has become reflective, it could stay.

1 Amelie stood in the heart of the fire unable to escape.

2 The blaze towered from every corner, menacing.

3 It burned everything it touched, but she couldn't move or cry out.

4 She wanted to run, find somewhere safe, but was frozen in a sea of flames that cared nothing for her.

5 It had its own plans, its own path, and Amelie was going to follow it regardless.

Tightening the text is one stage of revising the draft. Now it needs to be looked at again and could probably be sharpened more. ∞

Hong Kong Writing Challenge is on again!

Do you yearn to explore your writing?

Do you have a writing project you're trying to make time for?

Do you want to give writing some priority in your busy life?

If you've answered 'yes, but...' then the HK Writing Challenge might be just the commitment you need to get started.

textConnection's life-coaching department says it takes 21-28 days of continued practice to set a new habit.

This is not a lifelong plan. It's a 21-day writing challenge, over 28 days. It might be a beginning for you, a chance to finish a project, or it could be just plain fun.

YOUR TARGET

Write a page of text a day for at least 21 out of 28 days. This will create a substantial body of work. Write more if you like, but write on **at least** 21 days.

Report on your weekly tally by 5 pm every Friday, and we'll circulate reports to help motivate each other across the oceans.

GUIDELINES

1. Pages can be handwritten or typed. Date them, number them. You don't have to redraft the text, just write.

2. It can be one long story or 21 separate pieces. Fiction or non.

3. Do more than record your daily activities. Include at least two thoughtful observations in each piece: perhaps something you've noticed that day.

Anyone can take part in this Challenge. We won't be critiquing your writing—this is to get you writing in the first place, to get it into the daily habit.

Please wave back to my email address if you're interested: qwerty@netspace.net.au

GRANDE FINALE, HONG KONG

5-7 pm, Monday 16 November

Venue in Wanchai to be advised

Catch a ferry, hop on a tram, board a bus, to meet us to report on your experience.

If you've achieved the target, we'll even buy you a congratulatory drink!

If you don't meet the target, come anyway to be inspired. Meet fellow HK writers and talk about your experiences.



Reflections on the May Writing Challenge

- ∞ *Working as a writer for a living, it was so nice to be able to write in my own voice, about my own stuff.*
- ∞ *I got tough on my excuses: 'you can watch that half-hour episode on TV once you've done your writing!'*
- ∞ *This challenge came at just the right time for me. I've now made substantial progress on a project I've been wanting to start for a long time.*
- ∞ *I wrote about 10,000 words in total!*
- ∞ *I wrote on 17 days—a little short of the target, but I wrote 17 entries more for my project than I would have otherwise, so I'm rapt!*
- ∞ *I nearly dropped out of the Challenge because I didn't feel I could make the target. But the group encouraged me to keep writing whatever I could and I felt so supported I got stuck into a couple of project pieces.*
- ∞ *Celebrating the Challenge with Harvey Wallbangers took me back to my student days!*

The individual projects included:

- ∞ travel pieces
- ∞ most of the entries for a short book about favourite plant species
- ∞ personal secrets on an encrypted USB that only the writer knows the password to—ssshh!
- ∞ reflections on the way to work each day, in a specially bought journal
- ∞ journal observations to find 'voice'
- ∞ writing about family photos, choosing a different one each day.

The HK Writing Challenge: Saturday 17 October to Friday 13 November.

textConnection

writing ∞ editing ∞ training

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Email us if you want to be added to our distribution list.

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textConnection conducts training courses tailored to beginners and advanced writers, people working in publishing, education and business.

Our courses include:

- ∞ fiction writing for adults and children
- ∞ non-fiction and life writing
- ∞ corporate writing
- ∞ editing and producing publications.

We've been teaching writing and editing for more than 20 years each, and both work in the industry.

We conduct our courses in Australia and Asia.

