

The Many Colours of the Pen that Writes

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If you regard poetry as being only for 'those people', try watching the film *Il Postino* (The Postman). A fictional tale woven around Pablo Neruda¹, it is a heart-warming story of a postman who goes to deliver letters every day to the poet - and slowly finds the poet within himself awakening. By the end of that film, the realization that poetry is nothing but a contact with one's deepest self slowly begins to dawn in the mind of even the most diehard sceptic. [That film, in fact, prompted me to write my first serious poem: and I was amongst those who thought poetry was 'not for me'.]

In a similar sense, many of us may feel that writing skills are needed only by those whose day-to-day work demands a lot of writing: journalists, reporters, editors, researchers, academicians, writers, and others of that ilk. However, just a little bit of reflection will reveal that almost everyone (whether a doctor, businessman, engineer, nurse, teacher, advertiser, administrator or salesperson) is called upon to communicate something or the other in their workplace, and often times, the communication is expected to be in writing. Learning to do this effectively will go a long way in improving that facet of one's work.

Not everyone may be called upon to write a four-page essay, but recording, documenting, summarising, reporting, and occasionally, even a little bit of creative writing are tasks that many of us need to perform. The nurse who has to document the patient's progress (for the benefit of the doctor on duty) is better equipped to do it if (s)he has an idea of how to go about recording observations clearly and systematically. The engineer who makes a visit to the site of construction would

need to report about the suitability of the site (for the project under consideration) as accurately and concisely as possible. The administrator often calls upon those (s)he administers to quickly summarise the happenings in a meeting so as to help effect speedy decision-making. Parents need, on occasion, to whip

In his *Deliciae Physico-Mathematicae* (1636), German inventor Daniel Schwenter described a pen made from two quills. One quill served as a reservoir for ink inside the other quill. The ink was sealed inside the quill with cork. Ink was squeezed through a small hole to the writing point. Progress in developing a reliable pen was slow, however, into the mid-19th century. That slow pace of progress was due to a very imperfect understanding of the role that air pressure played in the operation of the pens and because most inks were highly corrosive and full of sedimentary inclusions. The Romanian inventor Petrache Poenaru received a French patent for the invention of the first fountain pen with a replaceable ink cartridge on May 25, 1827. The design of the pen allowed for smooth writing without unwanted dripping or scratching. Starting in the 1850s there was a steadily accelerating stream of fountain pen patents and pens in production. It was only after three key inventions were in place, however, that the fountain pen became a widely popular writing instrument. Those inventions were the iridium-tipped gold nib, hard rubber, and free-flowing ink.

Taken from the link:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_pen

¹Pablo Neruda (July 12, 1904 - September 23, 1973) was the pen name and, later, legal name of the Chilean writer and politician Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto. Neruda assumed his pen name as a teenager, partly because it was in vogue, partly to hide his poetry from his father, a rigid man who wanted his son to have a "practical" occupation. With his works translated into many languages, Pablo Neruda is considered one of the greatest and most influential poets of the 20th century. In 1971 Neruda won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

up a creative tale that will put their child to sleep or, as educators, need to bring home an important lesson that probably can be best conveyed only through a story. The salesperson needs to be able to summarise the attributes of the product being sold, in an appealing manner, so as to engage the potential customer within a short time frame.

Expressing oneself well in any language is therefore an undeniable asset, and often a basic requirement, for almost anyone. If one is able to write reasonably well in the language, so much the better! While forms of writing abound, I will confine myself to just four types of writing that are demanded of many of us in the workplace, and sometimes even outside it. These are: summarising, précis writing, journal writing and creative writing.

If one were to summarise the text in the box on the previous page, one would be called upon to restate the main ideas, omitting all supporting examples and evidence. The length of the summary could vary, but a sample (of a four-sentence one) is given below:

Unless one understands how a thing functions, one cannot improve its design. The humble pen exemplifies this statement, as it was not until its mechanism of function was understood (in the mid-19th century) that its design really took off. A 17th century inventor made a pen from two quills, the ink squeezed slowly through a small hole to the writing point almost as slow as the progress of the design of this writing instrument! Only when the role of air pressure in the operation of pens was understood, did a stream of patents and inventions flow smoothly out...nudged along the way by three key inventions: the gold nib, hard rubber and free-flowing ink.

If you found the summary more readable than the original text above, without a significant loss of matter, then the summary was a good one.

What's the difference between a summary and a précis, one may well ask? The classic text on précis writing, *Précis Writing for Beginners*, by Pocock is as relevant today as in 1917, when it was first printed. A précis is a

type of summarizing that insists on an exact reproduction of the logic, organization, and emphasis of the original texts. An effective précis retains the logic, development, and argument of the original in much shorter form. Given below is one attempt at making a précis of the same passage:

How has the humble pen metamorphosed over the years? A 17th century German inventor has left behind a description of a pen made from two quills, one inside the other. One quill served as an ink reservoir for the other. However, since most inks were highly corrosive and full of sedimentary inclusions, the design of the pen did not progress smoothly. Although its design has changed significantly over the centuries, it was not until the mid-19th century, when people finally understood the role of air pressure in the operation of pens, that a plethora of patents and inventions of various types of pens burst forth. The fountain pen became a popular writing instrument only after the gold nib, hard rubber and free-flowing ink were invented.

As you can see, there is greater adherence to the flow of argument in the précis than in the summary. I have often looked back on my school years and thanked my précis writing classes (and teachers!) for any writing skills that I may now possess. We would be told to shorten a three page text into one page, then into half a page and finally into a paragraph. The quality of attention that such a reading demanded (with the ability to sift out the non-essential from the essential), the continuous revisiting of content and words used, and the rephrasing (in brief) that we were thus called upon to do has stood me in very good stead in later years. When you have to urgently convey some important news, a good précis writer will do the trick! [Don't we all need one such person around, at home as well as the work place?] Writing reams is often far easier than being brief and succinct. Who was it who once said: I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote a long one...? Some say it was Blaise Pascal; others go as far back as Cicero.

If there is one other kind of writing that helped hone my writing skills it is letter writing, sadly an anachronism today, the age of electronic mail. However, even today, the option of journal writing is still open. Writing a journal is said to be one of the best ways of polishing writing skills. Demanding that one 'simply records' what has taken place in one's day is deceptively simple. For, it is seldom that words flow out of one's pen: or up from one's keyboard! Therefore, it is useful to trigger such writing by giving writing prompts, e.g. what did you have for breakfast today?

My day begins with my usual breakfast of a boiled egg. Peeling off the shell is strangely satisfying, as the removal of pieces is accompanied by the emergence of a whole. I have never quite gotten accustomed to the smell of a boiled egg: despite having it for breakfast for so many years. It always hits me with a start. Biting into the soft grey, white and yellow mush is not so pleasant, as it invariably demands a second brushing of teeth so as to not go around all day with a grey and yellow mouth! And what with one's bus due to depart at 0725 hours: it's seldom that I truly relish my breakfast.

This brings me to the fourth kind of writing: perhaps the hardest. What is creative writing? While I find that difficult to define, I do think that creative people "see" things differently. One of the things we are taught very early in our schooling is to compare and contrast things. Spotting differences is a skill we acquire very quickly. However, it is often the underlying sameness in much that is around us, that creative people discern: and the not-so-creative tend to miss, obsessed as they are with (obvious) differences.

So if we were to try this exercise in creative writing, again with the same two subjects: the pen and the egg, let's see what would happen...

Take a look at this picture of an egg, and just jot down words that the picture evokes out of you. Here's what I got:



Egg: oval, brown, round, smooth, new life, creation, waiting, continuation, shadow, gentle, rocking, brown on white.

Now do the same with this picture of the ink and pen:

Ink and Pen: words that will flow out of the pen, waiting, new words, creation, communication, ink waiting to be used, words waiting to pour out, pen ready to scribe.



What's connecting these two things? Do you feel they are too utterly different? Just wait till we try to tie them together, using the phrases and words jotted above:

WAITING

*Life will spill out of the egg
Words will flow out of the pen
Both are suspended in gentle anticipation
Who will emerge from the egg?
What will speak from the pen?
Waiting, waiting, the egg rocks slightly
The ink tremors in the bottle
Locked inside the brown and oval shell
Is a life waiting to be born.
Hidden inside the grooves of the nib
Are words that will fill the pages of a book
The Creator speaks through Creation
Some use words.
Others, creatures.*

If you think it's tough: just try! You may well be surprised by the results! Enjoy your bout of writing: summarising or précis, journal or creative!

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