

Notes on writing to engage with the reader:  
Support notes for ISPSO workshop “Writing with walls in mind”

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**How can we, as analytically oriented authors, write in accessible and engaging language without dumbing down what we say or losing the integrity of the message we wish to convey?**

I’m assuming that you want people to read your writing. Presumably you’re writing because you want at least a few people to pay attention to what you say and you may also hope that they will be influenced by your lines of thought. Boring writing won’t achieve that. Dense, obtuse writing probably won’t either. But nor will the vacuous writing styles that we sometimes see in popular magazines. I’m assuming that you want to take your readers on a useful or thought-provoking journey.

The goal of the following document is to provoke your thinking about how to write material in ways that engage your intended readership to evoke in them a useful experience. But let’s start with a well known fact:

**It** is well known that serious writers don’t use humour: That proper writing tells us facts and is not playful: That allegory, metaphor and poetics belong in fiction and poetry, not in credible non-fiction: And perhaps most importantly **it** is not good practice to use colons like I just have done.

Well, I’d like to challenge this “**It**” who knows so well all of the above. He<sup>1</sup> writes with authority about a multitude of topics, ranging from astronomy to microbiology, on to psychology – and more. Despite the fact that he’s been asserting his authority for centuries I tried to find him on the internet but failed. Nonetheless I should confess that I also quote Mr **It** sometimes in my writing. Doing so means that I don’t need to acknowledge that what I write is really just ideas that I have assembled and that resonate with me. By referring to the ubiquitous “**It**” I don’t have to expose myself and my views.

Now, having critiqued the distancing that we can achieve by using “**It** is well known...” and other terms such as “**There are many authors...**” we move on to evaluate the veracity of the other statements above, starting with the idea that there is no place for humour and play in credible non-fiction writing.

On the contrary, play can enable us to hold in mind simultaneously a number of apparently contradictory ideas, thus lowering our defences against otherwise foreign concepts. The ‘as if’ nature of play means that we can consider ideas not to be ‘serious’ and hence not a threat to our existing dearly held web of constructs. Having entered our awareness and having been held in a cognitive play space, ideas can then be gently tested and sorted. Some may then be allowed into the inner sanctums of the ideas that help to define who we are.

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<sup>1</sup> Who could argue that **It** is a bloke?

On the contrary, authoritative statements can quickly raise our defences creating a hard wall off which new ideas will bounce. You must NOT write authoritative statements! ;-)

Similarly, poetics can create an invitation for us to dance between the light and the shade of the forest of potentially infinite ideas that exist in the wider world and beyond. Pedantic text lulls us to sleep whereas the vibrancy of a cascade of images and metaphor stimulates associations and ideas and injects aliveness into the reading experience.

But as *It* said earlier, credible writers don't write in this fluffy and insubstantial way, so in case I'm losing credibility in your eyes, I'll revert to a more serious style for a while.

### Let's write for a wider audience than just our peers

Members of the ISPSO cohere around a shared interest in socio-analysis, psychoanalysis and systems thinking. We love to get together and talk our specialist language, heavily sprinkled with terms such as "Bion", "unconscious" and "denial". We want to be respected by our peers and colleagues and so when writing for consumption by our own field, we also aim to be serious, original and clever. But such writing is often very difficult to digest for readers from outside our field. So, one premise of the writers' workshop and hence of this document, is that it is also useful to write material that is accessible to people from the wider World. There is a lot of published material that is written for socio-analysts, but not enough written *by* socio-analysts that is accessible to a wide readership that includes those who are not familiar with psychoanalytic or even psychological terms. This workshop is based on the idea that participants want to invite lay readers into a community of thought that perhaps has previously been foreign or alien to them.

The remainder of this document consists of ideas to apply to our writing so as to make it readable, engaging and accessible to a lay readership.

### How can the written word engage with readers?

In the text below I suggest some principles to keep in mind when writing for accessibility. They are ideas rather than hard and fast rules. I suggest that you adapt them to your particular context and circumstances.

#### Limit mental hard work

Many readers will already be working their brains quite hard to integrate new concepts that you write about. It makes sense then, to structure our sentences in ways that don't stretch the mental resources of readers – in particular short-term memory. *For example, as authors, we need to hold in mind the notion that in order to make sense of a written sentence, particularly in the midst of entering new conceptual territory, readers will need to hold in mind all previous content in a given sentence before the final subject clause appears.* Yes, the previous sentence – in italics - is intended to be difficult to interpret. It is an example of a complex sentence structure that requires a lot of mental effort to understand. It is particularly difficult because there is so much content in the sentence before the subject clause. The reader has to hold in mind a lot of material in order to make sense of the final (subject) clause. I could write instead *"Complex sentences create a lot of mental work for the reader. It can be best to write in a way that quickly signals the main point to the reader and*

*then elaborate afterwards. This is particularly true when the reader is already grappling with new concepts.”*

Of course, short sentences can be overdone to the point where the text seems childlike. There’s no fail-safe formula.

#### Be active

Readers can experience a deadening or distancing from the text and from the author by the use of the passive tense. By the way, my intention was to write the previous sentence in the passive tense. I’m not sure if I succeeded.

An example. I originally wrote the first sentence of this document as ‘I am assuming that you will want your writing to be read.’ I later re-wrote it as ‘I’m assuming that you want people to read your writing.’ The first is in the passive voice and the second is in the active voice.

The reader can find it difficult to engage with the text and with the writer when there is no sense of action in a sentence. I’m not suggesting that authors don’t ever use the passive voice. It has a purpose. But let’s keep an eye on how much we use it.

#### Create vivid pictures

I was recently talking with a colleague who quoted a person as saying “I prefer listening to the radio rather than watching TV because the pictures are better on the radio!” TV provides ready-made pictures whereas text provides material for us to create our own pictures.

We can aim to offer readers vivid word pictures (and also graphics/images) of our experiences, our thoughts, our feelings, our confusion, our hopes and our passion. A sad movie evokes tears in the viewer. A happy movie evokes joy. This is because viewers ‘become’ the key character and feel as if they *are* the character in the movie. We as authors can offer images that are powerful enough to enable our readers to feel as though they are living through the experiences that we describe.

#### And of course – Story! But you already knew that

Each time I sit down to work on this document I have conflicting feelings. On one hand I love the idea of engaging with you (workshop participants) to co-create an understanding of how to write material from our field to be accessible to a lay audience. But on the other hand, I am afraid that I’m being prescriptive in this document itself and *telling* you rather than engaging with you – and hence that I’ll alienate you. If I am being prescriptive with the style of this document, I’m also contradicting some of the content of the document. Tricky stuff! Anyway, that’s my short story about some uncertainty that I’m feeling.

(Perhaps I could lecture you sternly about the need to engage with readers and to walk alongside them rather than telling them what to think?)

Hopefully by including our own stories as well as stories from others, we will provide some vivid images, cases and illustrations that engage the reader and tickle their interest and

curiosity. By the way, there are many forms to ‘story’, ranging from an anecdote or illustration through to a full-blown a case study. Each has its place, depending on your intent as author.

#### Include your own stories of struggles and vulnerability

As we lay out our own dilemmas, our own unknowing and our own attempts at solutions, readers might relate their own experience to our troublesome experience and wonder about how to work through it. Our stories may provoke or evoke in them useful ideas and associations. The reader probably does not need polished narratives and complete theories that are expressed from the distance of the third person narrator/author. Our own mess and our own experiments may lead the reader to sit up in bed reading a little longer. Perhaps we can offer hope that situations that were previously beyond understanding for the reader might become comprehensible. Thus, intractable experiences in the reader’s life may start to be transformed into material for learning

#### Balance simplification with realistic complexity

Some readers are hungry for formulae, algorithms and step-by-step guides. And some published authors respond with apparently simple solutions to life’s complexities. We too, could reassure our readers by promising an easy fix. However, it is probably unhelpful for us support the illusion that the complexities of life can be reduced to a few universal principles. We can’t honestly tell our readers that success is guaranteed by following recipes for action.

Endings provide a useful illustration of how some uncertainty can be useful. Many European movies end with an ambiguous scene. The viewer is left wondering “I wonder what happened in the end?” This way, the viewer’s thinking about the significance of the film continues well past the time of viewing. In contrast, Hollywood movies often tie up loose ends and assure us that everyone lived happily ever after. End of story. End of thinking<sup>ii</sup>.

With written work, it is likely that a reader will gain more from musing about possibilities than from being reassured that a given action or theory will save them from failure. We may be best to invite the reader into wondering, whilst not leaving her or him floundering in a soup of disorganized ideas. After all, offering our writing to readers in itself creates a legitimate expectation in the reader that we have something of value to say. It feels to me like a delicate balance. On one hand we’re wanting to offer readers useful material, but on the other hand we want to stimulate their thinking rather than feeding them with simplistic answers.

#### Simple language does not mean simple ideas

As lead editor of an emerging book, I all too often read early drafts of chapters that are written in complex language. All the authors are busy, and I hate going back to an author and saying ‘can you say that more simply?’ But recently I said exactly that to Bob Hinshelwood who is a very accomplished author. His response was to completely re-write the chapter and the transformation was impressive. I quote from his as-yet unpublished revised version.

*As indicated, humans too get into a moment where we feel driven automatically almost to swear angrily at someone. To give a two-finger sign to someone else on*

*the road, or a sigh of despair when our child has got his homework wrong – again. Such expletives just come out without thought.*

*But then there is a different process that occurs in humans. That automatic response can be interrupted. Freud called that reflex-like response a ‘motor action’, though we can do it with words as well. But we usually interrupt the possibility of that kind of ‘action’. We inhibit that impulsive reaction because it is uncivilised or ill-mannered.*

*And then that interruption gives an opportunity for something else to happen in between the stimulus and the behaviour. The early humans who kept goats or sheep so that they could eat when hungry had moved on from the lion who simply found food when hungry. Key to this, Freud said, was the capacity to have ideas in one’s mind<sup>2</sup>.*

Bob captures a complex concept that could easily have been explained in complex sentences full of jargon. Instead, his simple expression powerfully conveys his message.

Become a co-explorer with your reader

Text can invite readers to walk alongside the author(s) to build upon the known, and to look into the unknown. As authors we can tempt the reader to be a curious co-explorer with us. But entering the unknown can be scary so we need to provide trustworthy guidance. We need to appear through our text as authentic, curious, but also well informed. We need to be visible as human beings so that our readers can identify with us and want either to walk beside us or even in our shoes through the tapestry of ideas and questions encapsulated in our writing.

Help the reader construct a trustworthy author-in-the-mind

*Perhaps the traditional psychoanalytic stance of the analyst creating a blank screen can be unwittingly and unhelpfully translated into the author who hides her character, preferences and passion from the reader. Could this reduce the credibility to the reader of the author?*

On the subject of visibility, I usually find myself constructing a mental image of the author of whatever material I read. For example, I’ve constructed Ralph Stacey as clever but rigid and dogmatic person. I’ve never met him but that’s the image of him that his writing evokes in me. For me, Steven Covey is well meaning but moralizing and simplistic. Again, just from reading his books. In contrast, I constructed a Claudio Neri in-the-mind who is curious, whimsical and clever. Meeting him after reading his book confirmed my impressions.

Let’s assume then, that your readers will be constructing in their minds a picture of what you – as author – are like. They will be searching between the lines to find an authentic human being in you as author. You can give them a hand in this quest by directly writing about your experiences, fears, wishes, dilemmas, hopes and confusion. Not just any anecdotes though, they need to be relevant to the story you are weaving in your paper or chapter. You don’t need to stand on the pedestal of your own words to trumpet “look at me. I’m the real subject of this chapter”. Rather, let your readers know about your

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<sup>2</sup> From Thinking together: Connecting and disconnecting in groups by Bob Hinshelwood. In “How people think together” – in press. (Eds. T. M. Ringer, R. Gordon and B. Vandenbussche).

experience *as it helps to illuminate your topic*. Having said that, I'm a little self-conscious as I write this, because I've just reminded myself that you will be forming a 'Martin-in-the-mind' as you read my text.

#### Don't be a smart-arse

On the other pole to vulnerability is clever self-assurance. We can be tempted as writers to show how smart we are and to imagine the reader being impressed by our intelligence, knowledge and wisdom. What joy there can be from thinking that the reader admires us for our prowess and our knowledge! But writing of this nature is likely to be unhelpful to the reader. It may encourage the reader to project his or her expertise onto the author and to lose his or her own confidence and curiosity. Smart-arse writing can lead the reader to think "I'll never be as smart as this author". Or the reader may just see us as self-aggrandizing and hence not trustworthy.

#### Perhaps, provide containment for the reader

Our writing may offer a kind of containment for the reader that holds him or her in a safe-enough place to awaken slumbering questions, to bring the unthought and even unthinkable into mind. Our text may give a name to the intuitive knowing of the author and enable her or him to find patterns in previously chaotic memories and experiences. We may provide a name for a felt absence in the reader – a felt sense of something missing. This quality of containment is difficult to achieve through the written word. The main element in our text that contains readers is the implicit message that we as authors are trustworthy, authentic, well intentioned and well informed.

#### Walk slowly with the reader into a new community of thought

An example: For many authors from the socio-analytic field, the name (Wilfred) Bion will be familiar and will evoke many thoughts, ideas, theories and associations. But for many of our readers the word Bion will be the be meaningless. Or they might think of organic food. So, if we want to introduce readers to some of Bion's complex ideas we will need to build up a conceptual ladder, starting perhaps with reference to unconscious processes. When readers have had time to digest the idea of the unconscious it may be helpful to next introduce the idea of splitting and projection, and so on. In general, then, we need to build conceptual frameworks gradually, with rich illustrations and with time for foundation concepts to be integrated before building the next level of concepts. When writing books (rather than stand-alone papers), some of this progressive building can be done within each chapter and some can be achieved by careful sequencing of chapters.

#### Addressing the reader. What did you think?

In writing this text I've felt like I've been talking with you and so I've addressed you directly. However, I've heard a number of objections to this style of writing. For example, saying 'dear reader' or equivalent can feel patronising to some readers. But after all, you are reading this right now, so am I not communicating with you? I guess one problem is that we can't have a two-way conversation right now. So it's not really a conversation, more like a talk where I can't make personal contact with you and other readers. Maybe talking directly to you seems feels a bit contrived to you. For those of you who attend the Berlin workshop, we can have a conversation about this.

### A theory about theory and referencing

If the phone rings when an author is writing, the author will get distracted (Damasio, 2010). This is a direct result of the functioning of the brain (Eagleman, 2012). This is because the brain has limited capacity to multi-task (Schore, 2015). Do we get the picture? Some referencing styles create an effect like a phone ringing while we are reading. Yet at times readers will get excited by some of the ideas we are expressing in the text and will want to follow up with reading from related texts by following up on references that we provide.

At a recent meeting of authors and editors, we arrived at the following ideas about referencing:

*“We’re suggesting that we don’t interrupt our text by any form of referencing, rather, just superscripts that lead to endnotes or footnotes. Then authors who so wish will write supplementary notes for their chapter. The notes could include references, expansions of ideas and whatever the author thinks will enrich the text for the interested reader and perhaps lead them to related resources. That is, we’re not setting out to write an ‘academic’ book, but we’re hoping still to include a great deal of richness in an accessible form.*

*We’re suggesting too, that we as authors describe theories in our own words. That is how we understand the theory to apply to the situations that we write about. Then in the notes on the chapter we can expand and invite the reader to explore other writing – by providing references.”*

This particular referencing style won’t pass muster with many academic journals, but some book publishers are comfortable with this style.

### Evoking dreaming or reverie in readers

Sometimes while reading, I will catch myself day-dreaming without having realized that I’d actually stopped following the text. It’s taken me some years to understand this state of day-dreaming or reverie can be a really useful part of the reading experience. What leads me into this reflective thoughtful space is usually a (written) statement that evokes in me powerful thoughts or feelings – or both. The result is that my brain calls for time out to juggle this new provocative idea with what I already know or believe. I like this kind of written material because it takes me on interesting journeys of thought.

Perhaps we learn best when we are nudged from time to time into reverie, when new ideas are allowed to sit alongside previous knowledge in a dream-state? This coincides somewhat with the idea that the most powerful means of teaching in schools are based on provoking thinking rather than treating the student like an empty vessel that needs to be filled up with knowledge. Do we then, seek to evoke reverie in our readers? And if so, how might we do that?

### We are also writing to the reader’s unconscious mind

Many reader responses are unconscious and may never reach consciousness. Some will reach consciousness a long time after the reader has finished the book. Those of you who have run experiential learning events will probably have had past participants say things like “I wasn’t sure what I learned at the time (a year ago) but last week at a work meeting something really fell into place for me.” Books can have the same effect. Nonetheless, it is

reasonable to satisfy readers expectation that they will have some conscious satisfaction from reading our material at the time of reading, not just one year later.

I imagine that writing simultaneously to the reader's conscious and unconscious minds is a complex art and one that does not appear to have been explored widely in the literature. So hopefully we will be able to work together during the workshop to develop some ideas on this.

### Acknowledgements

These notes began as a short document that emerged from conversations between editors and authors contributing to the forthcoming book with a provisional title of "How people think *together*: The art of thinking together in groups, teams and communities". These conversations occurred mainly during the writers' retreats held in Gent (Belgium) in 2018 and 2019.

Also, I have been exposed to ideas from a wide range of sources, I have adopted those that make sense to me as my own. So this is effectively an 'open source' document and you are free to use it how you wish.

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<sup>i</sup> Thanks to Bill Bunbury

<sup>ii</sup> And yes, some people like me easily fall into the trap of dividing the World into good and bad!