

How to write like a human



THE FIVE WRITERS INSIDE YOU

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SimonYoungWriters

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I'm a writer

What do you see first when you hear the word "writer"?

It could mean anything. And for some people, it means one of these stereotypes:

- **Author** - either fabulously wealthy like JK Rowling, or starving and tortured like ... well, most unpublished authors.
- **Poet** - slightly crazy, deeply profound, good to have at parties. Depending on what kind of parties.
- **Journalist** - curious, determined and hungry. And possibly thirsty.
- **Pedant** - or perhaps an English teacher. Best be careful lest you dangle your modifiers in front of them!

Or, if it's a fairly savvy person, they may think:

- **Copywriter** - someone who knows how to persuade using words

Stereotypes to Archetypes

When I started freelance writing in 1999, I soon discovered not all kinds of writing are the same. There's something in these stereotypes - something all writers can learn from.

So why not turn the stereotypes into archetypes? Archetypes are used by storytellers to give their characters a mythic quality. Our hero is a Herculean character. His uncle is a typical (or archetypical) wizard/sage/advisor. These are literary or mythical archetypes. But maybe we writers need more writerly archetypes to help ourselves.

Why?

Take a look around at your world. It's changing. Every industry, every area of academia, every vocation is shifting its borders. To stay sharp, people who care about their careers need to learn about other disciplines. Engineers are learning psychology. Psychologists are learning public relations. Public relations people are learning computer science.

So why settle for being a one-trick writer?

I believe you actually have at least five writers in you. I call them the Five Writing Archetypes (Clarity 1, Imagination 0). Here's how they can help you write better.

Storyteller

The Power of Narrative



It could be the aristocratic novelist, typing a page a day from his luxurious French villa.

Or the Hollywood screenwriter, sipping his latte as he seeks character ideas from the passing crowd.

At their heart, these popular storyteller stereotypes take us to the ancient fireside, hearing about how the world works ... through stories.

Economist and academic Deidre McCloskey estimates that storytelling makes up 14% of the USA's gross national product - that's more than a

trillion dollars.

So why isn't "storyteller" a respected job title? Because storytelling is a latent skill in many jobs - law, marketing, even numbers-intensive disciplines like management consulting and market research.

It's only in the last 10 years or so that the business community has recognised the power of storytelling to bring about change in individuals and organisations.

What can a story help you do? It can put flesh on an otherwise abstract idea. And it can bring a vision into much clearer focus.

In 2003 Eugene Moreau approached me for some speculative storytelling. He was organising New Zealand Home Loans' annual conference, and needed something to inspire franchisees to the lofty goals NZHL had for the year ahead.

They could've used graphs and charts, but instead we gave them a story - a news story dated one year from the conference, describing the company's huge growth and, beyond that, it's influence on the whole industry.

Four years later, NZHL is a big contributor to the profits of Kiwibank, which bought the company for \$8 million in 2006 because it saw such incredible performance from the company.

ACTION POINT: **How to tell stories**

Bottom line, stories work because they engage the imagination. When you're faced with information that's dense, boring or abstract, ask yourself:

- Can I make this into a story?
- Is there a true story I can tell? (True stories are, naturally, more believable)
- What is the outline of the story - beginning, middle and end?
- Is it an interesting story on its own, besides the point I'm trying to make?

The Poet

The Search for Soul



Like the prophets of old the poet stands apart, accusing us by their very distance, pointing out things we knew but did not see.

“The poet who is not in trouble with the King
is in trouble with her work.”

Nigerian Author Chinua Achebe

What poetry is about

The poet is the visionary, using words to shock, to prod, to open a window into a brand new world. Or to see the world we live in as we've never seen it before.

The poet is about surprise, is about letting the reader or hearer see the world through his or her eyes.

In his marvellous book *Accidental Magic*, Roy H Williams says poetry is not about rhyming. Rather, “it is about unusual combinations of unpredictable words that surprise Broca (*the area of our brain that makes sense out of words*) and gain the voluntary attention of the listener. It is about transferring a new perspective.”

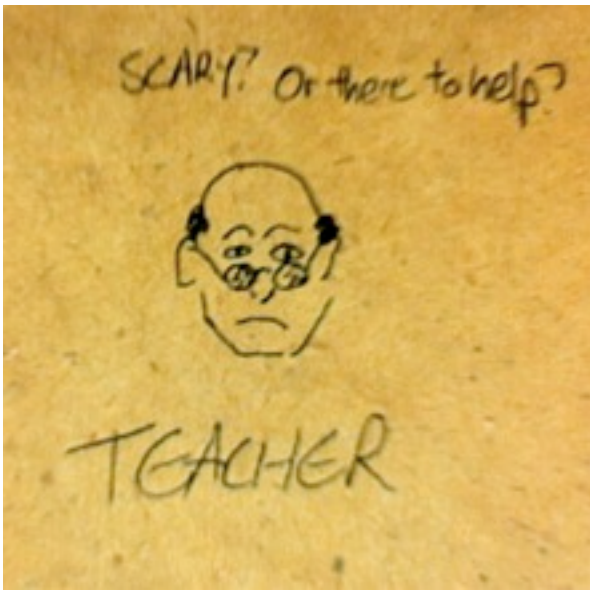
Poetry can put familiar concepts into surprising new words. It can also help us say hard truths straighter than we're used to. Management consultant William Dunk says “Poetry, for sure, is the best way we've got of banishing euphemism and the world of words without meaning”. (See also [William's site](#) for examples of business and poetry meeting up).

But poetry doesn't necessarily mean arty stanzas of florid verse. Poetry can be a chameleon, showing itself in the mundane. It's about how you choose your words.

ACTION POINT: How to infuse your words with soul

Next time you want to help someone see things differently, try these:

- What ordinary words can you replace with words that surprise? (NB They still need to be words people know)
- How does a sentence or paragraph sound when you read it out? The better it reads, the more 'right' it will sound.
- What are two unusual things you can put together to create something brand new in the mind of your reader? (For more on this principle, read *The Medici Effect* by Frans Johansson)
- How can you use words to awaken all the senses?



The Teacher

The tools for the job

Ruler in hand, ready to smack the hand of anyone who gets e before I ... that's the nightmarish image some of us have of English teachers. It has resulted in many people being afraid to write, afraid to risk saying it the wrong way - which is a shame, because you need to say it the wrong way sometimes, to discover the right way.

But there's a positive side to the teacher archetype. Grammar, correctly understood, can give you the tools to wield language powerfully. To really get your message across.

Notice how, in that previous sentence, I broke one of the rules of grammar? I used a standalone sentence - a sentence without a subject. According to "the rules of grammar", it's wrong. But did you understand it? Thought so.

The big secret of writing is, there are no fundamental rules of grammar, particularly not in English. It is and always has been a living organism, which explains why it has become one of the world's most spoken, written and read languages. But living organisms are hard to pin down.

As usenet personality John Nicoll said, *"The problem with defending the purity of the English language is that English is about as pure as a cribhouse whore. We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary."*

A strange evidence for this linguistic relativism is the phenomenal popularity of Lynne Truss' book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. It's subtitled *the zero tolerance approach to punctuation* but it actually shows how slippery language is, by explaining how it has evolved over the years.

ACTION POINT: How to turn rules into tools

When you don't want bad grammar or punctuation to compromise your credibility:

- Get familiar with the parts of speech. Think of them as your toolkit.
- Read widely on the how-to's of grammar and writing. Make up your own mind which style you will choose.
- When you're writing for someone else - for instance, in a magazine or on an intranet - ask for the publication's style guide. If they don't have one, use a dictionary and [this commonsense guide](#).
- If it breaks the rules, but reads well, use it.
- If it fits the rules but sounds funny, don't use it.



The Copywriter

The passion to persuade

The copywriter makes it his job to understand the human psyche, and discover the hidden triggers that make people want to buy. Now!

A good copywriter's top priority is the response of the reader. Grammar, vocabulary, and the "right way to say things" take back seat to this one thing: does it make the reader respond in some way? Does it make them feel the way you want? Does it alter their state? Most importantly, does it make them want to buy?

Copywriting as a profession has only been around for about 150 years. But one of its earliest practitioners, John E Kennedy, defined it as part of one of the oldest professions around: sales. In 1905 Kennedy defined copywriting as "salesmanship in print".

Together with another early copywriter, Claude Hopkins, Kennedy laid down the bottom line of what makes good copy: results. In his book *Advertising Tests*, he writes, "Mere opinions on Advertising Copy should be excluded from consideration, because opinions on Advertising are as conflicting as opinions on Religion". While religion can't be scientifically tested, says Kennedy, "it is different with Advertising, as it is with Mechanics or with Medicine, all three of which can be conclusively tested."

The copywriter tests and measures obsessively, giving him or her a sharp focus on the person who matters most - the reader. And of course that other important focus - what do you want the reader to do? Every word of the copy is then focused on leading the reader to that desired course of action.

Good copywriters learn as much as they can about the psychology of persuasion and influence. They know the product they're selling. They know the audience. And they know marketing strategy. Because a good strategy with average copy will sell, but a poor strategy, even with great copy, won't sell.

ACTION POINT: How to persuade with power and conviction

When you want to provoke a response in your reader:

- Never lie. You can only persuade people who trust you.
- Know **at least** this much about their audience: why do they buy your product? What real needs does your product fill? What else are they thinking of to fill that need?
- Write as long as you need to - and not a word longer.
- Don't be afraid to rewrite many times.

How to Write Like a Human



Journalist

The journey to truth

We see them, in the line of fire, risking their lives to give us the unfiltered truth. There's no question that's too hard to ask. Nobody escapes the journalist's scrutiny.

The journalist's job begins with raw curiosity. Why is the world the way it is? How did it get that way?

The journey continues with commitment. Some just ask the questions; the journalist seeks answers.

While others see a collection of facts, the journalist sees a story.

Once they've spotted a good angle, they follow the thread, asking questions until the connections become clear. Part of the journalist's job is separating the needles from the hay - the red herrings from the real headlines. This sometimes isn't easy.

As BBC news editor Kevin Marsh says, "a good journalist has the ability to grasp the big truths — with the humility to let them go again when the facts don't fit".

But curiosity and commitment aren't enough. The journalist also needs to be skilled at her craft: putting the story together so the truth can be told. Just ask the people who make films about social change - it's not just about finding the story, it's about translating it into a form that will interest your audience.

That's why the inverted pyramid was developed - a system of news writing that begins with the most important information first, then adds other, less important details further down the news story. Some historians say the inverted pyramid was originally developed so typesetters in newspapers could cut the story off at the end if space required.

Today page space isn't a problem (not on the internet, anyway), but time is. Your reader's time is precious and much is demanded of it. Give them all they need up front; leave the details to those who are really interested and press past the first two paragraphs.

ACTION POINT: How to find the truth in your writing

When you want to inform your reader:

- Be curious. Look for the angle that will interest them. Would they read it in the news?
- Find the facts. Specifics add credibility.
- Know your point of view, but let the facts correct you if you're wrong.
- Tell the most important part of your story first.

What now?

Now you've met the five writers who live inside you, let them loose. Practice writing in each of these styles. Get to know the tools that each one uses, and try them out as often as you can - not just when you need to.

The best way to get some writing practice is to start a blog. Choose a subject you're passionate about, and start writing. Experiment. Be brave.

The best thing about blogging is that you can participate in a community, getting feedback on your writing and getting ideas from others. The technical side is frighteningly easy - find out how to set up your blog [here](#).

And once you've set up your blog, let us know! Either email us at hi@simonyoungwriters.com or make a comment on our blog at www.SimonYoungWriters.com/blog/.



That's an idea!

And if you'd like to join our team, or use our writing services, visit us at www.SimonYoungWriters.com!

About the Author

Simon Young is a journalist, entrepreneur, speaker and founder of SimonYoungWriters. After writing radio ads for six years, Simon jumped into the emerging world of internet copywriting in 1999. Along the way, he fell into journalism, PR and direct marketing copywriting, and discovered that not all writing is the same.

His journalistic career has seen Simon interview some of the world's leading thinkers on the future of business, giving him a unique insight into how marketing works.

He lives in Auckland, New Zealand with his wife Marie, with whom he cofounded new media consultancy iJump in 2007.

About SimonYoungWriters

SimonYoungWriters connects organisations with the best writer for the job - whether "best" refers to experience, qualifications or simply raw passion for the subject. We believe you get the best writing from someone who enjoys the process. It's the best of both worlds - you get the specialist skill and knowledge for your subject area, as well as solid strategic thinking from the whole team.