

This piece was originally produced as notes for a talk I was going to deliver at the University of Westminster, on the day I hit 20 years as Editor of The Psychologist for the British Psychological Society. Then lockdown happened, and instead we put it on Google Docs and invited comments. To me, that sits nicely with the fact that I am by no means seeking to present myself as an expert on clear writing - even after all this time! So I thought we could continue in this vein, i.e. I share the link widely via Twitter and we gather further comments, in order to potentially produce a more polished version which has that collaborative aspect to it...

Telling psychology's stories of change

Jon Sutton reflects on 20 years as Editor of The Psychologist, and how psychologists engage wide audiences with their work.

I wanted to change it all. I hadn't edited a thing, I had barely written, and never managed anyone. But as an arrogant 25-year-old given the keys to The Psychologist, I believed I could open up the doors to build something new and exciting. I would unleash 50 increasingly powerful issues, and then head back to academia.

20 years later, here I am. Although I was way out on the timescale, I can look back on a period in which everything did indeed change. When I arrived in March 2000, we had four pages of colour every three months; we still couriered artwork to the printers; there was no website. Smartphones, blogging, social media, apps, podcasts... we've sought to adapt to every innovation, constantly evolving. We are achieving an expansive, diverse presence, on a daily basis. You can find a summary of these developments at <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-33/april-2020/magazine-you>

But the one aspect I longed to change the most is the one where I've made the least progress: how psychologists tell stories.

To quote (for the first and last time) from Game of Thrones, 'there is nothing more powerful in the world than a good story'. Humans are storytellers. There's a good argument that it is what defines us as a species. Wherever people gather (and these days, even when they don't), we tell stories. We seek to pull the listener in. We challenge, titillate, scandalise, amuse, change minds. We build worlds, guide our audience on winding roads, tangents and dead ends. We create heroes and villains. People *think, feel, do* differently because of what we have said.

Except when we write about science.

Of course, there are exceptions. There are brilliant psychologists who are great writers, and I'll mention many of them here.

Please add your suggestions for psychologists who are great writers / communicators.

But on the whole, writing about psychology is as bland and specialist now as it was in 2000. The impact agenda and all the new channels afforded to psychologists for their writing has done little to tempt them from their ivory towers. Many of the structures psychologists work within still expect and reward the formal academic style.

I realise I'm on a hiding to nothing here. According to Muphry's Law, writing about writing is a risky business. For two decades, I have resisted calls to write about how to write, because I'm not sure I know. I'm an editor, not a writer. A butcher, not a builder. [Although note Nell Frizzell's words: 'An editor may be a butcher, but... don't forget that, in the end, only a butcher can turn a live, stamping, snorting, animal into something you can stomach.' And when I whined about this on Twitter recently, Aidan Horner commented: 'I quite often watch the stonemasons next to York Minster creating amazing gargoyles by cutting away stone. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't view themselves as destroyers rather than creators'.] In 2015, when I wrote for *The Psychologist* on 'Words and sorcery', I joined forces with Simon Oxenham to do it, and we focused mostly on what *not* to do.

So if you read this and think 'who are you to preach to us', I'd agree with you. But I feel I can at least offer three simple tips, in the hope of opening up a wider conversation about what psychologists do and don't do, and possible reasons why.

Find the change

As Will Storr notes in his excellent book *The Science of Storytelling*, we have evolved to detect and respond to change in our environment. Change captivates us. Great writers have recognised this for centuries, and countless major works begin with change: *something has changed*, or *something is about to change*.

Consider these examples, from Storr's book:

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. (Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*)

The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. (Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*)

That Spot! He hasn't eaten his supper. Where can he be? (Eric Hill, *Where's Spot?*)

Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. (J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*)

The anticipation hangs in the air, driving the reader on. With the Harry Potter example, it's surely the smug 'thank you very much' which we know is about to be punctured.

Can you think of other examples from literature, or cinema? Once you are aware of this simple rule, you see it everywhere!

This can work for scientific writing too. When you're writing about your research or practice, lead with what is novel, what you are seeking to do differently, or the way in which this might one day change our world for the better.

That's not to say that all work in psychology has to be ground-breaking. As Laura Fortunato notes: 'If the only thing you want is ground-breaking research, all you will get is holes in the ground'. The element of change can be really small. But unearth that gem and thrust it into the light. As the Swedish popsters Roxette once urged, 'Don't bore us, get to the chorus'.

Here's an example from one of our most popular online articles of recent years, by Dr Annie Hickox. It's in our April edition, but after it appeared on our website last November it led to a big social media reaction, and was picked up by BBC Radio 4's All in the Mind to feature on their programme.

The call...

I was cooking dinner one balmy, sweet-scented summer evening when our daughter Jane called me. Phone calls, particularly on the house phone, were not our two daughters' preferred form of communication. I was accustomed to long strings of WhatsApp messages, or even days of silence when Jane and her older sister Alice were busy with studies, work, or friends in London. I figured Jane was calling to discuss the plans they had made for their upcoming trip to work in the states over the summer. Sometimes a real-time discussion is best for fine-tuning and planning. After her initial 'hello', I couldn't hear her voice. 'Are you okay?' I asked.

There was a broken pause and then: 'mum, I can't do anything'. I gently asked her what she meant, but my heart already ached with knowing.

When I looked it up for inclusion in this piece, I thought 'Wow, I must have pulled that bit out from elsewhere / shaped it / really drawn out the scene-setting, change aspect'. So I went back to Annie's original. I hadn't changed a word. Some authors, some psychologists, instinctively get it.

Of course, I can understand if you're thinking 'That's all well and good when you're writing about getting a phonecall from your daughter. It just doesn't apply to reporting research in a journal article.' And I would agree with you, that this rarely happens in journal articles. When I've called for examples on Twitter, the only one that has come back is Jerome Bruner in a 1987 paper 'Life as narrative': 'I would like to try out an idea that may not be quite ready, indeed may not be quite possible. But I have no doubt it is worth a try.'

Certainly piques the interest, but perhaps isn't change-focused as such. **Can you think of examples? Or do psychologists simply not write in this way for academic outlets?**

Put the people back in

If you read one psychologist on writing, it should be Mick Billig. In 2013's wonderful *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* he says:

'The big concepts which many social scientists are using – the ifications and the izations – are poorly equipped for describing what people do. By rolling out the big nouns, social scientists can avoid describing people and their actions. They can write in highly unpopulated ways, creating fictional worlds in which their theoretical things, rather than actual people, appear as major actors.'

If there's one piece of advice I've given more and more in recent years, it's to talk about people (and to give, to quote the title of Billig's latest book, 'More examples, less theory'). So if someone contacts me with an idea that seems fairly dry and abstract, my response will often be 'Look, what do you actually do? Talk me through an average day: the highs and lows, what gets you out of bed, the people you meet'. Our pages have become more personal (and often interview-based) as a result. [This has not been universally welcomed: we do get 'Stick to the science' thrown at us quite regularly. More on this later.]

As an aside, I'm quite pleased that when I look back at a piece in early 2001 about my own research, I see I chose to start it like this, emphasising both real people and change in terms of ideas:

'In February 1996, 16-year-old Katherine Morrison killed herself. Two schoolmates, Shelley McBratney and Lee Ann Murray, were put on trial for common assault. In the eyes of many, they were being accused of bullying Katherine to death. The Daily Record branded the girls 'Bitches from Hell', and the sheriff at the trial called them 'contemptible and cowardly' and said they had acted 'evilily'. There were claims that Shelley was jealous of Katherine's academic achievements, and ashamed of her own inadequacies. Shelley's mother had a different view: she felt that the tragic incident was simply a falling out between close friends, and she said that 'Shelley was bullied by the press. She was bullied by the court. She was bullied by everyone. That was the real bullying' (The Guardian, 25 April 1998).

Conflicting opinions in the explanation of aggression are not new. The public, the media, even psychologists: all have a tendency to stigmatise and pathologise individuals involved in threatening behaviour as psychologically and socially abnormal or deficient. But is bullying a pathological behaviour found only in a minority, or is it in fact a common identity choice actively chosen at certain times because it makes sense in certain social environments? Are the children involved inadequate, or could they be considered socially competent... even superior?'

If your research or practice in psychology involves real individuals, do you push them to the fore when you communicate about it? Do you think that helps to engage a wide audience?

This isn't just about magazines. If you are writing about research, in journals, you can still push people to the fore. The opening to Kruger and Dunning's paper 'Unskilled and Unaware of It', which defined the Dunning-Kruger effect, began:

'In 1995, McArthur Wheeler walked into two Pittsburgh banks and robbed them in broad daylight, with no visible attempt at disguise. He was arrested later that night, less than an hour after videotapes of him taken from surveillance cameras were broadcast on the 11 o'clock news. When police later showed him the surveillance tapes, Mr Wheeler stared in incredulity. "But I wore the juice" he mumbled. Apparently, Mr Wheeler was under the impression that rubbing one's face with lemon juice rendered it invisible to videotape cameras.'

Putting the people back in includes yourself. Jon Sutton may have been trained to talk about Jon Sutton in the third person, and to maintain an objective stance. But Alex Haslam argues: 'There's a lot to be gained from changing the mysterious into the concrete, and for writing in ways that make it clear what one's own perspective and role is (rather than implying, through

omission of these details, that such things don't matter).' And consider the evocative opening to George Miller's classic 1956 paper 'The magical number seven, plus or minus two': 'My problem is that I have been persecuted by an integer. For seven years this number has followed me around, has intruded in my most private data, and has assaulted me from the pages of our most public journals....'

Hold up your lamp

This is from some recent 'Tone of voice' training we had in the BPS offices:

'As psychologists, our members cast light on things that otherwise seemed murky or unknowable – like the goddess Psyche [the BPS logo], holding up her lamp to see better. Our tone of voice is all about casting light on things, too.'

I was rather dreading the training, but I liked that image, and it got me thinking about various different aspects of how we use language:

1) *Complex does not mean clever* (we'll return to this later). Most good authors – and, in fact, artists in all kinds of other mediums – know when to *stop adding stuff in*. It's about what you leave out, the spaces between. Uta Frith says: *'To me, good writing is simple writing. But simple is not fast. In fact it is very slow, and it is all about knowing what not to say. Inspired by the Slow Food movement I have tried to argue for slow science. Belatedly, I have realised that I need to argue also for slow writing.'*

In a similar vein, George Orwell's rules on writing include: 'If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out'. (I would say 'If you can edit, edit').

So aim for 'big ideas, small phrases' [as The Conversation urges]. Steve Reicher sent me a couple of examples, of big conceptual and theoretical ideas expressed in everyday language: Moscovici starts his 'Age of the Crowd' with: "If you asked me to name the most important invention of modern times, I would reply without hesitation 'the individual'." Roger Brown opens his 1967 Handbook of Social Psychology chapter on 'mass phenomena': "Mankind in the aggregate has a reputation for both good and evil. In our good character we are the 'people', in our bad character, the 'masses'".

Can you explain your own 'big idea' in 'small phrases'?

2) *Beauty and musicality*: Alexander Haslam says: 'I think that an appreciation of the beauty and musicality of words – as well as their power – is very important. Treat language as if it were a Stradivarius, not a sledgehammer.'

This is encapsulated in a famous Gary Provost quote:

"This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length,

a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.”

3) *Active, informal, subheads to guide, etc:* Beyonce did not sing: ‘If it was liked, a ring should have been put on it.’ (Although not far off... bad example. Rewrite a song lyric in terrible, formal, passive language.)

What holds us back?

At that point in putting together the advice on writing style, I got bored, and tailed off. Because I think you know all this already. To me, it’s more interesting to move on to a wider debate about what is holding us back. This is where I think this collaborative approach could really take flight.

When psychologists are talking about their research to friends or family in the pub, do they talk in the way they write? Not in my experience. And when you’re hanging out with colleagues at a late-night conference bar, do they tell engaging stories about their work? I would argue that they do.

Think back to the last conference bar you were in. What was the conversation like? Was their passion, energy? Were ideas expressed simply, in a way that you might not on paper? Was it all ‘objective science’, or did your personality and even politics find a way in?

So why does the voice get lost on its way to the page? Some argue that the problem is structural: Steven Pinker has argued that ‘academics have no choice but to write badly because the gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one’s seriousness.’ But that in itself is hinting at individual effects... ‘as proof of one’s seriousness’. This involves three related issues. I’m not going to go into detail on these, because I think each is nicely encapsulated by a quote or two:

- 1) *The guru effect:* ‘All too often, what readers do is judge profound what they have failed to grasp. Obscurity inspires awe’ – Dan Sperber
- 2) *The Ikea effect:* ‘I argue that some prefer [obscure writing] because each reader has to do so much work to get any meaning out of it, and when we have to work hard for something, we really value it’. - Jim Davies (2012)
- 3) *The curse of knowledge:* ‘It simply doesn’t occur to the writer that her readers don’t know what she knows – that they haven’t mastered the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention, have no way to visualize a scene that to her is as clear as day. And she doesn’t bother to explain the jargon, or spell out the logic, or supply the necessary detail.’ – Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style*
‘You have to study long and hard to write this badly. That is the problem.’ - Mick Billig

Perhaps these are all manifestations of *distance* between writer and reader. How do we close that gap?

When I started editing and writing, I would often hear the advice ‘know your audience’. But increasingly, the audience is ‘anyone’, via open online platforms. And how much difference is

there really, between 'Brenda in the chip shop' and a bored, tired, non-specialist psychologist? Why make it hard? Especially if we're writing in pursuit of real change, for example via policy makers. We have to grab the attention and convey evidence-based ideas quickly and simply.

How do you feel when you read writing in psychology that you struggle to understand? Does it make you think less of the writer, or yourself? Do you persist with it?

There are a lot of people out there who advise this approach to imagining the reader. A quick Google just threw up a lovely quote from a book from Sanford Kaye about 'Writing under pressure', this bit for those setting exam questions. 'Imagine your audience as a willing but pressured reader fully capable of understanding what you have to say, as long as you say it with reasonable care.'

Who is your audience / your audiences? Do you think there's much difference in the needs of each of them?

Storyteller or fabulist?

When I speak to psychologists about becoming storytellers, there can be a reticence, which seems to be about the potential for tall tales, massaging the truth, smoothing the corners. Liz Neeley, the Executive Director of Story Collider, a non-profit focused on telling 'true, personal stories about science', told the NPR Short Wave podcast that as a young scientist: 'I wanted to be the most serious, scientific scientist who ever lived. I thought that storytelling was somewhere between a distraction and a danger. I thought storytelling was like handwaving... it's what you did when your data was weak to nudge people towards your preferred interpretation.'

I can understand this, and I was struck by a quote from data fraud Diedrik Stapel: 'I wanted to manipulate the truth and make the world just a little more beautiful than it is'. Of course, we should be aware of the seductive allure of a beautiful story.

But uncertainty, incremental change and wrong turns in science can still be beautiful. It's fine to say 'We don't know', particularly if followed with 'and here's why we don't know: people are complicated, in these ways'. It's also fine to say 'We don't know for sure, but on the basis of the available evidence our advice would be x, y and z'.

I think we're seeing more of this in recent years, particularly from open science advocates. With an area like screentime, the picture has been muddied by 'moral entrepreneurs' selling books and public appearances off the back of a partial and overstated account of the evidence. Remarkably, given how long this area has been a concern for parents and policy makers, psychology is only just starting to push back against this by asking the right questions, in the right way, with the right data.

Doing the research, though, is just one part of it. Rigorous scientists like Andy Przybylski and Amy Orben are aware they need to tell nuanced yet engaging and practical stories around the research findings. And they need to tell them to large and diverse audiences.

I think this is long overdue. One very 'broad brush' way of characterising the whole 'replication crisis' in psychology is that it has been the 'big picture' storytellers of our discipline, comfortable and confident on the popular stage, versus the more methodologically minded, detail driven, cautious and private scientists. Many of the famous names who have felt under scrutiny are fairly undeniably good at emphasising what is simple, broad, elegant, persuasive, surprising and life-changing about the science of mind and behaviour. For the open science movement to lead to widespread and lasting change, its advocates have to get to grips with telling the stories of their work, and of open science in general.

I personally don't think there has been enough talk of dissemination in the open science movement. In this 'strategy for culture change in open science', I can't see where 'make it fun / engaging' fits in.

Who do you admire in our field for how they combine rigour with dissemination?

Stick to the science?

There's one more big road we can travel here, and it's one I've spent much of the last few months going down on social media. It's this fundamental:

What is science / psychology / the British Psychological Society / The Psychologist? What should it be? Who gets to decide?

Storytelling can shift stereotypes about who scientists can be, about what science can be. Whose science stories we get to hear is important. On The Psychologist, we're trying to ensure we give space for a broad range of voices, during divided and difficult times. I'm listening, and taking conversations offline wherever possible. But I'll take quite some convincing that there is some great, objective, definable thing that is 'science' that we should all 'get back to'. To me, science is inevitably ideologically driven, it's political, personal, progressive. The Psychologist is a magazine, and we will unapologetically tell the stories of psychology and of psychologists with all their foibles, motivations and other interests. It's characters and change that are most likely to engage readers, and ultimately improve the science and the world we live in.

Everyone has a story...

On The Psychologist, we seek to give opportunities to share yours.

§ Connect with us on Twitter @psychmag and @researchdigest

§ See <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/contribute>

§ Get in touch with ideas on jon.sutton@bps.org.uk

§ Look out for our Voices In Psychology programme and other opportunities

§ Podcast, live events and more

§ Discuss: what The Psychologist / the Society / Psychology / Science are and should be, who gets to decide...

Further reading

§ From thepsychologist.bps.org.uk: 'Words and sorcery', 'Writing for impact', 'Why magazines matter', 'Psychologists and the media: Opportunities and challenges'. 'The magazine is you'.

§ Mick Billig (2013): *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences; and More Examples, Less Theory*

§ Will Storr (2019): *The Science of Storytelling*

§ NPR Short Wave podcast: *Your Brain on Storytelling*

§ Joel Stickley, *How to Write Badly Well*

§ Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style*

§ Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*

§ Alan Rusbridger, *Breaking News*

§ Anything by science's evidence-based storytellers, such as Stephen Reicher and Alex Haslam, Uta Frith, Vaughan Bell, Suzi Gage, Ed Yong

Add your own resources!