

## Mr B's Sixth Form Writing Masterclass

For which (you ungrateful peasants) there is no charge, even though many people would pay very good money for thirty minutes to bask in the manly presence of Old Mr B.

Q: Dear Mr B, what do effective writers do?

A: Funny you should ask. They ....

### 1 Self-regulate

This means that part of your brain is monitoring – regulating – the decisions you make as you write. It's regulating accuracy; but it's also regulating style, questioning whether you could express an idea in a more interesting, straightforward or memorable way:

- *It's a really beautiful day out there; it's awful in here.*

This involves regulating accuracy – especially of homophones (words with different meanings but similar sounds, such as 'it's' and 'its') .

### 2 Reject initial words and ideas

You have a vocabulary of 50,000 words or more. Reject the obvious first word that your chavvy little brain tries to serve up; instead, pause and think of a more interesting or more unexpected or more precise word.

Thus ...

- *The writer's ideas are quite hard to understand*

... could be:

- *The writer's ideas are abstract and confusing.*
- *The writer's concepts prove incomprehensible at first.*
- *The writer's concepts seem initially incomprehensible.*
- *The writer's main ideas strike us as initially confusing.*
- *The writer's ideas initially baffle us and then gain clarity.*
- *The writer fails to articulate his ideas with sufficient precision: he leaves us baffled.*
- *Etc.*

### 2 Understand that language goes hand-in-hand with power

Some words carry real academic weight in our culture. They allow you to express ideas more precisely. They also make you seem smarter than you may actually be (this knowledge has served me well for fifty years). These include:

- **Words of tentativeness:** seems, suggests, implies, may be, could be seen as, appears to propose, possibly, might, probably
- **Words of analysis and proof:** demonstrates, proves, shows us that,
- **Words of authority:** we can tell; it suggests to us
- **More formal connectives:** therefore, thereby, despite this, however,

### 3 Use short and long sentences:

Short sentences add clarity and authority to a text. They gain real power when placed next to a longer sentence – like this:

- *The obscure history of the American sung jingle is probably something that most radio listeners never think about. In most cases, I suspect, they turn down the volume during the commercials and turn it up again when the music kicks back in. Not me. It's the jingles I listen for.*

### 4 Use punctuation to add clarity and elegance:

Mostly you will use **capital letters** and **full stops** to show the start and end of sentences. You'll use commas within sentences to separate items in a list or, sometimes, use them parenthetically (like brackets) to add emphasis.

**Colons** allow you to show there's another idea lying ahead – like this:

- *By the end of the first day of the Battle of the Somme it was clear that the number of dead was on an unimaginable scale: 60,000 men had lost their lives.*

Semi-colons allow you to divide two sentences that are related or opposing. They need to be able to stand alone, so the semi-colon could be replaced if needed. Here's how:

Similar items:

- *The Apollo 13 crew seemed doomed to certain failure; their oxygen supply was about to run out.*

Dissimilar items:

- *Winter is a season of horrifying bleakness; summer brings us hope.*

### 5 Be interesting and elegant

- Good writing **reads aloud** well. It has a rhythm.
- It **avoids clichés** (like the plague), sometimes by inserting an unexpected word: 'the war at this point was going from bad to appalling' or 'it had become a matter of insufferable life or inevitable death'.
- It has a sense of **voice**, of confidence, of being written by someone with something to say. Yes, good writing – we like you very much.