

# Blah Blah Blah: Empty Writing

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 4 min read

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## Blah, blah, blah

### By Paul Sheehan

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World Youth Day is going to be a big event. Big. The Pope. But inquiries about the event are being directed to someone called the "Director of the Outcomes Office".

This is not a parody, this is not an episode of The Office, this is the work of some grindingly earnest factotum. "Director of the Outcomes Office" is empty business jargon at its lowest ebb, coming from the world's largest Christian organisation. God help us. The speed of globalisation means that jargon, euphemism and cliché are spreading like algae on the river of life.

Who was the first businessman who coined the self-evidently redundant term "going forward"? Why has he not been assassinated or brought to trial? Why has this worthless, pointless phrase been taken up by thousands of business executives around the world, like an enormous flock of parrots? Anyone who uses the term "going forward" has just switched on a neon sign above their head saying "no originality here". Which is exactly how most bureaucracies thrive.

It's all good. This is another oppressively ubiquitous cliché. While the phrase suggests a zen-like acceptance and fatalism towards life's vicissitudes, it also suggests that the person uttering the phrase is destined for a life of intellectual servitude.

Whatever.

Whatever is now used so often, so universally, so indiscriminately, that it appears to be mandatory in some sections of society. I happen to like "whatever", at least when used in ironic counterpoint to a turgid speech or spiralling hyperbole. It captures the weary moral irony of our times. The best headline I saw in London during the week Tony Blair stood down as prime minister was "Blair. Brown. Whatever. Blah, blah, blah". It was a great headline, perfectly summing up the crescendo of media recycling of everything already said about Blair, and could be used for the majority of opinion columns, including this one. "Whatever" has gone into serious cliché orbit, used so often in so many ways that it mocks the vast wealth of the 500,000 living words in the world's richest language. Most people have a working vocabulary of about 2000 words, or less than 1 per cent of potential. Whatever.

The business world, the academy and government bureaucracies have a lot to answer for in deadening the language. Their natural foil, the media, acts as the *Medicins Sans Frontieres* against the disease, with unseen sub-editors, editors, reporters and producers working every hour of every day to excise jargon and euphemism (but not hyperbole) from public consumption. Little credit is given or expected, but the Daily Telegraph in London deserves special praise for its recent effort, *She Literally Exploded: The Daily Telegraph Infuriating Phrasebook*, by Christopher Howse and Richard Preston, built on the indignant flow of responses the paper received when it asked readers to submit words and phrases that really irritated them.

The surprise to come out of the book was the extent of pent-up irritation toward restaurants and gastronomic terms we accept but shouldn't, terms which soften the grit of real kitchen terminology, simple but insidious phrases: "pan-fried" (what else is it going to be fried in?); "oven-baked" (ditto); "freshly picked" (fresh); "field-fresh" (fresh), and "serving suggestion".

*She Literally Exploded* threw up some marvellous warnings about words that need to be expunged from any civilised working vocabulary: "inappropriate", "escalate", "legend", "hero", "challenged", "take care", "confirmed", "ground-breaking", "cheers", "moving on", "tipping point", "let's do lunch", "basically", "issues", "leverage", "24/7", "societal", "absolutely", "amazing" and the word "client" when referring to customers, patients or inmates.

Some of the entries were simply quoted whole, as little sketches, such as this one from Jackie Rowe: "When it comes to abuse of English, I've been there, done that, got the T-shirt." ?

Janet Thomas: "I totally see where you are coming from. At this moment in time it's not clear what is happening with our language. I'm often like, hello? Are we in the UK here?"

Barry Moyses: "We are committed to sharing best practice and passionate about facilitating appropriate skills through workshops and learning events around these issues. Using a web-based toolkit will empower users to drill down to assess local needs interactively. Stakeholders will be fully engaged in a consultation exercise breaking down barriers, pushing the envelope towards a seamless, one-stop shop service."

Nick Godfrey: "I hear what you're saying but, with all due respect, it's not exactly rocket science. Basically, at the end of the day, the fact of the matter is you have got to be able to tick all the boxes."

Irene and Andy Mitchell: "Retirement has required a rigorous and robust reassessment of our core competencies, visions and values. Leveraged away from our work-stations, a raft of financial and strategic options underpins and overarches the reinvention of our lifestyle mission statement ? and a re-evaluation of our methodologies has led to a sea change."

Some entries were real examples which were self-parody, such as the passage from this job advertisement: "Proactive, self-starting facilitator required to empower cohorts of students and enable them to access the curriculum."

The most lampooned phrase was "at the end of the day", and the most lampooned word was "like", which is easy to parody.

I have my own special, malevolent favourite, and kept the worst until last: "Your call is important to us."

Surely this tops the list of linguistic hypocrisy. Not only is the message delivered by a machine, the phrase, by its very existence, means you are not important, or this wouldn't be happening. If you want a human being to answer the phone, and provide service, you have to afford the "platinum" or "private" version of whatever you've bought.

As they say in clicheland, end of story.

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