

# The Weight of Words

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 5 min read

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## Pinned down by the weight of words

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The new public language is very efficient, if the aim is to keep us all in the dark, writes Don Watson

Ten years ago Toni Morrison devoted her Nobel Prize speech to "systematic looting of language" and the almost universal indifference to it. She spoke of "tongue suicide" and "dead language". Dead language, she said, "is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis ... Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance.

"However moribund, it is not without effect for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences."

This language, she said, was common among "infantile heads of state and power merchants". It leaves them with "no access to what is left of their human instincts for they speak only to those who obey".

In describing the language of tyrants, ideologues, megalomaniacs and bullies, Morrison offered a near-perfect definition of the contagion that now reaches into every nook of our lives. Education, for instance, is thoroughly infected.

In Queensland the people responsible for the senior secondary English syllabus describe "High Achievement" in these terms: "At High Achievement, the student has consistently shown knowledge and understanding of how texts are constructed across a range of texts in a range of social and cultural contexts."

Nineteen bullet points follow this under three headings: "Knowledge and control of texts in their contexts", "Knowledge and control of textual features" and "Knowledge and application of the constructedness of texts".

Read that first sentence aloud and you are likely to wonder how anyone charged with educating children could write it. And this is no idle sentence: it has been considered by a committee of educators. We must assume they decided this arrangement of words was the best way to express whatever was in their minds.

It won't do to blame any educational or literary theory on which the syllabus is based. It's not the thought that resists us and excites irritation and contempt. The first protest comes from the ear, and only afterwards from struggling cognitive faculties. It's the language. We can't get at the thought: the language puts it into a sort of holding pattern and there is a fair chance it will never land.

Queensland should not be singled out. The Victorian English curriculum includes a Plain English Speaking Award described thus: "The award provides opportunities for all students to demonstrate outcomes in speaking and listening in a variety of ways, including observing speakers' strategies, preparation of speeches and delivery of speeches in public settings."

We can assume that in Queensland and Victoria the curriculum is "outcomes-based". Those who don't know what this means or why they should be, might be enlightened by the NSW syllabus: "Outcomes: The outcomes describe what students learn about and what they learn to, as a result of teaching and learning in the course." Pretty well everything is outcomes-based these days.

We may soon expect to hear it at weddings and funerals - George had a good life on an outcomes basis. Every day in government departments throughout the nation countless sentences are built around "outcome". The same happens in the big corporations. Government departments learnt "outcomes" from business, and small companies and little local government agencies, and quite possibly bridge clubs and church auxiliaries are committing themselves to "outcomes" - "going forwards". Poor fools. I'm told among the really cutting edge these days "outcomes" have been superseded by "outputs".

Outcomes are not the only thing. "Working with the passion, commitment, enthusiasm, committed to teamwork to fulfill our company needs," says the mission statement of a sticky-note manufacturer. "We use our time to enhance our skills with the passion and desire of self-fulfillment." The CIA's mission statement says something similar.

The mission statement of the Multi-faith Chaplaincy Service at James Cook University concludes: "Respect for the individual's personal journey and traditional beliefs is given high value amongst all participating chaplains ... policies, strategic initiatives and operational plans will be put in place to ensure that a quality service, relevant to this vision and mission statement, are (sic) maintained."

The words - "value", "strategic", "quality", "commitment" and "outcome" - are almost to modern management what "proletarian", "glorious", "revolution" and "marching forward" were to copywriting in the old communist states.

Infected organisations and the consultants who serve as plague rats will sometimes concede that the new language might be infelicitous, as language, but never that it is less than functional and efficient as well as a key driver of communication.

Compounding cultural vandalism with intellectual slumming, those still capable of being embarrassed by the sludge - in universities, for instance - have been heard to say that the language used in their mission statements and other public documents has no connection to what the organisation thinks or does or hopes for.

But we might wonder how language that circumscribes or clouds thought can be more efficient than language that expresses, clarifies or enlarges it. Efficient by what measure? The measure of an assembly line, perhaps. Efficient in the way that containerisation is an efficient means of transport? Efficient as a way of containing human beings? This is what this streamlined (or mutilated) language strives to be: the machinery of the information age.

Even if we allowed this depressing possibility, there is little to suggest the mechanical version is more efficient than one that respects a few rules and allows a freer flow of words and thoughts.

If depleted language depletes an organisation's ability to think, might it not be less efficient? What if the managers were wrong, and it turned out that a bullet point is no more likely to be true than an original sentence?

An American guru of the information age, Edward Tufte, has come to this conclusion. Bullet points are "faux analytical", he says, and he illustrates his case by reducing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to a PowerPoint presentation. Naturally, it doesn't work. Not as language, as such. Not as a speech. Tufte says that the language of management is depleting our cognitive powers.

There is one other thing practitioners of the new public language will not admit. They will never say the language is coercive or oppressive. I would be more inclined to believe them if, since the publication of *Death Sentence*, I had not received so many letters from people who have been compelled to write in the prescribed way. They feel tyrannised and abused by it.

Almost as abused as those Victorian primary schoolchildren who last year were compelled to write their own personal mission statements, with their core values, key goals and preferred outcomes. As soon as they've got their lives sorted in the managerial context they'll be ready for those texts.

## **Don Watson is the author of**

*Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*

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