

Nordic Winter School in Astrobiology  
January 2005  
Sirikka

The richness of language

Random thoughts about  
writers and writing

# What is a writer?

- A writer of fiction is simply a person who makes up stories.
- He or she is just a perfectly normal human being who has found out that they can put stories down on paper that make other people really interested, excited and amused
- I'll talk most about stories for children, of all ages
- Which includes you!

- I will also say a little about why I am talking to you about writing
- Quite by mistake really, I have become a writer
- Not a famous writer of course, but nevertheless a writer of – so far – one children's book

# Who is a writer?

- Some of *you* are writers – or could be if you wanted to be
- Recently I asked a friend of mine who is a teacher of English in Aarhus in a "Gymnasium" or high school to suggest to their class that they each write a "nanostory"
- let me quote a couple of "nanostories" that these 18/19 year-olds wrote.
- The first is black humour with a relentless logic.

“At a random corner in a random city, there was an apartment house where nobody liked the landlord. They all minded their own business, and didn’t get in anybody else’s way. So when the old lady, from the 2nd floor, dropped dead in the bathroom, nobody noticed. Then the cats started feeding on her, and fighting over the body. But this, as it turned out, was not such a bad thing, because one day, in a heated chase, one of the cats fell out the window, and miraculously survived. But when the landlord went to return the slightly bruised cat, he found the old lady, dead and bloody, and threw himself out the window”

And this one is simply rather moving and makes people giggle in sympathy and say silly things like “aaaah”

“There was a girl. She loved her teddy bear more than anything. When she woke up, it was the first thing she saw and when she went to bed it was the last. The teddy bear made her life special, but one day her mother told her that she needed to throw it away. She was too old. The little girl woke up with a feeling of emptiness. Is this what it means to be a teenager?”

# Who becomes a writer?

- In the 20th and 21st centuries, practically everybody who has finally become a successful writer of fiction has started out in a different job, for example as a schoolteacher, a doctor or whatever.
- The reason is clear. You cannot “get a job” as a writer.

# What is a children's story?

- There is no such thing as a “children's story”.
- Alice in Wonderland, the Emperor's new Clothes, Klods-Hans (Clumsy Hans?), Ronja the Robber's Daughter (Astrid Lindgren), David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Treasure Island, Kim (by Kipling), the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S.Lewis and many, many more are for people between 5 and 122 years old.

- So what I will talk about is not about how to write a book for children, but just about the nature of writing, as far as I understand it!
- My own book is intended as entertainment for people of all ages, at least for all people who have not forgotten what it is to be a child and to live in a world of adventure and excitement.
- If people have forgotten that, then they had better just go to bed with a bottle of lakka and not get up again.

# Rules for a writer

The man who wrote Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, the Big Friendly Giant, Danny Champion of the World, Matilda etc., that is, the wonderful Roald Dahl has suggested some rules for writers

# *Rule 1 You should have a lively imagination*

One of the pupils at the school in Aarhus wrote a nanostory which started

“Once upon a time there was a boy who was assigned to write an essay, but he wasn’t able to do so because he didn’t have anything to write about as he had a terrible imagination.”

Well, that wouldn’t be any good – except that it makes a very funny and apt nanostory in this case, of course!

*Rule 2 A scene must come alive in  
the reader's mind*

Roald Dahl says that this is a gift which you either have or you don't have.

We'll come back to that later

# *Rule 3 You need stamina.*

You've got to stick at it hour after hour, week after week, month after month

(this sounds like your PhD advisor speaking?)

Like most things, it is 5% inspiration and 95% perspiration (sweat).

*Actually I don't quite believe the 95% perspiration. Writers want other people to think that they are suffering! I think that it's fun really.*

*Some of the pupils told me that they had great fun writing those nanostories!*

## *Rule 4 You must be a perfectionist*

You must go over again and again what you have written, read it many times, change it and change it once more and never be quite satisfied.

There are 430,000 words in the English language and you may not always have chosen quite the right one in every case.

# *Rule 5. You need a keen sense of humour and irony*

This is something that Roald Dahl had in excess. Anyway, to appeal to the

‘child in the adult’

as well as all young people, it is essential to have a good sense of humour.

Perhaps we could introduce humour into scientific writing?

# New Titles for Papers in Astrobiology

“Two lithophiles caught autotrophing under a rock”

or for Public Outreach to 7 year olds: notice seen in NASA Ames canteen:

“Cambrian fossil-burgers: taste the new Trill o’Bite”

I did in fact see the following on entering the USA at Dulles Airport

“Notice to all extremophiles: your practice is illegal under federal law and you may be refused admittance to the United States of America”

# *Rule 6 You must be your own keenest critic*

If a writer thinks that he or she has written something wonderful, then that person is headed for trouble.

(if someone thinks that they have a wonderful theory for the origin of life, then they not just headed for trouble: they are uscwap\*)

\* up sh\$t-creek without a paddle

# How I started writing

- In 1960, I was sitting on the beach, watching the sea. I was more than a little bored. I was sitting on the beach, watching the sea. I was more than a little bored. I was sitting on the beach, watching the sea. I was more than a little bored.
- I was sitting on the beach, watching the sea. I was more than a little bored. I was sitting on the beach, watching the sea. I was more than a little bored.



I discovered that I enjoyed writing and it went on from there, the children always asking for more.

I didn't intend to publish anything, but one day three years ago I began a story which started with the immortal line "Tommy was on holiday with his parents...."

And 400 pages later.....

Momentous events await fifteen-year-old Tommy when he goes on holiday to a chateau in the south of France near Toulouse. He sees a strange picture of an unknown and beautiful young woman and is magnetically drawn to her image.

Suddenly, he's 400 years back in the past, in the France of 1599. In that faraway time he finds the living likeness of the picture in the form of Eloise. They run off for a series of hair-raising adventures together, falling in love in the process.

Dynastic struggles, power-hungry bishops, outlaws living in the marshes, demonic caves, murderous clergymen and strolling players form the stock-in-trade of this wonderful historical romance. Its swift action and bubbling humour are matched by the author's canny portrayal of two teenagers meeting across four centuries.

And how does Tommy resolve the culture clash? With his mobile phone, of course – another hero of the tale! Read on, and look out for more adventures from the masterful pen of David Field as the story of Tommy and Eloise spills over into the twenty-first century in a volume to follow.

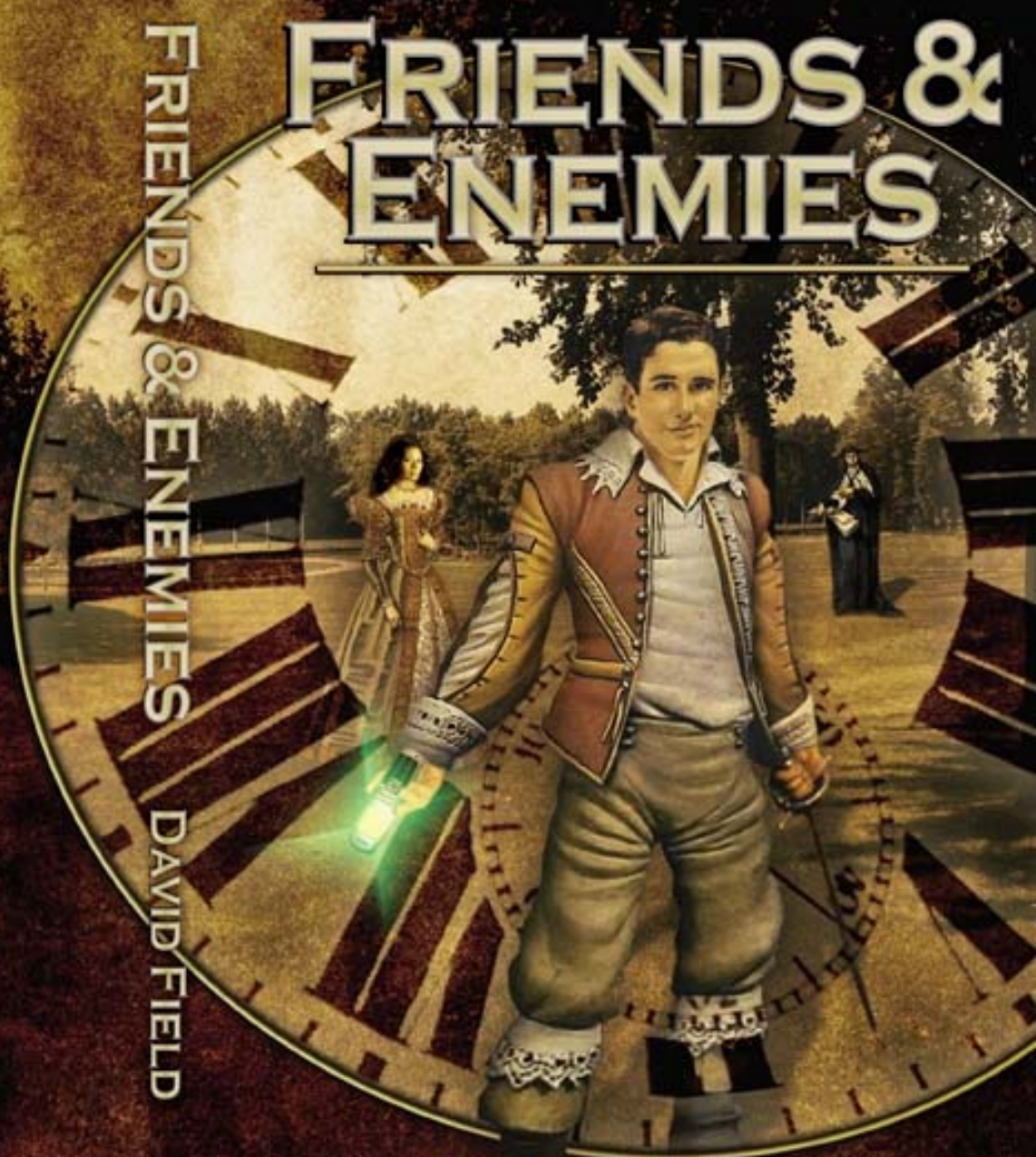
*David Field lives with his wife and two children in Aarhus, Denmark.*

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FRIENDS & ENEMIES

DAVID FIELD

# FRIENDS & ENEMIES



DAVID FIELD



[www.davidfield.co.uk](http://www.davidfield.co.uk)

*Friends and Enemies* is a story of the adventures of two young people, Tommy and Eloise, who fall in love.

The date is 1599 but Tommy is from the 21st century

How they meet and how Tommy can use his mobile phone to call home is all part of the story.

In that far-off world, they are pursued by a relentless power-hungry Bishop and his repellent brother

Dangerous secrets, outlaws and dynastic struggles punctuate the plot

# The Rules of Writing

The most important thing is STRUCTURE

You cannot just rush off without some feeling for the form of what you are going to write

Introduction, the story, then the climax  
(no conclusions section, please!)

Tchaikowsky used to paste his music around the walls of his room to see the structure.

A piece of music is like a book: you only experience one part of it at once – unlike a painting.

So every bit must be carefully scrutinized, honed, perfected. (Honed = formed into exactly the right shape and length)

The story line can let you up and down: but **keep the tension** – or the reader will start to snore.

Thriller writers know how to do this. They try hard – have you read the da Vinci Code?

All great writers do it too: but they are not trying. It just happens - you get so involved with the characters that everything they do and that happens to them is exciting

The characters in great novels have the status of celebrities, popstars, football heroes, while you read the book!

# Structure: *the first rule*

You need to introduce your characters, or mice, or subatomic particles, or whatever it is that you are writing about. A single line can sometimes do it very nicely.

“There was an old lady at an old-age home”, as one of the Aarhus pupils wrote in a nanostory. This immediately conjures up a picture, a different picture for everybody no doubt, but nevertheless, you are there with the old lady.

## *The second rule*

The story itself, after the introduction, must have a start, a middle and an end.

From the same nanostory: the start:

“Her passion was to look out of the window watching the sun go up and down over the North Sea. She had been watching for many years now, but she never got tired of it.”

The middle:

“It was the highlight of the day and the thing which kept her alive. But one day a new modern building came right in front of her window.”

The end:

“The old lady died a week later.”

Perfect!

# Another nanostory and its structure

“On a sleepy, sunny afternoon I was sitting on the banks of a canal, when a barge came chugging gently towards me. On the deck sat an old man smoking a pipe. As the barge approached, it began slowly to sink and as it passed by, the water was already lapping about the old man’s legs. The canal turned a corner and the last I saw was the bowl of the old man’s pipe sticking out of the water like a periscope.”

# You can make a horrid tale in less than 100 words!

Driving along a country road in late twilight I saw a mole on the tarmac. The poor creature was stunned and it needed somewhere warm and cosy. So removing my shoe, I placed it inside. The shoe tumbled over at a corner and the mole, now wide awake, scuttled out and under the clutch pedal, unseen by me. The lights changed to red in front of me and I slowed down, changing into third gear. The next car that I buy will be an automatic.

# The structure

## Introduction

“On a sleepy, sunny afternoon I was sitting on the banks of a canal,”

## The start:

“when a barge came chugging gently towards me. On the deck sat an old man smoking a pipe.”

The middle : action!

“As the barge approached it began slowly to sink and as it passed by, the water was already lapping about the old man’s legs.”

Brief interlude:

“The canal turned a corner”

The punch line ending:

“and the last I saw was the bowl of the old man’s pipe sticking out of the water like a periscope.”

leaving you with a crazy image.

# *Matters of writing Technique :* **STYLE**

Style's thing of most importance is intelligibly to clearly express what it, or he, or she, or maybe a cat or dog, would think if they had had the brains or they wanted, in a manner of speaking, to express it or whatever it was.

# *The first rule of style*

is to write so that people can understand what you want to say.

# *The second rule of style*

Grab the reader's imagination from the first line

You might like to try a “first line competition”

“It was a dark and stormy night.....”

“The dog bit him on the ankle so hard that he screamed in agony...”

“He was the most gorgeous man she had ever met, but, and it was a big but, he had a big butt....”

Or perhaps a most boring first line competition?

“There had been a small earthquake in the north of Chile. No buildings had fallen and nobody was hurt...”

# *The third rule of style*

Try and keep it simple. This is what the reader has come to expect in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Do not indulge yourself in great flights of florid language stretching like geese across a lurid sunset, mixing images (like geese + florid – which means flowery: when did you last see a flowery goose?)

Try to avoid doing this and other horrid things with the English language.

For florid language – or “Purple Passages” as they are often called, we can have a look at a passage from “She”

“She” is a classic of English Victorian literature, a wonderful adventure story by Rider Haggard (who also wrote King Solomon’s Mines).

## Keeping it simple: an excerpt from "She"

"The moon went slowly down in chastened loveliness: she departed like some sweet bride into her chamber, and long vein-like shadows crept up the sky through which the stars peeped shyly out. ...blah blah... quivering footsteps of the dawn came rushing across the new-born blue and shook the high stars from their places. ..From the east to the west sped the angels of the Dawn, from sea to sea, from mountain top to mountain top scattering light with both their hands. On they sped out of the darkness, perfect, glorious, like spirits of the just breaking from the tomb.....It was a wonderfully beautiful sight, and yet sad, perhaps from the very excess of its beauty.... etc.etc."

# Keeping it simple

Rider Haggard could have written:

“The sun rose in a pink sky.”

Of course, you are allowed to indulge yourself a little bit, for example to create an eerie (frightening) atmosphere.

“The moonlight made strange shadows of the bushes across the path. It was silent and lonely, with only the croak of a frog or the call of an owl, the creak of a branch to know that you were not alone on the Earth.”

from page 164 of “Friends and Enemies”

# *The fourth rule of style*

Writers often use a special style – rather than just special words - in order to create an atmosphere.

The feeling of oppressive authority for example in the very opening paragraph of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens:

“Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it would be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born... the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this Chapter”

[he means, Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse - it takes time to get used to the style – but it’s worth it!]

# Creating a special atmosphere

For example if you are pretending to quote the writing of another person

“Whosoever may see this document, be he of this time, of a time decades in the future or even of centuries to come, I ask that you should give me some little fragment of sympathy for the terrible torments that I have lived through, the agony which I have suffered.”

from page 124 of “Friends and Enemies”

This is in a totally different style from the rest of the book because the author behind the words is, in the story, a very special (and unpleasant) character.

# *The fifth rule of style*

Do not put judgments in the reader's mind.

To use the example which I just quoted from "She" and the very complicated sunrise.

Rider Haggard writes of the sunrise "It was a wonderfully beautiful sight" – if we had not already gathered that fact from the excess of language that we had just read, then the writer had certainly failed!

If we should not put judgments in the readers mind then

it may be better not to write “she looked angry”

Instead, describe how she looked and then the reader can work out that she is angry.

For example, if someone hisses in reply, or bangs his fist on the table, or scrunches a letter up in his hand, or squeezes an apple until the juice runs out between his fingers, you know that he is angry, without having to be told.

Tolstoy stuck to this rule. That is one reason why his books, like *War and Peace*, are so long!

*The sixth rule  
of style; you are there!*

*Roal Dahl's rule: A scene must come alive  
in the reader's mind: you must feel*

**"YOU ARE THERE"**

One way to do this is to include a short vivid detail.

“Three men were sitting in a corner of the darkened wine shop, a tiny window beside them admitting just a few rays of sunlight.”

You can see it! Just 24 words, and it is there in front of you. But the author has to have seen it, as he writes it, in his “mind’s eye”

Of course it could have been:

“Three men were sitting in a corner of the darkened wine shop. A few rays of sunlight, shining through a tiny window above them, lit up the rough surface of the table before them, catching the equally rough surface of the mugs from which they were swilling their drink, the light playing through the shadows, catching the tiny particles of dust that a little draft stirred up from time to time.....etc.etc.”

This is too long: the picture begins to fade.

Writing can be very exciting when it is pictorial.

If it can make you feel that “you are there” and then you are on the edge of your seat!

It can almost be like a video playing before your eyes, but with only the essentials showing.

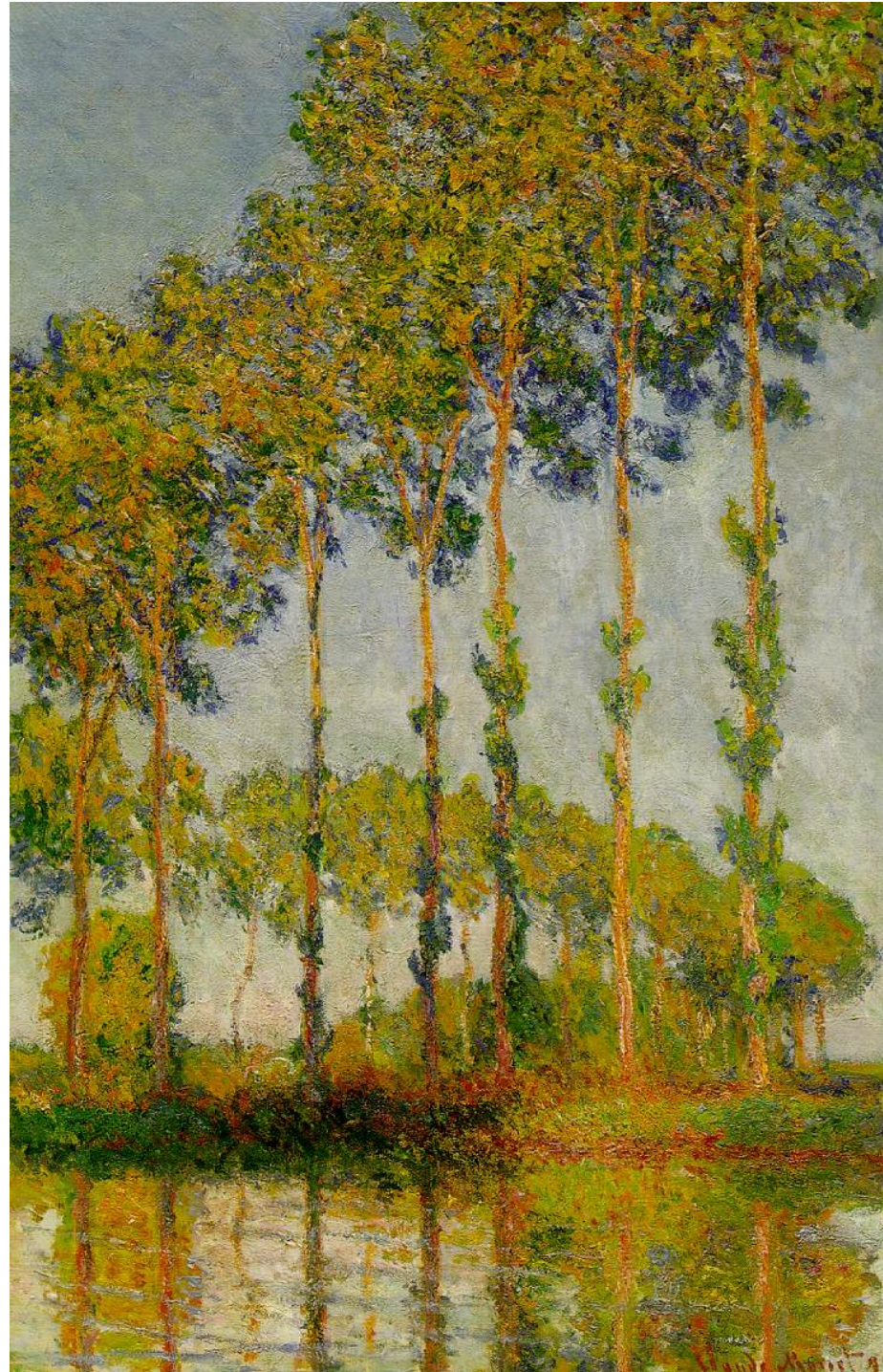
Think of the old man on the barge in the nanostory. If you have ever seen a canal and a barge on it, then you certainly see this image when you read this story.

But if I were to ask you, what colour was the barge, you would probably stop and think, “Well, I don’t know! Does it matter?”

*The sixth rule of style; you are there!*

Writing gives the immediacy of real experience - but is able to do so in just a few words, missing out everything which is not absolutely essential.

- You can see the trees shimmer in this Monet
- A photograph can be flat and dull, because the camera does not pick out the essentials as the painter compels the eye to do.



In the same way, when your mind is fed only the essentials, you achieve a heightened sense of reality

Very little is needed to make you feel that “*I am there*”.

You may the scene more vividly with less description

The reality which you have created as a writer is different for every reader, but everyone gets excited and interested.

economy of style helps create the excitement, the “you are there”

To say it again, the remarkable thing is that you do not need to define much in writing a story.

You need only to put in the absolute essentials.

This is one point about nanostories. You do not have to say anything about yourself except that you are sitting on the banks of a canal.

Or in the case of the unpleasant landlord,  
you do not have to say which city you are in  
“At a random corner in a random city” in the  
nanostory I quoted at the start

Or in the case of the following nanostory,  
you say nothing at all, but it works!

“Once upon a time there was a little lucky mushroom. The lucky mushroom was very unhappy because it had never seen the ocean. All the vegetables said that they had seen it, and that it was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Many years went by, and the mushroom grew old. One day it looked out the window as it used to, and thought about the ocean. Then it went into a deep sleep. Meanwhile a boat was rocking gently on the waves outside.”

- No accumulation of irrelevant detail.
- Everything you mention must be relevant.
- There may be a grandfather clock in the hall of the house where the murder took place, but you don't need to tell the reader unless the grandfather clock has some role in the story.

# Poetry and economy of expression

Poets are the best for economy, and the best of all is Shakespeare who can put in one phrase what others might require a whole page to express so clearly:

‘Young men’s love then lies

Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes’

(Romeo and Juliet).

# How poets work.

~~Ogger gokker gummi klokker~~

~~Ogger perle gummi gummi~~

~~Ærle perle or gummi klokker~~

~~Ærle be or gummi not~~

~~Ærle perle piff paff puff~~

~~Ogger be or not to puff~~

~~To gokker or not to piff~~

~~To be or not piff klokker~~

~~To be or puff to be~~

To be or not to be (ah! ha!!)

You see what  
hard work it is!

# Good writing uses the anti-bikini technique

Bikini technique: draws attention to the important parts without revealing what they are

Poetry reveals the important points whilst ignoring everything else

So should good writing

# *Style: Word painting*

- “To begin at the beginning. It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched courter’s-and-rabbits’ wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are blind as moles...”
- The opening lines of the greatest work ever written for radio, “Under Milk Wood” by Dylan Thomas, lived by poetry and died by drink.
- You can do it, but you have to very careful!

## *The seventh rule: consistency of style*

This probably happens naturally for descriptive passages or accounts of events.

“Clinging desperately to the walls of the house, he felt his fingers slowly slipping free, the soft stone of the brick crumbling in his hands. He lunged upwards, grasping for another hold, his heart banging in his chest. There was no hold! He fell. Oh! well that’s it then, he’s dead, ain’t he. Okay....”

This sounds a bit odd: falls a bit flat.

Of course you could do it on purpose using the dramatic style and then the cheerful style. But you cannot do it as a general rule.

You wouldn't expect to hear a chunk of Robbie Williams in the middle of a Beatles song.

This is related to the eighth rule:  
coming up now

## *The eighth rule: careful use of types of language*

Let's think particularly about conversation and how to write it.

There are of course many types of spoken English

For example, to play the piano in Pidgin English, as spoken in the depths of New Guinea, goes like this:

“Big fella’, black and white, bash him in the teeth!”

At scientific conferences, most people speak Ibe.  
“International Broken English”.

The way in which people speak places them immediately with respect to their degree of education – and, in British society, their social class.

“Dunno, mate!” is not what the Bishop of Kittilä would reply if you asked him the number of the bus to Sirkka.

But the old guy mending the plumbing might well say “Dunno, mate”.

He would not say “Well, I am awfully much afraid that I cannot recollect the number. It’s not in the prayer book” - which is what the Bishop would reply.

# Last words

There's lots of other things that I'd like to talk about.

For example the "Time Line"

How do you sort out the writing when the story line diverges, and two different things are going on at once, but in different places?

And last but not least

The Harry Potter phenomenon: people love books!

# The Harry Potter phenomenon sums it up!

People love books: a wonderful world opens out  
before you

And if you can write yourself and put some people  
of your own in that wonderful world, that is a happy  
experience!

Maybe some of these random thoughts, when  
applied to science, may help in making scientific  
papers more of a pleasure to read!

