

## Praise for *The Financial Times Essential Guide to Business Writing*

‘Engaging, effective, persuasive writing is an incredibly important and influential business skill, yet one that’s often neglected. If you can write well, you can command attention. And you can compel your audience – whether your colleagues, your customers, your prospects or your suppliers.

It’s a fascinating subject – and a fascinating book. Without doubt, it’s one of the best guides on business writing available today, expertly written and with clear, understandable guidance throughout. It will supercharge your writing and fast-track your business success.’

**Kate Allen**, Head of UK & Ireland Marketing, BP Castrol

‘Every serious business professional should have a copy of this book; it’s an absolute godsend. One of the three business books I always have on my desk to refer to, it’s worth its weight in gold. In fact it’s worth its weight in saffron.

If you want to write better proposals, reports or presentations, get your business recommendations or requests actioned or even shape your company’s marketing and advertising, this is the book for you. In short: if you want to get ahead in business, get this book.’

**Sheridan Thompson**, CRM Director, The Walt Disney Company

‘The definitive book on business writing and a really good read to boot. Forget dry, dusty tomes: Atkinson brings the subject to life in a way that makes it as enjoyable as it is illuminating. Five stars.’

**Jason Longley**, Head of Account & Business Development, ACE  
European Group

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clear image. Or if you're using a 'witty' image, have a straight, clear headline.

For example: one of the classic VW Beetle ads had the headline 'Lemon'. That intriguing headline is the 'twisted' part, so the image is 'straight'; simply a picture of the Beetle.

Conversely, a great, award-winning ad for a VW Polo many years later has a witty image instead. It's a wedding photograph where the bride and groom are out of focus, because the photographer has focused on the bus in the distance behind them, which has the line 'Polo L £8,240' written on the side.

It's a clever concept – the idea that the price is so astonishing, the photographer is focusing on that rather than the bride and groom. So this time, because it's the image that's 'twisted', the line is straight: it simply says *Surprisingly ordinary prices*.

You don't have to have an image and headline to make it a good press ad of course. One of my favourite series of press ads was for Tesco. One of the ads, for instance, just had a picture of an apple with no headline. The copy read: 'Granny Smiths. What's the difference between ours and our competitors'? Not much really. They're the same quality as Waitrose. And the same price as Asda.'



# 5

## Concept: Bringing your story to life

**All your *Content* and *Context* planning** has gathered together your eye of newt, phlegm of bat, dried mandrake root and the sigh from a melancholic mermaid.

But to create something truly magical, you should consider a concept to bring the ingredients to life.

And to help with your hubble, bubble, toil and trouble, I commend two very useful allies to you: SOPHIE and BOB. Just before we bring in SOPHIE, let me make the obvious point that not *everything* you write needs a concept. If you're writing an email to a friend, for instance, you'd be unlikely to give it a concept. Unless you were the sort of person whose dinner also came with a concept.

A concept is an idea borrowed from advertising. TV ads, billboards, viral campaigns – they all have concepts. And they're developed in ad agencies by young creative teams with modern haircuts and ridiculous trousers.

So you may wonder what relevance a concept has in business writing. Well, basically it's a theme that lifts your presentation, proposal or report from humdrum to humdinger. In business writing you'll use a concept a lot more subtly than an ad campaign would – but the principle's the same.

An ad campaign has a concept because they want to find a new way to stand out from the crowd. To connect with their audience. To add an

intangible value to their communication in addition to the content of their communication, in order to be appreciated, chosen, bought. And isn't that what you want from your business writing too?

## SOPHIE

OK. SOPHIE is an acronym to sense-check your ideas by. It stands for *Simple, Original, Powerful, Honed, Intelligent* and *Emotive*.

They're all pretty self-explanatory, but I'll cover them briefly, paired up into three couplets.

### Your concept should be Simple and Original

This is the toughest pairing of all: coming up with an idea that's both simple and original.

Coming up with a simple idea is relatively easy. Trouble is, lots of the best simple ideas have already been done. The simple way to express the emotional benefit of insurance, for instance, is *peace of mind*. As a result, that hoary old phrase has been used on three-quarters of the insurance communications out there for decades.

Coming up with an original idea is also relatively easy, if you just go mental. Chances are no-one's ever made sprout, toothpaste and wine gum casserole before. It would be original. But probably not very good.

No, finding an idea that's both simple *and* original (or at the very least, *fresh*, if original is too lofty an ambition) requires you to sit quietly and scratch your brain with a sharpened pencil.

And if you're brave enough, show people the idea. Do they get it straight away? Or do you have to keep explaining it to them, before they eventually say 'Oh ... I see' (in which case it's not simple enough). Do they say, 'Oh, I loved it when Sony did that' (in which case it's not original enough).

### Essential example

The tagline for a new Audi sports car: 'Mirror, Signal, Outmanoeuvre'. Three words. Only three letters of which are different from a well-known driving phrase. Really simple. Yet I've never seen it used as the lead concept for a car before.

## Your concept should be Powerful and Honed

Powerful and honed just mean making every aspect of the concept *even more so*.

Go back to the first two: simple and original. How could you make your idea simpler? What could you lose from it to make the idea clearer, more immediate? How could you make it more original? What twist or frisson of newness could you add to lift it above the ‘seen it before’ category? How could you amplify the idea, turn up the volume and make it more attention-grabbing, more engaging, more persuasive?

This is not a time for lily-livered whisperers, humbly suggesting their wares. This is a time for potent, irresistible voices, for mighty orators who have vast audiences hanging on their every word. Make your concept as potent as it can possibly be.

## Your concept should be Intelligent and Emotive

Your idea should appeal to your audience’s hearts and minds. So be wary of concepts that are cold, intellectual exercises lacking in emotion (although sometimes the emotion in a concept can be the warm feeling people get from understanding your intelligent reference).

Consider your concept from both angles, and if it’s lacking a rational or emotional aspect, work out how to add whichever is lacking to the idea. Just consider what missing *thought* or *feeling* you could bring in to your concept.

### Essential example

The Nike ‘Write the future’ TV ad had a simple, original concept with an idea that appealed to people’s minds: inventively imagining what famous footballers’ future lives might be like after doing well at the World Cup. But the concept was also rich with emotion, with moving music, slo-mo action and cheering crowds that stirred the blood and made you want to be part of it (by buying Nike, obviously).

So that’s SOPHIE. Remember her three couplets and you’ll know what to look for in your concepts. Now, how to come up with them. Enter stage right: BOB.

## BOB

‘Oh, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention!’ begins Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.

Sometimes, after a long day and with a deadline pressing, a muse of any kind can be hard to come by.

That’s why over the years I’ve gathered, developed and post-rationalised lots of ways of developing concepts. Together, they make up BOB – the Book Of Brainwaves. Using it helps prevent you from getting into a rut of coming up with the same sort of ideas over and over again.

I’m going to briefly cover ten of them here – and of course you won’t get a chance to explore all ten for every communication. But it is worth looking at two or three each time (and varying at least one of them each time) to come up with a potent idea.

Then, to select the best concept, evaluate them with SOPHIE. And also consider which best suit the medium you’re writing in and the audience you’re writing to.

### The Book of Brainwaves

- 1** Dramatise
- 2** Factualise
- 3** Reframe
- 4** Genre
- 5** Challenge convention
- 6** Topical
- 7** Analogy
- 8** Perspective shift
- 9** Become another
- 10** Anecdote

#### *Dramatise*

A simple one to start. Just exaggerate and dramatise the proposition until it becomes creatively compelling.

Since your proposition is usually around the key benefit, message or solution to a problem, dramatising that benefit will nearly always give you a strong concept for your writing. So this approach is always top of my list.