

Editorial

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In my Exchange workshop in July on email publishing, we talked all about managing an email publication, technology, etc. Something we didn't really go into too much detail about was actually writing for a digital publication.

Paul Waddington of Plain Text is a past master at this sort of thing, and so I'm delighted to include a number of tips from him on effective writing in today's newsletter. He's also running the "Free Pint Effective Writing Exchange" workshop at the beginning of November. Places are limited, but if you'd like to find out more then visit:

<<http://www.freepint.com/exchange>>

On that page you can also find out about the "Telecommunications Exchange" later this month, for which there are only a few places remaining. This session will equip you to research the telecoms sector efficiently with an awareness of the key resources and a basic understanding of telecoms networks and services.

Talking of Exchanges, we've had some super feedback about the two sessions we've run since the last issue. Data protection and competitor intelligence are key topics at the moment, and two great speakers ensured both events were very informative and interactive.

We're already lining up a series of workshops for the new year. However, do contact me if you have an idea for a session, or indeed if you would like to run one in your area.

I know you're going to get a lot out of today's Free Pint, and so I hope you enjoy reading it. I always welcome your feedback or suggestions about anything we do, and ask you to share Free Pint with your colleagues.

All the best
William

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Free Pint Telecommunications Exchange

Thursday 24th October 2002, West London, UK

"This Exchange is intended to give participants an awareness of the key sources of information on telecommunications, an ability to research the sector efficiently, and a basic understanding of telecommunications networks and services."

<<http://www.freepint.com/exchange>>

Free Pint Gold

In 2001, in her tips article about Tax links, Valerie Moyses took us through the 'information sources most used by the Library of Croner.CCH in supporting the work of the Tax Publishing Centre'. Liz Edols looked at Taxonomy software, definition, value and examples.

- Free Pint No.97 4th October 2001. "Tax Links" and "Taxonomies are what?"
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/041001.htm>>

Two years ago, Caryn Wesner-Early detailed sites on finding patent information, sites for inventors, National Patent Offices and Humorous patent/related sites. Pita Enriquez Harris looked at alternative ways of searching the Internet.

- Free Pint No.72, 5th October 2000. "Influence of the Internet on the Patent Process" and "All change for search technology?"
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/051000.htm>>

In 1999, Mark Southgate's 'Tips and Techniques' article helped us find UK Financial Information on the Internet, and Sheila Webber showed us the importance of having lots of links to your site and how to get them.

- Free Pint No.47, 7th October 1999. "Sources of UK Financial Information on the Internet" and "Getting Good References"
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/071099.htm>>

Four years ago, Phil Bradley wrote a feature article about viruses on the Internet and what to do about them, and Pablo Dubois looked at coffee websites.

- Free Pint No.23, 1st October 1998. "The Good Times are not about to end, unfortunately" and "There's an awful lot of coffee in Brazil: Coffee information on the Web"
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/011098.htm>>

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Free Pint Effective Writing Exchange

Thursday 7th November 2002, West London, UK

"This session will equip delegates with practical principles and guidelines for making online publications more effective through good writing"

<<http://www.freepint.com/exchange>>

My Favourite Tipples from Terry Kendrick

- <<http://www.rocketnews.com>> - Outrageously good news search engine with superb international coverage. Never leave for a client meeting without checking out the latest news on the client and its competitors. Only a five-day archive but, hey, what a five-day archive!
- <<http://www.business2.com/webguide>> - As a links guide to general business information topics this one comes up with excellent materials time after time. Nicely laid out and an all round good product.
- <<http://www.kamcity.com>> - Part free, part subscription, this is a gem of a website for key account managers. The news archive (click on NAMNEWS) is very useful for anyone watching FMCG markets.
- <<http://www.radio-locator.com>> - Wire the laptop up to your hi-fi system

and cruise the world of music as, sitting at your desk, you make profound thoughts for your clients. There are 16 US business news stations. Err... I'm sticking to the smooth jazz stations.

- <<http://www.kplay.cc/reference.html>> - Know Play? is an excellent idea particularly if you are in the USA. It provides a neat front end to sources for answering quick reference enquiries. UK readers will find great benefit from using the general and reference sources. It's never more than a couple of keystrokes away on my laptop.

Terry Kendrick is Director of Information Now Ltd.
<<http://www.terrykendrick.co.uk>>.

Email your top five favourite Web sites to <penny@freepint.com> or see the guidelines at <<http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>>.

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If you have a question about the Free Pint UK company research gateway, see the new page of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) at:

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Free Pint Jobs

<<http://www.freepint.com/jobs>>

As well as the selected listings below, check out the weekly Bar postings which list the latest additions to Free Pint Jobs. This week's can be found at <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b20153>> and last week's at <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b20058>>.

Here are some of the latest featured jobs:

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<<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2026>>
Put your knowledge of the US market, company filings, and research to good use in this evening researcher role at leading vendor.
Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment

Administrator/Researcher

<<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2045>>
Responsible for library support and research work for busy advertising agency.
Recruiter: Glen Recruitment

Senior Researcher

<<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2056>>
Market researcher professional with 5 yrs + experience of the transport industry required for a senior research position.
Recruiter: Recruit Media

[The above jobs are paid listings]

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The 'International Chemical Information Conference & Exhibition' is for all you chemical, patent, and sci-tech information professionals
<<http://www.freepint.com/go/e108>>.

The 'Competia European Symposium 2002' will be 'sharing best practices from world-class organizations, exchanging ideas, and learning from case studies in the field of competitive intelligence'
<<http://www.freepint.com/go/e97>>.

'Internet Librarian 2002' in November is for librarians, researchers and information managers. It will be focusing on the Internet, the World Wide Web and other technology that has transformed the roles within these professions
<<http://www.freepint.com/go/e156>>.

Submit details of your event today for free promotion. Simply complete the form at
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Tips Article

<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/031002.htm#tips>>

"Effective Writing: How Good Copy Can Make Your Information Work Harder"

By Paul Waddington

It is an enduring paradox of business that companies are prepared to spend massive sums on systems to manage information, but balk when it comes to putting money and time into interpreting what comes out of them. In one of the many studies of information overload, Gartner estimates that organisations worldwide will spend a cool USD 30bn on information management systems in 2002. Yet the same survey reports that 90% of companies feel that they are overwhelmed with information.

So what is happening here? Do information management systems simply not work? I don't think that's the case. There's no doubt, for example, that a well-managed intranet cuts down the time that staff spend looking for things. But no matter how well-managed it is, if readers then have to read lengthy, badly-written copy in order to get the information they need, the intranet will not have done its job. To put it another way: what's the point of a great medium if the message doesn't get through?

The web in particular has led to an explosion of publishing that we are still struggling to manage. On the Internet today, commercial websites live or die by the quality of their design and their written content. And since the technology boom ended, only the best sites, with the best writing, are still surviving. The popularity of weblogs, with their brief, informal style of writing, is testimony to the power of good writing online to draw and retain an audience.

But not every online communication is subjected to the savage Darwinism of the Internet. Internal websites, extranets, email newsletters, press releases: many of these continue to survive regardless of the quality of their written content. But as hard-pressed companies start to look for a return on investment from their information systems, good content becomes key. Because it is content that drives readership, traffic and results.

So how can information professionals boost the value of information with good writing? Here are five practical steps.

1. Make sure content is written for its audience

Even the smallest organisations contain a mix of different people -- technologists, accountants, salespeople -- who consume information in different ways. Some are happy to read dense, complicated text. Some would rather not read at all, and prefer to get their information from meetings and phone calls. When you are distributing content within a company, this difference in 'information consumption' style needs to be borne in mind. For example, only a few staff might bother to read a lengthy management announcement full of jargon, even if it does contain vital information on the future of the company.

Finding out about your audience is a key first step in producing effective written content. So if an announcement is targeted at the entire company, it should be written to extremely high standards. It is a paradox of writing that concise, clear writing often takes the most effort, as Pascal said: "I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter". However if content is targeted uniquely at specialists, for example engineers, then lengthy jargon and specialist terms are fine.

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<<http://resourceshelf.freepint.com/>>

2. Recognise the strengths and weaknesses of different media

One of the biggest errors with any new medium is to over- or underestimate what it can do. So we had early websites dense with text and slow-loading graphics. Much online information continues to ignore the strengths and weaknesses of the medium. If information is to be effective online it should:

- use the 'inverted pyramid', where a brief summary explains the content to follow. This is the same technique used in news stories. Online readers would rather not scroll
- be brief. It is suggested that web-based content, for example, should not exceed 500-700 words per article. Anything longer than this needs to be on separate pages or to be designed for print
- be 'scannable', using bullets and bold text to draw readers' interest. The low resolution of screens relative to paper makes people read more slowly
- use the power of hypertext. Good use of hypertext aids readability and builds the value of web pages

3. Tell stories

Much writing in business assumes that readers are more interested in a lengthy explanation of, say, a product's features than an interesting narrative explaining why it is good. So we get sentences like this:

"X's core product suite delivers an open, robust, cross-platform scalable solution for the indexing, categorisation and integration of disparate information feeds."

Someone knows what this means. But the intended reader is unlikely to get the point. Putting the same information in a narrative form, using examples and case studies, is much more effective:

"X's technology can manage information from many different sources. It has helped companies to:

- Categorise information effectively (link to brief customer case study)
- Integrate their information where different technology platforms are involved (link to brief example)"

People like stories. Using a narrative structure -- with a beginning, middle, and end -- is a powerful way of making complex information easy to interpret.

4. Remember that some writers are better than others

Online (particularly web) publishing can make it possible for anyone to publish, yet quality in the online medium -- for example a public corporate website -- is just as important as, say, in the printed annual report. Just as many staff would never make good salespeople, not everyone is a natural writer. It is important to recognise and deal with this, either by training or by giving staff access to templates and style guides. The alternatives are to outsource writing or to ensure only selected staff can publish directly online.

5. Build style guides and editorial processes and apply them

Rules and processes are well-established in the fields of information and knowledge management. Applied to writing, they can help to ensure quality and credibility. Organisations need to have a policy on questions such as: when is it OK to use abbreviations? How do we treat job titles? Product names? Who has final sign-off?

Building and managing style guides, for example, takes a little effort and time. But the value of minimising errors and inconsistencies -- a misquote, an out-of-date reference, or a misplaced decimal point -- far outweighs this.

In summary, good writing has a major part to play in helping companies to get the maximum value from their investment in information. Getting it right takes a little work, but if the reward is information that people want to use, the effort is worthwhile.

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Paul Waddington of Plain Text is running the "Free Pint Effective Writing Exchange" on 7th November 2002. For full details visit <<http://www.freepint.com/exchange>>.

Paul Waddington is a co-founder of Plain Text <<http://www.plain-text.co.uk>>, a company that specialises in writing for businesses, writing training and in helping companies improve their written communication.

Before establishing Plain Text, he was communications director of FT.com and prior to that spent ten years at Reuters, working with research products such as Reuters Business Briefing. Paul regularly publishes and speaks on writing and information-related issues. He can be contacted at <paul.waddington@plain-text.co.uk>.

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"Co-operation in Action"

Written by Stella Pilling and Stephanie Kenna

Reviewed by Alison Turner

Co-operation, partnership, collaboration - all buzzwords in the current political climate, but also a reality for most librarians. Given the growing emphasis on cross-sector and cross-domain working, the publication of this book is timely. Offering the expertise of a range of well-known contributors, the book presents a snapshot of current co-operation. But don't be misled by the 'world of information' referred to in the book's title - this book is firmly focused on public libraries, museums and archives, albeit with significant space given to the academic sector. Whilst co-operation with other sectors is referred to, there isn't the level of detail I was hoping for, as someone working in the health sector.

The book opens with a foreword by Tessa Blackstone, Minister of State for the Arts, which serves to emphasise the current political lean towards partnership and collaboration referred to in the book. The current climate in the UK is considered by several contributors, who outline influences and issues which are probably relevant to all types of library/information service. The book comprises 9 chapters in total covering issues such as: funding; areas where co-operation is working, such as preservation; and the perspectives of key organisations such as academic libraries. An overview of the international dimension concludes the book.

Two organisations which are particularly important in facilitating co-operative initiatives are the British Library and Resource, each meriting a chapter in this book. The chapters make for interesting reading, covering:

- The British Library approach to partnership working, with some detail on their Cooperation and Partnership Programme (BLCPP), and activities involving higher education, museums, just to mention two examples. This includes some reference to the British Library's work on the international scene, which readers may be less familiar with. Some indication is given of the future direction of travel.
- An overview of the work of Resource, particularly relevant given their recent announcement concerning cross-sectoral working. This chapter starts with a fun vision of the future where an entire family is making use of library and museum services in much the same way as they might use their TV or Playstation today. The author gives an interesting overview of the strategic direction of Resource, in three priority areas: user focus, seamless services and format of delivery.

I especially liked the positive outlook on co-operation given by the editors in the Introduction: "co-operation is about breaking down the artificial boundaries between institutions, between sectors and between domains in order that better services can be provided". The editors and contributors, whilst maintaining a positive approach, are

nonetheless realistic and cover some of the thornier issues around co-operation.

The book is useful in sharing the experiences of successful projects and initiatives and offering practical lessons. I imagine it's probably of more interest to colleagues in the public library sector or to those working in the allied services of museums or archives. There are some conclusions to be drawn of general interest, and for this reason it would make interesting background reading for anyone embarking on formal partnership projects.

Alison Turner is the Library Partnership Co-ordinator at the National electronic Library for Health (NeLH), NHS Information Authority.

Alison joined the NeLH <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk>> in 2001, having previously managed the library service at Gloucestershire Royal NHS Trust. Alison has worked in the field of health information for 8 years. In her current role, Alison liaises with health librarians to keep them informed of developments within NeLH and to identify opportunities for partnership working. The overall aim of the NeLH is to make information about effectiveness of care readily available to NHS staff, using Internet and associated technologies.

Related Free Pint links:

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Feature Article

<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/031002.htm#feature>>

**"From Knowledge Economy to Knowledge Ecology?
- IBM's David Snowden Maps a 'Third Way'
for KM at Open University Seminar"
By Andrew Everest**

Monday 8th of July saw David Snowden, Executive Director of the IBM sponsored Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity, acknowledged KM 'guru' to governments, corporations and their ilk, deliver an agenda-setting lecture at The Open University on the next generation of Knowledge Management.

Entitled "Complex Acts of Knowing - beyond the baleful influence of the 'tacit' and 'explicit' words", the lecture, hosted by the Open University Library & BBI (Beds and Bucks Information), gave Mr Snowden a platform to outline an iconoclastic 'organic' approach to KM. Offering effectively a 'third way' for KM, his approach does away with previous simplistic notions based purely on knowledge capture, and focuses on employing and exploiting traditional human knowledge- building instincts and behaviours. It conceptualises 'knowledge' as a flow, rather than a confinable commodity, in need of channelling and divining rather than control, and suggests use of a variety of 'pragmatic', sometimes unorthodox techniques to bring knowledge to the surface. With references to channelling of flows and the unorthodox, and a mysterious Welsh-/Druidic-sounding Moniker, one might have been excused for thinking this new 3G KM had something of the 3rd Age about it!

David Snowden's talk, however, avoided mysticism and concentrated on practicality. After a brief "Cooks' tour" of the sins of past generations of KM, he described the means by which his IBM-sponsored Cynefin Centre plans to explore and stimulate new ways of acting on the whole arena of knowledge discovery and knowledge-centred problem solving. His talk briefly illustrated a variety of devices/techniques used to tap underlying truths or hidden knowledge, including a memorable and amusing description of the appropriation of 'The Sims' computer game to unearth the undisclosed knowledge of executives' families in a study of work/life balance in corporate life.

The Cynefin approach rests on three tenets, paraphrased here from David Snowden's talk (the text after the maxim is the my paraphrase/interpretation of David's comments):

- 1. KNOWLEDGE CAN ONLY BE VOLUNTEERED; IT CANNOT BE CONSCRIPTED** - Unless the conditions are right, people will only let slip what they wish to disclose, and will often only provide the minimum amount or inferior grade 'knowledge' required for compliance when forced to 'share knowledge' as the KM mantra often exhorts.
- 2. WE CAN ALWAYS KNOW MORE THAN WE CAN TELL, AND WE WILL ALWAYS TELL MORE THAN WE CAN WRITE DOWN** - The amount of knowledge that can be codified into abstractions (e.g. a textbook or written procedure, a know-how database or best practice) is restricted by time and the ability to express complex instincts in a common language understandable to an audience.
- 3. WE ONLY KNOW WHAT WE KNOW WHEN WE NEED TO KNOW IT** - Knowledge is contextual, i.e. it only rises to the surface or can be captured when required or in reaction to an appropriate stimulus or set of conditions, which may

relate to a shared history, environment, or situation. Thus 'knowledge' or useful knowing will often only present itself in reaction to an event and can remain hidden or dormant unless prompted by techniques that mimic or somehow tap the factors that elicited its manifestation and creation in the first place.

The Cynefin Centre and its programme of seminars and 'action research' aims to promote:

- Descriptive self-awareness - creating the conditions where new meaning, understanding and insights emerge by looking at things in a new light.
- Diverse response - turning things on their heads; not settling too quickly into a comfortable solution or one way of doing things (i.e. no recipe).
- Embracing paradox - refraining from artificially resolving contradictions because contradictions are often rich sources of meaning and new insights.

Delivered in a lecture theatre these tenets and objectives could sound a tad high-concept and perhaps a little glib. However, where David Snowden scores over the average 'guru' is his use of anecdotal evidence (appropriate to the man who brought Storytelling to KM), underlining their practical applicability. Where do Descriptive Self Awareness, Diverse Response and Embracing Paradox fit into the real world of business, politics and the everyday operations, you might ask? Mr Snowden gave us the tale of the US Military Academy class, reduced to ashen-faced anguish when invited to understand the motivation and commitment of their new found terrorist foes, by re-imagining their present conflict in terms of a guerrilla war much closer to home, the American War of Independence, with the US cast as the British, and Al-Qaeda as the colonists. A valuable lesson learned, an insight gained and real knowledge generated, focusing on a real-world situation, using paradoxical cultural similarity to access existent, but untapped knowledge.

Coming off the global stage, David Snowden also illustrated how Cynefin seeks to exploit the paradoxes of human behaviour in relation to knowledge, and elicit new reactions to knowledge capture, creation, transmission and definition at ground level. Witness experiments carried out in association with Cynefin in weaning people off email, which actually improves the level of communication and knowledge sharing. Paradoxically something designed to aid knowledge transfer has become a bane, and often limits valuable knowledge transfer in its time-consuming volume.

An equally interesting project is the Cynefin centre's attempt to solve or at least provide an alternative answer to the sometimes thorny question, often posed by accountants, 'Why libraries?'. Once more, a paradox appears in that something as arguably useful as libraries are constantly under threat in the commercial and non-commercial world as a perceived cost. The Cynefin Centre in association with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) is exploring an alternative approach to cost- based justifications, by attempting to position libraries not as a cost to be borne, but vital eco-systems required for the survival of organisations. The aim is to provide a model of ecological impact measurement within an organisation, calculating environmental impact of using or losing the library on surrounding areas (e.g. communities, parent organisation, business units, etc.) as linked ecosystems, rather than relying on previous financial/resource based measures. In the process, mainstream ecologists have been enlisted to view the problem, thus providing a degree of external validity to the

thesis, rather than relying on the library profession to justify itself, with the obvious bias toward self-protection. For more details of this study see this month's CILIP Knowledge Bulletin - Starship Librarian <http://www.cilip.org.uk/practice/km_bulletin/num1_040702.html/>, where Mark Field, CILIP's Knowledge Advisor, describes the project briefly, going boldly as it were into the undiscovered country of 3G KM.

Whilst the Cynefin or '3rd generation' approach, as described by David Snowden, does not seek to completely throw out current thinking on KM, it does aim and claim to modify and challenge these substantially, with new insights from the science of complex adaptive systems.

The Cynefin approach -- and similar human centred approaches to KM, emphasising the power of approaches such as those that focus on the Human-Centred and Narrative aspects of knowledge -- would seem to have a great deal to offer, refocusing the attention of KM away from the 'bottle it and keep it and drink it like so much wine' mantras that have been generally swallowed whole as a cure-all for the information deluge. They might even provide the spark that re-ignites faith in KM, amongst punters who have yet to see convincing results from the mechanistic and IT-heavy information-retrieval biased versions of KM, turning the spotlight, as they do, on the deeper and more satisfying (and perhaps rewarding) dynamics of the knowledge equation.

Anything that makes the point that knowledge is a dynamic quantity, challenging a phrase that has launched a thousand expense accounts, but whose results are unsubstantiated, is worth a look. Insight into this new methodology does however come with a price tag. Participation in 'Action Research' programmes of the Cynefin Centre weighs in at a GBP 5K for a place at the table (something not mentioned too loudly during the lecture). Nevertheless, given the amounts thrown at KM systems whose return on investment are open to question, some might consider this new methodology a bargain, particularly if it yields early (and perhaps unexpected) results.

David Snowden certainly made an interesting and entertaining case for his new paradigms at the OU keeping a mixed audience of OU academics, external visitors and assorted University Knowledgegistas listening avidly over their otherwise prized lunchtime.

The subject matter of the Cynefin approach is complex, and reviews tend toward over-simplification. As Mr Snowden's theory points out "We can always know more than we can tell, and we will always tell more than we can write down", certainly true for this reviewer. An in-depth view of the concepts underpinning this '3rd way ahead' for KM can be obtained at <http://www-1.ibm.com/services/files/Complexactsofknowing_1.pdf/>.

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See you in two weeks!

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