



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

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Writing about facilitation in ways that help others

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Keywords

Writing, Tone of Voice, Critical Friends, Fog Factor

Traces in the sand

*I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

[Ozymandias (Extract), by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

(The Poetry Foundation has a helpful [Poem Guide](#) if you are interested.)]

Communicating in writing, and visually, can carry a message across centuries. Indeed millennia! Here, however, I'm not concerned about the blunt intent behind the inscriptions of, say, [Ozymandias](#). Engravings that assert the power of an individual at a time in history (Ramesses II), yet leaves little else of use behind.

No, in this article I won't get stuck in those sands. I want to build something that has both utility and is - to use a fancy word - edifying. Something that stands on firm ground and can be built on. Something that can add constructive insight and lead to useful action.

Writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.

[William Strunk, Elements of Style]

Specifically, I want to look at how we can write about facilitation in ways that help others. I'll focus on how to write in a practical and engaging way. To this end, I've introduced a couple of frameworks, concepts, and a checklist.

Critical friends

At a workshop titled '[Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing and critical friendship](#)', [Khorshed Bhote](#) and I were matched up as Critical Friends. Bob MacKenzie, in his paper [Critical friendships for coaching and mentoring in writing](#), defines such a relation as:

"A shared characteristic [...] appears to be that of mutual commitment and responsibility.

In critical friendships, as I understand it, 'critical' can mean variously 'key', 'crucial', 'scrupulous', or 'constructively challenging', whilst 'friendship' denotes the well-meaning, generous, intimate intentions of those relationships."

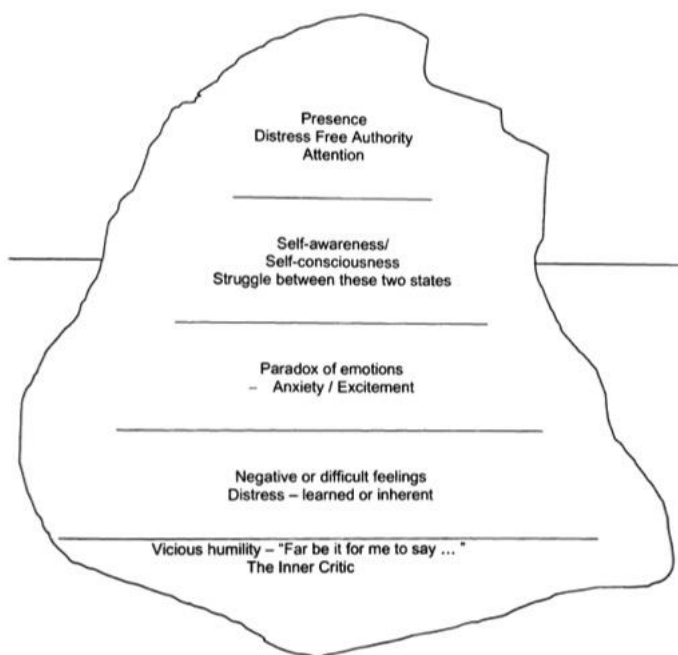
Khorshed Bhote and I had each brought a text along that we were looking to develop further.

Khorshed's piece 'Empowering learning through facilitation' has since appeared in the Journal of the Association for Management Education and Development ([Spring 2018 issue: Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing - Part 1](#)). This article is about our meeting as Critical Friends prior to this.

Ultimately our aim was to engage with the texts in a deeper and more meaningful way than we might have done on our own.



THE ICEBERG MODEL



Steve Dilworth [developed 'the iceberg model' in 2008](#) that neatly captures the layers of challenge and conflict that can exist within oneself - layers Critical Friends can arguably help each other to navigate.

In this article, practical in its intent, I'd like to illustrate how you too can do this, based on a practical example: how Khorshed and I structured our mutually supportive discussion.

Ground rules

First of all we agreed some basic ground rules. In the literature, this is known as the Critical Friend contract (or CF contract for short). We asserted our shared intent to be constructive, curious and positive. Peter Martin (quoted by Bob MacKenzie) sets this out quite nicely:

'I think that somewhere the danger of collusion resulting from the more general friendship (above) needs to be acknowledged and explored. It appears to me that CF stands in contrast to the adversarial system so prevalent in so-called centres of Educational and Publication Excellence. But I think it would be helpful to acknowledge that, without careful contracting, and re-contracting, the approach could become at worst a kind of shared solipsism!'

[personal communication to Bob MacKenzie, from Peter Martin, 16/3/15]

Clarity of intent

In order to give constructive and useful feedback on a piece of writing (as was the purpose of our meeting), we found that it is helpful to know what you're reacting to as a critical friend. Writing can go in lots of directions, and understanding the intent and aim is helpful.

To that end we shared what the objective of our respective articles were. And the audience we had in mind. Including accessibility and the importance of plain English. Both of us wanted to make it accessible and easy to read. We both had in mind fellow facilitators, and others interested in facilitation.

We also talked about what we were hoping the reader might do next. Our initial hope was to help generate some reflection, and then prompt action: inspiring ourselves and others to write about facilitation too.

We then discussed the kind of Tone of Voice we had in mind (rather than what might actually be on the paper). Basically how the text will sound to people. See the box below about Tone of Voice if you'd like to dig deeper into this area.

A note about Tone of Voice

Most facilitators will be familiar with the importance of Tone of Voice in the verbal context. John Heron talks about it in his 1993 book [Group Facilitation](#) and its importance is also referenced in Sam Kaner's [Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making](#) and in The 2012 [IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation](#) and so on.

The concept of Tone of Voice may however be new to facilitators who are writing about their work.

A brief primer for those who want to dig deeper

Kate Meyer from Norman Nielsen Group (a firm specialising in evidence-based user experience research, training, and consulting) suggests there are [four dimensions](#) of written Tone of Voice:

- funny vs. serious
- formal vs. casual
- respectful vs. irreverent
- enthusiastic vs. matter-of-fact

Whilst the variations across the above are almost infinite, it won't take you long to think of some examples that can easily be plotted against these statements. E.g. you'd expect a letter from the tax authorities to be serious, formal, respectful and matter of fact. That also means it'll be very dry! And if you don't want people to react to your writing as they might to a letter about their taxes, you'll want to think about Tone of Voice.

Whilst we didn't go as far as plotting the sought-after tone as one might using [Meyer's Four Dimensions](#), we both wanted our texts to be warm and welcoming.

Last but not least, we talked about how we could structure our mutual feedback to make it as constructive as possible.

We settled on a format which can be remembered with the mnemonic **GDD**:

- What was **G**ood?
- What was **D**ifficult?
- What might you do **D**ifferently?

And then, and only then, did we swap texts, read away, and mark up!

To give you a flavour of the GDD process that Khorshed and I followed, here's our review of the overall Critical Friend exchange, using this conversational format.

What was good?

Having a framework to hang our feedback on was useful - and in turn we checked off each item. So we were largely in good shape. The checklist is included at the end of the article, in case you want to try it for yourself. Our respective writing styles are very different (see Khorshed's article in Part 1 of this edition if you'd like to compare). Helpful for bringing contrast - and inspiring tweaks. Finding that ideal balance between personal narrative, interesting metaphors and practical advice.

What was difficult?

When you write, it can sometimes be hard to see the effect of your own words on the paper, versus how they are in your head. We checked: is there a clear call to action?

As a practical example, our discussion helped inform the recommendations in Khorshed's article, which were:

1. Be a reflective facilitator
2. Create a Facilitator's toolbox
3. Continue your professional development

And the article I had written ultimately turned into this guide!

We wrote all this in active voice, because:

"Never use the passive where you can use the active."

[George Orwell, Why I Write]

We also tried reading the texts aloud to ourselves and each other. It is the quickest way to find non-sequiturs, awkward jargon and acronyms. All such infelicities should be avoided as they make the text harder to read.

"When you read [your work] aloud, there are parts you might skip over—you find yourself not wanting to speak them. Those are the weak parts. It's hard to find them otherwise, just reading along."

[George Saunders quoted on LitHub]

A tip: If you're shy at first, here's a digital alternative to reading aloud

In case you're uncomfortable reading a text aloud at first, then many computers can do it for you. You'll find the functionality in the accessibility settings. You could even test it with this article.

Learn how to:

- [Hear your Mac speak text](#) - guidance from Apple for Mac users
- [Hear text read aloud with Narrator](#) - guidance from Microsoft for PC users

What's your Fog Factor?

We also ran the text through [Hemingway](#) (see also [readable.io](#) below), a free web app, to check for impenetrable sentences. That is a plain language way of saying: stay clear of the high [Fog](#) numbers.

The Gunning Fog Index is one of a range of readability tests designed to show how easy or difficult a text is to read. It is calculated by counting the average number of words in sentences + the % of words of three or more syllables timed by 0.4. The resulting number is a quasi-objective measure of readability. For more on this, see the accompanying box below.

“Short sentences aren’t hard to make.

The difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short

There are innumerable ways to write badly.

The usual way is making sentences that don’t say what you think they do.

Which can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences or you?”

[Verlyn Klinkenbord in [Several Short Sentences about Writing](#)]

We agreed to aim for a Fog Factor of grade 10 or below. The quickest route to that? Taking out difficult words, acronyms and the like. And shortening and simplifying sentences. Otherwise it is hard to read on a smartphone or in a rush... and we’re all in a rush.

For a second opinion, we also played around with insights from [readable.io](#) - always sobering.

A note about readability

The Hemingway App is one useful tool, but if you really want to geek out, try [readable.io/](#) - it analyses across a whole host of the different available indicators.

As an example, the scores for this article according to [readable.io/](#) are:

Readability Grade Levels

READABILITY FORMULA	GRADE
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.5
Gunning Fog Index	9.3
Coleman-Liau Index	10.1
SMOG Index	10.6
Automated Readability Index	6.9
Average Grade Level	8.9

Readability Scores

READABILITY	SCORE
Flesch Reading Ease	60.2
CEFR Level	B2
IELTS Level	5-6
Spache Score	5.1
New Dale-Chall	5.2

What might we do differently?

- Keep the Critical Friendship going! Keep writing, sharing and learning.
- The checklist has utility.
- The interaction and reflection has the edification.
- And don't forget to have some fun too.

It'll help you write about facilitation in ways that help others.

Some writing resources

In summary, here are a few resources that we found helpful, and some of which you might find helpful too:

... our Writing Checklist for Critical Friendship conversations

1. Set ground rules
2. Clarify intent - including objective, audience, tone - and hoped for action
3. Read the texts aloud
4. Analyse using objective tools
5. Discuss what was good
6. What was difficult
7. What you might do differently
8. Edit, rinse and repeat
9. Don't forget to share...

... and here are *two online tools for writing* which you can use

- hemingwayapp.com - quick and free to use online, offline app download also available
- readable.io - broader analysis of your writing - try for free.

Also, you might like to explore these *four books on writing*

- [Several Short Sentences about Writing](#) - Verlyn Klinkenborg
- [Elements of Style](#) – William Strunk
- [Bird by Bird: Instructions for Writing and Life](#) - Anne Lamott
- [Why I Write](#) - George Orwell

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Shelley, Percy B (1817); [Ozymandias](#) by (link to the Poetry Foundation - actual poem is out of copyright)

Acknowledgements

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About Michael

I've run organisations, chaired boards and developed changemakers. I provide 1:1 advice to Chairs, Chief Execs and senior leaders on strategy, change and turnarounds. I'm particularly interested in how strategic alignment can focus people - and enable growth. A key element within this is the kind of deep, constructive conversations enabled through Critical Friendship.

With my colleagues at Align Your Org, I facilitate strategy for organisations that want to enable all their people to put a shoulder to the wheel. Organisations don't make things happen. People do.

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A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

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