

## Transcript - John Simmons and Neil Baker - Why does good writing matter?

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# Transcript

Nathalie 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Nathalie Nahai.

Ross G 00:15

And I'm Ross Garner.

Nathalie 00:16

This week, we're asking, why does good writing matter? What impact does good writing have at work? What tends to go wrong? And how can we, as managers, foster a culture of good writing in our teams? To explore these questions, we're joined by writers John Simmons and Neil Baker.

Nathalie 00:34

John is an independent writer and brand consultant whose books include *The Invisible Grail* and *The Dark Angels* trilogy. Neil is a writer and communications consultant and associate poet with Canterbury's *Wise Words Festival*.

Nathalie 00:49

Together, they work with businesses, groups, and individuals to develop creative writing skills through their *Dark Angels* workshops. How are you doing, John?

John 00:58

I'm fine, thank you, Nathalie. That sounds very grand, that introduction.

Nathalie 01:03

I'm glad that you're well and Neil, how are you doing today?

Neil 01:07

I am also fine. Yes, thank you very much for asking and it's a pleasure to be here with you both.

Nathalie 01:13

It's great to have you. So let's dive in at the beginning. So why does good writing and good language matter so much in business?

John 01:24

Um, shall I go first?

Neil 01:28

You wrote the book on this, so you need to go first.

John 01:32

Why does good writing matter? There are so many reasons, really, but I'd break it down into two areas. First of all, it matters for the organisation itself. I use the word organisation so that it can encompass any kind of working being really. So if you're working on or in any organisation, then words are inescapable.

John 02:05

You just have to use words, but there's no way that you can communicate without using words. So, words help a business to do everything they would want to do. It helps an organisation to sell, to persuade, to engage with all its different audiences.

John 02:28

Whatever it is, you need words. If you need words, then it's much better, in my view, that you use words well. The better you become at it, the more likely it is that the business you're working with will succeed.

John 02:48

It's a virtuous circle, if you like. I guess the second reason, I'd say, is that all businesses are made up of people, and words connect people. So, words are a creative resource that enhance the lives of everybody, of people working in that business, and they create a culture that people want to be part of as a result.

John 03:20

So, I think it is in those two main areas, but there are all sorts of subsections of that that we can go into if we had time. I'm not sure we have time. Neil, what would you say?

Neil 03:35

I would say, yes, well said, I would agree with everything you've just said. I think it's, well, you know, what is good writing at work? I think, I talk about the three Cs, so good writing at work is clear, concise and compelling, okay?

Neil 03:54

So it's got to be clear because we want people to know what we're trying to say. And often writing at work falls at that first hurdle. It's not clear. So we want it to be clear. We want it to be concise because we all live and work in a very noisy world where nobody can demand an audience these days.

Neil 04:19

You know, we have to earn an audience even if we're writing to our team who should love and respect us and hang on our every word. We need to respect their time. So it's got to be concise, but also really importantly compelling.

Neil 04:36

We're communicating with people because we want them to know something or do something or feel something. And writing is a fabulous tool for making people know things, feel things and do things. Another reason that I'm becoming much more aware of these days is that good writing gives people a voice.

Neil 05:01

So the more people in an organisation who have a voice, the more people we hear from, the easier it is for people to speak up about what they agree with, what they disagree with, what they think, what they can bring to the conversation.

Neil 05:18

And as we know, I think a greater diversity of thought, perspective, opinion creates a healthier organisation. So the more people who can write in an organisation, the more people who feel confident writing, the healthier the organisation becomes.

Nathalie 05:38

And do you think anyone can write, or is it kind of one of these hallowed skills that you're either born with or you're not?

John 05:46

I'm sure I'm sure we've both been in workshops where people have been told it's good for them. Go on to this workshop so that it'll do you good. And they're there very reluctantly and they are saying literally or they are saying inside their own head, I can't write.

John 06:09

And so we reject that actually. We say everyone can write. If you can speak, you can write because you're using words by speaking. So it's a small step to actually put your words down on paper. And a lot of people who speak extremely well will claim that they can't write, which is patently an absolute nonsense.

John 06:34

So I think with encouragement, with the growth of confidence, with the right approach in workshops, for example, you can encourage anyone to write. And it all comes down to enjoyment. You won't get people to write better or to agree that they are a writer, which is one of our aims.

John 06:57

If you are dictatorial with them, if you're given the set of rules, here are your instructions. Ten top tips to become a better writer. And let them discover these themselves. Let them enjoy that process of discovery.

John 07:15

And through enjoyment will come the wish to write more and to write better. And that's the breakthrough that we aim to make in our workshops.

Ross G 07:26

You've set a very positive tone for this conversation, but obviously what I like to do is come in with the super negative tone and be critical. So if you think, do you think anyone can write?

Ross G 07:39

I think the, why do people think the opposite? Why don't they write just now? And I have, I think I've got two examples both related to fear. So one is a personal example. So my wife started writing poetry about a year ago and she just wrote it for herself, first of all.

Ross G 07:55

She saw an ad for a magazine competition and so she thought she'd enter it and she sent it to me as if, what do you think of this? And I almost started welling up. I thought it was beautiful. Like genuinely, I was actually quite shocked of what she was, because what she had said in poetry was different than what she might've said just in conversation about how she felt about certain things.

Ross G 08:11

So she submitted it and she never heard anything back, but she did keep writing poetry and she would put them on Instagram, but with a pseudonym and then she would take the Instagram down and then she would put it up again.

Ross G 08:23

And then she linked it to her like main Instagram and then unlinked it. And she did this sort of very sort of back and forth tiptoeing to the point that she could actually let anyone that she knew read what she was writing.

Ross G 08:34

Her poetry was getting better. She actually got an email this week to say she's going to be published in a magazine, which is super exciting because I've kind of been on this journey with her, but she'd been terrified the entire time of anyone finding out that she was doing this thing.

Ross G 08:45

So she felt super vulnerable doing it. So that's like a personal example for why someone might not want to. So that they don't want to write, but they don't want to let anyone read what they've written, I guess.

Ross G 08:57

The other example I was thinking of is I am in the fourth year of negotiations with the Highland Council's planning department for a garage conversion that I got done. And that is still not signed off.

Ross G 09:10

And the guy that I'm dealing with, I don't think he's going to listen to this podcast. I won't mention his name, but I suspect he'll never find out I said this. Uses the word whereby all the time in his emails, sometimes twice in the same sentence.

Ross G 09:23

And I think what he's trying to do is he's trying to sound like an authoritative planning officer, but actually what he achieves is I have no idea what he means ever. So it's like an impression of someone who works for a planning department.

Ross G 09:38

But I think that's driven by the same thing as what my wife experiences, which is fear. And so he doesn't have the confidence to just say the thing that he wants to say. He has to dress it up in corporate language.

Ross G 09:53

So how much do you experience that on your course? That people are either they don't want anyone to see their writing or when they do write, they write in this weird tone that's not really their own voice.

Neil 10:04

I feel your wife's pain. And that's a good thing. So I'm glad that your wife felt vulnerable. And I'll tell you why in a moment. But when I first started sending out short stories into the world, I did it under a pseudonym as well.

Neil 10:21

I used my mother's maiden name. I don't know why. Maybe because I was scared. I don't know what I was scared of, but I was scared. And then the first ever magazine to publish me, God bless them, Brittle Star, love them, go out and buy them, sent me a lovely letter saying, we love your story.

Neil 10:39

We want to publish it. This doesn't seem to be your real name. How do you feel about that? And I thought, well, what if this was the only piece I ever had published? What if after this one, that was it?

Neil 10:53

And I thought, I don't want to lose the opportunity of putting my name on it. So I said, no, no, no, put it under my name and sent the email to that effect. And then worried, worried, worried for weeks thinking, what will people say?

Neil 11:08

The neighbors will come around banging on my door when they read this in this small obscure poetry magazine. I've just felt so exposed. But that's a good thing. And it's a good thing that you feel vulnerable because the vulnerability is a sign that you are doing something that matters to you.

Neil 11:28

You're saying something that matters. So when you, good, good writing, whether it's business or short stories or poetry or whatever, you're writing about something that matters to you. And when you're saying to the world, you know what, this matters to me, you're making yourself vulnerable because they might say, you know what, it doesn't matter to us.

Neil 11:47

And not only that, we think it's stupid for allowing this to matter to you. So you're putting a lot of ego on the line. And so it can feel dangerous. It feels risky. But that sense that this is dangerous, that's what we look for in our workshops, I think is, ah, I can see now you're coming into the territory where you're doing something that matters to you.

Neil 12:12

And that's good. That's where we want to get you. And we can see that it matters to you because your face starts to change color and you might be a bit shaky and maybe your voice will go. And when these things happen to you the first time, they feel terrifying, but they're good things because they show that you are moving out of the safe and the familiar and the way that you've always done things before and you're coming into somewhere new, which is a beautiful place to come into.

Nathalie 12:41

That makes a lot of sense to me, especially when it's more introspective or personal work or expressions. But I think one of the things that's curious is how do we bring that quality into the workplace?

Nathalie 12:56

You know, what mistakes can we make when writing for a workplace audience? Can we give too much of ourselves? What if we don't give enough? Um, what are some of the things that go wrong?

Ross G 13:05

What if we dress it up in a vicious sounding language to big ourselves.

Neil 13:08

Yes, we haven't dealt with your neighbour yet have we, Ross?

Ross G 13:12

I think it tags into Nathalie's question as well. You know, it's which is

John 13:13

Well, to pick on that for Nathalie's question, whereby your planning guy is resulting to legal contract language. If you look at the legal contract, it's full of whereby's. And it's a very common thing in any kind of writing or any speaking in a sort of business setting.

John 13:39

The people retreat into the forms of language that they think give them authority. And generally this turns out as what we

call jargon. It's the language of a particular tribe, let's say. So that tribe is defined by the use of whereby and howsoever or whatever the legal form of words might be.

John 14:09

But there are other kinds of jargon and these tend to be recognised by people in that tribe. But it doesn't communicate as soon as you use these words outside that tribe. So for you, Ross, the use of whereby and all this is intimidating and it's confusing and it's certainly not clear.

John 14:31

And so we want to get rid of that kind of language and it does, as we've been saying, come from a sense of fear that you'll be caught out. I always use the example of my dear old grandmother who was born before the telephone came along and she would come over to our house for Sunday lunch and she would be brought to the telephone to talk to my aunt, my mum's sister.

John 15:06

And we would listen from the other room and my nan would speak with this posh telephone voice that she put on and we'd all be there sitting scratching our heads wondering, who is that speaking? There's no one we know.

John 15:22

But, you know, people in the business will put on the equivalent of the posh telephone voice and there's no reason for it. Use your own voice. This is what we're trying to encourage people to do and it's wonderful when your wife is discovering her own voice through poetry.

John 15:42

I've slightly puzzled because you said, I'm going to raise a negative example. For me, that was a wholly positive example.

Ross G 15:49

No, for sure that is positive, but I think you were taking a very positive spin on the question, whereas I always say, why would people not want to write? On the topic of jargon, I found a quote from author Anna Wiener about communication in the workplace, which we talked about this before in the podcast.

Ross G 16:06

It's a super strange place to workplace. There's all sorts of weird incentives of power dynamics. Here's what Anna Wiener wrote. People use a sort of non-language, which is neither beautiful nor especially efficient, a mashup of business speak with athletic and wartime metaphors, inflated with self-importance, calls to action, front lines and trenches, blitz scaling, companies didn't fail, they died.

Ross G 16:31

And so you see phrases like key learnings or a drop a pin in this or the business critical ask, parallel paths, these sorts of things. Are these useful within a tribe or is that kind of speak always problematic?

Ross G 16:46

What do we think? I've seen lots of shaking heads. Neil, you're gesturing.

Neil 16:53

Yeah, well, I think it's, um, well, this is a difficult question because, um, on the one hand, if you're using that kind of language, um, just listening to their roaster, don't take this personally, but you're, you're, my ears are screaming, um, painful words to just feel it physically.

Neil 17:19

Um, words to me are like living things, beautiful little creatures, little babies, children. You know, one is beautiful on its own. You put two together. Wow. Amazing. They start playing with each other.

Neil 17:30

Amazing things happen. Um, and yet in organisations, people want to kind of beat the life out of them or at least discipline them and line them up and be very unkind to them. Um, so on the one level, it's horrible.

Neil 17:45

On the other level, we have to accept that there are people who rise to quite significant heights in organisations just by using, uh, abstraction, jargon, meaningless words, um, because they can sound impressive.

Neil 18:02

Oh, you know, I've got no idea what he's talking about, but everybody else seems to be on board with this. So he must be really clever and in control of things. Well, in fact, the reality is nobody's got any idea what this person's talking about.

Neil 18:14

Um, so I think that, um, I always use the stethoscope example, you know, so if you're in, uh, if you're in a hospital and one doctor says to another, Oh, could, could you pass me the kind of the tube with the kind of things on the end that I stick in my ears and used to listen to the, the patient's breathing?

Neil 18:37

They would say, what, the stethoscope? Is that what you mean? Why didn't you just say that? Because for them stethoscope is a real thing. There's a thing called a stethoscope. They both know what a stethoscope is.

Neil 18:48

Um, so if one of them says, pass me the stethoscope, yeah, I get that. I understand it. There's something real about it, but the kind of language you're talking about there, it's, it's the language of, um, well, you know, fill in this blank.

Neil 19:01

I don't want to swear on your podcast. So it's, it's not, it's not the language reality. Um, but it isn't, it's a language of power as well. It's a language of excluding other people. Um, and, uh, coincidentally, Oh, guess what?

Neil 19:18

It's also very macho language. It's very militaristic language. It's language rooted in conflict or competitive sport.

John 19:27

Yeah, it's language that comes from the assumption that the authority of your position is what really counts. But it's not. It's the human connection that counts. And how do you make the human connection?

John 19:44

Will you make it through words? And you shouldn't use words that put up a barrier to that kind of human connection. And so that is, you know, I didn't work a few years ago with a bank, a big bank in Ireland.

John 20:07

And they had a severe case of what we called the parent-child relationship was coming down from on high and those senior managers talking to the ordinary staff in a very patronising tone. And so we had to get them past that.

John 20:33

But when they did, absolutely everybody felt happier at all levels of the organisation. And I include the senior levels in that because it becomes quite freeing for people once they feel, oh, I don't have to put on this aura of authority.

John 20:55

I can just connect with people on a much more human level. And they become admired as leaders if they can do that as well.

Nathalie 21:07

So if we're thinking about fostering a more real, genuine human connection through our language, what are some of the things that we can do to become better writers?

Neil 21:18

Two things, read, write. Next question. Does it matter what you read and what you write? That's me being clear and concise. Let me try and make it more compelling then. So, if you think about, you know, what are the challenges that you face when you're writing at work?

Neil 21:39

Possibly three. You know, how do I get your attention? How do I hold your attention? How do I move you in terms of how do I get you to do something you're not doing at the moment? How do I change the way you think about something?

Neil 21:52

How do I change the way you feel about something? Those are the challenges in business writing. But these are also exactly the same challenges that you've encountered when you're writing poetry, film scripts, novels.

Neil 22:05

You know, how do I get the reader's attention? How do I hold it? How do I move them? You know, how do I connect with them? So, one way of learning how to do that is to read, is to look at the writing that people actually pay money to read, you know.

Neil 22:23

And look at how do these writers, how do they take on these challenges that I face in my day as I'm writing an email to my team, for example, you know. How do they do those three things? And then, in terms of writing, I think, writing is a kind of a practice.

Neil 22:44

It's a muscle, depending on your metaphor, but it's something that the more of it you do, the better it you get. So, just get yourself a pencil and a piece of paper or some similar technologies and make writing part of your life.

Neil 23:02

Just write every day. Just write something. And then, that writing will become a natural thing that you do. It doesn't matter what you write about. Follow the great poet Mary Oliver's instructions for leading a good life, which are to pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it.

Neil 23:23

So, just look at the world around you. What interests you? Pay attention to what's going on. What interests you? What interests you about it? What's astonishing about it? And it could be anything. It could be what's astonishing about what your son said as he was leaving house in the morning.

Neil 23:40

It doesn't have to be amazing, but it's amazing to you. You noticed it. And then, tell about it. Write it down. Going back to your wife's example, Ros, telling about it might just be initially, tell yourself about it.

Neil 23:53

Write it down just for yourself. You don't have to show it to anybody. You never have to read it again in your whole life if you don't want to. But just the act of writing something down and saying, through the act of writing it down.

Neil 24:06

For me, right now, this mattered, and I wrote it down. All writing starts now, I think. It's as simple as that. And from there, you can go where you want to with it. But just do those two things. Read a lot.

Neil 24:20

Read widely. Read with the eyes of a writer as well. Read in terms of looking at how is this person doing this. I'm gripped. How's that happening? I'm bored. What went wrong? And then write. Write, write, write, write, write.

John 24:35

As much as I have to think about practice, it is important. I think it was Gary Player, the golfer, who put a long putt when in the hole and someone said to him, oh, that's a good shot, a bit lucky. And Gary Player said, well, the more I practice, the luckier I get.

John 24:55

And it's like that with writing. You just have to keep on with it. And the more you practice, not just the luckier you get, the more enjoyment you get and the more confident you get. And so there's a great playfulness in writing.

John 25:13

This is what we love about writing. It's a way to have play. And if you can approach writing as potentially play, then you will become better at it. You will get much better. And practice makes perfect, as they say.

Nathalie 25:33

So I've written two books and both times I've written them. I've found the idea of the book so much more playful and enjoyable than the actual craft of writing the book. And I actually find the process of writing just, it's really hard work.

Nathalie 25:49

Being concise of the language, being clear, and then finding the right word and also not repeating words overly. So if you've got a paragraph and you find yourself repeating the same word time and again, it's a creative call to kind of find a different path or way of expressing the same thing so that you are taking someone on a journey.

Nathalie 26:08

But I find that kind of writing, especially when it's research-based, extraordinarily intensive work and not very playful. And I imagine that for a lot of people listening, when they're thinking about writing, it could be a report.

Nathalie 26:21

It could be a white paper, whatever it might be. When it's, by its nature, perhaps less playful or there's less potential for creativity, how do you retain the sense of connection with the joy and the play because it's sometimes less possible than others?

Ross G 26:44

Could I come in there actually? Sorry, two of our guests. I was going to ask you about this Nathalie, because the very first conversation you and I had, I think, was about writing when we met. And you told me that you hated writing.

Ross G 26:57

But your book is very well written.

Nathalie 27:00

Well, it depends on the kind of writing, like poetry I love to write, music I write a lot of music and that's pure joy, or pure sadness, but like there's an emotion which is full and vibrant, but that comes from a very different place.

Ross G 27:13

But your book, so I think they, I don't know, you can tell me this is true or not. In the act of writing your book, you are forming your argument, right? So you don't actually know what you think about the thing.

Ross G 27:23

Is that fair to say? Because maybe that's a difficult bit.

Nathalie 27:29

I think it's more the process of weaving very complex ideas together in a way that is not overwhelming that assumes intelligence on the behalf of the reader but doesn't assume the jargon. It's kind of back to the point again, it's how do I translate something which is complex with hopefully a bit of levity, a bit of clarity and something that brings it to life.

Nathalie 27:50

And so constantly thinking about these different elements playing together and then making sure that the language doesn't trip on the tongue of the reader. So I read everything aloud when I'm writing it.

Nathalie 28:00

I'll read it aloud to make sure that it has a rhythm, that it has a pace, that it flows kind of like you would with your singing or writing and reading poetry. Because I think ahead of time I organise what I want to say and how things slot together but then it's just making sure that I am not using too many words when I could use better words.

Nathalie 28:19

It's trying to be as clear as possible at each point and making it interesting. It's actually harder than you might think with translating research to a potentially non-academic audience.

John 28:32

writing process, which is an important part of writing. And David Ogilvy, the appetising man of the last century, always said that, I'm not a great writer, but I am a good editor. And he was a good editor of his own writing.

John 28:53



And I think there are sort of editing tricks that you can do. You can set yourself little challenges that no one else will know, you set yourself these little challenges, constraints of it, the way I've described them in my books.

John 29:08

And that turns it into more fun for you. I've just written an academic paper. This is a first for me. And buried in this paper, I suggested to people, well, you can set yourself constraints. For example, make the first two words and the last two words of the piece of writing you to a coherent sentence that summarises the theme of your piece.

John 29:36

And I'm sure people might notice now I've made it public. That academic paper starts with the two words, writing is, and it ends with the two words, greater joy. So the theme of this paper is just an example of the little tricks we have to play with ourselves as writers to ensure we're getting the pleasure out of it.

John 30:09

We can introduce these little techniques.

Ross G 30:14

But what you've done there is that you've like, you set yourself a challenge, which is a way of crystallising what you think. And I think in business writing, this is one of the difficulties. So one of my team was writing a business case last week, and they sent it to me and they said, this is everything I've got so far.

Ross G 30:32

Obviously, I'll need to present it to the leadership team. And I said, I'm not going to let you present it. I want you to go away and rewrite it in such a way it doesn't need to be presented, because I don't think that you have totally crystallised what it is that you want to say.

Ross G 30:44

And until you've done that, you're not going to be able to present this persuasively, you just got to waffle. And eventually, you're going to stop talking and people are going to go, oh, yeah, okay, I think I get it.

Ross G 30:55

But it was much better on the second go round. And I think the act of having to, to put some constraints on the writing really helped him with his not just the writing, but also what he actually thought about the thing that he was asking for, something he was sure in the first place.

Neil 31:10

I think that's the reason that Jeff Bezos banned PowerPoint at Amazon and said it was the best thing they ever did in the business because as a senior leader, well, the senior leader, the leader himself, just bored of people just coming in and speaking to slides really knowing that a really good manager, you give them three slides and they can tell any kind of story with that.

Neil 31:44

They'll just talk to the slides and they can change what they're saying in the moment if it feels like it's not going down very well. But actually saying that what he said was no, I want a memo, put it in writing and then when the meeting starts, we'll all read it and then we'll talk about it.

Neil 32:04

And people complained initially and said, well, that's quite difficult. I mean, we've been writing one of the memo for the meeting that's coming up and it's taking us ages. And he said, yeah, good. That's the point.

Neil 32:17

It takes longer. It's harder, but it clarifies your thinking. And what I want you to bring me is clear thinking, not just a waffle accompanied by PowerPoint. So I think Steve Jobs did something similar.

Neil 32:35

And I think that when we were talking a while back about jargon, I think one thing that I see in the organisations I work with is that there's kind of like a big, there's like this big fat jargony middle in the organisation.

Neil 32:47

So when people arrive in the organisation, they say things like, how do things work here? What do we do? Why do we do this? What's the purpose of that? Does this work? Couldn't we do this better? Simple questions.

Neil 33:00

And they want simple answers because they don't know anything about how anything works. That is exactly the same question that people at the top ask, why are we doing this? Can we do this better? Should we stop doing that?

Neil 33:11

Why are we here? But it's in the middle where if you've been there for a while, you can't really ask those kinds of questions anymore. Because if you say, well, why are we doing this? And people could quite rightly say, well, well, you're running it.

Neil 33:28

You should know. Well, you know, why are you asking that question? So, you know, should we even be, should we have this product in the market? You know, does it make sense? You can't ask that question if you're leading the team of 100 people that are responsible for that product.

Neil 33:46

So it's when you get in the middle of the organisation that language gets cloudy, because, and the questions become really kind of abstract and strange, because you can't, or you feel as though you can't ask those questions anymore.

Neil 34:01

But good leaders, those who rise to the top, really value simplicity. And they ask the questions that matter, and they want clear answers to them. So the jargon kind of evaporates, I think.

Nathalie 34:17

Speaking about leaders and managers, how can they foster a culture of good writing on their teams?

Neil 34:23

So one thing I would say in response to that is that respect the fact that good writing takes time, you know. We've spoken a lot in this conversation about the joy of it, the fun of it, but it can be difficult as well.

Neil 34:37

So just allow for the fact it's difficult. Creative processes and all writing is a creative process. It doesn't move in a straight line. It's bumpy. Sometimes you have to go backwards to go forwards.

Neil 34:50

So just allow for that. Accept the fact as well that people are trying to write well. Sometimes that makes them vulnerable. So be supportive. Be encouraging. Give feedback on the work, not on the person.

Neil 35:06

That's really important. You can criticise what people have produced, but you don't need to criticise them. You know, everyone's doing what they can, doing their best. And the last thing that I think is that, you know, fundamentally, writing language is the most powerful technology that us human folks have ever invented in our history.

Neil 35:33

We invented it such a long time ago that we often forget this. We often forget it's something that we made and we made it to help ourselves, to help each other, to work together better. organisations all the time are investing in fancy new technologies that never really deliver what they promise or often don't.

Neil 35:53

But that seems to be fairly acceptable investing in technologies that don't really deliver. So my challenge is, what are you investing in writing? The greatest technology we've ever invented. Could you be investing more in that and helping your people to understand the power of that technology, helping them to use it?

John 36:14

And also to understand the time question that you referred to there, that it does take time. And the time it takes is not entirely taken up by tapping away at a keyboard or scribbling by pen or pencil in a notebook.

John 36:33

And that's just the tip of the iceberg when the words are actually appearing. The rest of the time is thinking. And that's the valuable part of writing. How do you think? I think by writing, this is the way I discover what I really think.

John 36:52

I write something down. But it doesn't come out in a beautifully crafted stream. You have to work at it and that takes time. One of the reasons why I got out of the corporate world of branding was that we all had to fill in timesheets.

John 37:15

And I was just so resistant to the whole notion of timesheets. Because how do you value that time that you have to fill in the form and say, I've spent eight hours on this, when actually the important part, the important breakthrough that you made was when you were having a walk that morning and it just came to you, a sentence, an idea just came to you.

John 37:44

And that's what you have to value. It's the idea you have to value, not the amount of time that is spent.

Nathalie 37:54

Speaking of time, we probably need to wrap up. Ross, what will you be taking from this very interesting conversation and applying in your life this week?

Ross G 38:03

It was super interesting, thanks Neil and John for everything you shared. Neil said something that struck me, which was that the writing takes time. It could take quite a long time to write down your thoughts.

Ross G 38:20

But I think what I was thinking about it was it takes a long time for you. It takes less time for everyone else than your waffly presentation that no one understands. If you're thinking, what's the business value of spending ages crafting this perfect thing?

Ross G 38:33

Well, it's not just your type of the business is paying for, it's all the people that are then going to have to read and understand. So I think that there's you can just suck up that pain because you're saving your colleagues a world of hurt by formalising your thoughts better.

Nathalie 38:50

I think for me it was something around vulnerability, so the idea that vulnerability shows up when something matters to us, and often we resist feeling vulnerable because we don't want to put ourselves in the firing line.

Nathalie 39:00

There's that militaristic language again, I guess, but it's this welcoming of vulnerability and the welcoming of something which is meaningful, which we like to talk a lot about in business. How do you create a sense of meaning and purpose, but actually what it means is taking that risk to be vulnerable.

Nathalie 39:15

That really struck me. John, what one idea would you like your listeners to remember from our conversation today?

John 39:21

Just that writing is a joy. That's what I'd like people really to take out of it. So many people approach writing with a heavy heart and think, oh, it's a terrible chore. I've got to grip my teeth and get through it somehow.

John 39:37

It's so much better. Your writing becomes so much better when you approach it with a joyful expectation, let's say.

Nathalie 39:47

And Neil, how about you?

Neil 39:49

Oh, what would I take from today? I think write for yourself first, I think. So I think that, you know, writing is a way that we communicate with other people, absolutely. But it's also such a gift to ourselves to write.

Neil 40:05

So sometimes when people come on our courses, they say, oh, you know, this feels a bit self-indulgent coming away to write. And I think, yeah, you know, self-indulgent, absolutely. So the word indulgent, the root of that is indulged, which is kindness, same as forgiveness.

Neil 40:24

So yeah, if this is self-indulgent, yes, this is an act of kindness to yourself. So be kind to yourself, get a pencil or a pen, write something down. Don't have to shout with anybody and treat it as a gift to yourself, a bit of space that you're carving out in a busy life, just to play with some words.

Nathalie 40:49

And now our regular feature of the podcast, which is about one thing that we have each learned this week. Ross, do you want to lead us in this cheeky round?

Ross G 40:57

Uh, sure. I've got a very quick one. I think I might be the last person in the world to learn this, uh, but we'll see. Uh, do you all know who voices Paddington Bear in the Ukrainian dub of the Paddington film series?

John 41:09

No! Is it President Zelensky by any chance?

Ross G 41:12

It's President Zelensky, yeah. Isn't it? Prior to his, uh... a wartime leader role. Yeah, he did the the Paddington dub.

John 41:24

Because a friend of mine sent me a cartoon yesterday with the image of the Queen and Paddington Bears facing each other and Paddington in the caption says to the Queen, would you like a cup of tea? And the Queen says, no, I'd like you to form a government.

Nathalie 41:48

That's really cute, I wasn't, well I'm not going to say anything political.

Ross G 41:54

You can listen to those jokes and try and work out what date we're recording this podcast. I'll put the answer in the show notes.

Nathalie 42:05

And how about you Neil? What have you learnt this week?

Neil 42:11

I learnt so much this week. I've learnt that I like experimental improvised modern jazz. This was an extraordinary surprise to me. I wasn't expecting to enjoy it quite so much or even at all, to be honest.

Neil 42:30

But I got my ticket, I showed up, I went to the event and it was astonishing.

Nathalie 42:35

Wonderful. And John, what did you learn this week?

John 42:38

I learned, or I relearned, that integrity matters. It's fundamental to all of us and to everything that we do. And I'm thinking in particular about Boris Johnson, the vote of no confidence or confidence.

John 42:59

The thing he was being judged on, whether people have confidence in him, wasn't the fact that he likes a drink or he likes to party. It's just that he lies. And so you need the trust of people in the words that you speak or write.

John 43:19

And so your personal integrity is fundamental to that. And this is something that all writers in whatever area of writing life you are. You need to remember this. Your personal integrity matters and it comes through in everything you do.

John 43:37

And you create trust by doing that. And trust is the foundation for credibility, for your words being read and acted on.

Nathalie 43:51

That's a wonderful note. I feel bad to share what I'm about to share. Yes, I've even read this book by Merlin Sheldrake called *Entangled Life*, which is about fungi. It's fascinating. And I've just learned that certain, certain fungi hunt nematode worms and they do this by basically checking to see if there is a certain class of molecule that nematodes use in order to conduct their basic functions.

Nathalie 44:21

But what's really bonkers is that some of them create these nooses, the fungi, I'm talking about the mycelial part of the fungi, create nooses which will inflate in a tenth of a second when touched, ensnaring their prey.

Nathalie 44:34

They create nooses to ensnare worms. This is just, there's a whole paragraph on the various grim and grisly ways that they capture their prey, but it's just extraordinary to think that fungi have particular methods of ensnaring food under our feet and we know nothing about it unless we pick up a book and read it because we can't see it because it's, you know, hidden from our eyes.

Nathalie 44:57

So that's what I learnt this week.

Ross G 45:00

Cheery note to end on.

Nathalie 45:03

Where can people find out more about you? This is the time where we get to plug your websites.

Neil 45:08

You can find out more about us by popping along to [darkangelswriters.com](https://darkangelswriters.com) and the best thing to do when you get there is to sign up to our mailing list and if you do that we will keep in touch with what we're doing and what we do ranges from five days away on a kind of writing retreat in Spain to coming along and writing poetry with me every Tuesday night on Zoom for free.

Neil 45:35

So we try to be very accessible so we do five-day things, one-day pop-up things, just drop in and have a go things. All of your listeners will be very welcome including you Ross and Nat. In fact I expect to see you.

Neil 45:51

And your wife Ross, bring your wife.

Ross G 45:54

Yeah, I will do. I actually would say that the Dark Angels have a collection of writings from the Dark Angels team that I would recommend, read it in prep for this. It's really good. And also John kindly sent me a copy of his book.

Ross G 46:06

Now I can never get it right behind you, but you've gone blurry. John sent me a copy of the book, *We, Me, Them and It, How to Write Powerfully for Business*, which we'll put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Ross G 46:17

As you can imagine from this conversation, very accessible and super practical. So I've enjoyed it. I think you ought to at home.

Nathalie 46:26

And that is it. You've been listening to the Future Talent Learning Podcast with me, Nathalie Nahai, and Ross Garner. Our guests this week were John Simmons and Neil Baker. Until next time, bye for now.

