

Rift Trek – Cutting To The Chase For Clearer Writing

Well, maybe we don't sing so well but we sure can play cricket! But this isn't about Jerusalem; it's about rifts, Hemingway and Star Trek wisdom: all those things relevant to clearer writing in reports!

I have been working in recent weeks with an Ethiopian colleague who is writing a report on the East African Rift system. The subject is relatively new to him and his draft reports reflect that: everything he reads seems important and he puts it all in his report.

The result is excruciating detail and nausea on the chemistry of the silicic volcanism in the Ethiopian shield volcanoes (which aren't important anyway) or the soda content of the rift valley lakes (which is important only if you're a flamingo, because your bony legs can handle it, and you're safe from the hyenas out there in the lake).

It's a common problem, this excessive irrelevant detail in first drafts – and too often in finished manuscripts. (I use the term 'finished' to express the author's view, not mine.)

I wrote about this in my Crispen, not Crispian column many years ago. (I remember that article because I said that the quality of writing in papers submitted to WABS 2 was below that of WABS 1 and the North West Shelf volumes and that annoyed some members of the WABS 2 Conference Committee – though they were polite enough to complain only when I wasn't in the room.)

Everything my friend discovers is a revelation and excites him. Obviously, he isn't focused on the reality that everything he reads was written by someone else; that every discovery he makes is a discovery only for him. Because of this, he is driven to put down all these facts he has 'discovered' so that he can communicate what he sees as profoundly significant. It's like teenage boys thinking they discovered sex and needing to talk constantly about it. It is very exciting and stimulating and everyone wants to share that.

Experienced writers do this too, compiling a first draft that is full of details and digressions. The difference is that they know this document isn't the finished product; just the starting point where they begin to throw out what isn't needed. They know Ernest Hemingway's advice was correct: the secret of writing is in knowing what to leave out.

That's the problem for the novice: he doesn't know what to leave out. My colleague certainly didn't.

My problem was how to teach him that. I tried editing his draft but I was rewriting every sentence, and for every paragraph that needed to be thrown out, there was a paragraph he'd left out and didn't know it needed to be in.

Put into blunt terms, my colleague, less young than inexperienced at industry reporting, was not clear about what he wanted or needed to say.

JAGS Editor Tony Cockbain has commented on this recently in one of his Editor's columns. Tony's point was that when the writing is not clear, and the paper isn't put together in a way that communicates clearly the basic points, it may be a sign that the thinking isn't clear either.

“**The secret of writing is in knowing what to leave out.**”

Pondering how to help my colleague clarify both thinking and writing, I remembered a play Robyn and I saw years ago in London, called something like *The Complete Unabridged Shakespeare in 1½ hours*. At one point in that wonderful show, the cast performed the play Hamlet in 10 minutes. Then they did it in five minutes; then, two minutes.

The humour of their performance came from their frantic efforts to cram all the action of the play into shorter and shorter periods of time. What is elegant and tragic at normal pace becomes slapstick at speed. Paul Robson's voice becomes chipmunk chatter if you play the record at high speed. Sir Laurence Olivier morphs into Jim Carey if you cram the hours into minutes.

What if we changed this? What is the Kobiashi Maru¹ solution? What if we don't cram everything into progressively shorter periods? What if we put less and less material in? Won't this force us into a progressively higher overview of the data?

We worked on a five-sentence statement about the Rift: *The East African Rift Valley extends for over 3000 km and is one of the world's best known geological features. The rift has two branches, both starting in Tanzania: the Eastern Rift extends north through Kenya to Ethiopia where it opens into the Afar Depression and*

joins the young ocean basins of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden; the Western Rift arcs NNE through Rwanda, Congo and Uganda. Many of Earth's hydrocarbon provinces are located in rift systems (e.g. the North Sea) but the East African rift has proved disappointing in that regard. Oil seeps have been known in Uganda's Lake Albert rift area for decades and recent discoveries there point to modest potential in the Western Rift. However, the intense magmatism associated with the Eastern Rift appears to have severely limited the potential there.

We then worked down to a three-sentence statement: *The East African Rift Valley extends for over 3000 km from Tanzania to Ethiopia where it joins the spreading centres of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Although many of Earth's hydrocarbon provinces are located in rift systems (e.g. the North Sea), there has been little exploration in the East African Rift and no encouragement until the recent discoveries in Uganda's Lake Albert Rift. It appears, however, that the intensely magmatic Eastern Rift in Kenya and Ethiopia has limited potential.*

Finally, one sentence: *The extensive East African Rift Valley appears to have modest oil potential in the Western Rift, passing through Uganda, but low potential in the intensively magmatic Eastern Rift passing through Kenya and Ethiopia.*

To tell his story within specific limits, I argued, he must allow fewer and fewer details. To do that, he had to make his writing clearer, more to the point, and to do that, he had to be clearer in his thinking.

That agreed, I assigned him the task of writing the report in five pages. (His draft was 20 pages, and that hadn't included oil potential – which just happened to be the subject of his report!). It was no more than asking for an extended abstract, but it proved to be great discipline. He got down to 13 pages at a first cut (with oil potential included) and then to six pages (if we didn't count figures).

I'd like to say Eureka and declare this procedure brilliant. Unfortunately what reeked was the six-page draft. But it was an improvement and that was progress.

So, if you're struggling with a report, try this. Stop writing and editing. Think about what you're saying and put it down in five pages. And just when you are feeling you've nailed it, start again and do it in two pages. Then go back to the report. If you've done the summaries well, the full report will be easier – and nowhere near as long as you thought it needed to be.

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¹ This needs no explaining to Trekkies. For others, it means changing the rules to solve the problem