

## Aliteracy: a modern problem with serious consequences for professional writing

John Shelton, 22 August 2011

A slightly expanded version of a paper presented at the *2011 Australasian Drafting Conference, Drafters in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Professional, Capable and Competent*, Friday 5 August 2011.

The style of your parliamentary drafts is characterised by leanness, literalness, lack of idiomatic or figurative device or metaphor, sparing use of punctuation and a tone that indicates that the words are not addressed to a specific reader or meant for an individual audience (though I believe one of your concerns is readership and how that affects the style of what you draft).

In fact, your clear, unambiguous style is but one of many different styles at the transactional end of the language spectrum. James Britton, a British linguist in the 1970s, described the transactional as “the language of getting things done”. The drafters I work with are “getting things done” in other areas of the public sector: they write reports of various kinds and complexity; they draft briefs for decision makers (for example, government ministers, CEOs of government departments, senior officers in their own and other departments); they draft replies to correspondence from officials, members of parliament, the public and so on. They present analyses and arguments supporting various decisions and actions (including the expenditure of vast amounts of public money) and they provide crafted information about events and portfolio matters. Yet, many drafters I talk to do not feel themselves to be *capable* or *competent*, especially after receiving their work back from managers with an alarming amount of scribbled correction and comment.

For these drafters my support is both psychological and practical. I help them write clearly and cogently for a reader beyond themselves by identifying salient ideas amongst the detail, by distinguishing between what their reader wants to know and needs to know, by focusing on meaning and the presentation of the message, and finally, by proofreading to ensure that the meaning is right and that the surface text features are correct. As you know all too well, such a process is complex and drawn out. Some of my drafters – particularly the younger ones fresh from university, or those who were in occupations prior to entering the public service - are surprised when I advise them that the first, second or even third draft of ANY piece of writing is unlikely to be the final.

For our purposes today I will refer to the various transactional types – the various language styles, language categories, kinds, purposes and language uses at the transactional end of the language spectrum - by the French word **genre**.

This paper has its roots in a background of teaching English over 50 years, of which the last 15 or so have been teaching mostly public servants. During this latter period, questions about the nature of literacy have become even more pressing and, at times, depressing. What do we mean by literacy in a twenty-first century developed country? What is aliteracy? Have our teachers been taught and do they understand the nexus between language, thought and culture? Do they understand well enough the interdependent relationship between reading, writing and thinking? Do our secondary school teachers encourage in their students a delight in reading, writing and thinking? Does the old adage “Use it or lose it” apply in the case of reading, writing, and thinking? Does aliteracy have any real effect on professional writing? If so, what can we do about it?

This paper attempts to throw light on some of those questions. It proposes that while aliteracy is a growing problem in the community it is of greater concern to managers of writers in the public service and that increasingly the professions will need to deal with it themselves.

**The Nature of Literacy/Background to the Problem of Aliteracy:** 'Literacy' is a tricky concept. Its concise but narrow definition – “the ability to read and write” – really tells us very little. Most of our primary school children are literate according to the dictionary definition: indeed, by age seven or eight they can read selected prose fiction books and informational texts – at their level of experience - and they can write a fairly long hand-written story or message, or even send a message by email, again appropriate to their level of experience. Learning two of the writing conventions - standard English/Australian orthography (spelling) and punctuation – goes on throughout their schooling and indeed through life. Yet, for many children and adults that learning remains sadly undeveloped.

In the early years the learning curve is incredibly steep but the ascent, for most children is “child’s play”; most children learn to read and to express themselves in writing in ways that still strike me as miraculous. We cannot teach chimpanzees how to read and write in any real sense of either word, yet most children accomplish all modes of language with extraordinary ease and very little help from adults. What they cannot do, of course, is read with any great depth of understanding material that is beyond their experience level and they certainly cannot write in a sustained way across a range of genres on topics beyond their experience. Nor, for that matter, can most teenagers, young graduates or even some of our more experienced public service employees.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy in these terms: “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

The important thing to note is that literacy “involves a continuum of learning”. As we grow into language we learn many genres, mostly unconsciously, and our literacy development is informed or limited by the spoken language we hear going on around us and by what our parents and others model, including playing with language itself and reacting to language. If we are fortunate as children, we learn by hearing adults modelling – mostly unselfconsciously and non-pedantically - and we pick up the rudiments of some of the genres we may go on to use later in life.

**Aliteracy:** While illiteracy is more common in the developing world, aliteracy is primarily seen as a problem of the developed world. The USA has focused attention on the problem since the mid-nineteen eighties when the term ‘aliteracy’ first began to appear. Conversations with French colleagues indicate that the French are particularly worried about the spread of aliteracy especially among young people. Like the Americans, they too define aliteracy as - **the quality of being able to read but lacking the interest to do so.** I add to that definition **the quality of being able to write but lacking interest in ‘getting it right’.** In Australia we tend to focus on writing rather than reading as the literacy problem.

Some commentators complain especially about the surface text features of a written message: in particular, spelling, failure to master the apostrophe, conventions of punctuation, and limited vocabulary choice. They see the problem as a failure to develop “skills”, the “skill” of punctuation, the “skill” of spelling and so on. The trouble is that writing is not a combination of skills; no matter how much we teach the apostrophe in isolation or correct the spelling of “accommodation” the so called “skill” doesn’t stick. Literacy development is holistic; we can fine tune aspects, but we cannot add a lot of distinct aspects together and expect someone to be able to read or write.

Other commentators despair over the structural features of the aliterate’s writing: faulty grammar, misleading arrangement of elements within sentences, misleading or wrong use of connectives (or, as the English call them, “signal words” - *however, yet, therefore, on the other hand* and so on), and a failure to develop ideas cogently. They complain that the aliterate doesn’t seem to care about what is written or how it is written. Their solution is to teach courses in grammar and the

metalanguage, that is, the language that describes the language (e.g. this is a verb, this is a noun, this is a gerundial phrase), but apart from providing some feel good knowledge about the parts of speech and their function, again the recently learned “skill” of grammar doesn’t transfer into their own writing or, if it does, it doesn’t stick. I liken the lone grammar lesson to a drill sergeant’s naming of parts with a modern rifle. He names all the parts as he dismantles the rifle and sets them all out neatly on a table. His instruction “Now, soldier, put it together and go out and destroy the enemy” is likely to be met with shuffling of feet and bafflement.

Some commentators also complain that it is a generational problem: Gen Y, preoccupied with electronic gadgetry and social networking, cannot concentrate for five minutes and are unwilling to invest time and energy in sustained mental activities demanded, for example, by tedious staff meetings. Nor can they read across a range of material in order to abstract key points and then summarise the ideas accurately and succinctly in a tightly written report.

The answer, of course, is that the ability to read and write is learnt over a lifetime of practice. The old adages are true, particularly of writing: “use it or lose it”; “practice makes perfect”. And the name of the game is learning how to read and understand different genres, and how to write effectively across a range of genres.

“Literacy” itself is thus a potentially misleading term. “Literacy” suggests a finite condition – one is either “literate” or “illiterate” – when the reality is that ‘literacy’ covers a broad spectrum ranging from what our primary age children achieve to a level so few of us achieve in a lifetime. The full UNESCO definition implies many fields of human endeavour, past and present and future, and involves a commitment to continuing to learn. And there is the heart of the problem. The “aliterate” are literate enough, but just not committed to continue developing their literacy, or refining their language skills and abilities to adapt to different genres.....or even testing the meanings of statements they write.

Most recently a federal government department colleague reviewing applications for a middle management position passed on to me this example of hollow management-speak – “People are a function of time and task.” No doubt the applicant thought that this gem he or she had read in some management text would clinch the job; but the applicant hadn’t thought about it, hadn’t tested the appropriacy of the statement’s meaning for that particular context. As it stands the statement represents the worst kind of management-speak about ciphers in a production-line enterprise. Professional staff do not consider themselves to be “a function of time and task”. Nor are the people they communicate with. Real people, not industrial ciphers, deal in meanings, sometimes straight forward but more often complex, full of implication and consequence, meanings that often affect the lives of countless others.

As professional drafters of meaning we accept that our role is to craft our meanings in language as best we can and with great care for and attention to both the meaning and the words. For us the words of the poet W B Yeats ring true –

A line will take us hours may be;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”

[from “Adam’s Curse”]

**The Beginnings of Literacy:** Language and literacy development start long before children arrive at school. If parents or carers are book handlers, book readers, who share books with their children then it is likely their children will grow into adults who are well advanced along the literacy spectrum, whose imaginations are continually switched on and running, whose sensibilities are refined and whose values are sound. If, on the other hand, parents or carers are couch potatoes (TV watchers hour after hour or players of electronic games by the day) then the chances are that the TV habit, its images and preoccupations will dominate their children’s language, values and preoccupations too. As teachers know all too well, some children come to school with limited, sometimes bruised experience; others come to school “rarin’ to go”!

Consider two samples of literacy development in early childhood. The first may be an apocryphal story, but an Early Childhood lecturer colleague swore it was true. One day, at a northern suburb primary school in a particularly depressed area of Hobart, an Infant School teacher was exploring the topic “the policeman our friend”. During activity time she asked the children to paint a picture of “the policeman our friend”. They worked away happily for a time and eventually the teacher wandered around to enjoy their efforts. To her great surprise one little boy had depicted a monstrous policeman with cruel teeth and red eyes. Worse, underneath he had carefully written, “Cops ar busteds.” Alarmed by the discovery of a potential little recidivist she asked a policeman friend for suggestions. “No worries. Bring the class down to the police station and we’ll all have some fun.” The next day at the station the children talked to several friendly male and female police officers, tried on police hats and reflective vests, sat in police cars, switched on the flashing lights and the siren, had yummy party food and went back to their classroom. The teacher asked them to paint another picture of “the policeman our friend”. The children happily depicted themselves and policepersons in police cars or directing traffic or wearing big police hats, but the little boy who had caused her so much anxiety once again produced a picture of a blue uniformed monster with blood dripping from fangs and wild red eyes. This time underneath his picture he had written, “Cops ar cuning busteds”. The moral is, of course, that home socialisation outweighs school socialisation.

In time, that little boy may have become one of the aliterates we are concerned about. On the other hand if, in the luck of the draw, he had one or two skilled, caring teachers during his schooling he may have gone on to become a highly successful criminal defence barrister, though experience tells us that it is highly unlikely.

The second is really a true story. Quite some years ago, as a visiting teacher education lecturer I was reading the story *Tog the Ribber* by Paul Colman and Gillian McClure, to a very bright group of Grade 4 children (around 9 years of age), children who when asked to report on what they did during their long holidays would tell stories about being taken overseas to Bali or Hong Kong or Europe...They were privileged children, children whose teachers complemented their homes’ general education and literacy development. At the end of the story, the children spoke about their night time fears, about being afraid of the dark... They passed the book around and tried out the language – “And I all sibble on my lones”; “I tibtoed priggled all with fear”. Later the teacher did verbal dynamics with them, getting them to move to the words and thus feel the meaning difference between pairs of words. At one point in the general conversation with the class I quite innocently said that I often wondered why the author had called his story *Tog the Ribber*. Quick as a flash, one little boy offered what was a startling insight for a 9 year old – “Jack the Ripper!” When asked why, he went on to explain to everyone that as a little girl the grandmother of the story probably heard stories about Jack the Ripper because she was old and Jack the Ripper terrorised the people of London a long time ago... Just where he had picked up that information is less important than the fact that he could find powerful parallels in two stories, one fiction, the other a piece of history, and provide an additional dimension to the story as it stood. That day - because of his flash of insight - he, the others in the class and I, all took quite a long stride along the literacy continuum.

As mature, literate adults we understand the process of making meaning in ways those children were not yet able to: *Tog the Ribber* is a powerful metaphor of psychological experience. Barbara Leondar, in her excellent article on metaphor and language reminds us that metaphor allows us to explore “...the infinitely finer, more subtle meanings which lurk along the borders of speech”. Think of besotted Romeo declaring to his friend, “Juliet is the sun!” He knew, as we do, that he wasn’t being “stupid” as some Grade 8 or 9 boys believe. His truth, hence our truth, is profound; it is only hinted at by the four words “Juliet is the sun”. On the *Tog the Ribber* occasion, in this “middle ground of experience” of story, the children were invited by the story teller’s language to exercise imagination and explore something within themselves. Over a period of 20 minutes or so they shared stories about their own frightening real experiences and nightmares and exercised their empathy and sympathy for another, the grandmother of the story. On that day, the workings of the imagination and the recall of an historical fragment fused into a deeper vicarious understanding of the world. That’s what education in the humanities should be about; that’s what the experience of literature should be about. Such experiences should be the well-springs of a

deeper literacy developing over time. Unfortunately, though, many of our young people in secondary schools miss out on continuing the exploration of literature as metaphor of human experience. Instead, as some stories to be related later reveal, they do not encounter literature for pleasure and enjoyment, but “study” it instead.

The story of the children’s exploration of the meaning of *Tog the Ribber* shows that reading is a complex cognitive activity. There is a powerful relationship between language and thought, between reading and experience. As we know too, sometimes to our frustration, reading is not a unitary skill; that is, the ability to read prose fiction does not always transpose into an ability to read poetry, or the instructions for setting up a new piece of electronic equipment, or legal documents, or a contract, or the fine print of a superannuation trust deed or, as we will hear later, a doctor’s instructions on prescribed medications. Moreover, we know that reading is not just taking your eyes for a walk along lines of print, but an active search for meaning, even if that involves turning to the end of the document to read the “recommendations” to pick up the gist of the paper before tackling the thing from beginning to end. A favourite trick of all canny students is to read the introductory and final paragraphs of a heavy research paper to gain an overview before reading the detail.

We can better understand why reading is both an active search for meaning and a complex process if we refer to a heuristic model of comprehension which identifies a number of connected aspects forming a whole (think of an elastic ball with various parts pinched out for scrutiny then allowed to assume the whole shape again). The aspects: **literal comprehension, referential comprehension, inferential, reconstructive, evaluative and appreciative.**

- The first two – literal and referential - refer to our background knowledge of the real world and the world of ideas.
- The next two aspects relate to a more active search for meaning. Inferential comprehension, as its name implies, refers to our capacity to comprehend something from unstated or hinted meaning.
- Reconstructive comprehension applies to our capacity to try a different reference or word meaning or to search for other meaning clues.
- Then come the more holistic aspects – evaluative and appreciative, where most teachers of literature start, assuming that the students have understood the novel or poem and have successfully exercised all those other levels of comprehension.

If you have teenage children you will have heard the claim that they can watch TV or listen to song lyrics while they are studying – that is, reading or writing. Yes, they can, most certainly; but only at a very superficial level since neither the TV drama nor the homework is fully comprehended at the same time. As the model makes clear, reading or writing any style or genre is a complex cognitive activity requiring concentration, patience, time, and quiet in order to actively pursue meaning fully.

Finding the space for sustained reflective reading is becoming more and more difficult. Johann Hari writing in the *Independent* reminds us that, “To read, you need to slow down. You need mental silence except for the words. That’s getting harder to find.” And he goes on to quote another writer who complains, “...I became aware, in an apartment full of books, that I could no longer find within myself the quiet necessary to read. I would sit down to read at night and read a few paragraphs only to find that my mind was wandering, begging me to check my email, or Twitter or Facebook. I found myself struggling with the encroaching buzz, the sense that there’s something out there that merits my attention”.

Hari claims that “most humans have a desire to engage in deep thought and deep concentration.” He goes on, “...[that’s] the function that the book – the paper book that doesn’t beep or flash or link or let you watch a thousand videos all at once – does for you that nothing else will. It gives you the capacity for deep, linear concentration....Reading is an act of resistance in a landscape of distraction...In the midst of a book we have no choice but to be patient, to take each thing in its moment, to let the narrative prevail. We regain the world a little by withdrawing from it just a little, by stepping back from the noise.”

We know that other genres, demand even more focused concentration to fully understand meaning. They require us to exercise inferential and reorganisational comprehension in addition to literal and referential. Take these four sentences for example:

Rice that is grown in Australia is the staple food of Asia.  
Rice, which is grown in Australia, is the staple food of Asia.

Images of Cleopatra show that she had a beautifully defined philtrum.

Lack of formal control procedures may result in an ad hoc process being applied to implementation of changes, including on which changes should be subject to approval prior to implementation.

To many, the first two sentences are identical in meaning, but the careful reader concludes that the first sentence, though grammatically correct, is patently untrue. Our background knowledge plus our capacity to “read between the lines” (or infer meaning) tells us that it can’t possibly be correct: we don’t grow enough rice here to feed one small Asian country let alone all of Asia. From an analytical point of view we note that the sentence contains a defining clause which limits the meaning of available rice. The second sentence, also grammatically correct, contains a non-defining clause – a mental aside, an additional piece of information - signalled to the reader by the two commas. The non-defining clause may be excised from the sentence without changing the generalisation. Here, the two insignificant marks on the page – the two commas – contribute essential information to the meaning.

Understanding the third sentence is more problematic. It is not possible to judge whether or not the statement is true unless and until other aspects of comprehension have been satisfied. If we apply the literal and referential comprehension aspects to the word “Cleopatra” without any further context we are left guessing who or what the word “Cleopatra” refers to – *that* Cleopatra, a pet or even a boat. In the meantime, if we want to understand the sentence we must also mentally wrestle with “philtrum”; in other words, we must do some work (and for many that is a bother to be dispensed with). It is not listed in the *Macquarie Dictionary* or the *Collins English Dictionary* or the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, but it is in *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary (Unabridged), Second edition* - “in anatomy, the groove at the median line of the upper lip”; that is, that groove between the lower end of the nose and the top of the upper lip. However, we cannot yet evaluate the truth of the proposition. Without more contextual information we are guessing. Maybe the original writer had in mind “Cleopatra” as played by Elizabeth Taylor. And what a philtrum was there!

The fourth sentence is an example of a more recent phenomenon, a mental clean up problem after using the ‘click-and-drag’ facility offered by the word processor. In this particular case, the writer couldn’t “see” what was wrong with the sentence and the computer did not raise any objections. It actually wasn’t his sentence but one he was editing into a document he wrote. He read it aloud, but still couldn’t locate the source of the problem. It sounded wrong, but why it was wrong he couldn’t fathom. The likely cause of the problem was a piece of editing the original writer had done, but in doing so that writer had failed to “clean up” elements from a previous attempt. Remove the “on” and move “which” and it suddenly makes sense –

Lack of formal control procedures may result in an ad hoc process being applied to implementation of changes, including changes which should be subject to approval prior to implementation.

I said earlier that aliteracy is a problem of the developed world. If we consider two major developed countries, the USA and the UK, the aliteracy picture is disturbing but, in the case of the Americans, unclear. The Americans turn out broad brushstroke figures; for example, “59% read fewer than ten books in a year” (people who lead busy lives may have difficulty reading that number and it depends on whether we are talking about airport novels, autobiographies or philosophy texts); or “90 Million Americans over the age of 16 lack reading and writing” (What is

meant by 'lack reading and writing'?) In the UK, however, Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent, notes a more alarming statistic - "According to an international study published last year, since 2001 the reading performance of children in England has plummeted from third place to nineteenth place in the world rankings."

If we look at Australian literacy levels then we discover a more disturbing picture. In 2006 Australia took part in the *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS)* as part of an international study coordinated by Statistics Canada and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Australian Bureau of Statistics' report on *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia, 2006* provides a depressing background picture of literacy and numeracy levels of Australians aged 15 to 74 years.

Four of the five knowledge and skills domains surveyed – Prose literacy, Document literacy, Problem solving, and Health literacy – interest us here. Numeracy is another story. First, the definitions –

- **Prose literacy** (the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts including those from newspapers, magazines and brochures).
- **Document literacy** (the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transport schedules, maps, tables and charts).
- **Problem solving** (goal directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution is available).
- **Health literacy** (the knowledge and skills required to understand and use information relating to health issues such as drugs and alcohol, disease prevention and treatment, safety and accident prevention, first aid, emergencies, and staying healthy).

For each domain, proficiency was measured and grouped into 5 skill levels (or 4 for the Problem solving domain): Level 1 was the lowest measure of literacy; Level 5 was the highest but with so few respondents actually attaining this level Levels 4 and 5 were combined.

The important matter to note is the definition of Level 3, the middle level, as the "minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy".

So, how did we do as a nation? Broadly speaking, the results show that of Australians aged 15 to 74 in the Prose literacy and Document literacy domains **barely half of the Australian population** (approximately 54%) attained scores at **Levels 3 and above**, while **46%** attained scores **below the minimum level** required to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work.

Worse, in the Problem solving domain **less than a third** (roughly 30%) attained scores at **Levels 3 and above**, while a massive **70%** attained scores **below the minimum level** required to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work.

The interesting Health literacy domain revealed that only **two fifths** of the population (approximately 40%) attained scores at **Levels 3 and above**, while **60%** attained scores **below the minimum level** required to understand and use information relating to health issues, disease prevention and treatment, safety and accident prevention and staying healthy.

Of the seven countries involved in the first round of the international survey Australia ranked in the middle of each scale (Norway ranked highest across almost all age groups; Switzerland next). But there was one heartening, if not unexpected figure:

- Internationally, in the **55 to 65 age group** achieving Level 3 or above, **Australia ranked second** in the Prose literacy domain.

That is, **the olds**, those who I believe should be national heritage listed as a literacy resource in the public sector, are well and truly literate, at least in Prose literacy.

Alarmingly, there is confirmation that the literacy level of those employed aged 25 to 34 years (including our not-so-recent graduate age group) has declined (their scores at Level 4/5 on the prose scale **decreased** from 25% in 1996 to 21% in 2006).

In theory, our drafters, specialist parliamentary drafters and writers in the other areas of the bureaucracy are all literate at Level 3 and above. But that doesn't give much assurance. We know from the experience of working with recent and, lamentably, not so recent graduates that they are not especially literate. If they emerge from particular faculties and study areas – business studies, accounting, economics and commerce, some science disciplines, engineering and, sadly, the Arts – then their literacy may be even less developed. Mercifully, law graduates have learnt to read and write.

In America there is great concern about declining literacy amongst science graduates. I am indebted to my colleague John Jenkin, formerly Professor of Physics at La Trobe University for a copy of the editorial in *Physics in Perspective*, an American journal on the history of physics in which the editors make a number of criticisms about science education in the USA. First, they lament the fact that “no consideration has been given to the humanities as a means of improving the standing of American students in the international rankings of science proficiency”. Second, they note that, “Most students go through an entire physics education without ever writing a paper, or even a paragraph, in common English words.” And in an attempt to change attitudes at the University of Maryland, physicists from various backgrounds invited as guest speakers all offered the same advice to students – *learn to write*.

In this country, the pure sciences are not hugely attractive to students nor are they well supported by the general public. Few people, even here in Adelaide, would be aware of the work of the Sir William Bragg and Sir Lawrence Bragg – the physicist father and son team whose work on X-ray crystallography in Adelaide and England won them the Nobel Prize in 1915. John Jenkin brought them to our attention in his recent book *William and Lawrence Bragg, Father and Son: the Most Extraordinary Collaboration in Science*. Even though Australia is one of the leading Nobel Prize-winning countries in per capita terms, our Nobel Prize winners are not generally selected into the curriculum so our young people are not encouraged to learn about the contribution of our 10 laureates (or 16 if we count those with connections to Australia) to human knowledge and understanding. At best, the general public encounter their names in occasional trivia quizzes found in TV magazines.

You are all literate drafters – Professional, Capable, Competent...Experienced and Wise. You have been through your writing apprenticeships, you have developed relative ease in drafting through practice and through reading how others have approached the problem of writing meaning clearly and concisely. Your professionalism grows in part out of your knowledge and appreciation of language; your awareness in common with T S Eliot that, “Each venture (we might say, each new drafting task) –

Each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of thought

[from “The Hollow Men”]

(As a poet Eliot used the word “feeling” not “thought”, but for writers at the transactional end of the language spectrum ‘thought’ is appropriate.)

Generally though the public do not share with us this appreciation of and feeling for language, which brings us to the question – Why are literacy levels in Australia so poor?

There are many socio-cultural, educational and psychological contributors to our general level of literacy and to what many see as a decline in literacy among the younger generations. The effects of our national characteristics of complacency and anti-intellectualism deserve greater analysis than can be attempted here, but I believe they are the main underlying contributors to the problem. The effects of the digital age on reading and writing or the literacy levels of Gen Y have also been cited by many commentators as contributing to a general malaise. I have chosen instead to outline four contributors that are within my competence and field of interest.

**First, our universities and colleges** - who once assumed that schools took care of reading, writing and critical thinking - **are doing little to extend literacy**. Our universities and colleges have had to cut back on teaching budgets so, in many faculties, the old fashioned small group tutorial system has disappeared. At the undergraduate level any tutorials that remain are conducted not by seasoned supplementary teaching staff but by honours students who work with large groups. The honours students know their subject matter so they check papers mainly for content and cogency. But what they cannot do is help junior students with their writing – there isn't time and honours students are not trained teachers so little is done to correct or improve poor written expression. Besides, the carefully considered essay presented in the form of a sustained argument with supporting evidence has been replaced by the more time-efficient multiple choice question or short answer.

**Second, we are not reading newspapers, magazines or books as we did a decade ago.** Booksellers and publishers are dramatically feeling the pinch and, according to Roy Morgan's research publications, Australian newspaper "readership" has been generally declining over the last decade and that decline has accelerated in the last five years. Over the decade 2000 to 2009 Australian newspaper "readership" has fallen by up to 20%. But, a word of caution. The term "readership" should be treated with suspicion: one interpreter of Morgan's research figures notes that "circulation" or "publication" should not be confused with actual "readership" since each day thousands of copies of largely unread newspapers are dumped on tertiary and secondary campuses, in cafes and other public places to make the "readership" figures more appealing to advertisers. Besides, what counts as reading? – A quick glance at the back page to confirm the favourite for Saturday's match? In the office a quick skim through the headlines for media views? Catching the funnies on the cartoon page? *The Weekend Australian* which offers book reviews, film reviews, and extended essays on a range of issues and topics has also recorded a large drop.

Generally speaking then, what these figures may be telling us is that sustained, engaged reading of anything but prose fiction has little appeal now to Australian readers.

**Third, many of our schools are contributing to the increase in aliteracy.** And here I'm not talking about the failure to actually educate, but the numerous occasions when teachers, themselves poorly educated and often aliterate, mis-educate and children give up.

Each of the examples given below is a case of mis-education. All include a language or communication problem that relates to aliteracy on the part of the teacher who may be trapped in his or her own curriculum knowledge - and thus fails to present the task in terms the child can manage - or is unaware of an ideas inflation problem of such proportions that ultimately the task is undoable except at a dangerously superficial level. It is far worse at secondary level just when our young people are so desperately looking for inspiration from teachers who are enthusiastic about their subject knowledge and who genuinely care about the learners.

The first example looks to be a simple maths problem. Yet from a six-year-old's perspective and given the infallible logic of a six-year old mind the problem is really a language-cognitive problem.

- A six-year old, who fortunately at this stage loves maths, was given this problem:  
"You are given  $10c + 10c + 10c + 10c + 10c$ . Divide that between two people. How much do (sic) each get? Answer: \_\_\_\_\_ c  
His answer was "20c for my friend and 30c for me". Challenged by his mother to find one answer to fit in the answer box he told his mother that of course "25c" would fit the answer space, but "You can't break a 10c in two." Next day his teacher confirmed that his answer was wrong; it should have been 25c. He was justifiably annoyed. [The addition of the word "equally" - i.e. "Divide that equally between two people", and changing one of the 10c to two 5c - would have been more appropriate for 6-year olds. At that stage they are not yet ready for the abstraction level that the adult was dealing in.]

Another example of mis-education concerns a tech-drawing class of 12 year olds where the teacher had set the class a task to rule very accurately lines of different lengths.

- On the blackboard the teacher had written the instructions – "Using your ruler draw two horizontal lines 5cm and 3.6cm. Draw one oblique line 4.8cm. Draw two vertical lines 8.5cm and 3.6cm".  
One group of boys wouldn't settle down. To the teacher's annoyance they were arguing about something. The student teacher, the source of this story, spoke to the boys and asked them what was so difficult about the task? "It can't be done," said two of the boys. "You can't draw a vertical line on a horizontal surface." An important part of the teacher's instruction was missing - the draftsman's or mapmaker's convention that "north" is at the "top" of the page (figurative language or metaphor again), that "vertical" is represented by the long sides of the horizontal page. The teacher underestimated the students' capacity to think outside the square that he had imposed on them.

The third example is much more serious because ultimately the student was put off reading serious literature by the actions of her teacher.

- I was tutoring boarding students at a prestigious private school some years ago. A troubled year 12 student sought my advice on a literature essay topic – "We have more empathy for Dr Frankenstein's creation than we do for Dr Frankenstein himself. Discuss." The student said, "I think the word should be 'sympathy' not 'empathy'. I have looked up the meaning of both words and I believe the teacher is misusing the word empathy. Dr Frankenstein's monster is a killer. I could never empathise with - that is, get inside the skin of or see the world from the point of view of - a murderer or a rapist. I would find it morally offensive to be asked to do so. But, if in court it was shown that he had had an awful childhood and that he was psychologically scarred then the court may show some sympathy, that is, fellow human feeling." Agreeing with her analysis and word meaning discrimination, I encouraged her to try an introductory disclaimer paragraph and then pursue the sympathy line. Bad advice. The student was hammered for shilly-shallying and not getting on with the topic and I was criticised for abetting the student and daring to undermine the teacher's authority! I doubt that the student got the university entrance result she sought.

The examples below simply indicate the poverty of teachers' understanding of young people's cognitive development. In fact, in the first example, the words and phrases ("discuss", "compare and contrast", "...by examining the similarities and differences between...", "exploring") indicate the teacher's obeisance to his or her university studies in place of genuine feeling for the subject and an interest in children's learning. What may be an appropriate task for a Masters or PhD candidate is not appropriate for a Year 11 student. (Imagine a 15 year-old's wild generalisations in an 800 word, necessarily superficial analysis of two sets of "social, historical and cultural influences".)

(For a Year 11 class): “Discuss the role dance plays in both Latin-American (specific) and African (specific) cultures. Examine the social, historical and cultural influences as well as exploring the use of staging, costume, music and rhythm. Compare and contrast the dance styles by examining the similarities and differences between them. (800-1000 words).

Some teachers are so caught up in one of the most orthodox trends of the age, the inflation of ideas and language because the effect sounds more sophisticated, more important. In the example below, the meticulous, hard-slog work done by real researchers is debased and devalued by this teacher who inappropriately used the term ‘research’. More appropriate to the first task (please note the task word limit), might have been ‘find out about’. There were 10 options for students to choose from; I have included 3:

(For Year 10s) “You are required to choose *one* of the tasks from the table below and prepare a written response, displaying your understanding of Justice and the Principles of Just War”. Weighting 20 marks (20%) **Word limit: 500 words**

1. Research 2 wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, by applying the 5 principles of Just War Theory, decide whether they would count as ‘Just’.
2. “War is to Justice as Medicine is to health”. Discuss.
3. Investigate the legislation that determines whether an individual is guilty of war crimes. Show how the law has been applied to a particular case.

The final contributor I wish to comment on is perhaps of greater potential concern - **the emerging view that our brains may be affected by the electronic inputs** we seek day in, day out. Baroness Susan Greenfield, well known in Adelaide for her connections with the Royal Institution of Great Britain, a branch of which was established here recently, draws on her neurological research to point out that “For the first time, ...in human evolution... our brains and bodies might be directly modified by electronic interfaces”. The research isn’t yet complete, but while the neurologists are worried about the effects of TV viewing over long periods on our children’s brain development, we know one thing with great certainty: that children and adults cannot exercise the aspects of reading comprehension I referred to earlier and at the same time watch TV. That is, they cannot fully understand, evaluate or deeply appreciate any kind of written message, including a prose fiction book, while engaged with an “electronic interface”. If we want our children and ourselves to become more literate rather than less, wiser rather than opinionated, we shouldn’t wait for Susan Greenfield’s research results, but should seriously consider limiting our TV and electronic gadget access and promote reading and conversation instead.

\*\*\*\*\*

**So back to our colleagues in the public service.** What do we do about the “aliteracy” they bring to their professional work? First, we must deal with some obvious givens. Our schools have large and varied curricula which are influenced by competing community interests so there is less attention paid to plain literacy development, especially writing development. Standards of teaching vary enormously and teachers’ own literacy levels, especially writing, are underdeveloped. Besides, they ain’t teachin’ grammar no more. (Depending a little on which Australian State or Territory you lived in grammar teaching, parsing and analysis, lessons in sentence structure and style, summarising... all largely disappeared in the 1970s.) Second, we must accept that increasingly the institutions – the various government departments and agencies – will need to become more self sufficient in nature. By that I mean the institutions will have to take on extra burdens involved in educating and training employees in the genres appropriate to their professional business.

By “extra burdens” I mean challenging assumptions that some senior staff have about their role. It is easier to be an editor criticising someone else’s draft than acting as a coach sharing knowledge and helping shape ideas. Perhaps that role needs to be modified. Instead of throwing less experienced writers in at the deep end, experienced staff should model process by encouraging pooling of ideas and negotiating content before the first draft is attempted. Experienced writers

should also consider working alongside a first drafter at the computer screen to help with sequencing and flow of ideas.

The “extra burden” also includes some unaccustomed but I believe highly rewarding and enjoyable activities like the following:

- Encouraging a back-to-books (not “back-to-basics”) culture in the workplace by talking about books, articles and other reading material, and even allowing a brief time in staff meetings for people to mention what book is exciting them at present. Resource centres typically exclude fiction, historical works, anthologies of essays... What a pity.
- Providing drafters with usable dictionaries like *The Collins Dictionary of English Language* or *The Collins Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* which provide both definitions and sample sentences, and also tell us the correct prepositions to use). Paper dictionaries also encourage browsing.
- Encouraging an awareness and appreciation of workplace language and style through conversation in section meetings rather than publishing yet another “Style Guide”.

Strategies to encourage better writing include reminding drafters:

- that they need to think about what it is they want to say before they put fingers to the keys. The old fashioned scribble pad and pen provides a platform for sorting out the mind’s baggage. Using the computer as a notepad may well substitute for paper and pen, but only if it is a place for sorting out the main ideas and sequencing them.
- to “get into the heads of their clients” while drafting to ask the same implicit questions a reader asks as he or she prepares to read a document – **Why me? Why this? Why now?**
- of the need to draft and redraft in order to get it right.
- that when they are drafting they are thinking as writers and they cannot read the same material as readers until they put some time between the two events (“letting it cool”, preferably overnight).
- of the need to print a copy of the draft and to proofread on paper – at least twice: once for meaning or sense; at least once more by reading aloud, for surface text infelicities, glitches, errors, omissions (reading aloud rather than reading silently is more likely to pick up the click-and-drag error referred to earlier).
- that the computer cannot do the thinking for the keyboard operator: Microsoft Spellchecker will not pick up most vocabulary errors because the wrong words fit perfectly well according too the rules of English syntax and spelling (Note that Microsoft failed and continues to fail to alert me to the deliberately wrong ‘to’ ).

Ultimately though, we need to remind drafters that self help is the only sure way to being located further along the literacy continuum. A commitment to improving one’s literacy by reading often and writing often, in silence and with a good dictionary open at the elbow, is a most useful start.

After encouraging more attention to books and reading as necessary to improving writing I would be remiss if I did not mention just two books that stood out amongst the books I have read this year. I found both highly entertaining and one particularly moving. They are by young Australian writers who use language brilliantly to tell a story. As far as I know, neither book is available via Kindle.

Sandy McKinnon's *The Unlikely Voyage of Jack de Crow* is an unorthodox travel story cum autobiography. Sandy, teaching in north Wales, decides to sail a restored Mirror Class dinghy from Wales to the Black Sea via the canals and inland waterways of England and Europe. In places it is hilarious as we see ahead what the inexperienced mariner cannot. He manages to cross the English Channel without mishap and, all up, traverses 4,900 kilometres through 12 countries and 282 locks. He encounters pirates in the Balkans and gets lost many times, but he makes it.

The second book is Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* set in Germany during the Second World War. It is a remarkable book whose narrative quiriness kept me completely engaged. I usually do not read fiction these days, but this one - recommended by a friend who said "Just read the first the first page or two" - caught me up in its strangeness. It was completely absorbing.

#### References:

*Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia*, The Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006

Britton, James, *Language and Learning*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974

Coltman, P & McClure, G, *Tog the Ribber*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1985

Furedi, Frank, "Let's turn a new page in the world of reading"

<http://www.frankfuredi.com/index.php/site/article/203/>

Greenfield, Susan, *Tomorrow's People*, Allen Lane/Penguin, London, 2003

Hari, Johann, untitled essay in *The Canberra Times* 30 June 2011

Jenkin, John, *William and Lawrence Bragg, Father and Son: the Most Extraordinary Collaboration in Science*, OUP, 2008

Leondar, Barbara, "Metaphor in the Classroom" in *Aesthetic Concepts and Education*, Ralph A Smith (ed), University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1970

Mackinnon, A J, *The Unlikely Voyage of Jack de Crow*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2009

Zusak, M, *The Book Thief*, Picador, Sydney, 2005

*Collins English Dictionary*, Harper Collins, Glasgow, 2009

*Collins Student Dictionary*, Harper Collins, Glasgow, current publication

*Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, Harper Collins, Glasgow, (with CD ROM 2006; without CD ROM 2008)