

Writing for Nerds

Neale Morison

Draft 1

2007-12-12 - 2008-01-25

Communication through Resonance

Writing is about communicating information. You are writing to an audience. You need to be aware of what the audience already knows, and what additional information they need to understand your communication.

Communication is achieved by resonance. Strike a tuning fork and a nearby tuning fork resonates. It comes down to physics. You cannot insert information directly into your audience's brain. You modulate your information into a dynamically varying sequence of impulses, and send it across the unimaginable void to your audience. You hope it will resonate with them, through some shared physiology, some shared experience, some pattern of nodes you have in common. Through this resonance they may be able to demodulate your message. Without solid scientific evidence, we postulate common humanity. It's a matter of faith. When it works it's a miracle.

When we set up a resonance in another person's brain, we are initiating ripples, wavefronts of stimulation whose consequences we cannot predict. The further they spread the less we can say about the resonances we have evoked.

To some extent you can rely on patterns that are hard-wired, and so are common to humans and other animals. We are hard-wired for faces, and for language. We are hard-wired to notice movement. We are hard-wired to decode speech, body language and facial expression into social cues.

Beyond hard-wired physiological resonance there is cultural resonance. Cultural information is packaged into symbols. When we share a common culture with our audience, the temptation is to throw in cultural symbols because it gets the job done fast. This is fine if you know your audience attaches to the symbol exactly as you do, and if you know how to avoid degenerating into cliché and anecdote. You can keep symbols fresh by spinning them somehow, viewing them in a new light, or by being subversive, using them against their common meaning. We can combine symbols in novel ways.

Rhythm

Because it is a sequence of impulses, communication is rhythm.

Rhythm is formed not by the position of a single impulse but by the relative position of impulses. Space is an essential component of rhythm.

As the frequency increases, an impulse becomes a beat, a beat becomes a sub bass throbbing, rising to audible pitch and at last to a scream. Combinations of impulse trains form melody and harmony.

Writing is speech. You have to hear it. In writing you form rhythms with phonemes, short term and long term punctuation. In long term punctuation is included the length and shape of sentences paragraph, section and chapter breaks. You form rhythms with ideas, introducing, repeating and developing them.

Characters set up a rhythm. Characters and ideas interact in harmony and counterpoint.

We experience emotion as rhythm. Fear results in activation of the sympathetic nervous system, delivering adrenaline into the bloodstream and increasing the rhythm of our beating heart, eliciting rapid, staccato movement. Peaceful emotions are accompanied by a slowing of the pulse and a legato fluidity of movement.

Emotions have a shape, a waveform envelope. They have attack, sustain, decay and release. We can experience it dynamically, over a period of time, or as a visual or tactile shape experienced in an instant.

By modelling the shape and tempo of emotional rhythms we can evoke the emotions via resonance in our audience.

Compression

You can't make a map with all the detail in it, unless you want a map as big as the landscape it is describing. You have to leave almost everything out of your writing.

Writing has bandwidth and you can use compression to achieve denser communication. You can condense information by allowing the writing to carry information on multiple levels.

You can achieve high compression with cultural symbols.

Compression is lossy and imprecise. Your audience's pre-existing patterns diverge from yours and you may communicate more or less than you intend.

You can always take a few more words out, but the time to stop is when it affects the rhythm.

Compression is psycho-acoustic. You can only take out the stuff that doesn't affect your audience's response.

Plasticity

As you communicate with your audience you modify their neural patterns. As they progress through your writing they resonate differently. You can assume they learn things you have told them. They don't have to remember them consciously. Your intention is to modify the brain of your audience.

Neurons learn through repetition. You need to get the rhythm of repetition right.

Dialogue

You do dialogue by ear.

Dialogue has a rhythm. Dialogue is song. This was demonstrated in a play I saw during a Sydney Festival in the 1980s: *Conversations on a Homecoming*, by Tom Murphy, performed by the Druid Theatre. It was a rowdy night in a pub, and out of the dialogue emerged arias and duets and choruses, not sung but spoken.

Dialogue reveals character.

We are hard-wired to detect nuance in dialogue, so dialogue can be very compressed. A single sentence of dialogue can reveal the character's educational level, mood, attitude to other characters, relationship with other characters, strategy for enhancing status with respect to other characters. There may even be an item of information the character is conveying in the words themselves.

The subtext of dialogue is the bulk of the message.

Description

You do description by eye.

Description can be sketched very sparsely. One important feature is enough. Description auto-generates missing features.

The language of cinema has permanently changed writing. The visual tools of cinema, the long shot, mid shot and close up are the tools of writing now.

We are hard-wired to recognize faces, so a close up on a face can achieve high compression. A tight close up generates the surrounding environment. We know the lips upon which we are focussing have teeth behind them, lodged in a skull which is decorated by a face, an accompanying body, which is wearing clothes, and is supported by surfaces and surrounded by a world. We can be confident as we concentrate on a pair of lips that the reader sees a world around them, just as an artwork has areas of

detail amid areas of broad suggestion. There's plenty of good work in the Mona Lisa but most of it is in the face and hands.

Visual imagination generates movement. You can control the movement explicitly or allow it to happen automatically if you're confident of the outcome.

There's a cinema fashion of constantly tracking and moving camera. As the dynamic rhythm of cinema has increased so has the rhythm of visual writing. Our shots can use pan and dolly and boom. We can change scene frequently. It's easy and inexpensive to move your characters. You just have to be aware of what effect you want and how you're achieving it. Walk your characters around, put them in a bus or on a train, give them some exercise and fresh air.

The devil makes work for idle hands. It's not a bad idea to give characters something to do with their hands. Give them a drink or something to eat or give them something to do, like cooking or walking or driving somewhere. Just fiddling works.

You can do sound design in writing. It works like description. In a way sound description works like indirect visual description, because the sound you describe inevitably evokes an accompanying image.

You do setting by touch. You feel the setting the way you feel the room you're in, the floor beneath you, the ceiling constraining the air above you, the pressure of the unseen objects behind you.

Plot is a vehicle but like music it must be surprising and inevitable.

Like a piece of music, a plot development has a shape. If you allow it to plateau you lose direction. It has local maxima, a peak. You can fade it in or fade it out. You can come in hard with a bang and end with a sudden falling away. Like all the components of writing, the plot has rhythm and emotive content.

You can work in scenes.

Ideas

Ideas happen over a sip of coffee, or in the shower, or while shaving. While walking or cycling. What is it about these occasions that allow ideas to arise? Why is it always hard to note the idea down? Keep a waterproof mp3 player/voice recorder wedged into some convenient crevice. Keep your cellphone in a plastic bag around your neck and voicemail the idea to yourself.

All ideas are good. You have to be prepared to throw away almost all of them, or at least archive them in a large trunk or a terabyte hard drive.

Challenges

To reveal character you have to put the character in a challenging situations and see how they respond to them. Challenging situations:

- A conversation establishing status
- A threat, an attack, a battle against character's person, health, family, reputation, honor, status, ideas, routine, relationship network, wealth, employment
- A conflict - two things the character wants, only one can be chosen. The choice may hurt someone the character cares about, or force a readjustment of world view or self image - abandoning an ideal, breaking a law, surrendering a dream
- Obstacles to be overcome - a mountain to climb, a river to cross, an F35 jet fighter to destroy with your diesel truck, physical fear, existential dread

The Novel

Poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity. The core business of the novel is immediate sense impression. As some have argued, it is formal realism, the repudiation of figurative eloquence, the particularization of character and background, naming, temporality, causation, and physical environment. Maybe. Descartes and Locke are in part to blame, along with socioeconomic forces of the 18th century, individualism, secularization, general education and the middle class. Epistemologically speaking, immediate sense impression is all we know, so if you want to tell people anything, back it up with immediate sense impression and they'll believe you.

Epistemology, epistemology, ontology, ontology. Good, that's over.

The internal mental life of a character qualifies as a sense impression, but you have to be careful of the resonances you evoke. If your character is morbidly depressed, dissolving in angst, and life in the character's brain is slowing to a grim halt, you achieve the same effect in your audience. The instinct for self-preservation, developed over millions of years of ruthless evolution, requires that your audience stop reading and do something more survival-oriented, like watching TV.

Another way of looking at it is that a novel is entertainment you can read. People learn to read in the middle class revolution of the eighteenth century, they want to have some fun with it. It makes sense to be entertaining, if part of the goal is having an audience.

Realism

There is a fundamental conflict in creating a shaped and structured form and making the content of that form realistic. The sensory impressions we experience have no particular form or structure. We may see a few local maxima, but in the longer term it's all background noise. The world is without beginning and without end, unless we want go back to the big bang or forward to entropic heat death.

Life goes in cycles. It's an artificial choice to write a chicken romance, or an egg coming of age.

So imposing a structure is pure artifice. We create the physics, the environment, the rules of our imagined world. No physics is better than any other, but commonly received physics is convenient. We achieve high compression if we can skip a few rules because they correspond to rules our audience already knows about.

Without rules, there is neither cause nor effect, and without causality there is no plot and no direction. The forward motion of time requires a physics.

Reality TV tells us nothing about reality except that people take a simple pleasure in watching people like themselves wrestling in mud.

People would probably rather escape reality than read about it.

Algorithm

A novel is an algorithm, but it is also a simulation. It is a model of the world, simplified and structured to run like a machine. The little balls roll down the tracks and fall down the holes and rise on the screw lifts and tip the levers, and the fun is in the balance between inevitability and surprise. What happens when two balls clash. What if one flies off the tracks?