

WORD BYTES: WRITING IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Carolyne Lee

with Nadine Cresswell-Myatt, Paul Dawson, Adam Deverell, Scott Drummond, Jenny Lee, Winnie Salamon and Lucinda Strahan

Melbourne University Press, <http://www.mup.com.au/page/123>

\$49.99, \$39.99, \$6.99. \$6.99

Does the world need another volume on writing? Browse through any search engine or bookshop and you'd be forgiven for thinking the discipline is as oversupplied as our brains are overloaded in this, the information society.

'Good writing matters', the cover blurb says. So this book needs to do exactly what it's promoting – stand out by using the power of the written word, which has 'defied all predictions and refuses to become obsolete'.

Author Carolyne Lee coined the term 'word bytes' to describe writing 'that can get itself noticed, read and retained by readers in contexts of information overload'. Lee compares writing that is catchy but glib and lacking the strength to embed itself in the reader's mind, with word bytes where a great deal of meaning is condensed, like poetry, into a 'certain economy of expression'.

Lee is a writer, teacher and researcher who has taught writing for over two decades and written across the print and online spectrum. For this, her third book, she has gathered a group of contributing writers from colleagues, graduates and students of the University of Melbourne's School of Culture & Communication, as well as diverse communication professionals from both inside and outside academe.

Of the 15 chapters, two-thirds are by Lee. They range from beginning the process of writing the word bytes, to controlling and shaping the work for the reader using the ancient arts of pathos, ethos and logos, then moving into researching and marketing. Each chapter presents an overview of the topic, as well as a toolkit of techniques and working methods – this review is a stab at the suggested structure for writing book reviews – and gives further reading. Other chapters cover op-ed pieces, as well as travel, fiction, corporate and web writing from contributors.

Now to the chapter that grabbed us. Editor extraordinaire Jenny Lee, also a historian and teacher, has written a chapter on editing that illustrates why she has inspired a multitude of university students, first at Deakin then Melbourne, to take up the green (or red) pen. 'If writing is about "getting it out",' she notes, 'then editing is about "getting it right".'

Lee's editing career began in 1982, when she began working on a four-volume, multi-author critical history of Australia. She then edited the literary and cultural quarterly *Meanjin* from 1987 to 1994, worked as a freelance book editor for six years then moved into academe. Her editing CV numbers around 50 books and her own publications include last year's *Making Modern Melbourne* (Arcade Publications).

Jenny Lee defines editing as beginning when the 'first flush of writing ends'. Initially she tackles the importance of the editor establishing a trusting and

respectful editor–author relationship. She moves through the structural then copyediting stages, explaining each topic in conversational word bytes that give both signposts and practical directions: e g paper or onscreen? (Lee advises paper for first reading of a long MS, but with an on-screen find and replace if there are distracting minor errors.)

The editor’s toolkit lists hard-copy references and how to use them, and then 10 tips are given and explained for developing constructive editor–author relations. Lee includes her characteristic asides – No 7 begins: ‘Offer suggestions, don’t issue instructions (a rule I’ve broken in preparing these points).’

The internet age has made publishing such a democratic process that it’s vital the print or pixels both gain and hold readers. This chapter will help writers to get their work to a coherent draft stage, and later during the editing phase with five points for authors such as No 5, headed ‘Think twice before you insist on restoring the original wording’.

Contrary to the dire predictions of editors being made redundant by word processors, they are needed more than ever: ‘the idea of the unedited publication has turned out to be as unrealistic as the paperless office.’ In fact the rapid exchanges afforded by digital technology have opened up possibilities of ‘new kinds of writing relationships through collective effort’.

Using an elegant, direct style, this book overtakes the concept of what not to do, eg weasel words, and shows what is required now we’ve moved through the transition from the introduction of the internet into the present day. The writing style contains none of the obfuscation that mars so much academic text, while offering a depth and range of content relevant to anyone who writes or edits, whether for a living, as part of their job, or is just starting out.

Word Bytes is available to be either read in hard copy (\$49.99) or online. The 14 appendices offer published examples of the featured genres, and exercises to accompany each chapter are available online (\$6.99). In fact, the whole book is available online for download, either in total (\$39.99) or by individual chapters (\$6.99). Available for free download are the prelims containing Carolyn Lee’s introduction, the appendices, and the bibliography and book index.

Yes, the world does need this book – whether to devour or dip into, whether as a textbook, a reference or a way to inspire and reimpassion yourself, and anchor your place in this information society.

Jackey Coyle