

# What do words want? Academics have a responsibility to send words well equipped into the world

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*Struggling with the familiar sensation of fear when preparing to send a paper to publishers? **Pat Thomson** writes that writers have an obligation to let words go; finish off that paper and let your words be taken up and savoured by readers. It's the only way to do justice to valuable academic ideas.*



In writing workshops I often come across people with conference and nearly final draft papers that they do not seem able to finish. The prospect of sending them out for review and possible publication just seems too hard, perhaps it's just too scary. Whatever the reason, the papers just don't get finished. I want to suggest here that we owe it to the words we have written to send them away.

Margaret Atwood (2003), writing about writing, describes the book (also read academic paper) as an intermediary between reader and writer. She imagines the page as a messenger, an envoi between two unseen parties:

*The writer communicates with the page. The reader also communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate only through the page. ... pay no attention to the facsimiles of the writer that appear on talk shows, in newspaper interviews, and the like – they ought not to have anything to do with what goes on between you, the reader, and the page you are reading, where an invisible hand has previously left some marks for you to decipher. (p 113)*

What the reader does with the text is out of sight, as well as out of the control, of the writer.

As academic writers we know from the way in which our work is cited that readers often make different sense of writing from that we intended. Any text, including our scholarly varieties, once written, stands apart from the writer and become available for interpretative reading work.

However, perhaps because an anonymous reader is a forbidding prospect, Atwood suggests that writers always write for someone – when we write diaries we are writing for ourselves as reader, for letter writers it is another person who is known to the writer- these are known readers. The problem for writers comes, Atwood suggests, when they have to send their writing out to an unknown reader – to Them. Doubt sets in. For successful fiction writers like Atwood, doubt and fear coalesce around the possibility of disappointing Them in some way. For academic writers doubt arises not so much about disappointing readers, but about the kinds of judgments that They might make about the quality of our ideas and argument, about our scholarship and about our writing. Some of what They think is communicated back to writers in the form of reviews, while much of course remain always unknown, and always therefore potentially negative.

Atwood considers a number of instances where writers have addressed their fear of what readers might make of the text. She talks for instance of Victorian writers who address their 'Dear Reader', of writers who have written about writers and their fears, and of writers who address their own concerns about how readers will deal with their creation. One of these is John Bunyan, who in *The Pilgrim's Progress* makes his book into a person. As Atwood puts it:

*Bunyan gives his book a list of detailed instructions; but the book becomes frightened of its assignment, and begins to answer back. Bunyan reassures it, and replies to its objections by telling it what to say in various difficult situations; and finally, he tells it, or her, that no matter how wonderful she is, there will be some people that won't like them, because that's just the way it is.... Useful and bracing advice for any book, I think. ( p.131)*

Atwood suggests that the duty of the book is thus to bear whatever the reader makes of it, even if it desires something else.

Atwood implies that writers have an obligation to words to let them go. When we send our words out into the world, we are moving from our most intimate reader – ourselves – to Them. We are committing words and writing to interpretations we cannot predict. However, we do not do words a good turn by keeping them always to ourselves. Perhaps it sounds rather fanciful to say that words want something from us as writers and readers, but if you think about it, there is an element of a truth in this idea. Words that are not used fall out of fashion, they no longer live, they reside in dictionaries and old books but are no longer common parlance. Words mean nothing until we take them up and write them, and then they mean nothing again until they are read. While they are infinite in their supply and malleable, they rely on us to animate them.

Thinking about what words and writing need from us as writers (and readers), while perhaps bizarre, does position us to think about how we might work with words so that they leave our screens with a fighting chance of being read sympathetically, empathetically, critically, imaginatively. If words are organized so that it is hard for readers to bring them to life, then we have failed the words we have made use of. They have been, to steal another metaphor from Atwood, sent to the dead letter office rather than being put into circulation. If words and writing want to be read, then we owe it to them to make whatever changes we need to so that they can be taken up and savoured by readers. This is doing justice not only to our ideas, but also to the words we take up. It is sending out our messenger as well equipped as possible.

OK. So this is all a bit fanciful. But the point – yes there is a point – of asking not what we want of words and writing, but what they want of us, is to try to de-familiarise that scary feeling that seems to arise at the prospect of sending the text away. Maybe thinking that we have a responsibility to words to let them live beyond the intimate relationship that we have with them is a way to motivate writers to finish off some of those papers that currently languish in isolation. Perhaps we need to think of the more social existence they might have if they are put into more general circulation.

*Atwood, Margaret (2003) [Negotiating with the dead. A writer on writing](#). London: Virago Press*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

#### **About the author:**

**Pat Thomson** is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. Her current research focuses on creativity, the arts and change in schools and communities, and postgraduate writing pedagogies. She is currently devoting more time to exploring, reading and thinking about imaginative and inclusive pedagogies which sit at the heart of change. She blogs about her research at [Patter](#).

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