
Explore and Heighten: Magic Words from a Playwright

Half the student's battle is learning basic skills, while the other half involves tapping into imagination, memory and a singular view of life and the world, a view no one else shares until you put it into words.

—ANNE BERNAYS, "PUPILS GLIMPSE AN IDEA, TEACHER GETS A GOLD STAR," *NEW YORK TIMES*

When a piece I'm writing needs a little more...something...I call to mind these five powerful syllables: explore and heighten. I owe this incantation to playwright Alan Gross, who had a group of us practically chanting it during a playwriting workshop I attended one summer during my college years. Whatever I'm writing, this phrase invariably nudges the content that oh-so-helpful bit further.

For example, while working at Nike World Headquarters, I discovered that my desk phone was made of material from recycled NFL helmets. Too perfect. *Got to tell friends about this*, I thought. I drafted a message:

Check it out—my Nike phone is made of old football helmets.

Then the magic words came to me as if the playwright himself were whispering them in my ear. *Explore and heighten.*

Phone...helmet...put one on, pull it down over my ears...am I wearing the phone?...this phone is my helmet...I am a formidable phone-calling foe...who is my opponent?...I hate being on hold...endless marketing hype...why can't they play some decent music?...waste of time...makes me want to hurt someone ...

I returned to my message:

Check it out—my Nike phone is made of old football helmets. Don't mess with me when I'm talking on this sucker. All those bleeping answering machines out there can put themselves on hold from now on. I make a call, it's going *through*.

One classic explore-and-heighten comes from a comedy sketch performed by two members of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. John Cleese (playing Mr. Praline) walks into a pet shop, birdcage in hand, to complain to Michael Palin (playing the shopkeeper), that the parrot he bought a half-hour earlier is, and for some time has been, decidedly dead. Over and over Praline pleads his case. Over and over the shopkeeper insists, ridiculously, that the bird lives. For example, he claims that the bird is simply “pining for the fjords” of its native Norway. An exasperated Praline launches into a tirade of explored-and-heightened phrases:

Look matey (*Picks up parrot.*) this parrot wouldn't go voom if I put four thousand volts through it. It's bleeding demised...It's not pining, it's passed on. This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff. Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot.¹¹⁸

Well and good for Monty Python, you may think, but the stuff I write involves a little less drama and far fewer dead birds. I'm with you. But all of us spin out the occasional sentence or paragraph that's somehow lacking—thin or unclear or mundane. From time to time, we all

118. Joseph Black et al., eds., *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, vol. 6B, *From 1945 to the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), 976. To see one of the many recorded performances of the Dead Parrot sketch, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vuW6tQo218>. For a summary of this sketch's history, entertaining in itself, see “Dead Parrot Sketch,” *Wikipedia*, last modified May 27, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Parrot_sketch.

write passages that threaten to make readers yawn or tilt their heads in puzzlement. Those are the times to add detail, the times to expand. Build up. Pile on the voom.

Invoke the magic of the mantra.

To give you an idea of how this mantra works for me, let me replay the Nike example in slow motion. I've drafted my original statement. I like its simplicity, but I don't want to send it out yet. I sense potential. I relax, breathe. Explore! My sentence, that so-so stretch of text, opens up. It becomes something palpable, something that I can crawl into. I feel it around my shoulders as I slip in, like a spelunker slipping into a small cave. (Caves and football don't usually mix, but bear with me. When we're thinking creatively, generatively, inventively, brainstormingly, anything goes.) I'm in a wonderland of half-seen crannies and cavities and side chambers. This space is pure possibility. I look around, expecting—knowing—that discoveries lurk just out of view. Now, heighten! Phone ... helmet ... put one on, pull it down over my ears ... am I wearing the phone? ... this phone is my helmet ... I am a formidable phone-calling foe ... hate being on hold ... endless marketing hype ... why can't they play some decent music? (When Mick Jagger wrote "Satisfaction," did he see Muzak in its future?) ... waste of time ... makes me want to hurt someone ... who is my opponent? ... hate to be the one who gets between me and the person I'm calling ... snap on the chinstrap ... whose voice is that? ... sounds distinctly like my husband ... "Marcia! Get that phone on and get in there! Tell the quarterback to run dive-five-right. The left tackle pulls, blindsides the answering system, knocks it flat. Go straight through the line of clerks and into the secondary ... you'll pick up ten, twelve yards easy."

Explore and heighten. Of course this phrase possesses no magic in itself. It can't transform a thing. But it can usher you straight into your imagination, the place where *your* magic lives, where your ideas are born, where your power finds its source, where you will discover—waiting for you—the best sentences and paragraphs you will ever write.