



# 1 TOPIC, 100 BOOKS

Linguist **David Crystal**, author of over 100 books on the English language, explains the value of cornering a niche, to **Tobias Sales**

**W**hile most are struggling to see their first non-fiction book in print, world-renowned linguist David Crystal has seen his figure exceed double digits. To date, David has written over 100 books. This is, of course, an incredible feat in itself but it becomes even more astonishing when you realise that every book is based around the same subject: the English language.

One hundred books. One subject. One question: how does he do it?

'Choose a topic that you really want to write about,' he advises, 'one that has engaged your curiosity.'

Most people possess some intense interest, a passion; for David, this is evidently the English language, of which he is clearly very enthused: 'Whatever English was like yesterday, it is different today, and will be different tomorrow. Trying to keep tabs on such a beast is a wonderful incentive.'

It is unlikely, for most of us, that they would ever get close to writing as many books as David, but even finishing one can be a real challenge, especially if you're not totally passionate about your subject. The average book consists of over 80,000 words; each has to be as inspired as the last.

Your passion and depth of knowledge may not be on the same academic level as David's but, whatever the subject you choose to write about, be it fishing, psychology, teaching or, of course, writing, make sure it's a topic that really ignites your interest and keeps the flames of enthusiasm burning throughout the writing process. There is nothing

worse than seeing the flames start to smoulder too early; your interest – or, dangerously, the lack of it – will be channelled through the pages on which you write.

Finding your niche, that gap in the market, can be a struggle that would defeat even the most determined of writers, and kill that vital motivation before you even get to your keyboard. Another important factor to consider when choosing a topic on which to base a particular book is its individuality. As David says, 'I wouldn't want to write on a topic if there was already a book out there.'

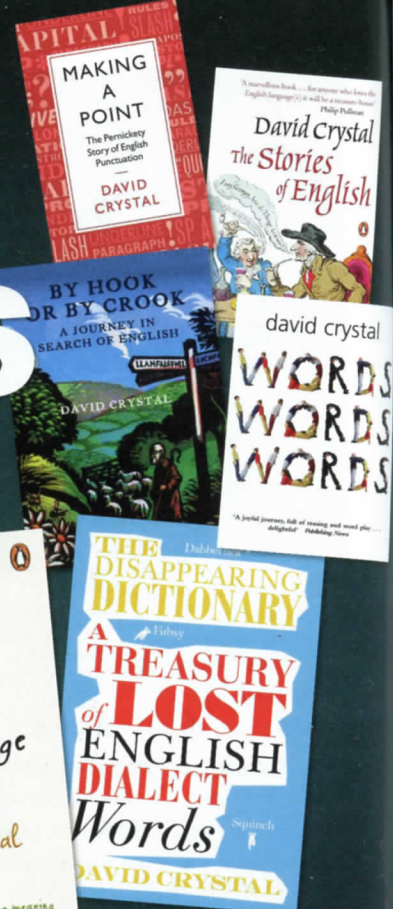
It may be worth drafting a few preliminary ideas and undertaking some research into what has seldom been explored.

'If there has already been a book published regarding your topic, discard it from your list, or at least approach it from a totally new or more interesting angle; but do not be disheartened, as inspiration can occur at any time.

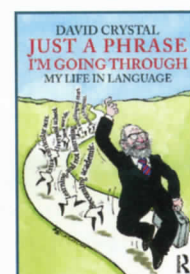
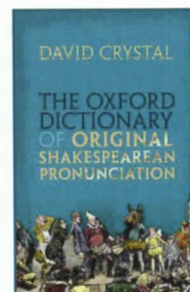
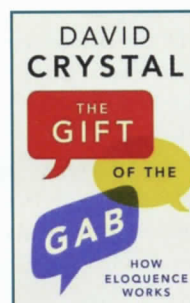
'As I write now, I have no idea which topic I'll be writing about next... but something will happen to suggest one and it could happen at any moment and when you least expect it but, fear not, it will happen, have faith, and, when it does, it can really be quite exciting!'

Devoting yourself to your chosen subject and writing industriously about it soon makes you an authority, the 'go-to person'. That reputation attracts like-minded people to you and you all feed off each other's enthusiasm and desire for more.

David often finds the seed for his next project planted while engaging with his readers. 'The majority of



See our pick of David's best books at <http://writ.rs/wmsept16>



my books are often reactions to a question asked by someone,' he says. 'If that question hasn't already got an answer, I will go and create one.'

Like a literary entrepreneur, David sees where there is no reference and becomes that reference. 'I wrote my book, *English as a Global Language*, because someone had asked me if I knew of a book explaining why English had become global and I couldn't find one,' he says.

Nobody likes to read a boring book; no writer wants to be a bore. Moreover, most readers are discouraged when the text of a non-fiction book appears too heavy, but readers familiar with David's books are often amazed at his skill in turning the complex to simple and in making the impenetrable accessible. So how does this linguist – with such an impressive career, spanning some fifty years and a CV encompassing broadcasts, television, academia and books – easily communicate to the non-specialist reader, and in a way that makes the subject, so to speak, Crystal-clear?

Firstly: 'Make no assumptions about prior knowledge. The biggest danger is to assume that people know what you are going to be writing about.'

‘This may seem obvious, but many writers are so engrossed with their topic – their passion – that they can exhaust their knowledge and, in doing so, simultaneously flummox and overwhelm the reader. The secret is to leave no jargon unattended. A desire to search the meaning of a technical term should never interrupt the flow and enjoyment of the book; the writer must explain every technical notion.’

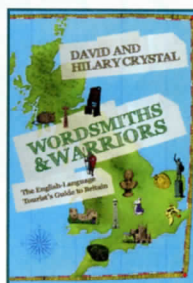
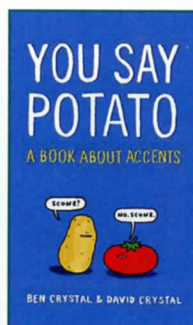
David is quick to warn that there is always the temptation that pesters the writer to overly complicate sentences, to ‘dress up’ the language to impress the reader. It must be remembered that your book is not an academic article; it is written to be read by a non-specialist audience; the layman who wishes to be informed. The best books are those that have that ability to take the reader on a journey where they are almost flying through the pages, chapter after chapter, hanging on to your every word.

know this, as it will totally influence the process of selection.’

The length of a book – whether it be 300, 400 or 500 pages – will be decided by the publisher prior to writing: ‘In the commercial world, the length will be a function of cost. The publisher will have a very clear idea about a selling price in relation to the number of pages.’

However, being limited in this way is not a problem for David; far from it. This need to carefully select, sequence and present your material is all part of the challenge that a disciplined writer should find stimulating and fulfilling.

Other important techniques are also vital to make the writing entertaining, while still keeping it informative. David’s pages are not crammed with lengthy anecdotal gags but are, instead, carefully peppered with humorous comments, often enclosed within parenthesis.



## DAVID CRYSTAL'S TEN TOP TIPS THAT WILL SEE YOU TO THE CENTENARY...

- 1 Choose a topic that you really want to write about, that has engaged your curiosity, and where you know you have something to say.
- 2 Develop your own style, and don't try to follow the often pedantic recommendations of style guides.
- 3 Always read your piece aloud - this will give you a real indication of your personal 'voice'.
- 4 Start small by writing something for a journal, magazine or blog. The length limit will make you realise that you have more to say than can fit into a single article... and that will suggest the possibility of a book-length project
- 5 Whatever you write, store it. Never throw anything away, even if a publisher has rejected it. It'll turn out to be useful one day.
- 6 If, when staring at a screen, you can't think of how best to start, start writing anyway, even if you think what you've written is rubbish. Something will be salvaged in the revision process.
- 7 Read and re-read and re-read, leaving at least a night between each draft. It always amazes me how you spot something in the morning that wasn't there the night before. I will read through a piece, some forty or fifty times, before it eventually goes to press.
- 8 Try to write something every day (even if it's only to answer emails!)
- 9 Use what is known about the psycholinguistics of language processing to inform the way you write.
- 10 Get the book read by someone from your intended readership.

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Throughout the process of writing a book, explains David, the writer should plan periodic intervals to get the book read by someone from your intended readership. ‘For my *Little Book of Language*, aimed at teenagers from around twelve upwards, I had it read by a twelve-year-old. A salutary experience!’ he explains.

‘The other critical thing is to be very clear about what the intended reader needs to know, which may involve quite a bit of preliminary thought. This prevents the writer from rambling, adding extraneous details and diverging from their initial aim or topic. The discipline that comes from having a determinate length is actually invaluable, otherwise one could ramble on indefinitely.’

David believes it is important, from the outset, that a writer knows the likely length of their book. ‘My books are all kinds of lengths,’ he says, ‘but whatever the extent, it’s important to

‘Achieving this balance is incredibly important; the reader expects an informative, serious book, but they never want a dull read. Always remember, too, that the reader is engaged with the book design, whether consciously or subconsciously. How the information is presented is half the battle in maintaining interest; it’s important to understand reader attention span. I like to keep my chapters short, use interludes, add panels, and so on. You need to “feed the eye”.’

Those who are familiar with David’s work will understand this approach, for it is his sharp and concise chapters that makes his books such a pleasure to read. A reader might gulp at the thought of starting a thirty-page chapter before retiring to bed but, somehow, dipping into the book to read five small chapters of just six pages doesn’t seem quite so difficult. **W**

