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Guest Author

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Harder Times

Alastair looks at the current economic climate and the priority for CEOs to focus on the strategic needs of their businesses

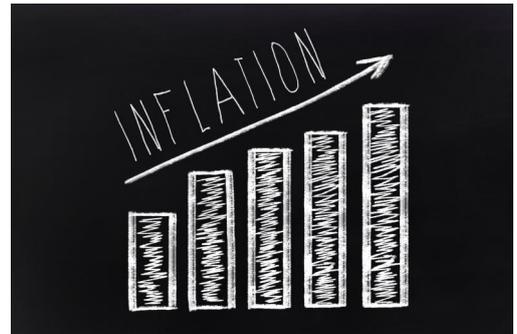
My work encompasses geopolitics, macroeconomics and global financial markets. Those big words may sound grand but it's mostly quite practical stuff: analysing current developments and providing a framework for plans to invest, borrow and hedge interest rate, currency and commodity exposures. The details and complexities can be difficult to communicate accurately in interesting and engaging ways, so as to differentiate myself and my output. I've combined here some insights from my analysis together with reflections on communication challenges I face in creating compelling, memorable ('sticky') content, for audiences who are familiar with the subject matter.

The media is currently making much of Inflation and, indeed, it's a worsening bane on the lives of the less well-off in every country, who are already experiencing hard times. However, soaring CPI numbers need not always be the main issue for those companies able to pass their own higher costs on to customers.

Businesses and financial markets are instead much more worried about the various threats to global economic demand. The CPI in the US is likely to peak in the current quarter and fall to 3-4% over the next 12 months. Even if, for much of the rest of the world, eye-watering Producer Price Indices (including notably in the UK) mean that the peak is some months away.

It's rather worrying that few seem to understand how inflation works any

more (see visual below), or how it can be contained. I am often having to (re) explain it, for example, too many references are being made to the bad old days of rampant inflation in the '70s and '80s. Current economic and social conditions are very different to those decades: employment is high and, outside monopolistic industries, unions have much less influence over a workforce with mortgages and credit card debts to service.



Inflation is when prices rise Source: Adobe Stock¹

These are factors I need audiences to appreciate. And, because there are currently some less typical factors in play, it's become a little easier to make such observations stand out. There's been an unusual coincidence of high profile, and highly impactful, unhappy developments. I find examples help, including a pandemic causing both a supply shock and a demand shock, a Russo-OPEC price-fixing cartel and a major war in Europe, leading to a global food crisis.

All those factors make it easier to explain inflation, with a further bitter twist that higher energy prices can quickly become deflationary, in the same way as tax hikes. Consumers are

Harder Times (cont.)

cutting back on energy usage while reducing spend on other less essential items. Higher profits are being transferred to producers overseas.

Moreover, higher food prices can be expected to have similar, if less severe, effects in richer countries. Although my audiences may be more attentive than usual, given these challenging circumstances, it remains a complex mix of factors to untangle and communicate clearly to them.

For “heartless” financial markets, a much greater worry has been what the central banks will do to combat a combination of inflation and slowing growth (increasingly described as ‘stagflation’, another concept that needs to be re-explained). This worry is aggravated by disillusionment, after three decades of hubris on the part of various individual central bankers.

Another unwelcome policy change is the unprecedented unwinding by the ‘Fed’ and other central banks of their vast asset purchase programmes. Unsurprisingly but also unusually, both bond and equity markets have been hit hard at the same time.

Putting all these elements together, we’re in a period of international political stress (and domestic stress in many countries). This feeds into an already slowing global economy that’s in the grip of inflation that will soon turn deflationary. This will hit corporate earnings and increase the cost of debt for all borrowers and undermine investment portfolios. Essentially, almost of us will be worse off.

Nevertheless, the good news is that most of us (and the organisations we work for) will find a way through. Downturns are nothing new, even if the upturns of the last 30 years have not felt that great at times.

I work with CEOs and CFOs on the macro challenges and opportunities they face. I help these clients to understand the main developments affecting them and to consider the various possible outcomes. They must,

in turn, explain and justify themselves to the whole gamut of their own stakeholders: customers, suppliers, staff, board colleagues and shareholders so I have to cut through the media and general noise to help focus them on the true key issues in play for their businesses.



Focus on your business’s ecosystem, not on outside noises. *Source: Adobe Stock*²

To do this, I try to provide clear and compelling interpretations on which they can make critical decisions. At the same time I must maintain their trust in me (my credibility) as a confident and reliable subject matter expert. It’s important that logical propositions and deductions form the basis of my content. But I also need to ensure that these audiences find my key messages engaging. So I use a range of relevant Rhetorical Tools. These include: comparisons, contrasts, and a variety of verifiable evidence (e.g. data, examples and statistics). I also sprinkle in what I hope is appropriate dry humour to season the mix, along with the odd metaphor (see GPD’s list of Top Rhetorical Tools)³.

Even if circumstances make audiences more attentive, it’s important to remember that the best informed advice is only fully appreciated when it’s communicated clearly and persuasively. That feels as true as ever, in these current harder times.

By Alastair Winter

Our guest author, Alastair, is a Director at Argyll Europe Limited.

References:

1. Inflation graph picture. Available at Adobe Stock.
2. Meeting image. Available at Adobe Stock.
3. GPD’s Rhetorical Tools—<https://www.gpb.eu/2021/08/rhetorical-tools-list.html>.

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Snakes Alive! Who said that?

Des looks at the power (and pitfalls) of using quotations

“**Every great story seems to begin with a snake**”. We’ll see about that. But using quotations wisely really CAN make us all more persuasive. As a movie fan, I wish I had confidence in the claim above being both factual and made by Nicolas Cage. I can’t though, so I won’t. Others should adopt the same approach more often.

That phrase is routinely, unquestioningly attributed to Cage. Yet those who claim they have tried to identify a definitive source for this “quote” (and I’ve had a go myself!) admit they can’t. Many lazily repeat it, all the same. Regardless of the source, it surely wasn’t meant literally, but instead hyperbolically: “**EVERY** great story...”? That would make for an unlikely Venn diagram, see below. We’ll return to snake quotes later.

The “Nick Cage” Story Universe? Not to Scale!



Quotation misattributions and errors are common, making their use problematic. Writer Ralph Keyes saw a nice niche for himself, addressing such issues. Quote investigation websites have become commonplace too, since. Keyes explains how “drift” and false attribution arise. For example: “**No plan survives contact with the enemy**”... usually attributed to Eisenhower. Or did Napoleon say it? Patton perhaps? No one seemed sure. The observation actually originated with Von Moltke in the mid-19th century... “**No operation extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the main body of the enemy.**” In a process that’s routine in the world of quotation, the Prussian field marshal’s actual words were condensed... over time, then placed in more familiar mouths.”

At GPB, we value the persuasive power of well-chosen, accurate quotations from authoritative sources. For instance, we

frequently quote boxer Mike Tyson’s pithy, modern variation on Von Moltke: “**Everybody has plans - until they get hit for the first time**” - often more colourfully (mis)quoted, “... **until they get punched in the mouth.**”²

Well-judged quotations are powerful and persuasive. They can endorse your key messages, making written or spoken content more impactful and memorable (‘sticky’). Used wisely, they can add credibility and gravitas. Both examples above were literal. Tyson was answering a pre-fight interview question, Moltke was writing a military handbook. Yet the metaphorical value of each reaches far beyond battlefields or boxing, into many areas: work, leisure — almost anywhere.

Using quotes lazily can prove counter-productive. As Joseph Roux, the 19th century poet and philologist noted: “**A fine quotation is a diamond on the finger of a... wit, and a pebble in the hand of a fool**”³. That may sound harsh but, even as I thought about this article, a dubious LinkedIn quote attribution made me skip the rest of the post. Socrates was apparently echoing the writer’s own advice in language straight from the LinkedIn playbook. It seemed all too convenient and shared no sources - a common problem AND a clue for the reader. Be suspicious!

I soon found websites featuring this Socrates ‘quote’. Yet none gave sources. Content is easy to copy from such sites but hard to verify. So few people even try, which speaks volumes about them. Need an authority for your pet idea? Just mention Socrates. Or Einstein. Or Sharp (see below). Only today I saw a LinkedIn post berating people for misattributing false views to marketing guru Byron Sharp. It used a dismissive and rude ‘**RTFM**’⁴. That reveals the strength of feeling such errors can generate — and earned a ‘like’ from Mr. Sharp himself.

Although researching the provenance of quotations may seem tiresome, it’s NOT trivial. We should pursue it with rigour. If a quote’s worth sharing at all, surely it’s



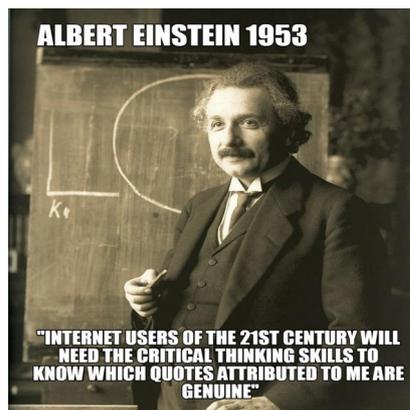
Desmond Harney

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Snakes Alive! Who said that? (cont.)

worth the effort of ensuring you've got it right. Don't be like Jerry, a used-car dealer from Rockaway, quoted by journalist Craig Taylor. Jerry doesn't even pretend he's checked his sources. He just sees the need for a voice more convincing than his own: '*Aristotle, or one of the f**king philosophers, said it's better to be good than bad. I mean, I don't really know what that means, but it sounded good.*'⁵ This may not be intended to convince but rather to make us laugh...



Albert probably didn't say this in any year. Image source: *Wikipedia.com*

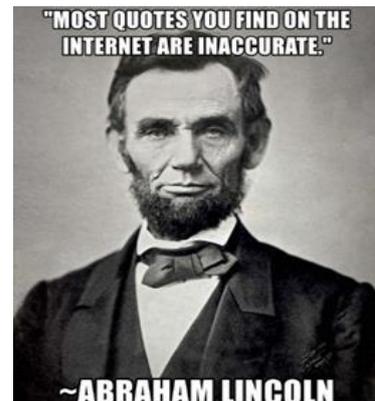
If you share data as evidence, probably you'll double-check its accuracy first, as you won't want to be exposed by errors. Yet unverified words are often put in the mouths of exalted speakers. Keyes slyly observes that '*Famous dead people make excellent commentators on current events*'⁶. They have no right of reply. Although the living also sometimes get co-opted too, for example: Oprah Winfrey, Warren Buffet, Pele, Sheryl Sandberg, Barack Obama. That's fine, as long as you're SURE about your accuracy.

Inspirational quote websites can be handy sources for a meme – but they're also minefields. So don't get your typing fingers 'burned'. It's all too easy to cut and paste (or even to invent!) pithy phrases attributed to 'famous dead people', cherry-picked specifically to support pet theories.

That's an approach you adopt at your peril. You need to be strict and conscientious about checking the provenance and accuracy of any quotes you use. Why's that important? Because

once you've unleashed a 'quote' on an audience, its degree of truth, accuracy and legitimacy reflects directly on you, just as the validity of your data does.

Ideally, share your reliable source references, as I've done here ("*Go ahead. Make my day*"⁷— check them, punk!). Also, your audience may know the quote, or may know it's been mis-attributed, so will know when you get it wrong. At the very least, if anyone checks for themselves, your credibility (and the reliability of the rest of what you say) risks being questioned.



Abe certainly didn't say this. Image source: *Wikipedia.com*

After all, if the roles were reversed, wouldn't you feel misled? Even one missing or wrong word, a typo or punctuation error, can change your quotation's meaning completely.

It should not surprise you that any whiff of error or misrepresentation damages trust. For example, Belloc's lying *Matilda*⁸ and Aesop's *Boy Who Cried Wolf* fatally undermine all trust in them. That's an outcome few wish for. Politicians should take note. False provenance, errors and lies negatively impact our credibility (or **Ethos**, one of three "Appeals" with equal importance identified by Aristotle). See left side of our triangle, on the next page.

Verification is a hassle, but accuracy is a must for persuasion. It builds your ethos appeal, reducing fears about deception. It builds an audience's belief and their trust in your abilities. It's a key for unlocking your persuasive capability, helping others to take a 'Leap of Faith' in backing your ideas.

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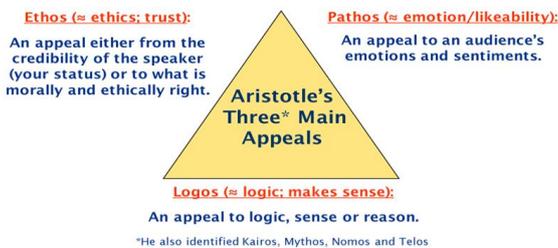


Snakes Alive! Who said that? (cont.)

Ethos is undermined so easily, it pays to focus on all factors that can weaken it. So, accurately attribute and copy any quotations, or else just omit them.

Now let's return to those snakes from earlier. The Bible is just one example text that supports the claim of our Nick Cage 'quote'. A 'great story' from early

The Rhetorical Triangle



Aristotle's Triangle [Source: GPB]

in its first Book (Genesis) famously involves a man, a woman, a forbidden fruit, and a serpent ("**more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made**"). Snakes have enjoyed a mixed reputation ever since. Although it's not true that even great Bible stories ALL "begin with a snake", it might surprise you just how often they are to be found elsewhere, now you've been primed to spot them.

I've recently been assured by teacher friends, unprompted, that "**Snaking**" is current slang amongst some school pupils for being sneaky and sly. An early use of this idiom comes from the Roman poet Virgil: "**a snake lurks in the grass**". Who knew that these state school pupils were just as well-versed in the Classics as some Old Etonians?!

The popularity of snake references may reflect their perceived rhetorical impact. I'll share a few more here I've noticed lately. For example, Nietzsche claimed: "**The snake which cannot shed its skin, must die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions**".¹¹ That's both a quote AND simultaneously a striking metaphor for the often polarised and entrenched opinions of our times. And there's the Snakes & Ladders game...

Here's a favourite old quote of mine, a critical wine review AND a great snake reference. "Sticky" enough to influence

my wine buying for almost 20 years: "**get rid of lingering neighbours... a spectacularly awful Palomino from the south of Spain, would clear a room faster than a cobra... why most Palomino is turned into sherry.**"¹²

A recent Europa League football final preview claimed that the Eintracht Frankfurt team "**strike out like adders when there's space**".¹³ It's a quotation AND a simile. Unfortunately for Rangers FC, who lost on penalties, it was all too prescient an observation, kicking off a great new story — with a snake!

GPB list the useful Rhetorical Tools, including quotes, on our website, at: <https://www.gpb.eu/2021/08/rhetorical-tools-list.html>. Try to use these well to better engage, entertain and persuade an audience.

We end with a last quote from our web page, defining quotations as: "**evidence using actual words spoken by someone else, usually famous, in authority... to assist with the clarity or persuasiveness of an argument**".

That's a neat summary, despite its absence of snakes. But do notice a key phrase: '**using actual words spoken**'. Not just any old words that might suit our narrative goals.

By Des Harney

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2. See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mike_Tyson Rick Warner (Associated Press), The Orangeburg Times and Democrat (Aug. 19, 1987)
3. *Meditations of a Parish Priest* by Abbé Joseph Roux (1866) - Part 1, LXXIV
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5. *New Yorkers: A City and Its People in Our Time* (2021) by Craig Taylor, pg. 196
6. *Nice Guys Finish Seventh: False Phrases, Spurious Sayings, and Familiar Misquotations* (2012) by Ralph Keyes
7. "Dirty" Harry, in 'Sudden Impact' (1983): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_ahead_make_my_day
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People don't seem very interested in listening



Ewan Pearson

There are 4 modes of communication, they're not used all that well

I was inspired to write about this because of a conversation with a client. They were complaining about the number of times they would be talking, and someone else in the meeting would start talking over them. I don't suppose that's ever happened to any of you! The client asked me what I might do to help.

Actually it's not that easy to stop this happening. There is a habitual element, a corporate culture element, and maybe what they were saying was not that interesting, went on for too long or went off the topic. Or the time allocated to the meeting was running out and the other person felt obliged to 'talk over'.

Before we go further, we need to summarise the Four Modes that exist in Spoken Communications (see below) to understand more of what was going on here. Really there should only be the first three modes, but people will be people...

Mode 1: Listening - using the ears and eyes, but not the mouth. Also in 'Active Listening' this is likely to involve the head's 'noddies' and 'shakies', the face in smiles and frowns, along with the occasional 'uh huh' from the back of the throat. The Japanese culture often reinforces active (but seemingly passive) listening with eye closure (or maybe are they just off the plane and tired?).

Mode 2: Thinking - quite a good thing to do from time to time, an under-used asset at work, best done with all other

brain and sensory functions minimised. We humans often try to think whilst doing one or more of the other modes, which, aside from thinking a bit whilst speaking, is a little like having two big computer programmes running on an old PC; they both slow down or even crash the thing.

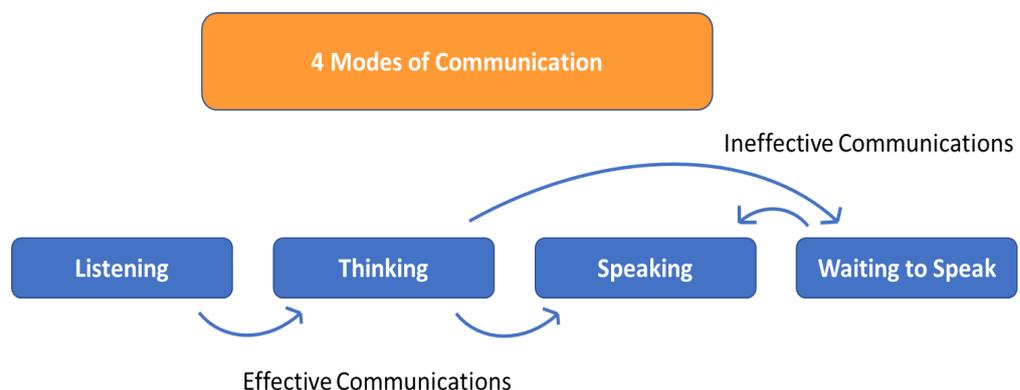
Mode 3: Speaking - Ah, we mostly think we're pretty good at this one, although the quality of output is sometimes dubious, either in what is said, how it is said or how long it takes to say it all. Those are topics for other SpeakUp articles gone before and yet to emerge from the keyboards.

Mode 4: 'Waiting to speak' mode. This is our name for what my client was asking about. It's when, instead of listening or thinking, someone who was doing those things switches into 'get ready to speak if there's any chance' mode, and signals with increasing displays and/or sounds that they want to speak urgently, with some grunts or words, gestures, or a combination, often in crescendo.

It's very common in media interviews where competition for the microphone between interviewer and interviewee is rife, and not entirely unwarranted. It suggests impatience (a particularly Western thing), annoyance that the other speaker has not stopped yet, and possibly disregard or disinterest for what the other person is talking about.

The cultural or habitual aspects can be

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People don't seem very interested in listening (cont.)

driven by the sense that to earn your pay or merit being at the meeting, you have to speak. I think you all know what I'm talking about!

So what is the solution?

Perhaps it's a cheeky point, but I'd go here first: being rivetingly interesting to listen to. That should ensure no-one interrupts. Preparing in advance is good for this, but it's more than that. What you say has to be worthy of the high attention levels you would like. Telling stories (true ones) well, instead of reciting a series of facts, helps a lot here. Being vocally 'fluent' too. Oddly, being provocative can also mean less interruption, as your 'opponent' will usually want to hear the full argument before trying to destroy it.



People talking over others during meetings
Source: Adobe Stock¹

Second, learn to be more concise - to make a point with no waffle - then stop.

Third, avoid over-elaboration with excessive detail: if you are asked the time, don't tell them how to build a watch! To get these right, we often work on what we call 'brain training' which is really helping someone to use the brief pauses between phrases to think better about what they are about to say.

Fourth is a culture shift to one that is more respectful of others. One of our Consulting sector clients started on this in 2018 as part of their Diversity & Inclusion efforts. I was expecting it to take some time, but by leading from

the CEO outwards, the effect was immediate and powerful. Suddenly I could hear moments, even pauses, when no-one was speaking. Mode 4 disappeared. Meetings didn't take or feel longer, because instead of argument there was thought and then reasoned discussion; no-one felt that to 'contribute' they had to say as much as possible and, instead of that, listening and learning became the norm. Wow. If you can also achieve that in your organisation, great things could happen.

Finally you can just reject the attempt to take the microphone and cling on to it by continuing to speak until you have concluded your point. This will mean at least two people are talking (I have observed as many as 6 people talking at once!), and everyone else is going to struggle to hear the speakers with any effectiveness. Again this is common in media interviews.

For me, continuing to speak has been on merit, or where the interrupting person (usually this is a journalist) is hounding you and has not given you any time to make your point. In these situations the audience support will tend to swing towards you.

By Ewan Pearson

References:

1. Megaphone image. Available at Adobe Stock.

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Additional Client Resources

Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd is a respected adviser based in London. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken and written word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews, Telephone Calls and Document Writing.

We also produce scientific voice, visual and content analysis reports, which are unique to GPB. We then provide voice and visual coaching, and content advice.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. In support of this we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as:

- Voice, Visual and Content Analyses,
- Prospect Relationship Management (PRM),
- the Information Iceberg,
- Client s' Rights Act,
- Feature, Benefit Impact (FBI),
- Buyers' Criteria Analysis, (BCA), and
- Our Q&A Methodology.

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GPB Website

The Grant Pearson Brown (GPB) website has all previous issues of our 'Speak Up' Journal, containing plenty of great articles with useful advice. In addition, there are other interesting analyses including our dictionary of acronyms, a list of all the Rhetorical Tools, and a list of neologisms (new words). These are regularly updated. Please get in touch if you have suitable words that we can add!

Please see those pages at www.gpb.eu, then look under 'Journals and posts' on the top tab.

YouTube

At GPB we like to provide helpful and entertaining playlists of videos about presentations, pitches, negotiations, giving speeches, and a lot more! Since our Spring 2022 Journal we have for example added to our channel:

- How to Catch a Liar (Assuming we Want to) by Dr. Paul Ekman
- Sir David Attenborough's Address to World Leaders at COP24
- Sir David Attenborough delivery of 'The People's Seat' address at COP24
- A Business Speeches Playlist

Please visit and subscribe to our YouTube Channel, where all this valuable video content is shared: www.youtube.com/channel/UCiF7nr4d3_iI8j8z862uVHQ.

LinkedIn

GPB's LinkedIn page is also regularly updated with posts and content from topical areas of interest. Again, we value any comments or thoughts and encourage healthy debate. Please visit and like our page, and contribute your views at www.linkedin.com/company/grant-pearson-brown-consulting-ltd/.



Find useful content at our website, on YouTube, and on LinkedIn! *Image source: Adobe*

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