

Expressions to dampen your excitement

Words were all they had, to take our hearts away, the Bee Gees sang. In my case, it's your mind I'm after capturing, and finding the right words is a problem facing us all.

Take "excited". It may be the world's most over-used word, as rugby writing enfant terrible Mark Reason noted of the current All Blacks. That was a bit unfair: most sports people currently overuse "excited" when they're interviewed by the media these days, with the possible exception of Peter Burling, whose ability to keep his exhilaration under control helped us win New Zealand's Cup.

Actually, sports people are mild abusers compared to those on MasterChef Australia. Not only are cooking judges Gary, Matt and George in a constant state of verbal excitement, but so are the contestants. To avoid over-exciting ourselves, we record the programme and fast-forward through exclamations and other banalities, pre-shot smilies, frownies and expressions of angst.

Ah, there's another one: "expression". These days, how many people do you see declaring they're "expressing" themselves in whatever sport or endeavour the media is covering? What does that mean? It was once an alternative verb for saying something, or getting milk, or doing a piece of art. But expressing yourself in rugby? How does that work?

What we're talking about is the constant churn of language fashion, the rise and fall of verbal devices that were once called "buzz words". I was reminded of it this week when a former student asked if I could send her a copy of my writing style guide, an aid I developed over 50 years of journalism, editing and teaching. It has a section on buzz words.

That took me even further back to the early 1960s and English classes with the venerable Mr Wit, New Plymouth Boys High School headmaster Wit Alexander. He told us he'd once stood next to a newspaper rugby writer at a match and was intrigued to see the man scribbling numbers in his notebook.

What could the numbers mean? Well, said the newspaperman, we have a book back at the office that lists all the clichés, and they're numbered. When covering a game, he wrote down cliché numbers and then expanded them into words when he went back to write his account.

Someone asked the inevitable of this tall tale: What's a cliché, Sir? Aha lads, said Wit, they're clever expressions that become so over-used by lesser mortals they lose impact. Later when I became a rugby writer, and probably ever since, I've borne Wit's wisdom in mind and gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid being a lesser mortal.

The fact that I've failed is all too obvious in this column, but that's not a bad thing in a way. When producing stock-standard, non-fiction, populist writing like this, you can try too hard at originality. I learned that early on, when one Saturday afternoon I began a rugby account for the Taranaki Sports Edition by saying some team or other "eked out" their victory. There will be no "eking" in this newspaper thank you very much, said a wise subeditor.

In the end, I've concluded that effective writing lies in simplicity – no adjectives, no adverbs and no buzz words, with the odd cliché thrown in to give a sense of familiarity for the audience.

Buzz words come and go, but most are as ephemeral as pixie dust. Remember "nek minnit"? Meant to be "next minute", and mumbled in a Kiwi skateboarder's online video account of the theft of his scooter, it was a saying that went viral online in 2014. Nobody says it now.

The words "derping" (making a funny facial expression in a photo) and planking (who knows) suffered similar early deaths, although both were used in a Sunday Star-Times political story recently. Adding "-gate" to denote a public outrage (after Watergate) has hung around for nearly half a century, so the process is unpredictable.

But the big worry is what might be happening to words in the rugby code book. Not before time, the rules are being rewritten to make them easier to follow. They've cut the wordage by 50 percent. But they've also run the book through a computer programme to make sure it accords with the

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understanding of a 12-year-old. A computer programme? Surely master rugby wordsmith Phil Gifford would have been a better option.

I'll just be excited when sports stars and cooks find a new way to express themselves.