Bringing peat to life

a guide to good writing for people who work in peat protection and restoration

Anna Chilvers & Clare Shaw

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Peat is a carbon sink that helps to keep our atmosphere healthy.

What is good writing? For some of us, it's clear, concise, efficient. It tells us what we need to know, with the minimum of fuss. For others, writing needs to be interesting, or funny. Perhaps it needs to be beautiful, or precise. Maybe it should tell a story or touch us emotionally.

Whatever our priorities, writing is always an act of communication. There is something we want to say, to someone. Good writing says what we want it to say - and it speaks loudest of all to the people we most want to hear us.

Peat is rich – 100% dark chocolate.

This resource is written by Clare Shaw and Anna Chilvers, co-editors of *The Book of Bogs* and members of The Boggarts: a Yorkshire-based network of artists who use creative strategies to protect our moors and bogs. It's aimed at everyone who works in peatland protection and restoration - from policy makers, land managers and researchers to hydrologists, bryologists, volunteers and activists. Whether we are writing speeches, reports, websites or funding bids, we are working with words. Our ability to write has a direct bearing on our ability to restore and protect peat.

As artists, we draw on creative strategies to spread awareness of the importance of peat - bringing facts to life and helping people not just to understand, but to care. And so can you. In this resource, we will show you how by sharing some simple techniques, such as

Peat is where my parents knelt down to the plants and taught me their treasure.

- Active voice: being present in your writing
- Editing: making your work clear and concise
- Making it real: using emotion and sensory details in your writing
- Using a wider and more interesting vocabulary
- Using story structures in your report, marketing and other written work

We'll also offer you a few simple ideas for creative exercises which you might use in public engagement, training and education - or just for fun!

Peat is layers of hope growing slow in the dark.

Why we love peat

It's a wonderful thing to hear about what people love. But often, professional, academic or corporate writing excludes emotion and in doing so, it leads to scientific and academic discourse which can feel disconnected from everyday language. We feel like we cannot write from our own experiences or emotions - our personal connection with our work, our excitements and anxieties, our hopes.

As a result, the way we communicate professionally and academically can feel inaccessible and empty of personal meaning.

And that is a problem, because when it comes to bogs, and other habitats, we need a language which communicates their importance, their layers of meaning, the deep feeling we have for them.

Active voice

Being present in your writing.
Often, we assume that we should take ourselves out of our academic, technical and professional writing, and present information from a dispassionate distance. But people love stories and are more likely to engage with your writing if you tell your own story. Look at these two examples, the first in the passive third person with no 'I', and the second using an active first-person voice.

1. A survey was conducted into the effect of distance on canine reactivity.

2. When I took my dog for a walk, I noticed that he barked at people when they appeared in the distance, but as they came nearer, he calmed down. I decided to find out if this was true of other dogs using a simple experiment and the help of fellow dog owners.

In this second version we have the writer's own experience, the reason for the survey, and we immediately become invested in the question - we want to know the details of the experiment and the results. We are pulled into a story and want to know how it ends.

I love how peat bogs show people who are new to nature that our local wildlife is amazing and fascinating - like the sundew in the wet pools, or the lizards resting lazily on the old rail tracks across the Lancashire Mosses, or the rare bog bush cricket calling amongst the heather in summertime.

Daveen Wallis,
Lancashire Wildlife Trust

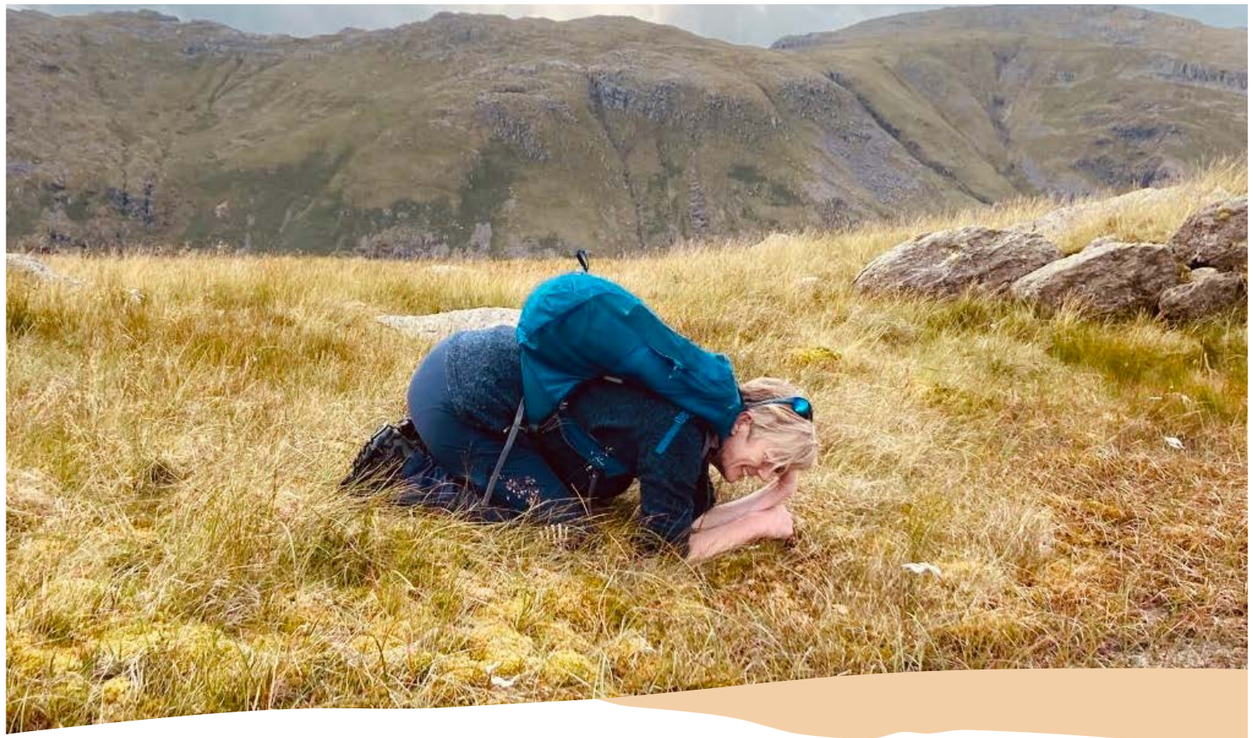
For me, peat is not just any soil; it is a super soil. Its wateriness and low pH make it a cask of historical treasure. Sometimes it allows its cargo of pollen, chemistry and particles to tell a story. It holds carbon, trying to keep us safe from overheating. The peatland habitat is one of carnivorous plants, broken bones and will o' the wisp.

Jen Jones,
Soil Scientist

What is your favourite area of peatland? Why do you love it?

Take five minutes to write down your answer to this question.
Write your answer as a list. Include:

- a sensory detail
- a personal memory
- a favourite scientific fact or observation
- a plant, insect, bird or animal

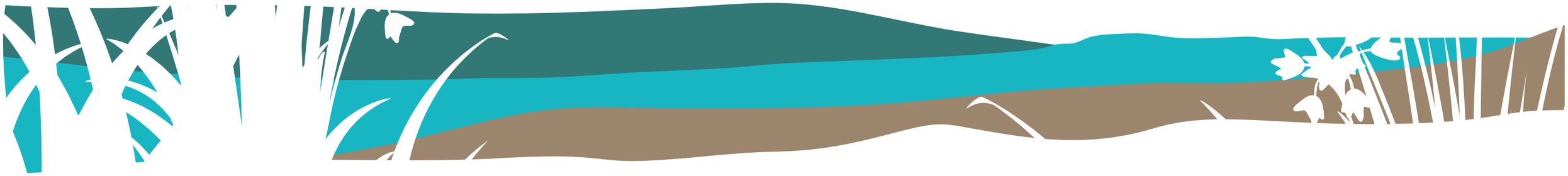


My favourite bog is Cors Fochno - partly because it's so familiar. I see it from my kitchen window and I hear the larks singing above it on a spring day.

I love that thousands of years of environmental process are so visible there - eight metres deep peat showing millennia of growing, a big tide scouring the sand back on the neighbouring beach to reveal peat.

Walking at dusk, the snipe and nightjar make it feel otherworldly. Once I bumped into an entomologist with a tiny pseudoscorpion species in a pot - he told me I was probably only one of 10 people in the UK who had seen a live specimen.

Rachael Davey,
Coetir Anian



Creativity, Science, Peat

There's a growing appreciation of the ways in which art can highlight the ecological and cultural importance of peat and draw attention to the urgent need to protect and restore it. Organisations like RE-PEAT, the Peat Appreciation Society, Peatland Exchanges, and Peatland Connection use creative expression and art to communicate the value of peat.

The 2025 "SOIL: the world at our feet" exhibition at Somerset House brought together responses from artists and scientists, with the aim of educating visitors about "the power and the fragility of soil, its fundamental role in human civilisation and its remarkable potential to heal our planet". Using words, music, visual art and film, the exhibition showed how "Soil is a secret world at our feet, an ecosystem as diverse in life as our night sky is full of stars". As Education Engagement Officer Helen Keron says,

"*With creative thinking and artistic vision, even a difficult and removed subject like peat bogs can be brought further into the public consciousness. This communication of technical subjects in an accessible and interesting way through collaboration of scientists and artists is a model that we hope to pursue further.*"

But you do not need to be an artist to write about peat in a way which welcomes, informs and excites the reader. In the next section, we'll explore how you can use sensory information to bring your writing to life.

Using emotions and senses in your writing. Your readers may never have been to a bog. They may have seen a photo of what looks like an open expanse of empty land. If so, they might wonder what all the fuss is about. What is so special about the bog?

Making it Real

Of course there are many answers to this question, many of them scientific and environmental. As well as giving these facts and figures, you have an opportunity to take the reader onto the bog with you, to share the physical experience of being there.

What does the peat smell like? What does wind feel like on your skin? What sounds are there of birds and animals, of wind and rain, of water, of footsteps in mud? Does the air taste of anything? What colours can you see? What shapes? Include some of the sensory experience of peatlands in your writing and the reader will begin to experience what the bog is like.

Don't be afraid to include your emotions. It may be that peatlands bring you joy, that they are a place where you experience happiness. You may find them unnerving or difficult. They don't offer places to hide from anything, including emotions, and your emotional state will be part of your experience. This is interesting. If the bog makes you feel something, we want to know about it.

What do I love about peat? Well, it's the past and the future bound together in a rich, dark layer that blankets the landscape. It holds stories and histories and it's the neglected, vilified underdog that we're finally coming to understand.

Jane Akerman,
IUCN UK Peatland Programme

I am fascinated by scanning electron microscope images of peat pores; dark, grainy, mysterious, a ghostly network of connections and the dark spaces that exist in between. Some are open to the flow of water; others are microscopic dead-ends.

To walk in the peatlands is a lesson in survival. This land is waterlogged, acidic, nutrient poor; its deeply compressed layers half decayed and gasping for oxygen. And yet, common cotton grass manages to thrive by snorkelling air through hollow stems. Sphagnum fills its dead cells with rain, each droplet holding thousands of tiny organisms, all of which provide food for other, larger creatures from dragonflies to water beetles and frogs.

Victoria Gatehouse,
Zoologist

Exercise 2: what can you see/hear/smell/feel

Next time you are on the bog...

...or any other area of peatland, write down 5 things you can:

- See
- Hear
- Feel
- Taste
- Smell

What I love best about bogs is that they are FUN. I love taking students on to the bog and asking them to jump - seeing how they respond when the ground shakes beneath them. Science should be fun! Whenever I visit the bog, I am always the muddiest and the last to leave – I want to get on my hands and knees and look closely, because that's what the bog invites.

Professor Sarah Davies,
Geography and Earth Sciences

Using story structures

Which is more enjoyable to read, a report or a story?
We are hardwired to follow stories. Humans have always loved stories. In tribal societies throughout history the Storyteller has been an important person. People would gather to hear stories, to be transported from their daily grind. The Storyteller would pass the secrets of his trade on to his apprentice, who in turn would learn to transport, to create the magic which would hold a crowd entranced waiting to find out what happened next.

Apart from escapism and enjoyment, stories have other functions. They help us to make sense of the world around us, and to understand other people and their actions. To understand the land and other life within it. They encourage us to put ourselves in others' shoes, to develop a sense of empathy. If we want to engage readers it makes sense to use story structure. Everyone understands stories.

I am lucky to live close to Norland Moor, where bogland exists as part of a mosaic of habitats (woodland, open water, grassland, crag). As I take the twisting rabbit-paths, I think of slow, yet essential beginnings. Of the precious unseen things and how we must protect them, those microscopic pores with their collective ability to shrink and expand, to swell with life and to empty again.

Victoria Gatehouse,
Zoologist

At its most basic level, story structure is question and answer. Stories ask questions and readers become engrossed because they want to know the answers. On a simple level, a murder story asks, 'Who committed the murder?' and we read on to find out the answer, a romance asks, 'Will the character find love?'

My favourite peatland is Dartmoor, not because it's healthy, or functioning like a peatland should, but because of the happy memories of me and my dad playing cow poo roulette, kicking pats at each other until we found a really sticky one. Open space to breathe, think and be at peace, away from the drug dealers, the poverty and the pain of the inner city.

Jane Akerman,
IUCN UK Peatland Programme

If you introduce your story question at the beginning of your piece your reader will read on wanting to know the answer.

From there the story takes us on a journey. We travel with the character from their ordinary world into an otherworld where they hope to find the answer to the question. This otherworld might be the bog, it might be a conference about peatlands, it can be anywhere - but it is the place where the character looks for the answer to the story question. Whilst there they might meet others, who may help or hinder them in their task. They might encounter problems or even dangers to be overcome. Their emotions may swing between hope and despair.

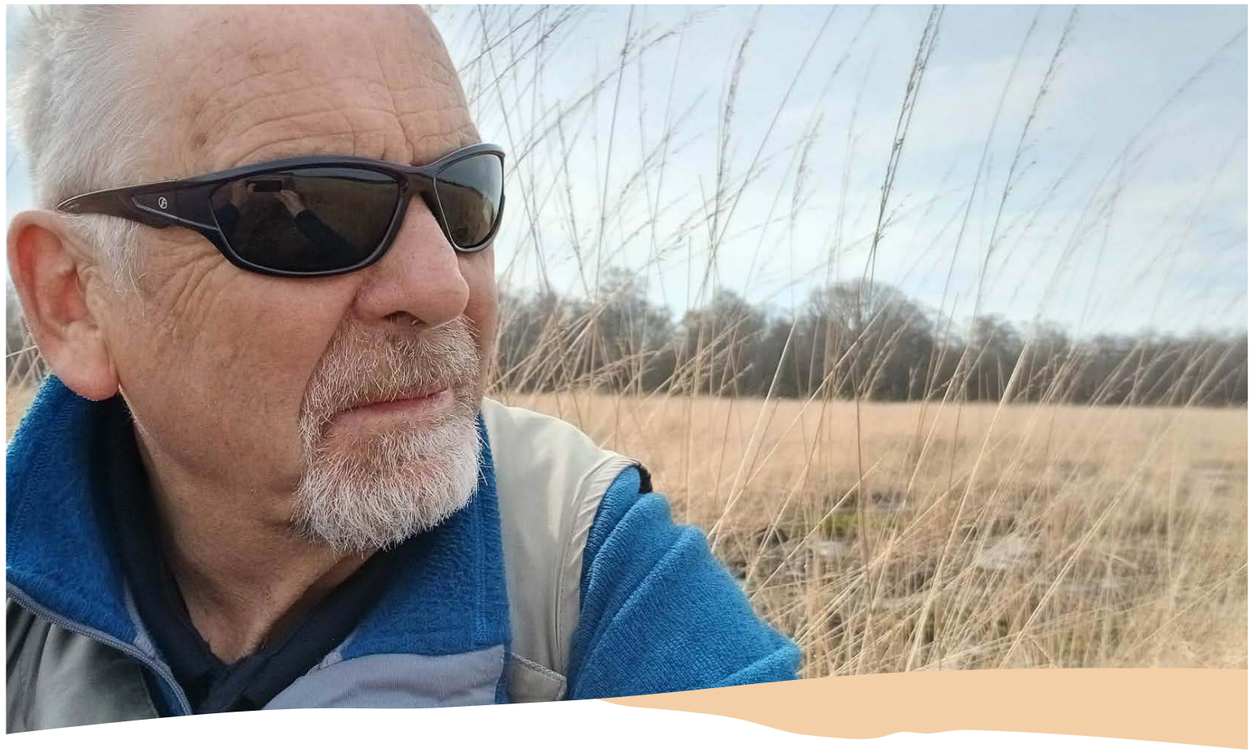
Eventually they will either find the answer to their question, or not. They might find something else they didn't expect to find. They return to their ordinary world with the answer to the question.

This is a simplified version of The Hero's Journey from Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and used to create thousands of stories. Famously, George Lucas used it as a template when writing the first *Star Wars*, one of the most successful movies ever made. It's a pattern people respond to instinctively, and we can make use of it to engage people in our writing. It can be used to tell the story of an afternoon's field trip, a long term project, or even the work of a lifetime.

Exercise 4: how did you get here?

What brought you into this work? Why do you work in peat restoration? What were you looking for?

Write your story as a hero's journey, where peatlands and bogs are the otherworld. You may mention allies you meet along the way, problems you need to overcome. Have you found what you were looking for? Do you have an answer to take back to the ordinary world?



I had my first sight of Bedford Moss at age 12, my eyes wide at this sweep of wild strangeness. Dragonfly/snipe/lapwing/curlew all invited me into their world, one I've squelched through ever since.

Dave Steele,
Wildlife Recorder

Using a wider and more interesting vocabulary

Vocabulary

We're going to suggest two seemingly contradictory things here - firstly, keep your vocabulary simple and straightforward, and secondly to revel in the specific language of your subject area.

Simple vocab

We've all probably had the experience of trying to wade through a document written in impossibly dense language, probably in the passive voice, and crammed full of esoteric words and acronyms that are only understandable to the expert.

If you want to connect with a wider readership, and engage people with your subject, if you want people to care about peat, keep your language straightforward and fairly simple. Think about your reader - write for someone who knows nothing about your subject. This doesn't mean you need to be patronising, but think about the best way to communicate your joy in your subject area with others who know little or nothing about it.

Juicy vocab

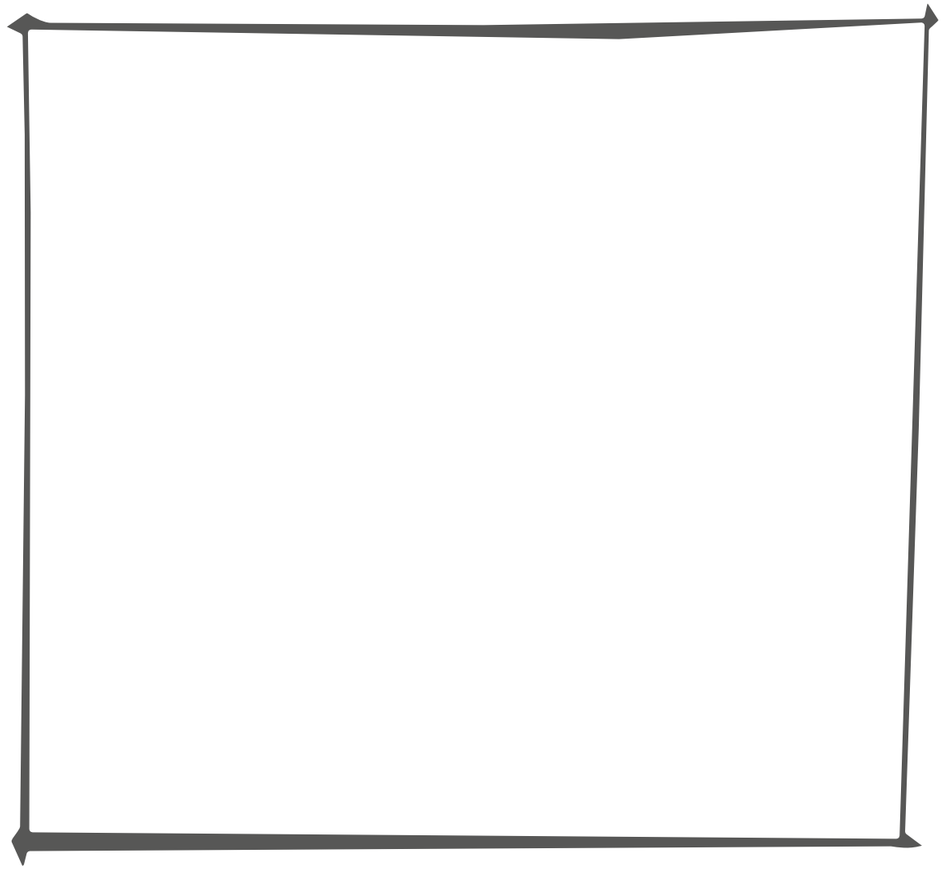
This doesn't mean you need to avoid subject-specific vocabulary - sometimes there is no other way to describe a particular aspect of a certain type of Sphagnum or the consistency of peat. Indeed, one way you might communicate that joy is by revelling in the language of your subject. There will be words and phrases that have very specific meanings, where no others will do. Don't avoid these words - but also don't just throw them in expecting the reader to know what they mean - explain them, and delight in them. Bring your reader into the world of the bog with these peaty words.

Exercise 4: juicy words 1

What are your favourite bog words?

Here's a sample of delicious vocabulary gathered from delegates at the IUCN UK Peatland Programme Conference 2025:

deep peat / schwingmoor / ecology / peat hags / mire / symbiosis / entanglement / flashes and flushes / dendroid / quaking bog / carbon / low ground pressure / muskeg / sphagnum pulchrum / communities / capitulum / sustainability / enhancement / stacks / fibric hemic sapric / restoration / rewilding / Vanessa Atalanta / ombrogenous / hangescek / rewet / sedge tussock / didishu / desolate / gylfinir / splendens / green hairstreak / moss pig / sporophyte / hummock / scallop bunding / migwyn / flow / bog beastie / smoothing / gully / turbery / snedding / habitat / humus / paludification / eriophorum vaginatum / sporangium / brash murmuration / bog steps / underwing / ombotrophic / bog bean



Play with these words

You might play with these words by taking them out of their context and using them to describe other things, thus familiarising the reader with their meaning. Look at these words which are used to describe aspects of moss and other plants:

- **Rugose:** wrinkled or corrugated
- **Julaceous:** overlapping leaves on a branch having a cylindrical appearance
- **Scabrous:** rough and scaly
- **Fascicle:** a bundle (of branches, nerves, muscle fibre, etc)
- **Fimbriate:** describing a border often frilled

Try using each of these words to describe something non-botanical. Write a sentence or two for each word.

Drafting and editing

First drafts are not finished drafts. They are a place where we gather our ideas and try to put them into some sort of order. Stephen King said that first drafts are when you tell your story to yourself, where you find out what you want to say. They are the first stage of writing. They are when we banish the critic or the editor or any voices that come unbidden in your head to ask what on earth you are doing.

The next stage, if at all possible, is to put it aside for a while - for as long as you can afford. Because when you come back to edit, you want fresh eyes. You want to be a reader of your piece. Because the third stage of the writing process, the editing stage, is when you tell your story for a reader.

It may be that you have people who can read your work and let you know if it is well-written - clear, concise, interesting. But more often we have to be that person ourselves. Try to imagine you are someone who is reading this piece for the first time.

Look at the point of view. Have you written in the first person? If so, is it consistent? Look out for sentences written in the passive voice.

Other things to look out for when editing: Does it say what you want it to say? Is the tone appropriate for the intended audience? Are the grammar and punctuation correct?

Some writers write long first drafts which need to be cut right back. Others write drafts that are almost a skeleton or template of the final piece, and they need to build on this. Which are you?

Exercise 6: 100 words

Write around 200 words about a significant visit to a peat bog or another landscape.

Write quickly without worrying about getting it 'right'. Don't let the censor in. Don't pause to look at what you've written. Let your emotions and senses splash onto the page.

Part one. Now get your editing pen out. Cut your writing until you have only 100 words, whilst keeping the meaning.

Part two. Take one sentence from your new version. Set the timer for five minutes. Use that sentence as the basis for a new piece of writing.

Which of these felt the most productive and helpful for you? This might give you a clue as to which sort of editing you need to do.

Creative writing

Throughout this resource, we've shown you how strategies from creative writing - **storytelling, juicy vocabulary, active voice, sensory observation, careful editing** - can make your professional and technical writing clearer and more engaging for the reader - and more satisfying for you as the writer. Whether we're writing reports, case studies, funding bids, marketing copy - creative writing can help us write better.

Creative writing invites us to observe closely, to imagine the world from different perspectives, to invite the reader to connect with our experiences. It's a powerful tool in our work - it doesn't just teach the reader about the value of peat; it asks them to care.

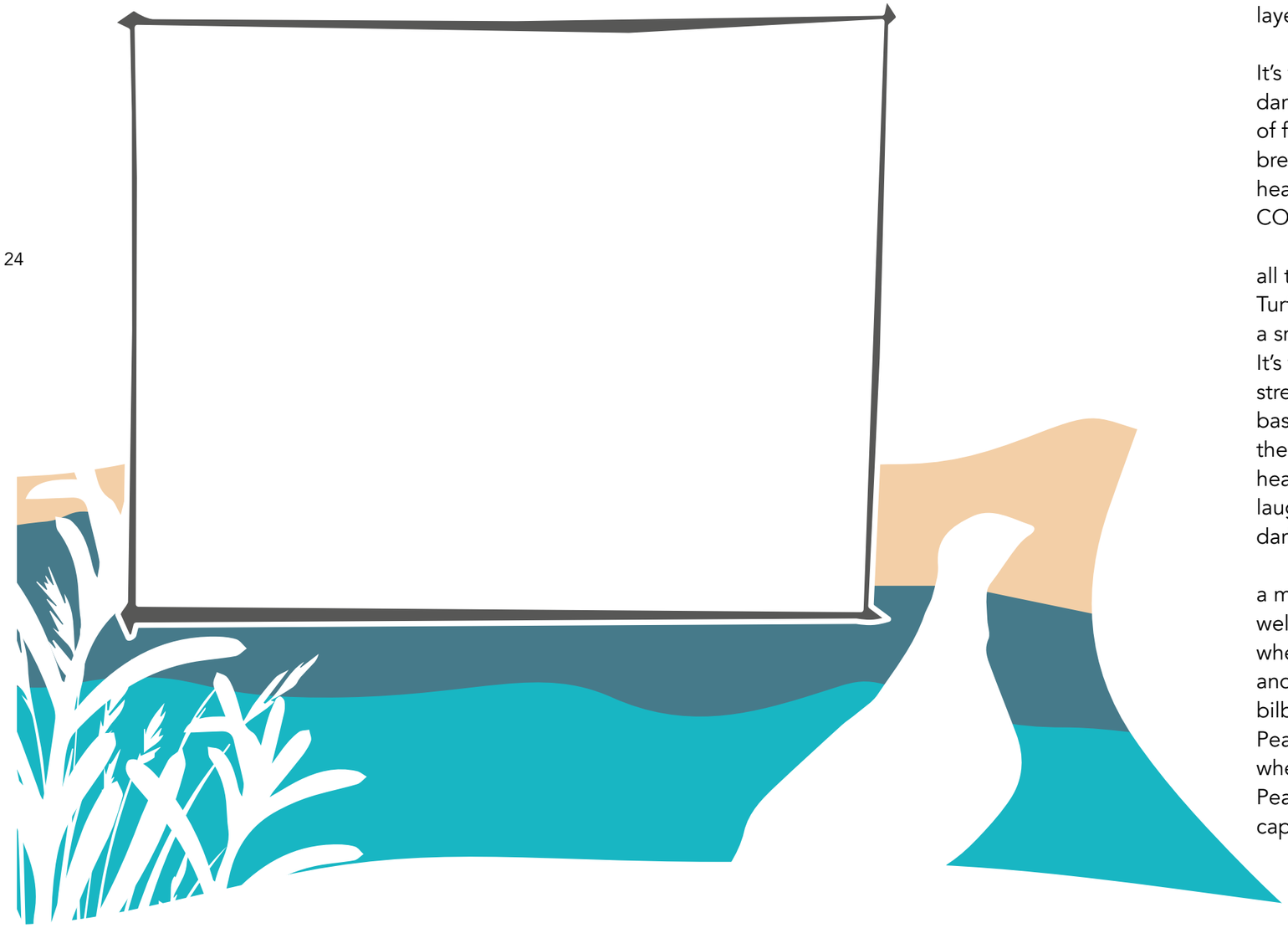
"Art has a unique way of touching people. If we stood on a soapbox and told you what we think, if we gave you a leaflet – you would learn some information. You would witness emotion in our impassioned speech; maybe the power of rhetoric would move you. People who do that well can make a real difference. But art takes a different approach. Rather than telling you the facts, it invites you to step into the same place as the artist, to feel the emotion for yourself" (Chilvers and Shaw, Book of Bogs).

In this final section, we'll demonstrate a simple creative writing technique which you can use - for yourself, with your staff team, with students or with visitors to your site.

Peat is...

Beginning with the words "Peat Is", take five minutes to write down at least ten observations - scientific and botanic facts, colours, birds, insects and animals, folklore, memories and sensations.

Open each line with that phrase - "Peat Is". Any time you get stuck, just come back to those words, and let them lead you.



Here's a group poem written in 24 hrs by online contributors on social media.

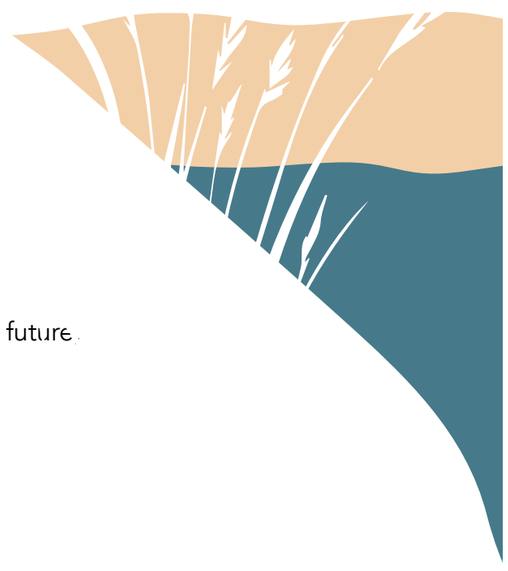
Peat Is

preservative, rich and dark,
a hiding place for butter or bones.
It's bog oak and burial,
Yde Girl with red hair,
strangled with her woollen band,
the tomb of an Irish elk.
To the Tollund Man, peat is
more fitting than a fine silk coat,
rich and beneficent.
A treasury of broken promises,
layers of hope growing slow.

It's the pickle jar of the maudlin moor,
darkest chocolate, the taste
of fine malt. Ancient weather
breathed into the earth. Saviour of secrets,
healing and chemistry. A squelchy lung,
CO_2 gobbler – peat remembers

all the dynasties of the earth.
Turf and moss burnt, peat is
a smell you'll never forget.
It's flesh and skin
stretching to the wide horizon. Vital
bastion of biodiversity,
the colour of night jar
heavy with old rain. Peat is
laughter, liquid life and pungent
dark. bouncy – bog, fen and wetness,

a myrtle-spattered embracer of
welly boots, 4x4s, dreams,
where my parents knelt down to the plants
and taught me their treasure - past and the future.
bilberry, ling and elusive sunstar.
Peat is Orkney and whiskey, memory
where grass and heather are recollection.
Peat a slow burn you can't stamp out
capable of bursting into flood or flame.



Last words

from Anna and Clare

We hope you found this resource useful. Please feel free to share it and use it within your organisations and within the community. We want as many people as possible to know and care about peatlands, to realise what amazing and important places they are, and how vitally important it is that we look after them.

That's why we curated *The Book of Bogs: Stories of a Yorkshire Moor and Other Peatlands* which was published by Little Toller in 2025. It's an anthology of writing from poets and storytellers, scientists, archaeologists and nature writers who all love bogs, and who want to share that love through their writing. We've also produced other bog-related resources, such as the Poetry Society's Bogs Talking: a creative learning resource for children and young people.

This resource is based on a day-long participatory workshop we delivered at the IUCN UK Peatland Programme Conference 2025, along with ecologist Johnny Turner. We regularly deliver bog-themed nature writing workshops, as well as working alongside the Royal Literary Fund to deliver functional writing skills workshops in workplaces.

If you'd like to find out more about our work, follow our links or contact us here:

Clare Shaw at shaw_clare@hotmail.com
Anna Chilvers at annaruthchilvers@gmail.com

Anna and Clare are also co-authors of a monthly bog-themed blog at blogsandbogs.substack.com

IUCN National Committee United Kingdom

Peatland Programme

This resource was designed with support from the IUCN UK Peatland Programme, which exists to promote peatland restoration in the UK and advocates the multiple benefits of peatlands through partnerships, strong science, sound policy and effective practice: www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org