

Medical Communications

SECTION EDITOR



Lisa Chamberlain James

lisa@trilogywriting.com

Editorial

Dear all,

Well here's a sentence I never thought I'd write:

In this issue we learn how the Argentine Tango can make us better writers.

Really! When our contributor, Susanne Geercken, told me that this was the topic she'd chosen, I was both intrigued and astounded – how on earth do those two worlds collide? I knew from the Dublin conference that medical writers liked to dance, but we don't usually incorporate it into our professional life.

However, I knew we were in very safe hands, and if anyone could merge these two disciplines, it would be Susanne. Susanne has worked as a medical translator, writer and workshop leader since the early 1990s. Her two areas of passion are languages (she is a trained translator for English and Spanish and also speaks French and Portuguese) and dancing. She has been a ballroom dancer for more than 20 years and an enthusiastic *Tango Argentino* dancer since 2012. Therefore, I eagerly awaited the email alert, and was certainly not disappointed.

I am delighted to be able to present Susanne's excellent article to you – if you are at all like me, you will find it inspiring, you will learn something from it, and if it doesn't make you both smile and want to jump into your dancing shoes, I'll eat my hat!

After this issue, I expect to see much more dancing at the EMWA conferences! The gauntlet is thrown...

Bestest,

Lisa

What Argentine Tango can tell us about writing

Over the past 4 years, I have become a passionate dancer of Argentine Tango. Where exactly the dance was born remains the subject of some controversy (claims have even been made that it had its roots in Finland),¹ but most people would agree that the capital of Argentine Tango is Buenos Aires. Therefore, last year in November I did what every true tango

aficionado does: I travelled to Buenos Aires in search of the "authentic" tango experience. Surprisingly I returned home with inspiration not only for my dancing but also for my writing. Why? Because Argentine Tango is all about communication and it can help us remember some important principles of good communication:

Present your subject matter with passion and dedication

When I first started listening to tango music, I actually thought it was pretty boring – every piece more or less sounded the same to me. Gradually, however, I understood that tango is like good wine — you have to acquire the taste for it. It is fascinating how your perception is refined after some time, once you have learned to listen more closely: there's tangos where the driving factor is a dominant beat; there's lyrical pieces that remind you of Italian opera; there's uplifting *valses* and there's the jazzy, sometimes even discordant "Tango Nuevo". Tango dancing is about letting the music touch your heart and interpreting it with your body and your feet,



improvising as you go. "*La música te lleva*" – Let the music guide you. As one of our tango teachers puts it: "This is what I want: if I see you dance behind a sound-proof window pane I want to 'hear' the piece you are interpreting by watching you move."

I think this is also the secret of good writing: we should get across the essence of what we write about so convincingly that the reader will understand even "behind a sound-proof window pane". This requires intimate knowledge of our subject matter, passion and dedication.

Focus on your audience

If the purpose of dancing tango is to communicate about the music, how does the couple do this? After all, they can't use words. Like in most couple dances, there are two roles in Argentine Tango: a leader and a follower.² On the basis of their common repertoire, the leader will "suggest" a movement and the follower will "respond". The leader has to have a clear idea of the next moves he wants to initiate. His task is to communicate these ideas to his partner by offering her clear signals. Since there are only few fixed sequences of steps in tango, there is always room for interpretation and improvisation (this is actually what makes the dance so intriguing). Therefore, the leader has to remain very flexible, ready to adjust his next moves to his partner's – sometimes unexpected – response. To ensure enjoyable communication in this setting, it is very important where the partners put their main attention: if the leader is very focused on his own dance and interpretation of the music, he may lose connection with her, making her feel uncomfortable and "left behind". If, in contrast, the leader centres his attention on his partner, making sure she has time and room to respond with her own interpretation of the music, they will enter into a beautiful non-verbal dialogue.

An author's role is similar to that of the leader in the couple: having firm ideas and sending out clear messages is not enough – to ensure successful and enjoyable communication you also have to stay sensitive to the needs of your readers if you don't want to risk losing them.

Respect conventions

There are many conventions and subtle rules in

tango, particularly in the public dances, the *milongas*. In order to be part of the tango community, you have to know about these rules. It is part of the tango culture to change dance partners. To an outsider, it seems like magic how, in a large dance hall, a man and a woman sitting on opposite ends of the hall, get up as if they follow a silent command and meet on the dance floor. The secret is that the couples agree to dance by what is called *cabeceo* or nod. Basically you constantly scan the room with your eyes until you find a partner who holds eye contact longer than what would feel normal. If you don't want to dance with this partner, you look away. If you do wish to take up the offer, you nod and both partners approach the dance floor to dance. It is, of course, important to know about this convention because if you don't, you miss out on any opportunity to dance at all.

In writing, too, it will have consequences if we break conventions. Some months ago, I had to translate a medical complaint from a customer. As part of her complaint, she demanded a substantial compensation for harm incurred, threatening court action. She attached copies of relevant medical documentation. You would expect such an important claim to be sent in an official letter, maybe even by registered mail. Her complaint, however, was sent in the form of a poorly written email with some snapshots of hospital records and the last sentence saying: "sent from my android mobile telephone". Even though in the age of electronic devices, text messages have become widely accepted, in my eyes, this still constitutes a breach of convention that will take away some of the credibility of the writer's request, independently of the seriousness of the issue brought forward.

As writers, we should therefore make sure we know the conventions governing our domain of writing and respect them. Of note, this even applies for fields like advertising, where you consciously play with breaking conventions. Particular care is required when touching culturally sensitive issues like historical and

political aspects, religion, national pride, feelings, or gender.

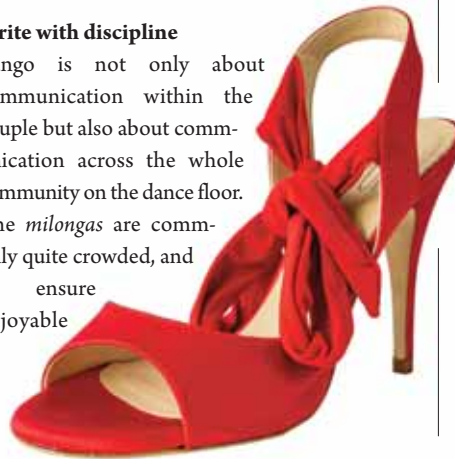
Be gentle with your audience

Traditionally, the music at the public dances is organized in sequences of three tango pieces followed by a pause. This is called a *tanda*. During the pause (called *cortina* or "curtain") the DJ will put brief interludes of contrasting music, such as Swing or Salsa, while all dancers leave the dance floor and new couples form. With the first tunes of the new round of tangos the dancers are back on the dancefloor, ready to join their next partner in the *abrazo*, the tango embrace. The tangos played in each *tanda* consist of similar pieces, often from the same orchestra so that the new partners in the couple can gently get to know each other and their common repertoire: the first tango is for "tasting", the second for "trying out" and the third for "enjoying".

What does this teach us about writing? Be gentle with your readers and consider that they do not know your subject as well as you do and may need time to adjust. Introduce your subject carefully. Make an effort to guide your audience through your text, using metalanguage like headings, topic sentences and introductory clauses to advise the reader what to expect next. Just imagine how nice it would be to make your reader feel like a tango partner wrapped in a gentle tango embrace!

Write with discipline

Tango is not only about communication within the couple but also about communication across the whole community on the dance floor. The *milongas* are commonly quite crowded, and to ensure enjoyable



dancing, the couples move along around the dancefloor in one or more neat circles in counter-clock direction (this is called *ronda*). Skillful dancing means that you can master the art of staying within your circle, never invading another couple's space and keeping an even distance between the couples. The aim is for all the dance couples to generate one single flow in line with the music so that their dance transcends the couple and creates a community on the dance floor.

As you may imagine, it not only requires great skill but also considerable discipline to keep moving elegantly as a couple but also stay within the line. The image of the *ronda* can remind us of the need to be disciplined in our writing, striving to create a stringent text without unmotivated digressions. In good writing, like in the *ronda*, there's no room for ego trips.

Conclusion

Writers and dancers share the same principles of passion, dedication, focus on other, discipline, and respect. I hope that I have awakened the tango spirit in you and enticed you to become a tango dancer at heart (or even in real life?) when you go about your next piece of writing. Feel embraced – *un abrazo*.

References

1. Aki Kaurismäki in *Midsummer Night's Tango* (2013). Documentary. A film by Viviane Blumenschein (very interesting documentary that I recommend to anyone interested in the subject)
2. The roles of "leader" and "follower" are not necessarily gender-specific in Tango. You will often find women dancing with women and men with men, sometimes even switching roles between or within the dances. For better flow, however, I will refer to the "leader" as "he" and the follower as "she" in this text.

Susanne Geercken

Susanne.Geercken@web.de

Birmingham 2017
Save the Date
 The 44th EMWA Conference in Birmingham, England will be held on 2 - 6 May 2017 at the ICC.

For further information:
http://www.emwa.org/EMWA/Conferences/Conference/Birmingham_2017.aspx

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