

ADVENTURES IN TYPEWRITING - IN AUSTRALIA

When the lockdown began here in Australia, I - like all of us - found myself with time on my hands. I learnt typing in school, in the old-fashioned way, and that was on big, heavy manual typewriters. They made a satisfying clunk noise when you typed, and frankly my Apple Magic keyboard wasn't doing that for me. Even when I was writing my PhD I often lamented the lack of the rhythmic feedback as you typed.

I should point out that I learned on typewriters in the early 1980's. By 1988 I had fully signed up to my XT computer, and I was an early adopter of computers (and the PhD is in Information Systems - so I am not a luddite and in fact my 'superpower' is in the use of computers).

But that need for aural feedback is a strong thing. Mushy keyboards were not nice to type on. Let me describe the moment I found the mechanical keyboard scene as a revelation. But after acquiring my 'end game' keyboards - two IBM Model M keyboards - I turned my attention to typewriters.

I invented a new game - bidding on eBay to lose. That worked OK for a while - until I found to my dismay that I actually misjudged and bought a typewriter. My Olivetti Lettera 32. It is the typewriter I am writing on now and it has a nice, quick, light action and the typeface is clean, neat, and - with a new ribbon - black. It occasionally feels a little dinky, and it is missing a couple of features (a paper guide and a paper shield on the platen), and the carriage return is a little wonky. It came from the hoard of a 94 year old woman who moved into aged care, and I bought it from her niece out near Jimboomba (a small country town out near Beaudesert in Australia). I believe this model is from about 1974.

Now, when you are looking at typewriters in Australia there seems to be a premium to be paid. The Australia Tax is real. Typewriters in some sort of good condition cost a great deal more than they seem to overseas. The sellers are usually clueless. They really have no idea what a typewriter is other than that they think there is a ready supply of idiots prepared to buy them. They often advertise a rusty heap of junk for far more than it is worth.

For example, I purchased my Olivetti Lettera 32 for \$117.50 (\$2.50 less than my max bid). Admittedly, it is not 'proper' vintage and it is the model made in Mexico. But it is in good working order (the case too) and it has the cool Techno typeface. In comparison though there are other Letteras advertised for \$300 or more. I do note that they don't seem to sell quickly.

So yes, the Australia Tax is a thing.

A key issue is that the cost of shipping drives up the cost of these things. I have sourced these typewriters locally because even inter-state shipping costs a significant chunk of the cost of the typewriter. You can completely forget about international shipping on a 7 kilogram 'portable' typewriter!

I have gotten to the stage now where I have five typewriters. Four portable typewriters (three Remington Monarchs and the Lettera) and - gasp - an Olympia SG3 which is the same model typewriter that I had at High School. The 'G' stands for the German word 'Grosse', and that is a very fair description. These standard typewriters are BIG. I only think I have room for one or two of them in my life.

And of course that begs the question of whether a typewriter is of any practical use in the 21st century. Certainly, at least, that is the question that my wife has asked at least five times now, and each time with her eyebrows quizzically arched.

The answer to that is, of course, a definitive 'no'.

Typewriters are obsolete. They are slow. They are unforgiving of mistakes. And, frankly, editing the analogue, typed, page of text is a right proper pain in the proverbial.

I cannot google a question that comes to me while writing, so fact checking my work is something that has to be left until later. I cannot quickly alt-tab to my Twitter feed with the Olivetti, my Olympia, or any of my three Remington Monarchs. But, I do wonder how it might compare to something like the Freewrite, which famously only allows you to backspace. No editing allowed. Rather like - ooh, I don't know? - a typewriter. Both force you to keep moving forward - you can correct an error when you make it on the typewriter using whiteout tape, but you are not going to white-out an entire paragraph and re-type it. And you can definitely forget about good old cut-and-paste - except of course for the literal version of that.

But I guess those limitations are the things that are actually features, not bugs. Typing on the typewriter forces you to concentrate on what you are writing. It is inherently distraction-free (except of course for the copious use of white-out tape). Eventually, your writing should be turned into an electronic version, but you could write the first draft and then use an OCR tool to scan it into text.

If you want to do serious writing with a typewriter, you will want to return to the old-fashioned discipline of the first, second and third drafts. Write it once, all the way through (or, if it is a long piece, in sections). And then mark that up with a pencil and then re-type (and re-write) a second draft. And possibly a third. You will by necessity become more disciplined and structured in your writing since you won't be spending all that time hacking and pulling apart your writing as you go.

That may or may not be a good thing.

I think it is important that you don't get too wedded to pages as you type them. Be prepared to start again, or put a line through whole paragraphs. Or simply use an 'x' in those early drafts to remove the words that are not wanted.

I have simple white-out tape that I use to correct errors as I go, though you don't want to be too precious really about that first messy draft. I have a stylus for use on a tablet with the rubber tip that I use to tamp down any wayward bits of tape. It is far easier than old fashioned liquid paper.

You probably want the draft that you are going to scan to be the cleanest draft, but you can also edit the final result and you will very likely want to review your OCR'd text when you scan it. It will never be 100% correct in my experience. Again - this is a feature, not a bug, as it forces you to engage with your text. Your focus keeps the relationship between you and your text, nothing else. I use ABBY FineReader OCR as part of DevonThink. Handily, that gives me a good, searchable, PDF at the end of the process. There are actually some interesting-looking tools that you can use as an app on your smartphone now too to perform OCR as you type it there and then, though I think it might be interesting to compare the accuracy of such tools.

Ultimately, whether the typewriter is of any use to you will depend on whether it frustrates you or not, and whether your writing improves as a result. Typing is unforgiving; I learnt on typewriters so I have latent skills in getting it right the first time (or at least, I seem able to type without a large number of errors creeping in). To make it easier on yourself, I suggest using the lightest typewriter you can find, and the most reliable. I would stick to a portable, as it's easy to hide your mistakes in the cupboard. A standard typewriter has a heavier action and really requires a commitment of desk space!

So that re-typing pages is less of a chore for you, I suggest double-spacing your typing. That also allows you to more easily mark up your second draft. Have the white-out tape at your side - errors are OK but it might be a bit demotivating to see all those typos (though, again, this is a feature, not a bug). Remember, the only draft that you will get a real benefit where there are no typos is the draft that you are going to OCR into your computer. With that in mind, aim to have a dark, fresh ribbon in the typewriter. Otherwise, OCR might be quite a bit less accurate.

Overall, for me this has been a bit of a rediscovered hobby during lockdown, and I do not know that I would expect to do an awful lot of writing in this way. It is a good circuit-breaker from simply hacking away and copy-pasting together a document, and it is good to write without distraction. I could achieve that, though, with my laptop if I simply turned off the wi-fi. But these machines can be a Thing of Beauty in their own right, and it is nice to have them working away and giving you the feeling that you are banging, and clacking, and slamming words onto the paper productively. That is a feeling I have missed.

Though, to be fair, I am not at all convinced that my family feels the same way.