

Activist writing

Brian Martin

I originally wrote this in 1978 to be a chapter in a book published by Friends of the Earth Australia, but the book never eventuated. I slightly revised the text in October 2010.

The task: prepare a very basic leaflet for the anti-uranium mining campaign, designed for people who know nothing whatever about the issues, especially for use at a number of public meetings in country towns near Canberra in late 1977.

The following is the text of my first draft. Spelling mistakes and other inaccuracies are included. (The topic words at the left were not part of the text, but were for the use of those commenting on the draft.)

Uranium

Uranium is a metal that can be used in nuclear power plants to produce electricity. But producing electricity using uranium also produces radioactive waste products. If these wastes enter the body, they can cause cancer and genetic defects (deformed babies).

Plutonium

One of the most dangerous waste products is plutonium. One millionth of a gramme of plutonium is enough to cause lung cancer. A typical reactor produces 100 kilogrammes of plutonium per year.

Plutonium and other waste products can be released into the environment due to an accident, due to natural disasters such as earthquakes, or due to criminals or terrorists (for example stealing a shipment of radioactive waste).

Waste disposal

Plutonium remains dangerous for over 250,000 years. Thousands of tonnes of radioactive waste must be isolated from the environment for at least this long. No proven and tested method yet exists to do this. Several countries, such as West Germany, have stopped building nuclear reactors because of this unsolved problem.

Proliferation

Nuclear weapons can easily be made from plutonium. 10 kilogrammes is all that is required. Many countries, such as India, Argentina, and South Korea, can use nuclear reactors or reprocessing plants to produce plutonium to make nuclear weapons. The Fox Commissioners warned that "the nuclear power industry is unintentionally increasing the risk of nuclear war."

These dangers are real. Many nuclear accidents have occurred, numerous terrorist threats have been made, and India in 1974 exploded a nuclear bomb made using plutonium from a Canadian reactor.

Social repression

If sabotage, terrorism, and proliferation of nuclear weapons are to be stopped, measures such as nuclear police and surveillance of dissidents will be required. One of the costs of a nuclear society will be loss of personal freedom.

Institutional effects

Nuclear power requires huge investments of money, dependence on remote experts, and creates strong organisations with a vested interests in nuclear power. This means that there will be less community say in decisions, less democracy, in a nuclear society.

Aborigines

The mining and export of Australian uranium will contribute to all these problems. It will also cause destruction of Aboriginal culture. The Aborigines do not want uranium mining.

Jobs

It takes nearly \$500,000 to create one job in uranium mining. The same money invested in manufacturing or rural industries would produce many more jobs.

Alternatives

Nuclear power only produces about 1% of energy used in the world today. Many alternatives exist. Energy conservation (such as insulation in houses) can reduce energy requirements by up to 50%. There is plenty of coal for hundreds of years. Renewable energy sources (solar, wind, and organic materials) are the only long term option. Many are economic now, and others only require further research and development.

This draft satisfies *some* of the requirements for a basic leaflet: it is short, it covers the primary issues in an orderly way, and it is written in reasonably simple language.

A meeting was held to discuss this draft. It was decided that we could do better. The following improvements of a general nature were mentioned:

- (a) The text should be shorter.
- (b) Graphics should be thought of in developing the text, not tacked on afterwards.
- (c) The language needs to be simpler, less academic.
- (d) The numbers (such as the amount of plutonium produced in a reactor per year) should be made meaningful by providing analogies and comparisons and images that are meaningful to the person in the street.

Starting again from scratch, I developed the following draft. It was then inspected by several people for accuracy, simplicity and vividness. Suggestions for change are given in the footnotes.

URANIUM

Uranium is a metal. It is used¹ in nuclear power plants to make electricity. Uranium also gives the raw materials² for making atomic³ bombs.

[picture of nuclear explosion]

Nuclear power⁴ is dangerous

Nuclear power plants produce lots of plutonium — a deadly poison.⁵ A tiny speck of plutonium⁶ can cause cancer. It⁷ can cause your children to be deformed — or your grandchildren

Plutonium stays dangerous for over 500,000 years.⁸ No one knows how to store it safely.

Atomic bombs are easy to make with plutonium.⁹ A nuclear power plant produces enough plutonium each year to make 20 bombs.

¹ Add “as a fuel” after “used”: this explains the role of uranium in electricity generation.

² Change “raw materials” to “explosive materials” or something like this. People may not readily grasp the meaning of “raw.”

³ Change “atomic” to “nuclear”, which is the preferred word these days (and also technically more accurate).

⁴ Add “Why” before “nuclear power”: reasons are being presented.

⁵ Change “poison” to “radioactive poison”: this tells that plutonium presents a different kind of danger than ordinary poisons, even if the word “radioactive” isn’t fully understood.

⁶ Add “in your lungs or bones” after “plutonium”: this adds vividness as well as precision.

⁷ Change “It” to “Some of the other radioactive wastes”: this is more accurate. Plutonium can cause genetic defects if it lodges in the sex organs, but the beta emitters such as strontium-90 are more important in causing genetic defects.

⁸ Change “stays dangerous for over 500,000 years” to “and some of these other wastes have to be kept away from people and their food for tens of thousands of years”: adds accuracy and vividness.

⁹ A. Change “Atomic bombs are easy to make with plutonium” to “An exploding nuclear bomb only needs a ball of plutonium the size of a grapefruit”: adds vividness.

B. Next change it to “A grapefruit-sized ball of plutonium is enough to make a nuclear bomb”: the previous version didn’t make sense to some people.

C. Next change it to “A grapefruit-sized ball of plutonium is enough to make a nuclear explosion”: this is more accurate, since the plutonium in a (non-exploding) bomb is farther apart than the size of a grapefruit; it only comes together in the moment of explosion.

“The nuclear power industry is unintentionally contributing to an increased risk of nuclear war.” — The Fox Commissioners¹⁰

Small benefits to Australians

Uranium mining¹¹ would increase Australia’s national income by less than 1/2%.

There will¹² be only a few jobs¹³ from uranium mining. The money needed to create one uranium mining job could create 25 manufacturing jobs.

Uranium mining will destroy Aboriginal land and culture. The Aborigines do not want uranium mining.

Alternatives

[solar graphic]

Only about 1% of energy used today is made from nuclear power. There is plenty of coal for hundreds of years.

Conserving energy (for example, putting insulation in houses) is safer and cheaper than nuclear power. Solar and wind power are the best energy sources for the future. They are also the most suitable for the poor countries now.

Opposition

Nuclear power is being opposed by masses of people all over the world — Sweden, West Germany, France, Japan, and the United States. Australians can help this worldwide movement. The best way is to help to

KEEP URANIUM IN THE GROUND [radiation symbol]

For more information, see your local anti-uranium group, or
Movement Against Uranium Mining/Friends of the Earth
P.O. Box 1875, Canberra City 2601 Ph. (062)-473064.

¹⁰ Change “The Fox Commissioners” to “Ranger Inquiry Report”: the results of the Inquiry should not be associated with only one person (Fox).

¹¹ Add “It is very likely that” before “uranium mining”: the Ranger Inquiry found a range of possible economic impacts.

¹² Change “will” to “would”: don’t assume that mining is inevitable.

¹³ Change “few jobs” to “few hundred jobs”: this gives a better idea of the limited impact of mining on employment.

There were other suggestions as well, and of course minor grammatical changes. The above suggestions were not made all at once, but in a process of give and take over the course of at least one more version of the text. After searching for appropriate graphics and laying out the text and graphics (and these are not easy nor automatic tasks) and getting comments on *that*, the final version was produced (see the end of this article).

Compared to speaking, writing has several advantages and disadvantages from the producer's point of view. Some of the advantages are that there is no need for personally appearing in public (you can be as scruffy as you like while you write), there is plenty of time to get things right (there is no need to perform well *right now*), and the written word has a much greater permanency. Of course speaking can become permanent through recording; but at least in today's world, written materials are much more likely to be reread and studied, and thus to have a continuing and lasting influence. Some of the disadvantages of writing are the lack of immediate response from and interaction with the audience, the long delay between the labour and the published product (it often takes months or years for an article to be published), and the requirement for a much more logical, polished and accurate product (which is directly due to the permanence, and therefore possible close inspection, of the written product).

Actually, there are many similarities between speaking and writing. Here I'll briefly summarise these similarities, and then treat some of the problems peculiar to writing. Similarities:

(a) Broadening the competence and experience in writing of members of a social movement is important in building grassroots involvement and reaching a more democratic assessment of methods and goals.

(b) There is great satisfaction to be gained from writing (seeing one's name in print is a real ego booster).

(c) Activist writers need to be better than writers peddling the establishment line.

(d) Study of the issues is essential.

(e) It is important to understand and use evidence, examples, arguments and responses.

(f) It is valuable to think out what you are going to write.

(g) Conciseness is vital (I plead guilty on this score).

(h) Visual aids are important (when allowed and appropriate): graphics, *italics*, subheadings, indentation, CAPITALS, footnotes,* upside down words (see some of Marshall McLuhan's recent books for inspiration, or advertisements from any glossy magazine).

Now for some of the areas where more comments are needed.

Matching writing (style and content) to the planned audience

To do this, it is obviously necessary to decide who the audience should be. This is not always easy. If one's aim is to further the concern and involvement of members of the public in vital issues affecting human well-being and survival, it is not always clear how this aim is most usefully pursued through writing. Usually this *doesn't* mean academic articles in academic journals. (See page 9 for an assessment of places to publish.)

Feedback

As in speaking, feedback in writing is of the utmost importance. Here is my normal procedure in writing an article, after deciding what the topic is and who the audience is to be:

(i) I think of the general structure of the material over a number of days, weeks or months. Whenever I think of something that should be mentioned, argued or treated, I jot down a reminder note.

(ii) I try to write down a general outline of the things to be covered, which may be added to or altered during a continuation of (i).

(iii) I write a draft of the article, expanding on the outline point by point, trying to get *something* down on paper (for me the hardest part is the first draft).

(iv-1) I reread the first draft, making corrections, deletions and additions.

(iv-2) I reread the second draft, making corrections, deletions and additions.

(iv-3) I reread the third draft, making corrections, deletions and additions.

* The occasional footnote can add variety. Too many footnotes are distracting and signify academic work. [The other footnotes in this article were added in 2010 as more convenient than in-text notes.]

(iv-4, 5, 6, etc.) As above, when necessary. I find that usually it is best to wait a day or a week (in later drafts) before going through a draft: this gives me time to become somewhat detached from it and to approach it more freshly.

(v) I type the latest draft.

(vi) I give copies to several people (honest critics if available) for comments and criticism, with a deadline for responses.

(vii) Sometime after the deadline (and usually after some prodding to actually get comments), I reenter stage (iv), taking into account the comments and criticism, and then exit after (v) (in a few cases, a further pass through (vi), (iv) and (v) is necessary).

The moral of this tale is that polishing and feedback are a necessity for effective communication through writing.

Practice

I've said that polishing written work through the aid of comments and criticism, from the writer and others, is essential for good writing. But on the other hand, too much emphasis on perfection can make a writer dry up. Sometimes I've found it impossible to write a sentence or a page because what I think of is never good enough. The solution to this common stumbling block is practice: the more you write, the easier it is. Like study, a little each day is best. There are several ways to loosen up: (1) write long letters to friends who won't mind what you say; (2) write, for 15 minutes a day, just anything, whatever comes into your head, but keep writing that 15 minutes, even if it's "I can't think of anything to write, I can't think of anything to write, ..."; (3) keep a voluminous diary, or impressions of TV advertisements you've seen, or your ravings on the collapse of modern industrial society. It doesn't matter so much what you write; just the experience of writing down lots of words helps set your mind working on the task of expressing your thoughts in a linear, logical, verbal manner.

Don't give up

Once I've written something I feel is worthwhile, I keep trying to get it published. Often this means getting used to rejections. My experience is that many rejections are on

grounds of either inappropriateness (many newspapers and journals don't take *any* unsolicited material from unknown outsiders, or do not accept material that is too academic or too popular) or of unacceptable opinions — unacceptable to the publisher that is (for example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* is rather intolerant of anti-nuclear material), or both. The first reason may be acknowledged; the second never is, so some other excuse must be made by the editor or referees. The point is that these reasons have little to do with the quality or importance of the work. My experience also is that persistence usually succeeds (but not blind persistence: if a capital city newspaper won't take an article, perhaps a country newspaper or a student newspaper would). There are several reasons for persisting in this way: it gets what you've said across to *someone*, it reduces the discouragement that comes from writing something that never is read, it exposes editors to some pressure to consider your point of view (even if they don't publish it), and it provides valuable experience for later efforts. And if you don't get at least an occasional rejection, you probably aren't pushing your point of view as strongly as you should.

Another way to avoid premature discouragement is to start small and build up as you gain experience. A short column in a FOE newsletter is perhaps a more suitable beginning than a feature article in the *Guardian Weekly*. But whichever way you go, the best of luck.

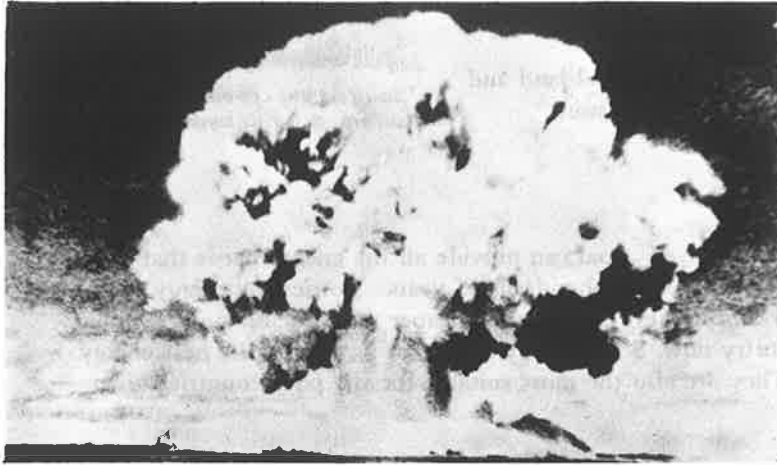
PS. I do not pretend to be the foremost writer or critic in FOE — getting the opportunity to write this article was partly a matter of being known by the appropriate people (something which is all too prevalent in the writing and publishing game). Nevertheless, if you can't find anyone else to read what you've written, send it to me and I'll do my best to get someone (myself or someone else) to offer comments.

PLACES TO PUBLISH

<u>Type of outlet</u>	<u>Examples</u>	<u>Likely impact</u> (in terms of promoting a citizens' movement)	<u>Ease of access</u>
Daily newspapers in large cities	Sydney Daily Telegraph Melbourne Herald Melbourne Age	Large and varied audience, diffuse impact	Articles: very difficult Letters: variable
Newspapers in country areas	Parkes Champion Post Tallaganda Times	Varied but smaller audience, higher impact (due to relatively smaller contact with media in country areas)	Variable; sometimes eager for material
Mass weeklies and monthlies	Woman's Weekly Reader's Digest	Large, but centred on people with particular social orientations (for example, housewives)	Difficult?
Newsmagazines	Bulletin, Time, Newsweek	Large, centred on particular social groups (for example, white collar)	Very difficult
Weekly tabloids	National Times, Nation Review	Limited to readership mainly from particular social groups (for example, upper middle class)	Difficult
Organisation journals	Chain Reaction, Habitat, union journals, student newspapers	Smallish audience, possible large impact (unless preaching to the converted)	Variable (often easy)
Free distribution	Leaflets, posters	Depends on scale of distribution	Easy
Semi-academic journals	Quadrant, Ambio, Australian Quarterly	Limited	Variable
Academic journals	Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences, American Journal of Sociology, Theory and Society	Very limited	Variable (usual prerequisite: experience in academia)

(There are exceptions to all the above generalisations. For example, The Canberra Times is excellent in terms of printing articles written by non-journalists; an article in the academic journal Science can have a large impact.)

URANIUM



Uranium is a metal. It is used as a fuel in nuclear power plants to make electricity. Uranium also gives the raw materials for making nuclear bombs.

WHY NUCLEAR POWER IS DANGEROUS

Nuclear power plants produce lots of plutonium - a deadly radioactive poison. A tiny speck of plutonium in your lungs or bones can cause cancer. Other radioactive wastes can cause your children - or your grandchildren - to be deformed.

Plutonium and some of these other wastes have to be kept away from people and their food for tens of thousands of years. And yet no one knows how to store them safely.

A grapefruit-sized ball of plutonium is enough to make a nuclear explosion. A nuclear power plant produces enough plutonium each year to make 20 bombs.

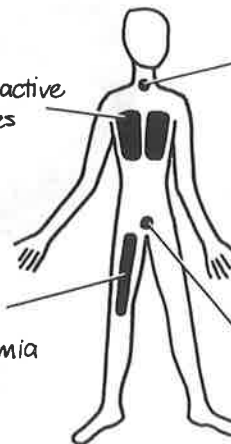
Inhaled radioactive krypton causes lung cancer

Strontium 90 causes bone cancer leukaemia

Radioactive iodine causes cancer of thyroid

Radioactive caesium accelerates ageing

Genetic mutations for future generations



Cancer takes up to 20 years to develop. Children are more susceptible than adults.

'The nuclear power industry is unintentionally contributing to an increased risk of nuclear war.'

—RANGER INQUIRY REPORT

SMALL BENEFITS FOR AUSTRALIANS

It is very likely that uranium mining would increase Australia's national income by less than ½ per cent.

There would be only a few hundred jobs from uranium mining. The money needed to create one uranium mining job could create 25 manufacturing jobs.

Uranium mining would destroy Aboriginal land and culture. The Aboriginal people do not want uranium mining on their land.



"Sorry old boy - its either your culture, or our air conditioners"

ALTERNATIVES

There is no need for nuclear power. Coal can provide all the energy needs that nuclear power can, and there is enough coal for hundreds of years. Conserving energy (for example, putting insulation in homes) is safer and cheaper than nuclear power. Solar heating is a growing industry now. Solar energy and wind power are the best energy sources for the future. They are also the most suitable for the poor countries now.



OPPOSITION

Nuclear power is being opposed by masses of people all over the world — in Sweden, West Germany, France, Japan, the United States and other countries. Australians can help this worldwide movement. The best way is to help to

KEEP URANIUM IN THE GROUND

FOR MORE INFORMATION

See your local anti-uranium group, or
Movement Against Uranium Mining/Friends of the Earth,
P.O. Box 1875, Canberra City, 2601.
Phone: (062) 47 3064.

