



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

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### ON WRITING AN ARTICLE

**M**OST people have an urge to write, and few people's lives do not provide material about which to write. Our purpose is to get the urge and the material together in an acceptable way.

Business people are accustomed to reading and writing reports. The essential difference between writing a report (Monthly Letter of February 1952) and writing an essay or an article is this: in the report one is charged with conveying information to someone who is, in most cases, already interested, while in an article one has first of all to catch attention, then hold it, and then satisfy it.

There is a tendency to speak of authorship as if it were a mystery, remote and secret, revealed only to a few gifted or inspired people. That is an attitude of which to be suspicious. Many delightful essays have been written by men and women who had no gift from the muses, but had something to write about and the energy to get down to writing it.

There are three points to be considered before you write for publication: your purpose in writing; the reader's purpose in reading, and the publisher's purpose in publishing. It is not enough excuse for taking pen in hand merely that one wishes to see one's words in print. But if what you have in mind satisfies the three purposes—then write.

#### *Basic Principles*

Nothing is particularly difficult if you break it down into small jobs, and this business of writing lends itself admirably to such treatment.

Simplest slogan to remember, probably, is "have something to write; write it; end it." Another is to be sure to use enough details so that your reader will know what your article is about. To make things easy for the reader, follow a natural order in your writing from point to point, and do not leave out any "bridges" between points. And—a sadly unused precept this—stick to your subject.

There are three literary forms which the writer will wish to bear in mind: intellectual, moral and aesthetic.

Under the first he will detect the possibility a situation holds for writing about it interestingly; he will, through collection of material and thinking about his subject, prepare an orderly array of facts and thoughts. The moral form demands sincerity in the writer; not honesty only, but the strong desire to do the job so well that he conveys his vision and conclusions to the reader in clear and convincing language. The aesthetic form demands that he incorporate something of beauty in his writing, beauty of language, of construction, of illustration, and of exactness.

Skill in writing means ability to present a subject accurately and vividly. It is here that the genius of a writer shows itself. The soul of the craftsman cries out against the stringing together of words and phrases to make a show without caring about the communication of ideas.

Where does vividness come from? No essayist is worth his salt who does not keep fresh in his mind the knowledge that the revealing incident and the illuminating flash are far, far better than the roll of drums in conveying ideas. Literature touches life, and it needs to be lively; it is designed to please or to inform, and it must be understandable; the writer fails of his highest success who neglects the art in writing which makes what is written inviting to readers.

Literature is composed of words, and words are symbols, not things in themselves. They have, it is true, rhythm and harmony when put together skilfully, but in the main their beauty is to be found in the association of ideas in the mind of the reader.

This is why good writers begin at the point of the reader's interest. Some authors, full of their own thoughts, have produced articles and books which are so little known as to be almost confidential. They wrote their subjects for themselves and not for readers, and insisted with dignity that those who wished would find their way through the maze of words. As A. P. Herbert, that skilled writer, put it: "If you want to feed the birds you do not insist that they walk in at the front door."

## *What to Write About*

Life is so full of things crying out to be written about that there should be little difficulty in selecting a topic about which one knows something and can learn more. Anything that a competent writer loves well enough he can make attractive and useful to any good reader.

The theme should be something important to people, something that affects their lives. When the happy conjunction is found of something vital to the writer and of significance to the reader, then writing becomes emotionally rewarding. It is Dorothy L. Sayers who vouches for this in *Gaudy Night*: "When you get the thing dead right and know it's dead right, there's no excitement like it. But if there's any subject in which you're content with the second-rate, then it isn't really your subject."

There are three principal ways of getting ideas for articles or essays: by drawing upon your own experience, by listening to others, and by reading. Few authors believe in the miraculous conception of ideas. The only way in which they get topic titles is by dredging for them.

This is where observation becomes important. The writer must do more than see things in a casual way. His every waking hour is useful to his muse. The things that pass before his view will be received with feeling and understanding. They will stimulate his thoughts. A writer will feel more to the cubic yard and take in more in every sixty seconds than do people who pass through space and time without his urgency to comprehend events.

### *Nothing Comes from Nothing*

There is no such thing as creation of an article out of nothing. The writer does not inhabit a desolate world, nor does he scribble within the confines of his own brain. All life contributes to his work. He draws upon his experience for descriptive power and for guidance in laying a new thought alongside a stored thought and producing a novel idea.

Wide reading provides the writer with a treasury of facts, thoughts, analogies and illustrations he needs. He must replenish his mind continually, if his articles are to have sparkle, authenticity and newness. It is impossible to write anything proudly if our heads are empty of material upon which our ideas may work. What a condemnation it was when Dr. Samuel Johnson said of a man that he had written more than he had read!

Fortunately, there is no reason in these days for neglect of reading. Libraries are available almost everywhere, in towns, in caravans, and even by mail. Many of the world's great books are published in low-priced paper-covered form. Digests and general magazines carry authoritative articles about persons and events.

That is for background reading. When it comes to finding facts for a specific article, the writer must change from wide reading to digging in a confined

space. He will stake out an area and stay within it. Shakespeare found the plot of *As You Like It* in Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* and that of *The Winter's Tale* in Robert Greene's *Pandosto*; he found his Roman stories in Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch. That represents his wide reading; then, he had to bear down on each idea, to build around it the authentic environment that makes a play credible.

No matter what subject a writer chooses upon which to write, something has been written about it. Diligent enquiry at the library, in book stores, of professional people in universities, of the information departments in industrial associations, of adult education and extension school people, will uncover rich lodes of knowledge. The information sources available to Canadians are great, but that, as Kipling said so often about an interpolation in his *Plain Tales from the Hills*, "that is another story". The discussion of sources merits a Monthly Letter of its own.

### *Imagination and Inspiration*

Having gathered the needed facts, then is the time to give imagination wings. If he has imagination, there is nothing in life too trifling to be developed into an interesting piece of writing by a competent writer. It often happens, indeed, that trifles grow under capable treatment, backed by adequate knowledge, into better literature than do big events.

It is good practice for the budding writer to write something in some degree imaginative every day. Draw upon the past and the present thoughtfully; get inside the facts to search diligently for something on which the imagination may exercise itself profitably; and then write.

It is an exhilarating experience to produce an article, a letter to a friend, a booklet, or even a single line, that bears the brand of inspiration. It is a personal triumph that gives pleasure to others when we use our imagination to make little events interesting.

### *Starting to Write*

People frequently ask a writer: "How long does it take you to write an article?"

That is a difficult question to answer. Some persons think only of the intensive time of special research for this particular article and the fevered hours of writing. How wrong they are!

Preparation for composing an article which attempts to be informative and readable started many years ago. It includes all the experiences of the writer—school, travel, work, church, sports, societies, social life. It includes drab days and days full of adventure. It includes happiness and sorrow, realization and disappointment. It includes friendships and their loss.

The time taken in writing is an individual thing, conditioned by the author's personality, the nature of the article, the availability of raw material, and other factors peculiar to environment. One thing is sure: when the starting gate rises the wise author will ride the horse always on the dead run.

The way to start writing is to start, even at something small or less pretentious than one would like. When an ambitious composer asked Mozart how to write symphonies, the master remarked: "You're rather young; why not try ballads first?" "But you wrote symphonies when you were only ten years old," replied the aspiring young man. "Yes," said Mozart, "but I didn't ask how."

When a thing is thoroughly well done it sometimes has the air of being a miracle. There is no miracle about a piece of successful writing: it is hard work gathering facts, hard work recalling precedent pictures hard work fitting them into the present setting, hard work appraising intelligently, hard work writing carefully and brightly. Any sort of book, any sort of article, any sort of advertisement, any sort of speech, if it has merit, is an achievement arising out of toil and sweat—and often tears.

A little orderliness can be pressed into service to ease the toil. Having gathered the evidence, we may arrange it in order. We may group and marshal and classify the elements of this chaos of notes we see before us. Even when a writer writes an article about writing articles, he has to organize his facts and thoughts.

#### *How to Write*

The labour of composition begins when you have put these separate threads of fact and thought into a loom, to weave them into a continuous whole.

Writing takes more care than talking. He who writes carelessly confesses thereby that he does not attach much importance to his own thoughts.

Literature is a human document. It cannot be rigid, like a dictionary, but neither can it be casual, as in talking.

Brevity is a golden rule, but a special kind of brevity. The reader, it may be supposed, has not done as much swotting on the subject as you have done. His mind is not full of it. It will not do, then, for you to hop, skip and jump with no bridges between the leaps. The reader will not be able to follow what is to the learned writer a perfectly clear pattern of landing places.

Brevity, in the sense of telegraphic shortness, has no place in article writing, but brevity, meaning pungency, has an important part to play. No situation must be left to drag out its melancholy course in long-winded language. To use many words to communicate few thoughts is the unmistakable sign of mediocrity, while to gather much thought into few words understandably—that stamps the good writer. It is sheer laziness, said Churchill, not compressing thought into a reasonable space.

#### *Language*

Language can be made to express in living words every conception of the human mind. It is the writer's aim to put into type vivid descriptions and well-drawn word pictures of things he sees and hears and imagines, so realistically that an exact reproduction is formed in the reader's mind.

This ambition calls for the use of dynamic words, words which are graphic, active, and pleasant. It pays scant attention to rules and regulations, spurning the bogus bogey of the split infinitive and suchlike, and it concentrates upon making moving-pictures, not still-life. It takes colour where it can find it, as Angelico used the white of the lily, the rose of the dawn, the blue of the sky and the gold of the stars, in his painting.

The colours must be blended. There must be cohesion and continuity. The writer, seized by an idea, will keep right on writing. He will not go back at the second paragraph two or three times before writing the third. So long as original writing is under way and going well, he will keep the copy flowing. Then, the article completed, he will pause, hand over the reins to his intelligence, and start polishing and amending.

Vivid writing, which should be the aim of every article writer, is attained through the use of well-drawn word pictures. It will be found that the words which last longest in memory, and the thoughts which die latest, are those which because of their liveliness and their fittingness are not content to die. Words can become alive, and walk up and down in the hearts of readers long after the occasion for writing them has passed.

Colour can be overdone, of course: it must be fitting to the subject, to the writer and to the audience. The true artist in words is restrained. He does not make a habit of using circus-poster yellow and red in his reproductions of scenes, and he does not use war club words when pinsized ones will do. Colour depends upon perfect fitness. It can be as delicate as the inner tint of a lilac blossom.

It may seem strange to some to suggest the reading of poetry as an aid in writing prose. Coleridge described prose as "words in their best order" and poetry as "the best words in their best order." That, surely, is something to be attempted by the writer of articles.

A poem has rhythm, images, and completeness. It is sensitive to the tiny oscillations of molecules and to the rise and fall of nations and to the birth and death of stars. To reveal the inner forces of these things, the words in poetry must not only give a name to an object but must give a true image of it.

Herein lies the great service of poetry to the prose writer: it makes him acquainted with synonyms and the gradations of meanings and the subtleties of exact expression. The writer who reads poetry will approach nearer the finding of right words than the man who despises poetry as something soft and effeminate. Very few poets have succeeded in being so poetical as Isaiah, Sir Thomas Browne and Ruskin have been in prose.

#### *Simplicity*

The writer is thrice blessed who can present ideas so that they are apprehended with the least possible mental effort.

Affectation in writing belongs to extreme youth. Every mature author seeks to express his thoughts as purely, clearly, definitely and shortly as possible, and his simplicity is a badge not only of truth but of genius.

Obscurity causes much misunderstanding. It may, by some, be taken to indicate profundity of thought, but many readers have learned not to blame their own lack of understanding for the writer's clumsiness in expression.

There is a lot of nonsense talked about style. The style of great authors has been their way of saying what they had to say simply, clearly, concisely and gracefully. Style is the living body of the writer's thought, and not a costume that he puts on and takes off.

When a man starts talking about rules, in whatever art, you may know him for a second-rate man, according to John Ruskin. If he talks about them much, and makes them his god, he is third-rate, or not an artist at all. But if one insists that there must be rules of some sort about style, here are five laws under which all the conditions of style may be grouped: Economy, Simplicity, Sequence, Climax, Variety.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch sums up the principles of style neatly in his book *On the Art of Reading*: The strength of good prose resides not so much in the swing and balance of the single sentence as in the marshalling of argument, the orderly procession of paragraphs, the disposition of parts so that each finds its telling, its proper place; the adjustment of the means to the end; the strategy which brings its full force into action at the calculated moment and drives the conclusion home.

### *Craftsmanship*

A few hints may be given about ways in which the author may attain clearness in what he writes.

Sentences should be short. From the example given in some books of a sentence 213 words long written in the 19th century, we have come today to prefer sentences that average no more than 25 words, and Rudolf Flesch, author of several excellent books about writing, advocates an average of 17 words. The way to shorten sentences is to look for the joints in their construction and break them there into smaller pieces.

The craftsman in words uses them to convey ideas, and that is the only use words are. The reader is not interested in what a word means to the author, but what it means to him.

There are words to fit every requirement of the writer, and he is unfair to his reader and to his own reputation if he is satisfied with "nearly" the right word. Words have an aura, and a rose by any other name would not be exactly what we think a rose is.

The particular writer will seek the word which is so exactly fitting that it will seem an echo to the sense of what he seeks to convey. When appealing to a fighting instinct his words will stamp their feet; in hunting they will swish with secrecy, or speed and

thrill as the game is run to earth; in fearing they will throb and shiver; in teaching they will vibrate with authority.

Look at nature. How fitting are the words which describe the rustling of trees, the rushing of waters, the chirping of birds, the growling of beasts, and the whistling, humming, crying, groaning, scolding, laughing and chattering of human beings. From these sounds, in some way, after centuries of experiment, art produces a Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and a Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The new writer falls heir to all of that, and there is no excuse for his using bleached-out, blunted, commonplace words and forms.

### *Descriptive Writing*

Much writing consists of describing events and things. A letter home from vacation, an account of a new business project, the report of a staff function: these are almost wholly descriptive.

Greatest success in description comes through simplicity in telling about scenes and persons and events so that the reader seems actually to participate in or to know them. Description should not be static, but active and moving.

Observed facts are needed as the basis of graphic writing, and dearth of facts cannot be hidden by all the fine language in the world's dictionaries. The person who does not work at observing, recording, analysing and thinking—the person, in short, who is lazy about his writing—will write descriptions that are drab or blatant, but never engrossing or attractive.

One example of the power of good description may be given. It is from Browning's poem *Meeting at Night*. Browning wrote: "The gray sea and the long black land; and the yellow half-moon, large and low." Think of what is lost in pictorial power if "long black land" is changed to "the shore stretching in darkness for miles on each side."

### *Keep Trying—and Learning*

A world is passing by, and those with an urge to write are trying to put a bit of it on paper. Every article, every book, cannot be a masterpiece, but honest journey-man writing can accomplish much in practical business affairs, in affording aesthetic enjoyment to both writer and reader, and, perhaps, in making the world a trifle better.

Experienced writers as well as novices frequently come to grief. Those who have been writing for years have planted many memorial flowers at spots where a great idea fell by the wayside, where some outside force compelled them to abandon a brilliant endeavour, where an inner lack drove them from a promising prospect. Writers learn to rise above these tragedies without minimizing them.

For those who persevere to the point where they attain some measure of acceptance of their work by readers, and some degree of satisfaction in their own minds: for them, writing is a medium of achievement and of adequate self-expression, a giver of tranquillity, and a means of furthering their most devout desires.