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On Writing Clearly

WHEN you write a letter you are trying to convey a meaning from your mind to the mind of your reader.

Clearness in writing a letter consists in this: that you write what you wish to say in the spirit in which you wish it to be received, and in such a way that your reader gathers both the spirit and the facts without effort.

We are not interested in this *Monthly Letter* with the mechanics of letter writing. There are already many comma sleuths, type addicts, and grammatical high priests engrossed only in the techniques. It is the message that is important. We need punctuation, clear type and grammatical construction as servants, but our purpose in using them is to write so that we shall be understood in the spirit in which we write.

There is a personal benefit in writing clearly. The more clearly you write, the more clearly you will understand what you are writing about. The noted English author, Arnold Bennett, writer of novels and short stories that are still well read after forty years, went so far as to say "the exercise of writing is an indispensable part of any genuine effort towards mental efficiency."

It is one of the good things about communicating ideas that we can be always improving, sharpening up our wits so as to do the job better. It is sad to come upon someone who has thoughts that are worth-while, but who is not learning how to express them. Still more to be pitied are those who think that they have conveyed their ideas when they haven't.

Think of the reader

Some letter writers are completely absorbed in the things about which they are writing, about quantities and qualities, about dollars and delivery. To become intelligible and effective they need to enrich their thoughts by spreading them out so as to include people.

Some persons will say that business is objective, mechanical, dealing with commodities and services rather than with people. How absurd it is to say so when every business man knows that every sale, every purchase, every contract, every financial deal, depends upon the word "yes" or "no" from some human being.

In addition to getting across its point, your letter should make a friend of your reader, or consolidate a friendship already established. There should be an air of grace in it, raising your stature in the eyes of the reader.

How is all this to be attained? By seeing your message through the eyes of your reader. What is the person like to whom you are writing? What will he be interested in learning from you?

Imagine yourself talking to the reader, instead of writing. Almost automatically you will find yourself answering questions he might ask if he were sitting across the desk from you.

This requires you to write the reader's language. Avoid words he is not likely to know, or, if you have to use them, explain them without giving the appearance of "talking down" to him.

Go farther than the bare facts demanded in a question. Find out what more you can do. Often there is a point of information that would be helpful to your reader, about which he failed to inquire. By giving it unasked you are using your position in a constructive way to raise the prestige of your firm and enhance your value.

The writer's responsibility

People who write letters have an obligation to be intelligible. They are not writing to impress their correspondents but to express thoughts.

It is unjust, it is immoral and it is unbusinesslike not to know what you mean, to shrug a careless

shoulder and say that you write what you write and the reader should make his own interpretation.

We are tempted to believe that when our ideas do not get across to someone the fault lies in his incapacity to grasp them. But when we shrug off our duty in that way we put ourselves on a level with Sancho Panza, the simple squire who accompanied Don Quixote on his adventures: "If you do not understand me," he said, "no wonder if my sentences be thought nonsense."

There is, of course, some responsibility laid upon the reader of a letter. A writer should not be required to write in some magic sort of way so that an inattentive, mind-wandering, careless, inefficient or foolish reader is compelled to understand what is said — like forcing medicine down the throat of a reluctant child.

Analyse and assemble

All hope of clearness is lost if you start to write about something you don't understand, or if you write faster than you think. Let us keep our thinking straight and we shall have well-founded hope of making our writing simple.

Clear thinking is needed for wise action in every field of human action, but in none more so than in writing letters. The more we have predigested our data before starting to write, the more free our minds are to tackle the composition of a letter.

We need adequate information. That is the basic material of all verbal reasoning. The information has to be exact: let us have no woolly ideas in the foundation of our thinking or we cannot avoid woolliness in the structure we erect upon it.

One of the great arts in effective correspondence is to get down to the nub of the matter, see the essential points, brush away the superfluous, and express the result of our thinking clearly.

Putting into practise a system like that can be the greatest enjoyment on earth for a writer of letters. The alert-minded man finds greater satisfaction in digging up the answers to questions than in answering them when the answers come easily. If a man loses this sense of enjoyment he is already beginning to stiffen up.

Then, having gathered the facts, decided their priority, and determined the tone of our letter, let us arrange our material.

A writer makes a gross mistake when he tries to cram into his reader's mind a mass of unorganized ideas, facts, and viewpoints. Clarity begins at home. Having thoughts to convey, we need to survey them from end to end and to shuffle them into the order of their importance. We have to classify and conquer the elements in ourselves before we can write with any certainty of appealing to the intelligence of others.

All this is not so laborious to do as the description of the process makes it seem. With thoughtful self-discipline over a period we shall find ourselves analysing and assembling and expressing swiftly and incisively. It will not remain a conscious process, but will become second nature.

The right words

A stock of good words, culled from excellent authors, is a precious thing. There is a feeling in words, as well as sense. They will laugh and sing for us, or mourn and be sad, if we take the care to use the words that convey the spirit as well as the sense of what we wish to say. As Gertrude Stein put it: "One of the things that is a very interesting thing to know is how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside of you."

Words are sounds, and written words are the musical score of meaningful sounds. In nature there are rustling trees, rushing waters, chirping birds, growling beasts. Human beings laugh and hum and whistle and groan and scold. From all these sounds, in some way, after centuries of experiment, art produces a Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and a Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Those same symbols are given to us with which to influence people. All we need do is choose them wisely and use them imaginatively.

The person to whom you are writing will respond to some words while remaining indifferent to others. How can you expect to energize a reader into doing what you want him to do if you write stale and flat words in uninspired sentences? Mark Twain is quoted as saying: "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Putting words together

Jonathan Swift, whose writing experience carried him all the way from the baby-talk of his *Journal to Stella* through the fire and thunder of his essays on religion and politics to the satire of his *Gulliver's Travels*, said shrewdly that writing style is "proper words in proper places."

To conquer the harshness of sense and the deadness of facts so often encountered in daily work needs the management and creative power of people who have set their sights upon true word artistry. This does not by any means encourage a flamboyant style. If the spirit of Macaulay or Carlyle or Ruskin were to drop in some day seeking to write a piece for our customers, we should certainly make way for him. But when we are left to ourselves we will be content with short

sentences, humble words and clear pictures, so long as they express what we wish to convey in the spirit in which we wish it to be received.

Speaking of humble words and clear pictures, let us look at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In it you will find a hundred homely phrases that have become part of our language, and there is not a difficult word among them. Here are examples, picked without great searching, from the first Act: Not a mouse stirring; The trappings and the suits of woe: Frailty, thy name is woman; A truant disposition; I shall not look upon his like again; More in sorrow than in anger; The primrose path; Something is rotten in the State of Denmark; Neither a borrower nor a lender be; To thine own self be true; To the manner born; The time is out of joint; I could a tale unfold; One may smile, and smile, and be a villain; Wild and whirling words.

Whatever painters of pictures may claim as their liberties in spreading their cubistic thoughts before the public, the writer cannot demand that license: he is under obligation to be explicit. He will fail if he fills his letters with affectation and conceit, if he tries to cover up lack of matter with splashes of novelty, if he abandons simplicity as a criterion of beauty.

This is not to say that flamboyancy is always wrong. It is not wrong always, but it is always dangerous. There are rare occasions when great golden phrases are needed and fitting. Everyone feels at some time the urge to break into rich prose or poetry. The place to sow such literary wild oats is in a private garden, not in the field of business.

About simplicity

It is not easy to write simply; in fact it is more difficult to be simple than to be complex. But it is a pleasant experience, like getting into slippers after a day's work or shopping.

The *Editorial Manual and Style Guide* of Maclean-Hunter Publishing Co. Ltd., Toronto, has this to say: "The ideal article has been described as one written so that the words are for children and the meaning is for men." That can be a guide for letter writing also.

This is not a plea for an A B C sort of writing. Far from it. We in business, charged with writing and reading letters, have graduated from the primer class. If you are going to stand out for clearness at any price, then you are going to shut out yourself and your readers from many good things, because many good things cannot be told in primer language except by being put falsely.

If we are to say anything significant about a business matter; if we are to sell an idea or a commodity; we have to rise above the level of sheer enumeration of first-order facts.

There are some things a reader should not expect to grasp entire at one swift reading. To a quick and practised mind, understanding a factual report may be easy, but when matters of appraisal and opinion are involved it is expected of even the most accomplished reader that he will pay attention, mull over, and use his brains.

As the writer of a business letter you will do your best to make the reader's job easy. You stand between your firm and your correspondent as interpreter.

You should not fidget around the edges of what you have to say. Nothing can be more deadly in a business letter than faltering and fumbling, or spreading yourself over a lot of generalities, or wandering off into vague profundities.

Be concise. Use short, direct, simple statements to cover your points, and state them in well-organized order. When you are inclined to use often the words "and, but, however, consequently" in the middle of your sentences, try putting in a period instead. You will find that this adds to the clearness of what you are saying. It dissipates the fog, and saves your reader from having to back-track to find the path.

Give facts exactly and as completely as is necessary. It is more important for you to be sure you have given the needed information than it is to get all the mail into your "out" basket before noon.

Be precise. Surely you have something specific to say or you wouldn't be writing the letter.

Define problems, solutions and words for yourself before putting them into writing. Some of the greatest disputes would cease in a moment if one of the parties would put into a few clear words what he understands the argument to be about. When writing your letter, you do not need to define everything, but only those words or thoughts that may not be as clearly understood by your reader as by you.

Be meaningful. Words need to have not only meaning in themselves — dictionary meaning — but meaning in the setting in which they are used. They should convey a message, not merely the symbol of a sound. It is said that certain New Guinea people announce important events by beating drums, passing the signals from hill-top to hill-top. All that the signals tell is that something has happened about which the listeners had better become excited. That should not be, but sometimes is, the only effect of letters. They leave out the intelligible content of their message, or they deal in abstractions without concrete meaning.

Some pitfalls

Be careful. There are some areas in expression where special care is needed. A map cannot be drawn of all

these in this small space, but a few will be mentioned as typical of the sort of thing for which the writer needs to be on the alert.

Loose or unattached pronouns can cause trouble. An airplane accident was traced to the fact that when the pilot ordered his co-pilot: "Pull 'em up!" the co-pilot raised the flaps instead of the landing wheels. The "them", being loose, attached itself to a different context in these two minds.

Avoid exaggeration. It is essentially a form of ignorance, replacing poverty of language. Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, said that every reporter ought to be knocked on the head and told that he does not improve his work or do the office any good by exaggeration.

Keep adjectives in reserve to make your meaning more precise, and look with suspicion on those you use to make your language more emphatic. Adjectives and adverbs should only be used where they contribute something to the sense.

Beware of words with two or more meanings. After fifteen years of research a Columbia University professor learned that the word "run" has 832 meanings. A little girl meeting for the first time the hymn "There is a green hill far away, Without a city wall" was rightly puzzled as to why a green hill should have a wall at all. The word "without" meaning "outside" had not yet come within her knowledge. Be sure that you write in such a way that the words you use will be read in the same sense by your reader.

Avoid jargon. Specialists in any branch of human activity acquire methods of communicating ideas that set them apart from other specialists and from the general public. Yet even the most learned scientist does not order a dinner or propose marriage in five-syllable words, some of them manufactured specially for his own use.

Many great men have written simply. Few people today have anything more important to say than William Harvey said about the circulation of the blood or Charles Darwin about the origin of species. If they have, then we may forgive them the use of longer words.

A creative purpose

Textbooks on writing can go only so far as to give examples that may suggest lines to follow. Letter formulas are not like corsets, into which thoughts are forced and laced. They are rather like skeletons around which we mold the flesh of thoughts, and then breathe into the words of our thoughts the breath of life.

Writing a letter is not routine. Every letter has some creative purpose, else it has no reason for being written. It is designed to win or increase friendship, to bring in an order, to get goods you want, or to perform some other function that will add to your personal or business well-being.

The ambitious writer will try to get rid of sameness. The laws of nature and the desires of men are against it. A business letter should have personality. It should use variation in tone and manner as well as in contents.

This means using constructive imagination. It is a mistake to merely copy form letters out of a book. Be original. Learn the principles of clear writing and set your own course. A horse can't win a race by following in the steps of another horse, says James F. Bender in his book *Make Your Business Letters Make Friends* (McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., New York).

To sum up

An essay like this, whose value consists merely in its bringing together some known facts in brief form, is to be considered as nothing more than an introduction to its topic.

The letter writer who is eager to improve his work will wish to read further and deeper. Take Shakespeare for the concrete simplicity of his word pictures. Read the parables and the Gettysburg address for the comprehensive way they convey great feelings about ordinary events. If you can make time to enjoy reading a book about another art whose principles can be adapted by you to your writing, read John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. He tells great truths about composition and structure, about simplicity and the light and shadow of art.

The principles that these writers used are as vital today as they were when written. Complexity of living has come upon us with our progress in science and technology. The essence of physical evolution is movement away from the more simple towards the more complex. But in our social contacts we need to put forward every effort to move from complexity to simplicity. This is as necessary in business as it is in international affairs.

The man who fails to try to write so clearly as to be understandable to the audience he desires to reach is lazy or affected. If he does not know the subject about which he writes he is a pretender. If he does know his subject and cannot express his thoughts he is merely incompetent.

The superior man writes as if he were interested in what he is trying to say, and as if it were vital to him that his readers should understand what is in his mind.