



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## ON WRITING A LETTER

NO one knows when the first letter was written, or who wrote it, but the letter, as a form of self-expression, has existed for thousands of years. Whether written on stone, on wood, or on skin, with the edge of a sharp flint, a burnt stick or a goose-quill pen, or on paper with a modern electric typewriter, letters have changed the course of history. They have played their part in provoking wars, in cementing famous friendships, in closing great business deals, and in the realization and destruction of dreams.

Many lasting and lovely examples of this most graceful and self-revealing of all arts have come down to us through the ages. The letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son are still quoted as models of educational literature; those of Madame de Sévigné give a vivid picture of the times of Louis XIV; and from the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians grew the foundation of the Christian dogma of salvation.

But it is not with the letter as a social grace, a golden link in the chain of romance, or a lasting piece of literature that we are concerned in this article. We will attempt to discuss what often seems to be the step-child of the art of writing — the business letter.

Mail is used for many purposes. Contributions are solicited; services are sold; and all kinds of goods, from bobby-pins to expensive automobiles are promoted by letter. One of the outstanding examples of business built up and maintained by letters is the great mail order house, whose yearly turnover runs into millions of dollars. You may imagine the amount of correspondence involved when you learn that one Canadian mail order house sends out three million main and three million secondary catalogues a year.

All too often the great potentialities of the business letter are not thought of. Time is short, and letter writing may be looked upon as a task to be performed quickly, with the least effort. It is safe to say that the reader reacts to letters written in this way with the same lack of interest as was originally shown by the writer. The letter which is just "good enough" will very likely have only mediocre results, while a drab, casual letter may often actually annoy the reader.

Few men are in business for financial reward alone. Business is a means of living, of self-expression and of real self-satisfaction. The average business man is a perfectly normal human being, sympathetic, warm and friendly. He finds it natural and easy to show his real personality in face-to-face contacts, but alas! when he sits down to write a letter he changes completely. He becomes cold, formal and full of phrases like these:

"We beg to advise and wish to state  
That yours has arrived of recent date.  
We have it before us, its contents noted,  
And herewith enclose the prices we quoted.  
Attached please find as per your request  
The samples you wanted, and we would suggest,  
Regarding the matter and due to the fact  
That up until now your order we've lacked,  
We hope you will not delay it unduly,  
And beg to remain yours very truly."

A business man may be firmly attached to such meaningless phrases but he may consider parting with them when it is pointed out that they add quite considerably to the expense of his letter. Experts have estimated that the average cost of a business letter, including the time spent by the person dictating it, the stenographer, and materials, is slightly more than 40 cents. A Chicago concern has estimated that the cost of letters amounts to half a million dollars a day in the United States. Short, friendly letters are not only less expensive, but are better builders of goodwill than the long, formal kind.

### *Aim of the Letter*

What does the business letter set out to do? Basically it may be defined as a message that attempts to influence its reader to take some action or attitude desired by the writer. The reader must first believe, and then he must feel. If he believes and feels strongly enough, then he will take the desired action.

To begin with, the writer must think: What am I trying to accomplish in this letter, and how can I best accomplish it?

If a man writes or dictates under an inspired surge of ideas and his expression is so closely identified with his thought and feeling that he cannot make it better by planning and preparation, then, obviously, he should not try to do so. True inspiration needs no trimming or tinkering. But in the majority of cases we are not inspired; we have only an idea to be worked out, and planning is needed.

The writer should have a clear mental picture of the letter he will write, including its length, the propositions he wishes to make, and the general phrasing of the central ideas. Be quite clear as to what you want to say before you begin to write, for if the purpose of the letter is not clear in your own mind, how can you expect to make it clear in your reader's mind?

In their book, *Business Writing: Theory and Practice*, Messrs. Parkhurst and Davis list the basic purposes of the business letter: (1) to insure accuracy; (2) to make transactions binding; (3) to furnish complete records; (4) to provide the least expensive communication; (5) to make contacts for the salesman; (6) to promote goodwill; (7) to talk more effectively; (8) to buy or sell goods.

If our letters are to be effective, and accomplish all these objectives, then it is easily seen that hasty composition will not do.

#### *The "You" Viewpoint*

The most important thing to think about when you sit down to write a letter is not yourself, but the reader. What are *his* interests? What are *his* needs? What kind of a letter would *he* like to get? There can be no completely successful or effective letter unless the writer moves over into the place of the reader, and considers *his* comfort and *his* convenience.

It is always a great temptation to write about what we ourselves are doing or hoping to do; it is human nature to tend to be self-centred. We like to think that everyone is interested in *our* problems, *our* products, *our* desires. But self-interest must be subordinated if a letter is to be effective in selling goods, services or goodwill. Forget about yourself and concentrate on your reader. It is a good idea to make the two principal words "you" and "yours". "We", of course, cannot be dispensed with, but "you" can be emphasized and cultivated.

Every day most business houses receive letters from a wide cross-section of the country. Our day's mail can include letters from bankers and business men, housewives and clubwomen, teachers and pupils, city dwellers and people living on isolated farms. To do justice to these various readers we cannot attempt to write to each one in exactly the same way. Each has his own particular interests, his likes and dislikes, and we need to try to make each recipient feel that the letter he received was written for him and him alone.

For example, letters to city men may be shorter than those to farmers, especially in the "between season" periods. Letters to women can be more deferential;

they can appeal more to the emotions, and emphasize the beauty, design or up-to-date styling of the product. Letters to men can be more direct and factual, stressing economy and efficiency. Classify your reader, and then individualize him.

Henry Hoke, publisher of *The Reporter of Direct Mail Advertising*, spoke to the Advertising and Sales Executives Club in Montreal this spring on the subject of successful letter writing. He mentioned four things as being wrong with most business letters. These are: (1) useless words; (2) improper arrangement of words; (3) incorrect expression of thought; and (4) offensive words. In this last category he emphasized the words "I", "we", "our", "mine", "my" and "us."

Giving the reader the centre of the stage is a challenge, and it can be fun, too. It calls for more than just bringing out some old stock phrases. Everyone likes to think of himself as capable of observing and understanding human nature. Everyone likes to be considered a man of imagination, sympathy and perception, with an elastic mind and varied viewpoint. Here is an opportunity to give all these desirable qualities their full expression — right in the letters you send out every day.

In considering your audience, it is important never to underestimate their intelligence. F.P.A., the well-known writer and columnist, says in an epigram: "The average reader is considerably above the average." His stock of information, which is quite a different thing from intelligence, may be limited, and that's your job, to supply it in a form that is appealing, readily understood, and not condescending.

#### *Be Complete and Concise*

The characteristics of a good letter can be said to be those of a good advertisement: it should contain what the writer wants to say and what the customer wants to read about. Particular care should be taken to include in a letter all that belongs there. Too many letters have to be written to supply information missing from previous ones that were vague and ambiguous.

The good letter is the clear and simple letter. Clarity of expression is essential if you are to put your message across. After one of the late President Roosevelt's fireside chats, he received this letter from a little girl: "I heard your speech over the radio about the banks. It couldn't have been much of a speech because I understood every word of it." This short sentence contains the essential clarity of a good letter.

Many of us have developed a dislike for writing letters, and we sometimes feel that writing is an awkward form of communication, a second-rate substitute for conversation. Speaking to a person is easier, more natural.

A man might write "Dear Sir: Your esteemed favour of the 20th instant has just come to hand. In reply we beg to state in reference to same that we are remitting herewith our cheque as per your statement in the amount of \$89.95". That same man, using the telephone, would likely say, "I'm sending you a cheque for \$89.95. Thanks for waiting for it."

Before beginning to write or dictate, ask yourself this question: "If he were sitting across the desk from me, how would I say it?"

Although the written word loses the power that comes from emphasis and inflection in conversation, letters are not a second choice of communication. They are a power in their own right, and sometimes can be more forceful, more intimate and more conclusive than speech.

Let's get the idea out of our heads that there are two languages — English and Business English. Business English is simply good, effective English. The ability to use language well is nowhere more effective than in business correspondence. Incidentally, a few business schools, which use out-of-date letter models for dictation purposes, ought to realize the danger that young people may think this is the language of commerce, and so carry on the old, antiquated phrases in their business life.

The business executive who wishes to avoid stale and trite phraseology should examine the letters going out from his office. Notice how many words and phrases are repeated over and over again. Mark these and call them to attention of the writer; insist upon having obsolete terms replaced by lively terms such as you might use in conversation.

Most clichés were strong and vivid when they were new, but constant usage has rubbed away their bloom. It's not easy, especially for a busy man, to expend that little extra effort in thinking up a newer, fresher phrase, when a well-worn expression is at hand, just waiting to be used once again. But how greatly the fresher phrase will strengthen and give new life to his letters!

The choice of words is important; words are the writer's bricks with which he builds. The wider a man's vocabulary the greater the fund upon which he may draw, and the simpler it is to choose the happy word, the word that fits. A book of synonyms, such as Soule's, should be at the elbow of every letter writer.

### *Be Brief but not Blunt*

Shakespeare, that master of words, once wrote: "When words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain." Most executives are pressed for time, with many demands upon their attention. Too often the letters they write could have added to them what the 17th Century scientist, Pascal, said in a postscript to a 20-page letter: "I hope you will pardon me for writing such a long letter, but I did not have time to write you a shorter one." Here is a truth within a paradox. A short, well-thought-out letter takes more time to write than a long repetitious one, because the writer has spent that little extra time in marshalling his thoughts, and eliminating all unnecessary words and ideas.

Extra words lessen the impact and import of your message. Compare these phrases: "This service, which is offered without any charge whatsoever, is available to all of our customers"; and "This free service is available to all our customers." And these: "The fea-

sibility of granting your request for financial assistance is left to the well-seasoned discretion of our manager" with "Your request for a loan depends upon the experienced judgment of our manager." In both cases, isn't the second phrase the clearer?

Because words are fewer does not mean that courtesy should be sacrificed. There is a difference between being concise and being curt. In their efforts to keep their letters short, some business men verge on the side of rudeness. Once again you should look over your outgoing mail. If most of your letters consist only of a paragraph or two, it is possible that you can make them warmer and more human by adding a few friendly sentences. Simple words, like "please" and "thank you", are often overlooked in the aim for brevity.

### *Personality is Needed*

Another ingredient of the effective letter is personality, and by this we do not mean peculiarity or eccentricity. Sometimes the wish to please and attract by novelty leads a writer away from simplicity and mars his writing with artificiality and affectation. Many a business man would reach a style of natural forcefulness if he would devote himself to common sense and simplicity and not strain after some elusive elegance.

Personality is the expression of the writer's true self and thoughts. It balances humanness and dignity in a nice proportion. It is friendly, without sacrificing any of the dignity of office. Indeed, official position becomes surrounded with added graciousness.

Individuality in letter writing does not mean disregarding the amenities. There are certain customs that people expect to see observed. There may be no good reason for beginning a letter with "Dear Mr. Jones", but to change this form may distract the reader, and, worse still, irritate and antagonize him.

Sometimes humour creeps in to business letters. Robert L. Shurter, in his valuable little book, *Effective Letters in Business*, tells of this interchange between a large mail order house and a customer: "Gents: Please send me one of them gasoline engines you show on page 785 and if it's any good, I'll send you a check for it." And the company replied: "Dear Sir: Please send us the check and if it's any good, we'll send you the engine."

### *Types of Letters*

Now that we have set up some guide posts, and made some resolutions about our letter writing, in what kinds of letters do we expect to use them?

Several types of letters are written in business houses every day, but there is no more important letter than the *Sales Letter*. It is the life-blood of business, and it is particularly important that it should make your reader believe and feel. Then if he believes and feels strongly enough, he will send you an order. A simple formula by which you may achieve this is summed up in four words: Picture: Promise: Prove: Push.

To *Picture*, you need to get his attention, which may be half-hearted; after all, your letter is not the only one on his desk. So pinpoint his wandering interest by painting a picture in your first paragraph. Make your opening short, but let it *say something*.

It is impossible to get the reader of a sales letter to react favourably until you have built up a desire for your product or service in his mind. You cannot do this until you have aroused his interest, and you cannot arouse his interest until you have gained his attention. A strong start, an inspirational lead, makes your letter more effective, and incidentally gives it a better chance of being read. A single fact, well stated, will be more arresting than all the glittering generalities you can crowd into an adjective-filled paragraph.

Next, *Promise*. Define your product or your service, describe what it will do, in words your reader knows, in phrases that appeal to him, and in terms of his interest. Live up to your attention-catching opening — remembering that his wastepaper basket is always close at hand.

*Prove* it by evidence that backs up the promise. You can carry out what you so glowingly describe to him. Convince him by endorsements, testimonials and statements of value.

And finally *Push*. Tell him what you want him to do: fill in the order form, clip the coupon, mail back the enclosed card, or invite you to call.

A fifth "P" which can often be used to advantage is the *Postscript*. A man reading a letter usually scans the first paragraph, as he does the newspaper headlines, glances at the opening words of following paragraphs, drops his eye down to the signature, and if there's a P.S. he'll catch that too. If this is sufficiently arresting, he will be inclined to go over the letter more thoroughly.

The *Adjustment letter* is not difficult to write. Generally, you admit the error and make the adjustment with good grace. Whether the customer is right or wrong, the tone of the adjustment letter should be polite and courteous. The skilful adjustment correspondent will try to convey his understanding of the customer's misfortune by expressing regret, though he may know very well that the customer is at fault. The aim of this letter is not merely to grant the adjustment, but to keep the goodwill and the business of the client.

*Claims letters* are written to bring errors to the attention of those whose responsibility they are. Here the claimant would do well to heed the dictum of Walter Hines Page who said: "The writer of personal abuse always suffers from it — never the man abused." One stands a better chance of getting a fair adjustment in the particular case and more careful attention in future if a tolerant and even-tempered tone is used.

The *Credit Letter* has two forms: the letter granting credit and the letter refusing it.

In the first type, the writer does not merely state terms and conditions. He has an opportunity to make

it a sales letter, telling the customer about the superior goods and services of the firm, in a friendly, thoughtful way.

The second letter, refusing credit, is more ticklish. It must refuse the application in a tactful way, all the while attempting to get the customer's business on a cash basis. The writer can point out the advantages of cash buying, such as discounts, and freedom from monthly bills. The "you" attitude can be sincerely expressed. But don't preach.

*Collection letters* have two purposes. One is to get the money, and the second is to keep the patronage of the customer. The writer can concentrate on the "you" viewpoint by showing that it is to the customer's advantage to pay.

One of the most important letters that we ever write is the *Application Letter*. It is a personal sales letter, and the writer is selling himself. This letter, if it is to get favourable results, must attract attention, arouse interest and create desire. "I" will necessarily be often used, but it can be used in a modest and unassuming way. Point out to the prospective employer how useful you can be to him, what abilities you have to offer him. You can picture, and promise but you must also prove — for not even the best-worded letter will get a job for the unqualified applicant.

Every letter should, of course, be a builder of goodwill, but letters expressing goodwill alone are comparatively new business communications. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and so on are used as opportunities to write friendly letters to old and new customers, and thus keep the name of the business house in their minds.

### *Study Human Nature*

It can be seen that the first class business letter writer must be a man with background, a man of broad interests, considerate, adaptable and above all, human. He must be versatile and acquainted with the thought of the times. How can he best achieve all these things?

First of all by studying human nature, and this cannot be done by sitting all day at a desk. The letter writer should know how the foreman feels, what the clerk behind the counter thinks, what is in the salesman's and the customer's mind, as well as the opinions of his own colleagues. Widening of a man's interests results in a broadening of his viewpoint and his understanding.

Reading is important, too. And not just reading the current magazines and the daily newspaper, though these are necessary and not to be neglected. But wide reading of the best there is in the works of the great writers will be of inestimable value and self-satisfaction.

While the letter writer cannot copy the leisurely style of such authors as Dickens or Thackeray, he can take something from them in their knowledge of human nature and of life. He will increase his understanding, and add to his vocabulary. He will strengthen his own style. He will have a broader and deeper appreciation of the thought of the people, and all this will be reflected in his communications, both oral and written.