



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 49, No. 3

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, MARCH 1968

### *About Writing Letters*

WE ARE SO BUSY tending our time-saving devices that we can find little time for anything else. We are so snowed under by the news and views of other people that we find little chance to express our own ideas.

This is an invitation to escape for a while from subjection to things and people, and to pass around some ideas of your own. Writing letters is fun, it is useful, it is easy.

Every letter cannot be a masterpiece worthy of being put into a printed book, but every letter can be, at the very least, a good journeyman job suited to its purpose. Its only purpose is to meet the needs of the reader.

People who write letters do not aspire to the fame reserved almost wholly in these days for writers of fiction. But writers of letters convey more thoughts to more people in a week than the fiction writers do in a year. They move more people to action. They give more people pleasure. They conduct the nation's business. For them there is no Governor General's medal or Canada Council grant. They do have, however, the sense of service and the tonic of self-expression.

A well written letter does not attract notice to itself. It has three points of focus: the writer, the message, and the reader. All you need is to have something to say, to know to whom you are going to say it, and then to write in such a way as to tell your story in a pleasing manner. This applies to both private and business letters.

Many people who think with regret of their lack of skill in talking well find relief through writing letters. Samuel Johnson said: "No man is more foolish than Goldsmith when he has not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he has." Napoleon was uncouth as a speaker, but became master of a quick, strong and lucid style which placed him among the great letter writers.

#### *Family letters*

To inform is only a minor function of the letter to a member of the family. Here is a free and easy chat that can go a long way toward holding families together in

these days of early and wide dispersion. There is not in the wide world a thing so sweet as a letter with family feeling in it. It adds to pleasure and divides sorrow.

The letter between members of a family tells about commonplace things. It mentions the events of the day, the pastimes enjoyed, and what new people have been met. It is somewhat like coffee-party talk, full of trifling stories.

But it has substance too. As Helen said to Menelaus: "Tell me about your adventures on the voyage from Troy. I gain nothing by knowing it, but because you are dear to me I want to share in all you have experienced."

There is room in a family letter for gaiety and wisdom. It can call back carefree days to memory. Its advent can be just like the entry of the Good Fairy in a stage play, setting things to rights.

#### *Business letters*

As to business letters: writing is part of your job, so why not make it a pleasant job?

Your work offers as much chance to be original, to persuade, and to apply logic, as any form of writing.

Business writing must be designed to perform a service. It must have something to say that matters. It has an instant impact; it involves both you and your reader. It has no room for airy frills.

William H. Butterfield, fruitful author of business textbooks, says in the latest edition of *Common Sense in Letter Writing* (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963) that there are seven steps to take: (1) get all the facts; (2) say what you mean; (3) don't take half a day saying it; (4) write courteously; (5) focus your message on the reader; (6) make your message sound friendly and human; (7) remember the "tact" in "contact".

Written with these points in mind, your letter may be received as a stroke of genius, which is pleasing. But you will know that it is the product of thought and work.

So, know what you are writing about. Don't depend

upon starting out "Dear Sir" in the hope that the greeting will inspire you. Your reader's trust in what you say will be won only when you make it evident that you know your subject.

"Most correspondents," said Lord Chesterfield, "like most every learned man, suppose that one knows more than one does, and therefore don't tell one half what they could, so one never knows so much as one should."

Ideally, a business letter takes nothing for granted, but is written so as to be clear to any reader. It is written to accomplish a definite purpose, to explain something, or to get from its reader a definite kind of action.

No business letter should give the idea that it was written down to the twelve-year-old mental level. Give your reader the civility of treating him as if he were a cut above average.

The great merit in business writing is to be clear, and this includes using language that fits the purpose. Recall as a warning the wrath of a Queen when her prime minister addressed her "as if she were a public meeting".

If you think a letter you have dictated is stodgy or not clear, call in your secretary and read it aloud to her. Does it flow freely? Has it the right tone for your reader and your purpose? Does it cover the points you wish to make without excess words?

You must concentrate on getting your facts, but if your mind hits upon a good "angle" while you are scanning a sheaf of statistics, make a note of it quickly. It will likely illuminate what you have to write about the figures.

There is no reason why a touch of grace should not show itself in business letters. Some of the most potent letters are those that do not have to be written at all. They are "thank you" notes, words of praise for a job well done, good wishes on business and private anniversaries, and on fête days. Some firms, knowing the virtue in letters, have told their people to look for a timely excuse to write, even when there is no routine business object to be served.

About the layout of letters this *Monthly Letter* has nothing to say, because many people have written whole books on the topic and layout is a personal choice. Most eye appeal in letters should consist of refinements which add interest and emphasis, without sacrificing the sense of the letter or trading the quiet conversational tone for the loud speaker.

### *Getting started*

The first step in both business and private letters is to catch the attention of your reader. Shakespeare's usual plan in his dramas is to begin with a short scene that is either full of life and stir or lays hold of the audience in some other way. Then, having secured a hearing, he proceeds to talk at a lower pitch, with little action but giving much information. *Julius Caesar*

opens with a crowd in turmoil; when this has had its effect in winning the eyes and ears of the audience, there follow quiet speeches in which the cause of the uproar is disclosed.

Madame De Sévigné, famous for her letters in the seventeenth century, started one like this: "I am going to tell you a thing the most astonishing, the most surprising, the most marvellous" . . . and so on for fourteen more rousing words.

Where are you to get ideas, either for the opening or to go on with? Seize a piece of paper and scribble down a list of topics you think might be of interest. A dozen will come to your mind without much trouble.

When Telemachus, son of Ulysses and Penelope, feared to address people at a meeting, the goddess Athene said: "Thou shalt think of something thyself, and something the gods will put into thy mouth." Homer gathered up the oral verses of the Greek poets and made of them the beauty of the *Odyssey*: but when he put them into his words they became his own.

If you don't know what to write next, shift your viewpoint. A photographer finds that moving only a pace this way or that changes the picture in his viewfinder. Try a little original thinking, too. That is what makes letter-writing an art. It grafts new limbs on to an old trunk.

Don't despise smallness. The extras in a movie are not really vital to the plot, but they are very much needed to impart the feeling of reality, like the small talk in letters.

While a business letter should be so shaped as to deal with matters in order, the friendship letter should wander, like friendly talk, from one idea of interest to another. It should be sincere, feeling both the tears at the heart of things and the laughter at the surface.

It can be said bluntly that writing a letter will be a boring chore if it is kept on the childhood level of telling an absent papa about a visit to the circus with Uncle Bill. And think how tiresome it will be to the reader.

Link what you say to the cheerful things of life, and leave out the doleful telling of your ills. Let some sunshine into your letters. If you write too often about your trials and troubles you will give your reader the notion that you enjoy them, or at least that you enjoy them for the pleasure they give you to tell about them.

### *Writing deserves care*

"What about style?" someone may ask. There is no need to worry about forming a style if you think of your reader, have a topic of interest to him, express your thoughts clearly, and show good taste.

This does not mean that you can be careless. It is unjust to him to suppose that the person to whom you are writing does not want the best you can give him. Your success depends a lot upon the stitching. One reaches back into history and forward into imagina-

tion; one chooses what fragments and colours are to be used; then the way they are sewn together is important.

Write plainly and vigorously, with plenty of active verbs. Express yourself so clearly as to give your reader the least excuse for being confused. He may not agree with what you have to say, but at least make it clear what you are saying.

Try to express rather than to impress. There is a leaning today toward the ornate, but that is not any more in the interest of communication than was the work of the monks who adorned the letters of their manuscripts with such a riot of ornament that it was toilsome to read the pages.

If you receive a reply to your letter which is obscure, take a look at what you wrote. You may not have expressed your meaning well. The best writers are sometimes caught out. Napoleon wrote to one of his staff: "I have received your letter. I don't understand a word of it. I can't have explained myself clearly."

One bounden duty of the letter writer is to rub out flat, stale and hard-to-comprehend sentences. You will find that the more in earnest you are in trying to explain something the simpler will be your language. It is the "anything will do so long as I get it off my desk" sort of man who is hard to read.

There is a bonus value here. The more clearly you write, the more surely you will understand. Haven't you paused at times to think how much clearer the sentence you have just written has made the subject in your own mind?

### *Letters are words*

Someone quotes the Chinese as saying "A picture is worth a thousand words." But in a thousand words you could include the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, the Hippocratic Oath, a sonnet by Shakespeare, and Magna Charta — and no picture on earth can take the place of these.

In private correspondence we use good talking words, but whether business or private our letters must be made up of words which convey to the reader what is in our minds.

Saucy and audacious language unfit for the business office may be just the thing to lighten the day for a friend, while words weighty with the massive thoughts of business would add nothing to family fellowship.

When dealing with a serious subject, keep in mind that words are, after all, only nearly-correct ways of saying what we think, and try to use the best word, not its second cousin who is better known to you. A book of synonyms will help in this choice.

You do not need to have a big stock of tall opaque words, each having a great number of syllables. French shares with English the most elaborate compound: in-com-pre-hen-s-ib-il-it-y, with its root "hen"

and its eight prefixes and suffixes — and it describes and illustrates what we must not have in our letters.

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with 100,000 words in it, has only eight per cent with more than two syllables; Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner", with 3,000 words, has only sixty with more than two syllables, and John McCrae wrote the imperishable "In Flanders Fields" without a single word of more than two syllables. This *Monthly Letter*, with about 3,400 words, has only 186 with more than two syllables; twenty of these are proper names and thirteen are in quotations.

### *About being brief*

A belief common in our age is that anything can be improved by cutting, and that the shorter a letter is the better. This does not stand scrutiny. A condensed style such as some magazines use is far more difficult to follow intelligently than is the more relaxed style of newspapers.

Many short-cuts are self-defeating. They waste the reader's time. The only honest way to write shortly in letters is to choose words that are strong and sure-footed so as to carry the reader on his way toward comprehension.

Being brief does not mean being like a miser writing a telegram. To chop things down merely for the sake of shortness reminds us of the dreadful deeds of Procrustes. He was a bandit who tied his victims on a bed. If their length was greater than that of the bed, he cut short their limbs. It is, most of the time, more important to be courteous and clear, even if it takes more words, than to be brief.

When you are writing a business letter you can give it onward movement and pressure and make its purpose plain by leaving out all that has not a bearing upon your subject.

Condensation must be done with intelligence and sensitivity. Some things deserve to be written at length because of their worth as literature. Someone who is a slave to brevity at any cost may tell the story of a leading exploit at the siege of Troy in ten words: "Achilles chased Hector three times around the walls of Troy." But for this he would sacrifice the exciting Book XXII of the *Iliad*.

Other things demand to be written about at length so that an obscure subject may be made plain. Still others need length to fulfil their purpose: if you wish to describe every room in your new house it is the number of rooms that sets the length of your letter.

Keep in mind that most business letters are written to tell a reader something he wants to know, but not everything about the subject. A visitor to the Swiss pavilion at Expo asked an attendant the time, and was told how a watch is made.

When you finish a letter, stop. You are not a novelist, who must round things off in the last chapter, dis-

posing of his characters neatly. Don't strive for a tune-ful hearts and flowers closing. It will only put a hurdle between the real end of your message and your name.

### *The reader's interest*

Write about what interests your reader. Think what the human emotions are, and try to pluck their strings. When you learn to do it with ease and grace you will be a good letter writer.

Ask some questions which will give your correspondent a starting point for his next letter to you. Express a challenging thought, or respond to one expressed by your correspondent. When telling about an event, describe it as the person to whom you are writing would have seen it from your vantage point.

Lighten what you write with the torch of imagination. You may be telling about a single event, but you can draw its images from your total life experiences. How sawdusty we seem when we write about events in often used phrases instead of with freshness and a touch of the whimsical.

Light and shade are needed in any composition. The sculptor produces them by the nature of the relief. The painter has to create them by his choice of colour. The musician ranges from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* in many melodious variations. The writer of letters selects his words so as to chisel, paint, and compose by their contrast of strength and softness.

Quite important in the outcome is urbanity. The dictionaries say this is "the quality of refinement, politeness, affability, civility, and good breeding." Subject your vehemence to revision.

Be calm, courteous and correct. Some letters are painful to answer because they tend to rouse your ire, and to show temper in a letter is a fatal flaw. Have in mind the picture of the correct eighteenth-century gentleman. He never failed in a measured politeness, partly because it was due in propriety toward others, and partly because from his own dignity it was due most obviously to himself.

### *Trying too hard*

Preoccupation with clever literary ideas is an obstacle to success in letter writing. Don't be ashamed of your blots: the reader is not going to approach your letter with a magnifying glass.

One business man went to the length of making an error deliberately, so that he could change it with his pen, thus making his letter personal beyond all doubt.

When you refrain from fussiness, that does not mean being heedless about things that matter, but merely not stewing over trifles, like pacing your office while seeking the perfect — the only perfect — word. In a story by Albert Camus there is a man writing a book for thirty years, and he never gets past polishing the first beautiful paragraph.

You are not writing a scholarly treatise. You may include a half dozen howlers and no one will spank your wrist. The thing is: does your letter interest your reader and tell him what he wants to know and what you wish to tell? Too much fine burnishing will blur the outline. If you can write things in such a way that your reader believes that is just the way he would have said them himself, you have won a crown as a writer.

### *When to write*

It is common practice in business to write at once when the occasion arises, but we are less careful in private correspondence. Many good letters go unwritten because of lack of the sinewy go-to-it spirit that would have written them.

This is a pity, because family and friendly letters are of so great importance. You don't have to wait for something thrilling to happen. How seldom does excitement visit the woman in her kitchen or the man in his garden! You need only the discernment to say to yourself: "So-and-so would enjoy hearing about that" . . . and then sit down and write it. Banish from mind that hoary excuse: "waiting for inspiration". It is a confession of lack of imagination, of interest, and of gumption.

Since we are denied as long lives as we should like, let us leave something to bear witness that at least we have lived.

There should be a whiff of leisure in a letter to a friend. Lay the hour-glass on its side, so that the sands cease to flow.

The writing of a letter to a friend in this spirit is a helpful emotional experience for you. We are social beings, and we feel better when we communicate our thoughts to others. That is likely the secret behind Shakespeare's sonnets. He maintains that the thought of his friend reconciled him to life, but writing the sonnets was probably more effective for this purpose than was the friend himself.

Writing a letter is a way to stretch your mind. It makes things clear and reveals new angles; it tosses your thoughts about, and marshals them in an orderly way. To write to a friend about what you have read refreshes your knowledge, and impresses your mind by putting the discovered tidbit into your own words.

People are being shocked into wakefulness every day by the mass media. Advertisers are grabbing them by the lapel and shouting sales talk into their ears. World unrest is twisting their wrists with threats of war and inflation.

In the midst of all this, a little calm is welcome. A pleasantly gossipy letter from a friend suggests peace of mind, and we need not be ashamed to enjoy it or to shrink from writing one like it.

Upon sitting down to write, think this: "I am going to write such a letter as I would wish to receive." Then lay your thoughts beside your paper, and copy them.