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Making the Most of Language

MANY PERSONS who are not specially talented or highly educated have learned to express themselves well in speaking and writing. By using language with skill they have made their way from the inglorious life of solitary organisms to the rich life of communion with their fellows. They have progressed from obscurity in business and social life to impressive attainment. Such satisfaction is within the reach of everyone.

Thousands of young men and women go into business or a profession every year with their hearts set upon self-fulfilling careers. They need to learn now, during their years of training, how greatly their chance for success depends upon their ability to use words accurately and effectively.

It does not matter how little related to the niceties of language your business or profession may be, command of language adds to your ability and extends your knowledge. Before expressing your thoughts in words you make up those thoughts in words. The more meaningful and exact you make the words in which you think, the better fitted you are to cope with the complexities of life.

As the Overstreets say in their book *The Mind Alive* (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., New York, 1954): "An adequate power to express oneself is not a literary frill with which to decorate the edges of life. On the contrary, it is the indispensable tool of our self-understanding and self-acceptance and of our rational contact with the world around us."

Only a few business men believe that it does not matter how they speak or write. Successful people know that the person who does not use words precisely can never be sure that he has said precisely what he meant to say. He has no assurance that his reader will understand him. If there is one thing worse than being unable to express a thought it is thinking that one has said something when he has not.

Writing is a craft

If you keep in mind the two principles, clarity and precision, and write simply and naturally, you may disregard the tyranny of small critics. You do not write effectively merely by obeying the rules of

grammar and syntax, but before you break the rules you should know what they are.

Skilled writers study words so that they use those that are fitting, and they consider the most effective way of putting them together. They observe how words affect the thinking and acting of people.

The urge to "write as you speak" can lead to a trap. If one puts into letters or print too much racy speech the resulting prose will be either an enemy-maker or something to be laughed at; if one writes as loosely as he talks, his letter or essay or report will command little respect.

In any sort of composition meant to communicate ideas, the writer must consider his purpose and the needs of the reader. It is irrational to sit down with pen and paper to write something that will be worth the effort unless you know: (1) what you wish to say, and (2) to whom you wish to say it.

It may be taken for granted that the thoughts of a person receiving a letter will run something like this: What is this letter about? How does it concern me? Is this statement true? What does the writer want me to do? Why should I do it?

Creative writing is a bridge from the mind of the writer to that of his reader. Across this bridge the writer must send information of interest to the reader and ideas which will stir him to thought or action.

The words sent across the bridge have meaning only when they are understood in depth and breadth by the person reading them. A word or a sentence is not merely a bundle of sounds: it is also a bundle of associations. Most of the time people cannot grasp our point unless they are able to connect it with their own experience.

People respond readily to some words while remaining indifferent to others. Try to use words and language that will affect your correspondent as you wish him to be affected. Take into account the perception range of your reader: are you sure that he will read out of your letter the thoughts that you mean to inspire in it?

If your subject is difficult, if you must take your

reader through swampy land, at least throw him a rope. Give him some help toward reaching solid ground. There are times when persuasiveness consists in saying things that leave the reader believing that is just the way he would have said them himself. But be tactful: do not remind him that he didn't.

Anyone writing for a wide audience must pay attention to possible peculiarities and dislikes. An enumerator making his rounds of households before a British general election said: "A number of people can be thrown by being asked what sex their children are. They would look affronted at the word 'sex'. By and by I learned to rephrase the question as 'have you got any little boys or little girls?'"

Know your subject

It is necessary for the correspondent seeking to sway people to his viewpoint to be prepared with facts, a fact meaning something known to be true. The writer should have a bigger array of facts than he is likely to need. It is disheartening to make a good start and then run out of gas. It is humiliating to have a correspondent ask for facts which the writer should have known enough to supply without being asked.

A mind cluttered up with undigested facts, suppositions and theories is in no fit state to dictate a letter. Plato followed this drill: he announced his subject, presented it rapidly in numerous aspects, walking all around it in the process, and then spoke in such a way as to relate his ideas to the lives of the people around him.

One sign of deftness in written work is the ability to keep to the point of your topic. Something often happens when you are writing that changes the direction of what you are saying from due north to nor-nor-west. It is not always desirable to fight this drift, but it is always wise to know that it is there.

To ramble in words is to confuse the issue you are discussing. Brevity is not always the soul of wit. The real trouble is that speeches and letters are too irrelevant, too dull and too slovenly. They give the impression of using a shot-gun shell loaded with many words in the hope that some may hit the target. These faults make the speech or letter appear long.

Business language

Business men are aware that the ability to get along with people, to advance in their jobs, and to sell their goods, depends on clear communication.

Some people in business have been misled by the illiterate suggestion that they should not concern themselves with the real people at the other end of the communication line, but should write their letters and address their telephone calls to abstractions like "customer" and "prospect". Writing letters can be made an exciting as well as an intellectually absorbing exercise when you determine to find the right words to say to a real person.

Once a letter leaves your "OUT" tray it is what is

in the letter that counts, not what is in your head. Before signing a letter look for the needed virtues. Is it complete? Is it courteous? There is no situation in which you are so right in your contention that you can afford not to be urbane. Did you end it gracefully? It is just as important to make a first-rate exit as a dramatic entrance.

Your letter is more than a statement of facts. It is an expression of your personality, a symbol of your status.

The matter of style

If you express your thoughts in their proper order in words that are proper to the occasion, you will be writing in a clear style. Socrates, about to drink the hemlock, urged his friends to disregard the manner but think of the truth of his words. A maxim of Horace's said that good sense is the source and origin of good style.

Light and shade are as necessary in writing as they are in sculpture, but if you overdo either one you obscure the meaning you wish to convey. Do not feel that you have to shout every once in a while. Your reader will look at a rainbow without having his attention drawn to it by a clap of thunder.

A writer of good taste — some people would call it "sensitivity" — will take pains in perfecting his style to make the reader believe that he took none at all. When the style shows in a piece of writing one feels as if he were on the wrong side of the stage scenery, with all the props and ropes and pulleys nakedly seen. Someone described good writing style as being as casual-seeming as the skimming of a dragon-fly.

Style is closely linked with feeling. A fact or a truth may be stated so as to touch the intellect alone, or it may be expressed in terms which, without dimming its clearness, may appeal to the reader's sensibility by their harmony or energy.

Make time for star-gazing in between bouts of writing. It is a way to woo ideas and to surround them with bright images. It helps, if you wish your ideas to seem inspired, to make them sound as if they were inspired.

In conveying an idea we may show what it is by giving instances of it in operation or by making contrasts. If you make a general assertion that is of importance to your purpose in writing, follow it up with proof or illustrative examples.

The most effective device a writer can use is the parable, a metaphor which presents a story to illustrate a point. We do not wish to write in pictographs as our long-ago forefathers did, but the closer a word or a sentence comes to picturing what it stands for the easier it is to comprehend.

Words are esteemed for more reasons than the meanings they convey. If you analyse your enjoyment of a verse of poetry or a passage of prose that gives you delight, you will find that only a part of your enjoyment comes from thought of the facts or events

to which it draws your attention. Much comes from the beauty of the words and sentences considered as a pattern of sound.

Poets reach out for words that paint pictures. Homer wrote, quoting the one-eyed giant blinded by Ulysses: "This weak pigmy wretch, of mean design." A non-poet might have written: "just a little, ugly weakling has blinded me."

Poetry uses synonyms for variety, metre and rhyme, therefore poetry is a first-class place to quarry words that will add a lilt as well as accuracy to a piece of prose.

Build a vocabulary

We do not inherit words and the tales they tell. Many times as the story of Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp has been told, it must be told again for every child as new generations come upon the stage.

When building a vocabulary fit to express all our thoughts, hopes and emotions, we need to remember that words are symbols, standing for things. If we did not have words we should be condemned to carrying around large bundles of things instead, like the professors in Gulliver's satire *Laputa*.

When you improve your vocabulary it will be larger and broader, but it will also have greater depth and precision, enabling you to use the word symbol which most closely calls up the thing symbolized. It will enable you to express purposefully facts, ideas, feelings and experiences. A word fittingly chosen may be like an electric switch: something that turns on the light.

Our stock of words is enlarged through the experiences that are woven into our lives. Our writing is effective, vivid and interesting when we put this stuff of our lives into it.

Close and attentive observation of what is going on around us is necessary if we are to write brightly. Everyone has seen a photographer of nature subjects at work: he puts his camera lens close to the flower, or as close as he can get it to a bird or a butterfly. The lens brings out beauties that the eye cannot see and projects them on a screen. So Shakespeare sprinkled his plays with similes and word pictures that presented themselves to his attentive observation. In *Cymbeline* we find "Like the crimson drops i' the bottom of a cowslip". Shakespeare had to pay imaginative attention to see this imperial mixture of crimson and yellow in the cup of a primrose.

Next to personal observation comes reading as a source of words. Knowledge of words does not descend upon us magically at the end of any grade in school or at the end of a university course. It comes as a matter of being acquainted with many men and women of talent through their books.

The purpose in reading is not to learn to write like Molière, Churchill or Callaghan, but to profit from comparison between one style and another, and to learn by example the most effective use of words. This

reading is a lifetime pursuit, so that we are kept up to date by seeing words used in a multitude of combinations amid changing scenes.

Published in 1971, *Techniques of Teaching Vocabulary* is a book that will be useful to all persons who write, as well as to teachers. It was written by Edgar Dale, Professor of Education, and Joseph O'Rourke, Research Associate, both of the College of Education, Ohio State University. It is published by Field Educational Publications Inc., Palo Alto, Cal.

Using a dictionary

The business of a dictionary is to report how words are used, and not to prescribe or proscribe meanings. Notice how many different meanings words have. Some have broadened over the years, while others have narrowed. You will be jolted now and then by finding that the meaning you commonly attach to a word is not mentioned in the dictionary.

When you are writing about specialized subjects the conventional dictionary must be supplemented with lists of terms pertinent to the specific fields of endeavour. Every profession and occupation has words to express its principles and practices. Medical researchers and astronauts and historians do different things, and they also talk different languages. A writer's library may contain dictionaries of biology, geography, geology, law, music, mythology, philosophy, psychology, science, and many others.

Some persons throw the word "jargon" at these specialized languages, but the use of special words is jargon only when it is used to communicate with people who have not been initiated in the special field. Writing in a scientific magazine sold on the news-stands, the author of an article entitled "Verbal Communication" used paragraphs like this one: "Transformations that provide the invariants with diverse concomitant variations can be roughly divided into two kinds of alteration: contextual and stylistic."

Words have width and depth

He is a good workman in writing who uses the implements of his craft with care and skill. He chooses words as a skilled machinist chooses the tools that will do particular jobs in the finest way.

Words are picked up by the conscious mind and made into pictures in the subconscious. When you write π you are writing a constant, the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter; when you write the formula *NaCl* you are indicating the chemical substance, sodium chloride, and it always means that substance and nothing else. Few words in common use have such limited denotations as these. Consider "mother" and "father". They are extended into multiple new areas of use such as "mother of parliaments, mother earth, mother wit; the child is father of the man, father to that thought."

The interpretation we give words is bound up with the images they evoke. "Informer" and "informant" may be said to mean, roughly, the same thing, but

note the difference that may be read into them. "Informer" makes us think of stool-pigeons and talebearers; "informant" has no such nasty frill attached to it.

To differentiate words in both depth and width, we have books of synonyms. Three that are available in paper back editions are: *The New Roget Thesaurus in Dictionary Form* (G. P. Putnam's Sons Inc., 1961); *A Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms*, by Joseph Devlin (Popular Library, Toronto, 1961), and *Soule's Dictionary of English Synonyms* (Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1966).

Sir Ellsworth Flavelle has suggested that we find the precise meanings of words by consulting antonyms as well as synonyms, thus checking them by both their meaning and their non-meaning.

Nearly every writer is tempted at times to embellish his work by using qualifying words; others are dead set against the use of words that modify words. Without doubt, adjectives and adverbs can weaken a statement or blur the meaning.

You cannot measure a writer's genius by the length of his words. Some enjoy the use of big words without paying attention to their meaning; others use gigantic words on a microscopic topic, like pinning a white beard on the face of a child, and yet others think that their dignity demands that they use many-syllable words. When Dr. Johnson was asked about a comedy he said: "It has not wit enough to keep it sweet." Then, realizing that this sentence was not up to the standard of his sonorous prose, he hastened to give a more full-toned sentence: "It has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction."

If your desire to use big words is as overpowering as Johnson's, recall what Shakespeare did to get rid of his stock of resounding nonsense: he invented Pistol, associate of Falstaff, to make meaningless speeches in magnificent verse.

Revise your language

Everyone should revise his language habits from time to time in order to keep pace with life and custom. Language is an expression of human activity, and because human activity is constantly changing language changes with it.

During the past half century the rapid production of new ideas, concepts and machines has necessitated the coining of new words to name and describe them. The computer, the physics learned by high school pupils, the complexity of world-wide corporations, could not be explained in the Greek of Aristotle's day or the words used by Tolstoy, Dumas or Dickens. Ancient pompous phrases have no more right to live than have the slang-laden phrases coined by a rebellious generation. Both must prove their ability to fill needs.

There are accepted good standards of every language, and the fact that a language is changing is not a good reason for abandoning the standards. In all change there must be an element of continuity; if that

element of continuity is absent you have not change, but the destruction of one thing and the creation of another.

One trend today is toward the use of ugly words. We can do quite well in expressing ourselves intelligently without the mean and unlovely words which some writers introduce in the name of liberty, frankness, and progressiveness. A good writer put it this way: "I try to watch the words I say, and keep them tender and sweet, for I never know from day to day which ones I'll have to eat."

The wholesomeness of language is menaced not so much by the crude vulgarism of the untaught who are indefatigable in their search for gross, squalid and violent words, but by the blithe irresponsibility of the taught.

Discipline as well as purposefulness plays a part in effective communication. Do not give in to the "any word will do" mentality, or scatter words as if you were shaking a floor mop. Use honest words, the sharpest you can find, to say what you mean. Choice of words by a writer deserves as great care as does the selection of a fly by the same man when he goes fishing or of a club when he is on the golf course.

Read it over

Ask yourself "How does my writing read?" Quite often one does not fully know what he has written until he reads it.

Look over the letter or speech and ask whether this or that word is as serviceable in its context as some other word might be. Experienced writers make many changes at this point.

Check whether the language you used is suitable to the occasion, the subject and the person to whom you addressed it.

Have you made it clear that you are interested in what you write? A piece of writing is strong if it conveys the assurance that the writer cared about what he wrote. It is doubly blessed if it gives the reader the feeling of believing that the writer understood him and his problems.

Boiled down to its essential, language is serviceable when it conveys things useful to be known. When a person has great thoughts and cannot express them, it is like high voltage passing through a small wire, and the only relief is to blow a fuse.

A person may be neither an eloquent speaker nor a great writer, but practice and a faithful system of reading and observation will change him into a convincing speaker and a readable writer.

He must practise as consistently as a musician. If everyone waited until he was perfect in the subject, no books would ever be written.

It is a good idea to approach every job of writing with the thought: "This sheet of paper, like Michelangelo's block of marble, has great possibilities in it."