



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 41, No. 7

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, SEPTEMBER 1960

Imagination Helps Communication

THE BASIC SKILL in every profession and in most businesses is the ability to organize and express ideas in writing and in speaking.

No matter how clever an engineer may be technically, or an executive managerially, or a research man creatively, he does not show his worth unless he communicates his ideas to others in an influential way.

Language is the most momentous product of the human mind. Between the clearest animal call of love or warning or anger, and man's most trivial word, there lies a whole day of creation — or, as we would say it today, a whole chapter of evolution.

A business man is not called upon to present the elegance of a wit, a novelist or a poet. He must express himself accurately, clearly and briefly, but he need not denude his language of beauty and appeal.

The purpose of the writer is to communicate effectively. He needs a feeling for writing the right thing in the right way at the right time: not a barebones recital of facts, unless in a specification or legal document, but a composition of words which will convey his meaning and his sentiment.

This requires use of imagination, which is the cornerstone of human endeavour. John Masfield, the Poet Laureate, wrote: "Man's body is faulty, his mind untrustworthy, but his imagination has made him remarkable."

Writing imaginatively cannot be taught. It can be studied in examples — the writings of Dafoe, Shakespeare, La Fontaine and Jules Verne show what can be done, but not how to do it. In this, writing is on a par with art and the product of an artisan's hands. The painter can no more convey the secret of his imaginative handling of colour than the plumber can teach that little extra touch he gives a wiped joint. All three, writer, artist, artisan, have secrets springing from within. After learning the principles, they go on to

produce their works inspired by the dignity of accomplishment due to their gifts.

Look at the drama built into small events by choice of words and use of imagination: Dafoe gave us Crusoe recoiling from the footprint in the sand; Homer gave us Achilles shouting over against the Trojans and Ulysses bending the great bow; and Bunyan gave us Christian running from the tempter with his fingers in his ears. None of these was an epic event, but by their mastery of putting imagination into their communication these writers painted scenes which stirred us in the reading and linger in our memories.

A good piece of writing, whether it be a novel or a business letter, does three things: it communicates a thought, it conveys a feeling, and it gives the reader some benefit.

The writer's tools

What are the writer's tools? A wide range of language, for variety and to avoid the commonplace; active verbs, to keep the action moving; similes, which make words paint a thousand pictures; metaphor and parable, to make meanings clear, and rhythm, which contributes to smooth, easy reading.

To these tools, the writer adds imagination, always being careful to bring it within the scope of facts. Art in writing must not be used as an escape from reality.

This sort of writing is not so simple a thing as fluency, which soap-box orators have in abundance. It is not so simple a thing as grammatical exactitude, which can be hammered into boys and girls by a teacher.

But when it is properly done, imaginative writing is very powerful. Look at *Cyrano de Bergerac* in the drama by Edmond Rostand. The hero was valiant and romantic, but very sensitive regarding the size of his nose. This sensitivity prevented his making his court to the beautiful Roxane, but he wrote ardent letters to her for a handsome and stupid friend. The power of

the written word won Roxane's love for his friend by proxy.

Good writing needs to be appropriate to the occasion, the purpose, the reader and the writer. It must not be too pompous for its load, or hesitant about what it seeks to do, or beneath the intelligence of the reader, or too arrogant for the writer's position.

Writing is only serviceable and good with reference to the object for which it is written. You say: "That is a beautiful dress"; but let the dress slide from the model's shoulders and lie in a heap on the floor, and what is it? A heap of material. Its virtue resides in its fittingness to its purpose.

What is written imaginatively in the daily work of office and industry will get desired results. If the writer looks further, what is written with imagination will live on when this Atomic Age is ancient history. Why? Because imagination is the one common link between human minds in all ages.

Imagination in writing finds expression through the use of accurate and illuminating equivalents for thoughts. You may show your imagination by dealing with something unfamiliar; by calling to attention a commonplace fact that is generally overlooked; by bringing into view familiar things in new relationship; or by drawing together relevant thoughts in a nosegay tied with your own ribbon.

An imaginative writer can look out upon the sprawling incoherence of a factory or a city or a nation or a problem and give it intelligible statement.

Something about style

The style in which you write is the living embodiment of your thought, and not merely its dress.

When you put words together you convey not only your purpose in writing but your character and mood, both of which are important to your reader's understanding.

Let the occasion dictate the manner of your writing. Sometimes a manly rough line, with a great deal of meaning in it, may be needed, while a different set of circumstances demands the lubrication of sweet words. A blinding light is not always the best illumination: the delicate colours in moss-covered rock are enhanced by overcast, misty air.

Knowledge of techniques does not give the writer this discrimination. Technique is always a means and not an end. If we allow rules to govern our writing we become tongue-tied by authority. As Rembrandt remarked to someone who was looking closely into one of his paintings, seeking the technique, "pictures are intended to be looked at, not smelled."

We do not find ourselves tripping over technique in the inspired paragraphs of great literary works. Think of the forcefulness, the meaning, the simplicity of expression, in Lincoln's Gettysburg address, in Churchill's "fall of France" radio broadcast. Then contrast the great golden phrases of political campaigners, rising from nothing and leading to nothing: words on words, dexterously arranged, bearing the semblance of argument, but leaving nothing memorable, no image, no exaltation.

At the other end of the scale are those who write speeches and letters stodgily. Too many people who are nice people at heart become another sort when they pick up a pen or a dictaphone. They tighten up. They become unnatural. They curdle into impersonality and choose starchy sentences. Their product is like a page printed with very old and worn-out type. In the vivid prose which marked some seventeenth century writers, James Howell wrote: "Their letters may be said to be like bodies without sinews, they have neither art nor arteries in them."

A letter in which something significant is attempted — a sale, a correction, a changing of opinion, the making of a friend — cannot be written in a neutral and bloodless state of mind.

In letter writing, imagination must supply personal contact. When you call in your stenographer to write a letter you are entering into a personal relationship with the reader. He is no longer a statistic in a mass market. He and you are human beings talking things over.

Most business communications have lucidity rather than emotion as their aim, but none except those which are frankly and openly mere catalogues can afford to exclude humanity. There should be some in-between space in your letters, some small-talk between the important ideas, some irrelevancies which temper the austerity of business.

The reader's interest

No matter what your letter is about, the reader will want to know: "How does this affect me?"

It is a literary vice not to seek out the reader's interest. You may tell him what you want in impeccable language and forceful manner, but you fall short of success unless you pay attention to what he wants or can be made to desire. Your ideas must enter, influence and stick in the mind of the recipient.

As a writer, you may protest that some of the failure in communication may be blamed on the receiver, but it is your responsibility as sender to determine in advance, to the best of your ability, all potential causes of failure and to tune your transmission for the best reception.

Granted, something must be expected of the reader. Every writer is entitled to demand a certain amount of knowledge in those for whom he writes, and a certain degree of dexterity in using the implements of thought. Readers who demand immediate intelligibility in all they read cannot hope to go far beyond the limitations of comic strip language.

However, the writer is bound to eliminate every possible obstacle. He must not grow away from people. He must anticipate their questions. Let the salesman stand at a bargain counter and listen to what goes on in the minds of prospective customers. He will see women who spend ten minutes examining socks advertised at 35 cents a pair — do they stretch? are they washable? will they stay soft? are they tough enough to wear long? Those women are not up on the plateau of bulk sales, but down where a nickel counts.

That is the imagination of preparation. Then comes the imagination of expression. The most important demand of customers is for friendliness in those who seek to do business with them. A man may pride himself upon being an efficient, logical person, unswayed by sentiment in business matters, but at some stage in his every business deal there is a spark of emotional appeal and response.

You need to study your audience and then write what you want them to understand in the form that is most likely to appeal to them. Any other course is like the childish custom of writing a letter to Santa Claus and burning it up the chimney.

Give imagination wings

If you do not wish your letters to be read yawningly, write them wide awake. When a good idea strikes you for a letter, ride that idea on the dead run: don't wait to ponder, criticize and correct. You can be critical after your imaginative spell subsides.

The search for the exact word should never so usurp the writer's attention that the larger movements of thought on which the letter's argument depends are made to falter and so lose their fire. The first draft of a piece of writing should be done at white heat. The smoothing and polishing may follow later.

Some degree of novelty must be one of the materials in every instrument which works upon the mind.

By "novelty" it is not meant that the letter should be artificial. Great art consists in writing in an interested and straightforward way.

A good writer is not always original. You cannot hope to reproduce in your own words how Keats felt as he listened to the nightingale singing. It is far better to copy his ode. Mr. Churchill could not help it, even if he

did not desire it, when his "blood, toil, tears and sweat" echoed Garibaldi, or when his first speech as Prime Minister, declaring it to be his policy "to make war", echoed Clemenceau's "Je fais la guerre." Shakespeare took his plots wherever he could find them, from older plays, English chronicles and Plutarch's *Lives*. His originality consisted in the skill with which he made a story over and covered the skeleton with the living flesh of his language.

If a man has vision and sympathy — ingredients of imagination — and adds sincerity, he will be able to beautify the familiar and illumine the dingy and sordid. Montaigne one of the world's great essayists, said: "I gather the flowers by the wayside, by the brooks and in the meadows, and only the string with which I bind them together is my own."

Variety in expression is as necessary to a piece of written matter as it is to an attractive bouquet. Monotony in a letter is like a paralyzing frost.

The Greeks knew this: they set off the loveliness of roses and violets by planting them side by side with leeks and onions. Some fastidious or critical people may complain of unevenness in your writing because it is not sustained at a peak. But there is no one more tiresome than the man who is writing always at the top of his voice.

Use words honestly

The effort to bring up the highlights must not blind us to our obligation to be moderate. To be dynamic and forceful we don't need to give the impression of breathlessness. Strong words lose their force if used often. Don't say "the roof is falling in" when you mean that a crack in the ceiling needs patching. If you habitually term a dull party "a disaster" what have you left that is vivid enough to cover your feelings about an earthquake?

From the moment that a writer loses his reverence for words as accurate expressions of his thoughts he becomes second-rate. Even experienced writers testify to their constant search for the right word.

Follow the spirit of what you are saying in the way you write it. Sometimes you will use little, jolting, one-syllable words; in another composition your meaning and feeling may be conveyed better in cascading syllables like Milton's, or in earthy words that fit the urgency of the occasion.

There is no better way to learn the feeling of words than through reading poetry. The use of synonyms so necessary in poetry gives us a grasp of language and readiness in its use. Exercise your imagination by looking up the wide choices of words meaning the same thing, in varying shades of strength and

attractiveness. A handy book to have on your desk is *A Dictionary of English Synonyms* by Richard Soule (Little, Brown, and Company, Boston).

Be careful to use qualifying words only where they contribute something to the sense you wish to convey. An excessive use of qualifiers vitiates the force of what you write.

Correct modification is an essential of perceptive accuracy, but every modification means a deflection in the reader's flow of understanding.

To test this, take some magazine which professes to popularize news events, and strike out every adjective and adverb which seems dispensable: note how much more authoritative and less tinted by opinion the items appear.

The business man should test business reports and letters by asking "What omission of fact or skimping of research or expression of prejudice does this adjective cover up?"

Pictures in words

Our writing creates pictures in the reader's mind. We use metaphors to sharpen and extend the reader's understanding of our ideas by presenting him with images drawn from the world of sensory experience: "She has roses in her cheeks; he has the heart of a lion." If we say that a brook is laughing in the sunlight, an idea of laughter intervenes to symbolize the spontaneous, vivid activity of the brook.

In 240 words of a single soliloquy of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare gives us these imaginative phrases, now part of our everyday language: to be or not to be, the law's delay, the insolence of office, the undiscover'd country from whose bourne no traveller returns, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd, there's the rub, shuffled off this mortal coil, conscience doth make cowards of us all.

Metaphors are not confined to poetic writing: they occur in science and business writing, too: the flow of electricity, the stream of consciousness, the thinking machine, getting at the root of the problem, falling into error, indulging in mental gymnastics.

Local colour is an element in imaginative writing. Your highlights and your expressive phrases do not have to come from the classics. A good writer, even on the most prosaic of topics, will mix his own mind with his subject. True imagination, no matter how strange may be the regions into which it lifts its head, has its roots in human experience. What arises in your writing from what you have been through will be more vivid than what you glean from the writings and experience of others.

Background for imagination

If the imagination is to yield any product useful to the writer, it must have received material from the external world. Images do not spring out of a desert.

The writer will train his mind to roam, to seek food, to experience events. He will read widely, observing words at work in a multitude of combinations.

A library has evocative power. Merely to sit within view of good books draws out the goodness in one. A library has driving power, too: it challenges us to convey meanings and feelings as these writers did.

The books in an executive's office should not consist solely of directories, almanacs, *Canada Year Book*, and the like. In literature are recorded all the thoughts, feelings, passions, and dreams that have passed through the human mind, and these can play their part in the efficiency of the letter writer today. Even on the battlefield, Napoleon had in his tent more than three hundred volumes ranging through science, art, history, poetry, travels, romance and philosophy.

To do all that has been suggested takes time. It requires preparation, practice and participation: preparation through reading and study, practice through revising and rewriting, and participation through putting something of yourself into every letter.

We must get out of the vicious system whereby we spend a forenoon verifying the price to be quoted to a customer, while refusing to spend two minutes in reconstructing a clumsy sentence in the letter we write him. To be slovenly and feeble is not only discourteous to the persons we address but bad business, because it leaves the door open for misunderstanding.

If you are going to describe an event or a product, do not be content with black marks on white paper: at least stipple in the background and use some colour in the foreground.

It is necessary, too, to be in earnest. Many people dream away their lives, talking of the writing they mean to do, and in the end they fall asleep, still babbling of the green fields of literature.

If you make only average grades in your letters when you could with a little effort top the class, you are bound to be disappointed with yourself. The writing of letters, business or personal or professional, is no mean ministry. It deserves the best that can be given it, and when it is rightly done it absorbs the mind wholly.

Why not be one of the knowledgeable elite instead of one of the conforming average?

They are probably best who, having a subject on which they wish to express themselves, sit down to write about it in a loving way. As Cyrano de Bergerac described his genius: "I have but to lay my soul beside my paper, and copy!"