



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

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### WRITING BETTER LETTERS

**O**URS is an age of high-powered communication. Telephones link continents, radio broadcasts to every country, television brings events into our living-rooms, wire services function at split-second speed.

We are all trying to express and explain ourselves one to another. In our contacts internationally and nationally, and in our business and social dealings, our customary instrument is the written or spoken word.

Perhaps, since words are free as air and just as much taken for granted, we don't place enough value upon them. But when we remember that without words we could not communicate, not even with ourselves, they become our most precious possession.

Words are important, then, and they are powerful. Are we realizing their full worth and potentialities? And just how much of all we write and speak really reaches the other person?

Rudyard Kipling tells in one of his *Just So* stories a fascinating tale of what might have happened to the first letter. The small daughter of Tegumai, a Primitive Man, sent a letter — the first letter — written on birch-bark, asking by means of a series of pictures for a new spear for her father to use carp-hunting. The letter was received, read, and thoroughly misunderstood by her mother, who thought it told of a great and terrible battle, and she rallied the whole tribe to the rescue of her husband.

On the other hand we have the true story of the famous composer, Tchaikovsky, and his correspondence which lasted for many years with the wealthy Madame Nedejda von Meck, who became his influential patron and his best friend. The composer exchanged hundreds of letters with her, but they never once met.

Somewhere between the failure of Tegumai's daughter and the success of Tchaikovsky come most of our efforts in the field of communication. We are aware of the necessity to express ourselves clearly and to understand other people better; we are trying

to communicate — but the universal state of misunderstanding testifies to a need for improvement of our methods.

#### *What is Communication?*

Let's look at business. Business men are more and more aware of the vital importance of communication. Before the war the word "communication" was not in general use except as a term for a system of communication such as telegraph, telephone or post. Today there is hardly a business speech in which the word is not used — and used in its basic dictionary meaning: "The interchange of thoughts or opinions."

Smooth operation of every business organization is dependent to a large extent on the ability of business men to communicate intelligently, effectively and swiftly with other people. This includes not only their customers, but their employees and their colleagues. The man who can explain himself may command what he wants; he who cannot convey his desires in an understandable way is left to his own personal resources.

The persuasive tongue or typewriter is, therefore, among the primary assets which an individual and a business must have in order to attain any real success.

Business men are recognizing this fundamental truth. Not only are many companies holding schools in conference and public-speaking techniques, but they are setting up correspondence improvement programmes and letter-writing seminars, and using films to show their staffs how to write better letters.

Most of these courses, seminars and "clinics" have been aimed not at supplying rules to be slavishly followed, but at provoking an awareness of good English expression.

#### *Before the Beginning*

A letter seems a simple thing; it has a beginning, a middle and an end. But between the beginning and the end lie many dangers.



We really have to begin *before* the beginning. We must copy the architect, who first drafts his plan and designs every detail.

The authors of the long-lived play, *Life with Father*, found that the time taken in planning paid dividends. They spent two years in working out a plan, and then wrote the play in seventeen days. An article like this may take only a few hours to write, but before the first key is struck there were years of reading and an intensive three or four weeks of research.

Business men are not in the playwrighting profession, time is short, and business letters are not intended to be pieces of deathless prose. But a few minutes, well-spent in thinking of what you are going to say, how you are going to say it, and to whom you are going to say it, will help to lift your letters out of the routine class and into a more informative, inspired and *effective* sphere. There can be more "punch" in a short, well-thought-out and well-composed letter than in a far more effusive, gushing and lengthy letter.

### *How to say it*

After you have planned your beginning, middle and end — sounding the main theme at the beginning, echoing it at the end, and developing it by natural steps in the middle — how are you going to say it?

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch whose *Art of Writing* we have often quoted, says that the first aim of speech is to be understood, and that the more clearly we write the more easily and surely we will be understood. That seems like a self-evident truth, and doubtless is, but the purpose of this article is not to discuss truths but who does what about them.

Most good writing is simple; the natural quality of good prose is simplicity. A man who thinks that long words and the use of abstractions are symbols of superior writing is quite wrong. The long words may be quite correct, and their attributes may be admirable, but this article deals with making communications understandable. To refer to a man as "envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary" may flatter him in the standing and sanctity of his profession, but if you wish to communicate an idea of his position you will call him "Minister".

Simplicity is an elusive thing; it must be sought after. It is a complex thing; discipline and organization of thought, as well as intellectual courage, contribute to it.

The allurements of elegant variation, as they are called by H. W. Fowler, the distinguished compiler of the Oxford English Dictionary and author of several books on good English usage, do not attract first-rate writers, and quite often such attempts to be picturesque and different are strained and unnatural.

In this dangerous class falls the use of foreign words. This is a weakness to which some of us are inclined, thinking perhaps that they inject a piquancy into our

writing (If we were really honest, we might find that our love for them stems from a pride in our superior knowledge!) A good rule to follow is that all words not English in appearance are, in English writing, ugly and not pretty. They are, however, justified if they afford much the shortest or clearest, if not the only, way to the meaning — or if they have some particular appropriateness of association or allusion in the sentences wherein they are used.

The same is true of technical terms. When they are being used in speech or writing for the general public, or for customers who are not experienced in their use, such terms should be translated into more familiar language.

Short words (and usually, though not always, they are familiar words) help to achieve clarity of expression. They are not only easier to use, but more powerful in effect; extra syllables reduce and do not increase, vigour. And you are not losing beauty of expression. Shakespeare, in his sonnets, those lovely and lilting pieces of literature, used short words almost exclusively. More than 96 per cent of their language consists of words of not more than two syllables.

Habitual use of long words may lose you the confidence of your reader. As the Eaglet said in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Speak English! I don't know the meaning of half the long words, and what's more, I don't believe you do either!"

Short sentences, like short words, strengthen our writing. The average written sentence in Queen Elizabeth's day ran to about 45 words; the Victorian sentence to 29; ours to 20 and fewer.

### *Write About Things*

Concrete words are the basis of a vigorous style. They are words that correspond as closely as possible to what we feel, see, think, imagine, experience and reason. Such words are more easily pictured, and as a result more easily understood by your reader. Look at the Parables. They speak only of things which you can touch and see. "A sower went forth to sow seed"; "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took". These are not abstractions. They bring the great principles of conduct and belief to the people in familiar pictures.

A French philosopher said the same thing in this way: "An abstract style is always bad. Your sentences should be full of stones, metals, chairs, tables, animals, men and women."

All these faults — use of long words, use of technical or obscure words unnecessarily, use of lengthy sentences, and use of abstract terms instead of concrete images — all these seem to find their natural home in jargon.

Jargon loves abstractions, far-fetched words, obscure constructions, false prestige and cloudy phrases. It confuses, but it also protects. It is useful to employ this ambiguous language, it has been said, so that if



the text be successfully carried out, all credit may be claimed; but if the text be unsuccessfully carried out, a technical alibi can be set up out of the text itself.

But it is not good, honest English, and what's more, your readers won't understand it.

### *And Now: Style*

What about style? It has been said that style is much the same as good manners in other human intercourse. It grows out of trying to understand others, of thinking of them rather than yourself, and of thinking with the heart as well as with the head.

Cardinal Newman, a great master of style, denied that style is a kind of extraneous ornament laid on to tickle the taste. Dean Swift, another authority, said that proper words in proper places make the true definition of style. Style has also been defined as that use of words by which they convey more than their dictionary meaning — the personal and artistic use of language.

To those who wish to improve their writing style, here is a word of advice: when you feel you have perpetrated a specially fine piece of writing, look at it impersonally and even ruthlessly — then delete cold-bloodedly, particularly the superfluous adjectives.

Style may be said to be the power to touch with ease, grace, and precision any note in the gamut of human thought or emotion.

Dr. Rudolf Flesch tells us in *The Art of Readable Writing* that your language differs from that of anybody else. It's part of your own unique personality. It has traces of the family you grew up in, the place where you came from, the people you have associated with, the jobs you have had, the schools you went to, the books you have read, your hobbies, your sports, your philosophy, your religion, your politics, your prejudices, your memories, your ambitions, your dreams and your affections.

This adds interest in life for those of us who write business letters, because in communicating with others on behalf of our company we have a double responsibility; to express our own personality and that of the company we are representing. Our letters can be a happy union of our own character and that of our organization, its friendliness and its wish to serve. When you stop to think it over, the best letters are of this sort.

This thinking of your reader and his feelings is just another evidence of good manners. In our intercourse with readers we should strive to satisfy Newman's famous definition of a gentleman as one who never inflicts pain: we will always try to be good company, to make our readers at home and at ease and pleased with themselves. Even the most difficult tasks of communicating ideas may be approached in this urbane spirit.

If we succeed, all our communications with others will be received with a remark similar to that expressed by George Eliot: "I never before met with so many of my own feelings expressed just as I should like them."

### *Get to Know People*

The letter-writer has many obligations. He must put aside his own feelings and thoughts and consider first those of the other man. He must fit the proposition to the reader and he must never give the impression that he thinks the reader is ignorant or in any way inferior. He must never write down.

In our personal, face-to-face contacts, we do not like people who are condescending. In a letter, this quality seems worse, because somehow we think of written words as being so premeditated and planned.

The great authors, as Emerson said, never condescend. To write down to our readers is a denial of our whole way of life, and a negation of the philosophy that every one of us is on the way up. Our readers are not unintelligent, although they may be uninformed, which is a totally different thing. Our job, in all our communications with others, is to supply information that may be useful to them.

If we study our audience, we will be less likely to make mistakes. Let us make sure we know for whom we are writing. Let us talk to our prospective readers and customers, if we can, and find out what they know, what they don't know, and what they would like to know. Then we can incorporate the results of our findings in our own minds, and write for our readers. We will be writing not to Man, but to a man.

Writing cannot have the same personal impact as speech; it has been said that spoken language is the primary phenomenon, and writing is only a more or less imperfect reflection of it. But, by aiming for clear, correct, thoughtful and written communications full of fellow-feeling, we can approach a reasonable facsimile of it. At the same time we can avoid the occasional rambling vagueness and careless thinking that sometimes characterizes our talking selves.

The more we know of people, their likes and dislikes, their ways and habits, their hopes and fears, the better all our communications with others will be. This is itself a reflection of the fact that the more human, the more sympathetic, and the more understanding we are, the better persons we will be not only in our own inner lives but in our dealings with others.

### *Reading is Essential*

There is a second way of attaining what we seek. Association with others teaches us about human nature; there is also wide reading, which introduces us to the minds and experiences of great writers in their observations of people and events. The world of literature lies open to all of us.

Reading extends our experience, increases our interests; it adds to our knowledge and our pleasure.



The more extensive our acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled, the more extensive will be our understanding and our powers of communication. Right reading makes a full man — a man not replete, but complete.

Being human, we can all find excuses for not reading as we know we should. Time is short, days are full, the mass of written material is enormous, and selection is difficult.

In one of his lectures on English literature given at Cambridge in the earlier part of this century, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch recommended the reading of three books: The Bible, Shakespeare and Homer.

Now we may not have a copy of Homer at hand, or even a volume of Shakespeare, but all of us can probably find a Bible on our bookshelves.

We cannot aspire to prose such as we find written there; but it will be something if we become fully aware that such writing exists. One who wishes to improve his style and clarity and expressiveness will lose himself in the beauties of a great book just because it is a masterpiece, but at the same time he will absorb the goodness of it.

Read as widely as you can; read the classics, for they are doubly permanent. They remain significant and they also acquire new significance in succeeding ages. Read books by modern authors, don't overlook magazines and the daily newspaper, but be selective. Choose the best, and by that we mean the best for you. There are doubtless legitimate occasions for indulging in "escape" literature — the kind of book that uses up an evening after a hard day at the office. Next day you don't remember the plot of it, and not a phrase is worth repeating. As a steady diet that is too thin fare for an ambitious youth or a grown man.

### *Are there "Tricks of the Trade"?*

When you come down to the hard facts of writing, how are you going to make sure you are communicating your ideas?

By gadgets? There is one made of celluloid, on which you dial certain facts about what you have just written: things like syllables and affixes. There will pop out at you from one of the little windows a verdict ranging from "easy" to "very hard".

By semantic devices? Well, there is a book on our desk which shows the number of times certain words are used in 1,000,000 words. From it we find that "gadget" was used two times, and "word" more than 100 times. Does that help? Somehow, we can scarcely fancy a business man (two times in 1 million) leafing through a book while dictating to his stenographer (six times in a million) a letter asking someone to pay his bill (more than 100 times in a million).

By books of similes? Well, one such book gives 88 pages of words which may stand for "very" in certain circumstances. But picking the right circumstance is still the writer's problem.

When it comes to choosing between two words, a common plan is for the business man dictator to jump at one, and then ask his stenographer, "Does that sound all right?"

That these aids, if aids they be, to readable writing exist, is proof that improvement is needed, and that there is a void to fill.

Good writing is not achieved by rules and devices. It is an art to be practised. To wait for inspiration is fatally inefficient, although it is a common-enough excuse. The secret of success is solid daily practice.

Armed with a few ideas; a genuine concern and interest in our readers; a reverence for and knowledge of our language; a background, constantly expanding, of good reading; and perhaps a reminder in our diaries to check our correspondence periodically, we shall be well equipped.

### *At the Reader's End*

The business of communication demands two — the author and the reader. We have spoken solely of the duties and responsibilities of the writer in this matter of communication. What about the reader?

In the creation of works of art, literature, poetry and drama, the responsibility of communication laid upon the artist is great. He has obligations to fulfil, for his is the great gift, the great thought, expressing itself to an audience. He is the expert. But in business life the roles of writer and reader are largely interchangeable. At one moment we are the writer, and at the next we are the reader. Much of what we have said about one holds true for the other.

The reader who puts aside prejudice and brings an understanding spirit and an open mind to a piece of writing is co-operating wholeheartedly with the writer, who, in turn, has been thinking mainly of the recipient. A meeting of minds takes place, and a closer understanding is reached.

As the General Manager of this bank said not long ago in introducing a collection of our Monthly Letters on *The Communication of Ideas*: "No greater good could be achieved by humanity today than the ability to communicate ideas. If we know what others are thinking, and if other people — in business and social life, nationally and internationally — understand what is in our minds, what we are striving for, what we hope for, many misunderstandings will be avoided."

After all, there are few gifts that one human being can give to another in this world as rich as understanding.