



# Royal Bank Letter

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## *Powers of Observation*

*The mass of people take little notice of what's going on around them. They don't know what they're missing by not observing more consciously.*

*Observation helps to bring success in business. More important, it is the key to a vibrant life...*

"You can observe a lot just by watching," Yogi Berra said. This pronouncement invariably draws indulgent smiles from admirers of the great baseball guru's off-the-wall way of putting things. But when you think of it, its simplicity masks profound truth. It clearly reflects a lifetime's experience of looking around the playing field and noting subtle clues as to the opposing team's intentions. In the broad field of life, people would observe more if they would only watch more deliberately what is going on before their very eyes.

Why be observant? Because it mightily helps carry a person satisfactorily through life in all its aspects. Indeed, observation can be crucial to life itself. The graveyards of the world are strewn with the remains of mortals who died before their time because they failed to take note of lethal hazards. The most poignant of all last words is "oops," or its equivalent in other tongues.

Some are born with the faculty of keen observation, and others must develop it. The doyen of fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes, was of the former class. In one of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about him, Holmes says of a man he has just met for the first time: "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else." One glance at his visitor was enough for him to take in all these points of identity.

Holmes told his companion Dr. Watson that he believed his talent for observation was partly hereditary. At the same time, however, he had improved on what

nature had given him by making an effort to see what others might overlook.

His whole method of detection, he said, was "based upon the observation of trifles." He once scolded Watson: "I can never bring you to realize the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a bootlace." In his own specialized way, the great detective was making the basic philosophical point that nothing, absolutely nothing, is insignificant. "All objects are as windows," Thomas Carlyle wrote, "through which the philosophic eye looks into Infinitude itself." Anyone interested in developing his or her observational skills would benefit from a reading of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and probably derive a lot of pleasure out of it in the process.

In any case, Holmes was a literary creation, and literary men and women have always been known for their knack of observing things that normally would escape the attention of ordinary human beings. An outstanding observer like Marcel Proust could spend almost a whole page describing in the minutest detail the effect of looking through a window on a rainy day. It is amazing how rich an experience that fine French novelist could extract from a situation that would seem banal to almost anyone else.

W. Somerset Maugham, who became the best-selling author of his time, was one of those who had to train himself to be observant. When he abandoned a career in medicine to become a writer, he went through the exercise of spending hours in the British Museum,

jotting down everything he could gather about the shape, colour, and decoration of the artifacts on display.

Maugham later developed the habit of entering every little detail about the people he met and the places he had been in notebooks which he carried around with him constantly. He proceeded to turn the realities he recorded into fiction acclaimed for its ring of truth and its insight into the human heart.

The all-time champion of English writers, William Shakespeare, was an observer *par excellence*. He evidently believed, to paraphrase his own words, in drawing profit from everything he saw. He wrote that through observation, one could look clear through the deeds of men to the motives behind them. Shakespeare did just that with his characters, giving his plays the unique power which they retain undiminished to this day.

Shakespeare was not only a great playwright, but a great poet. The best poets in history possessed the ability to zero in on the particulars that reveal the essence of

*Children are superb observers, especially of their parents' ways*

a situation, a scene, or a personality. Their incisiveness was not the result of their inherent sensitivity. They actively worked at trying to peer into the hearts of all their subjects. Walter Savage Landor, no mean poet himself, struck to the core of poetic observation when he praised Robert Browning's "inquiring eye."

The same spirit applies in the visual arts — painting, sculpture, photography, cinematography. The masters of each of these disciplines look long and hard at scenes and objects to discover what small details add up to an image that brings out their true significance.

But observation is more than merely visual. One can observe by sound, by touch, by taste, by smell, and by the central nervous system, as when one "has a funny feeling" about something or somebody. It especially counts in music. Johann Strauss Jr. was said to have drawn some of his most famous melodies from hearing birds sing. Performing musicians listen to every note and beat of recorded renditions by masters to perfect their technique.

Observation is also one of the chief operating principles of science. Scientific method is based on the study of phenomena as they go through changes, whether natural or induced. Discoveries that burst on the world like a thunderclap are often the products of years of patiently peering through microscopes and noting the tiniest permutations in the subject of the research. Genius is 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration, as

Thomas Edison is said to have said.

Edison spent countless hours observing electrical and mechanical phenomena. In his invention of the electric lightbulb, he conducted 3,000 experiments before he found the formula that worked. He was another who trained himself to take in all he saw and note it. He wrote: "The average person's brain does not observe a thousandth part of what the eye observes. It is almost incredible how poor our powers of observation — genuine observation — are."

Edison was not the only one to remark on how heedless ordinary people are of the world around them, which is strange, considering the way people start out in life. Small children are superb observers. They point out all sorts of things that adults never notice and ask piercing questions which their parents are hard-put to answer. They are exceedingly alert in applying the results of observations. A child can look, for instance, at the makeup of a board game and absorb in a couple of sittings exactly how the game is played.

In all too many cases, however, children are discouraged from exercising their natural powers. "Billy, you really shouldn't talk about the gentleman's (funny-looking) moustache," a mother will say. Adults often find the childish habit of pointing out things disconcerting, especially when it applies to them personally. Children have an unerring and uncompromising eye for their elders' slightest flaws.

The thought that children's basic characters are largely shaped by their typically sharp observation of their parents' ways should lead parents to re-examine their behaviour in their presence. Children emulate what they see and hear, for better or for worse. Aristotle's famous admonition rings loud and clear in this context: "If you would understand virtue, observe the conduct of virtuous men."

A boy or girl at the age of five or six has a roving mind full of a curiosity that verges on creative genius. To be very young is "to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower," as William Blake wrote in his *Auguries of Innocence*.

It might seem to adults that children's verbal observations are merely statements of the obvious, but they are actually an unfolding of the learning process. Instead of saying, in effect, "everybody knows that," adults should be telling children what more there is to be known about the subject, and where they can find further information on it. Parents and mentors should seize the moment to stimulate a child's desire to learn more about anything; if suppressed,

the urge to pursue it may never come again.

Still, it seems natural to shush up children when they make their running commentaries on the world, or to laugh off their comments as cuteness. That is a mistake to be guarded against, because it may detract from their full potential in the long run. Children who are regularly subject to put-downs tend to become inhibited because they learn to keep their thoughts to themselves to avoid embarrassment. They may also stop making the random observations that trigger their comments in the belief that nobody is interested in what they experience.

"It is to be regretted that habits of exact observation are not cultivated in our schools," Baron Wilhelm Humboldt wrote in the late 18th century. Judging from the paucity of subject matter in conversations among teenagers in western society, the situation has not changed greatly since then.

Evidently teenagers do not notice much in their day-to-day wanderings that they consider worth talking about. One of the benefits of being observant is that an observant person is seldom lost for something to say; the passing scene provides a succession of conversational topics. As the revered Canadian newspaperman Gregory Clark noted, good observers are sometimes accused of making up stories. In reality, though, they simply remember more of what they have experienced than other people do.

As a philologist, diplomat and philosopher of sorts, Baron Humboldt deplored the lack of schooling in observation mainly because it leads to a public acceptance of fallacious reasoning. Systematic observation — seeing and recording reality with one's own eyes — saves the mind from being led astray. In this tricky world of ours, we all have to fight our

*Cutting through the intellectual jungle by seeing things as they are*

way through thickets of erroneous assumptions, misleading generalizations, and deliberate misinformation. By making us focus on the actual rather than the presumed, informed observation can free us from the tyranny of theory. It can show us the paths through the intellectual jungle which lead us as close as possible to the plain truth.

That can only happen, however, if a person is able to synthesize what he or she observes, comparing and combining impressions to come up with rounded conclusions. To do so takes a kind of continuing education, consisting of gathering background knowledge of

all kinds from various media — especially books, which can be referred to again and again. Simply noticing things is pointless if one has no idea of what they mean, or has no intention of finding out about them. Background information enables one to interpret observations and put them in context.

Knowledge is a defence against jumping to conclusions. So is an awareness that we are all inclined to see what we wish to see according to our preconceptions, prejudices, and cultural conditioning. Good observers try to filter these misleading factors out of their thinking as far as possible. The act of observation itself is an antidote to self-delusion, teaching that

*To really watch what is going on around you, keep a clear mind*

things are as they are, and not as we would prefer them to be.

Observation is a great aid to judgment. It allows us to make evaluations on the basis of heightened experience. "An observant man, in all his intercourse with society and the world, constantly and unperceived marks on every person and thing the figure expressive of its value, and therefore, on meeting that person or thing, knows instantly what kind and degree of attention to give it," as the noted American lawyer John Foster wrote.

How does one become that kind of effective observer? First, by the conscious practice of "just watching." It is not as simple as it seems; to really watch what is going on around you requires a clear mind. Good observers try to rid themselves of preoccupations, which is a good thing in itself psychologically. They also try to slow down their mental processes in order to take everything in.

Effective observation depends on a cultivated memory. Impressions picked up in the course of everyday life are worthless if they are not retained. Good observers file away what they experience in the backs of their minds for further reference. A person who has taken note of how a certain thing is done will bring that knowledge to bear when he or she is faced with doing it.

On a practical plane, military instructors show students pictures and see how many features in them the students can pick out and interpret as to their significance. The more often they go over the photos, the more details they are able to identify. Officer trainees are given drawing materials and sent out to sketch bits of the countryside in detail. Since observation is so



important in journalism, student reporters are sent out on a street and told to make notes about everything they see.

Ordinary individuals wishing to sharpen their observational skills might try the same methods. It is an interesting exercise to take notes on, say, a street scene and then compare them with a photo of the same scene and see what points have been missed. This invariably shows the fallibility of the average person's perception. When observation becomes a habit, however, one's intake of details is almost sure to improve.

A simple practical rule for those who want to improve their observational skills is, "Walk, don't drive." Though they see a lot with peripheral vision, drivers (and cyclists) have to keep their eyes on the road. The habit of walking exercises the mind at the same time as it exercises the body. A city-dweller who strolls to

*Building an ability to size up a situation at first sight*

the office every day is never without mental stimulation as he or she observes buildings, traffic, and other people. Connoisseurs of urban life vary their routes to savour a city's variety.

A trail through the woods may seem devoid of life to an unobservant person, but it will be teeming with interest for an informed observer. Every tree, every wildflower, every mushroom has its own identity to those who know what they are. An ordinary hiker will see a pretty little yellow bird; a knowledgeable observer will see a male goldfinch. What is nothing but an orange butterfly to one person is to another an amazing monarch butterfly.

Among the most accurate observers of all are woodsmen accustomed to finding their way through the wilderness by noting natural signs in a landscape that would seem completely uniform to a city-dweller. The well-known Labrador trapper Horace Goudie, whose autobiography *Trails to Remember* was published by Jespersion Press of St. John's, Nfld., in 1991, once told of how he got separated from his son-in-law on his first visit to downtown Toronto. Goudie had only been over the route from his son-in-law's suburban home to downtown once in a car, but when he found himself on his own, he walked for several kilometres to the very doorstep of the house without hesitation. He was guided by everything he had seen and mentally noted about the streets, signs and buildings on that first car trip.

But good observation is by no means restricted to the outdoors. A trained engineer can scan a factory

floor and note dozens of points about its workings. An alert sales representative can enter someone's office and tell how best to approach the person after a quick glance at the desk. Observation has its most practical application in business and other forms of administration. A sharp business person is one who can size up a situation accurately and quickly. No one but a good observer can do that.

The American industrialist Eugene C. Grace obviously had business first in mind when he wrote: "If I were to prescribe one process in the training of men which is fundamental to success in any direction, it would be thoroughgoing training in the habit of accurate observation." Like Sherlock Holmes, an effective observer in business sees what others overlook, whether in a productionline, an administrative routine, or a balance sheet.

One's powers of observation are never more severely tested than when it comes to the human factor. An effective business person will try to understand the cares and motives of colleagues and customers by using the rules of good observation: watch deliberately, pick up clues to their character from their talk and comportment, and keep one's mind both clear and open. Misjudgments of people can lead to serious costs in business. They are usually made in the absence of a sense of what makes a person tick.

"Perhaps there is no property in which men are more distinguished from each other, than in the various degrees in which they possess the faculty of observation," the American jurist William Wirt wrote. "The great herd of mankind pass their lives in listless inattention and indifference as to what is going on around them, while those who are destined to distinction have a lynx-eyed vigilance that nothing can escape."

In other words, observation is a major key to success — and not only to success in business. For instance, the observation of people — of their feelings, their wants and needs — is an aid to the mutual understanding that makes for successful personal relationships.

The observation of the passing scene is proof against boredom; every day brings new sensations, new things to enjoy and to think about. People who are interested in things are interesting themselves, so observation indirectly lends individuals popularity in their social lives.

Most of all, by providing constant mental and emotional stimulation, observation lets people know what it means to be truly alive — to live life to its full potential. And regardless of whatever other successes one may have, the leading of a vibrant and fulfilling life is the highest success.

