



The Practical Writer

Written words form the mainstay of communications in organizations. But they often fail to do their job. Here, a guide to writing that means business. There's nothing to it but blood, toil, tears and sweat . . .

□ From time to time most educated people are called upon to act as writers. They might not think of themselves as such as they dash off a personal note or dictate a memo, but that is what they are. They are practising a difficult and demanding craft, and facing its inborn challenge. This is to find the right words and to put them in the right order so that the thoughts they represent can be understood.

Some writers deliberately muddy the meaning of their words, if indeed they meant anything to begin with. When most people write, however, it is to get a message across. This is especially so in business and institutions, where written words carry much of the load of communications. The written traffic of any well-ordered organization is thick and varied — letters, memos, reports, policy statements, manuals, sales literature, and what-have-you. The purpose of it all is to use words in a way that serves the organization's aims.

Unfortunately, written communications often fail to accomplish this purpose. Some organizational writing gives rise to confusion, inefficiency, and ill-will. This is almost always because the intended message did not get through to the receiving end. Why? Because the message was inadequately prepared.

An irresistible comparison arises between writing and another craft which most people have to practise sometimes, namely cooking. In both fields there is a wide range of competence, from the great chefs and authors to the occasional practitioners who must do the job whether they like it or not. In

both, care in preparation is of the essence. Shakespeare wrote that it is an ill cook who does not lick his own fingers; it is an ill writer who does not work at it hard enough to be reasonably satisfied with the results.

Unlike bachelor cooks, however, casual writers are rarely the sole consumers of their own offerings. Reclusive philosophers and schoolgirls keeping diaries are about the only writers whose work is not intended for other eyes. If a piece of writing turns out to be an indigestible half-baked mess, those on the receiving end are usually the ones to suffer. This might be all right in literature, because the reader of a bad book can always toss it aside. But in organizations, where written communications command attention, it is up to the recipient of a sloppy writing job to figure out what it means.

The reader is thus put in the position of doing the thinking the writer failed to do. To make others do your work for you is, of course, an uncivil act. In a recent magazine advertisement on the printed word, one of a commendable series published by International Paper Company, novelist Kurt Vonnegut touched on the social aspect of writing: "Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers. If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your readers will surely feel that you care nothing for them."

In the working world, bad writing is not only bad manners, it is bad business. The victim of an incomprehensible letter will at best be annoyed

and at worst decide that people who can't say what they mean aren't worth doing business with. Write a sloppy letter, and it might rebound on you when the recipient calls for clarification. Where one carefully worded letter would have sufficed, you might have to write two or more.

Muddled messages can cause havoc within an organization. Instructions that are misunderstood can set people off in the wrong directions or put them to work in vain. Written policies that are open to misinterpretation can throw sand in the gears of an entire operation. Ill-considered language in communications with employees can torpedo morale.

A careful writer must be a careful thinker

In the early 1950s the British Treasury grew so concerned with the inefficiency resulting from poor writing that it called in a noted man of letters, Sir Ernest Gowers, to work on the problem. Out of this Gowers wrote an invaluable book, *The Complete Plain Words*, for the benefit of British civil servants and anyone else who must put English to practical use. (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1954.)

Gowers took as his touchstone a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson: "The difficulty is not to write, but to write what you mean, not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish." To affect your reader precisely as you wish obviously calls for precision in the handling of language. And to achieve precision in anything takes time.

Gowers suggested that the time spent pursuing precision more than cancels out the time wasted by imprecision. People in administrative jobs might well protest that they were not hired as writers, and that their schedules are crammed enough without having to fuss over the niceties of grammar and the like. The answer to this is that it is an important part of their work to put words on paper. It should be done just as thoroughly and conscientiously as anything else for which they get paid.

No one should be led to believe writing is easy. As great a genius as Dr. Samuel Johnson described composition as "an effort of slow diligence and steady perseverance to which the mind is dragged

by necessity or resolution." Writing is hard work because *thinking* is hard work; the two are inseparable. But there is some compensation for the effort invested in trying to write well.

The intellectual discipline required to make thoughts come through intelligibly on paper pays off in clarifying your thoughts in general. When you start writing about a subject, you will often find that your knowledge of it and your thinking about it leave something to be desired. The question that should be foremost in the writer's mind, "What am I really trying to say?" will raise the related questions, "What do I really know about this? What do I really think about it?" A careful writer has to be a careful thinker — and in the long run careful thinking saves time and trouble for the writer, the reader, and everybody else concerned.

The problem is that many people believe that they *have* thought out ideas and expressed them competently on paper when they actually haven't. This is because they use nebulous multi-purpose words that may mean one thing to them and something quite different to someone else. Gowers gave the example of the verb "involve," which is used variously to mean "entail," "include," "contain," "imply," "implicate," "influence," etc., etc. "It has . . . developed a vagueness that makes it the delight of those who dislike the effort of searching for the right word," he wrote. "It is consequently much used, generally where some more specific word would be better and sometimes where it is merely superfluous."

The right word will almost tell you where it should go

There are plenty of other lazy man's words lurking about, threatening to set the writer up beside Humpty Dumpty, who boasted: "When I use a word, it means just what I want it to mean." It is therefore wise to avoid words that can be taken in more than one way in a given context. This ties in with the first commandment of practical writing, which is: "Be Specific." "Specify, be accurate, give exact details — and forget about fine writing and original style," Rudolph Flesch says in his book, *How to Be Brief*.

Style tends to take care of itself if you select the right words and put them in the most logical order; so, to a large extent, do grammar and syntax. Find the right word, and it will almost tell you where in a sentence it should go.

This is not to say that grammar and syntax are not important. Words scattered on a page at the discretion of the writer simply would not be comprehensible. The rules of language usage also exert a degree of discipline over your thinking about a subject by forcing you to put your thoughts in logical order. Many grammatical conventions are intended to eliminate ambiguity, so that you don't start out saying one thing and end up saying something else.

Most literate people, however, have an instinctive grasp of grammar and syntax that is adequate for all ordinary purposes. The rules of usage (in English more so than in French) are in any case flexible, changeable, and debatable: new words are invented as the language lives and grows, and a solecism in one generation becomes respectable in the next. So while grammar and syntax have their roles to play in written communications, they must not be adhered to so slavishly that they interfere with intelligible expression. Gowers quoted Lord MacAulay with approval on this score: "After all, the first law of writing, that law to which all other laws are subordinate, is this: that the words employed should be such as to convey to the reader the meaning of the writer."

Vocabulary is usually the least of a writer's problems

Since words come first, an ample vocabulary is an asset in conveying meaning. Oddly enough, though, people who have difficulty getting their written messages across rarely lack the vocabulary required. They know the apt words, but they don't use them. They go in for sonorous but more or less meaningless language instead.

People who are perfectly able to express themselves in plain spoken language somehow get the idea that the short, simple words they use in

everyday conversation are unworthy to be committed to paper. Thus where they would say, "We have closed the deal," they will write, "We have finalized the transaction." In writing, they "utilize available non-rail ground mode transportation resources" instead of loading trucks. They get caught in "prevailing precipitant climatic conditions" instead of in the rain. They "utilize a manual earth removal implement" instead of digging with a shovel. When so many words with so many meanings are being slung about, nobody can be quite sure of just what is being said.

The guiding principle for the practical writer should be that common words should always be used unless more exact words are needed for definition. The reason for this is so plain that it is all but invisible. It is that if you use words that everybody knows, everybody can understand what you want to say.

A common touch with language has always distinguished great leaders. Winston Churchill comes immediately to mind; he "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle," as John F. Kennedy said. Churchill mobilized the language in more ways than in his inspiring speeches. As Prime Minister of Great Britain, he was that nation's chief administrator at a time when governmental efficiency was a matter of life and death for the democratic world. In August, 1940, while the Battle of Britain was at its peak, Churchill took the time to write a memo about excess verbiage in inter-departmental correspondence. It read:

Let us have an end to such phrases as these: 'It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations...' or 'Consideration should be given to carrying into effect...' Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from the short expressive word even if it is conversational.

Churchill's own wartime letters and memos, reproduced in his memoirs, are models of effective English. It is interesting to speculate on how much his clarity of expression, and his insistence upon it in others, helped to win the war. He was, of course, a professional writer who had earned a living from

his pen since he was in his early twenties. He was something of a literary genius. In the light of this, it may seem ridiculous to exhort modern white-collar workers to write like Winston Churchill. Nevertheless, the principles of writing which Churchill followed are not at all hard to grasp.

Churchill was an admirer of H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of English Usage*, to which he would direct his generals when he caught them mangling the language. Fowler set five criteria for good writing — that it be direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid. Any writer who tries to live up to these is on the right track.

By keeping in mind two basic techniques you can go some way towards meeting Fowler's requirements. These are:

Prefer the active voice to the passive. It will make your writing more direct and vigorous. It's a matter of putting the verb in your sentence up front so that it pulls along the rest of the words. In the active voice you would say, "The carpenter built the house;" in the passive, "The house was built by the carpenter." Though it is not always possible to do so in the context of a sentence, use the active whenever you can.

Prefer the concrete to the abstract. A concrete word stands for something tangible or particular; an abstract word is "separated from matter, practice, or particular example." Churchill used concrete terms: "We have not journeyed all this way, across the centuries, across the oceans, across the mountains, across the prairies, because we are made of sugar candy." If he had couched that in the abstract, he might have said: "We have not proved ourselves capable of traversing time spans and geographical phenomena due to a deficiency in fortitude." Again, there are times when abstractions are called for by the context because there are no better concrete words, but try not to use them unless you must.

Sticking to the concrete will tend to keep you clear of one of the great pitfalls of modern practical writing, the use of "buzz words." These are words

and expressions that come into currency not because they mean anything in particular, but merely because they sound impressive. It is difficult to give examples of them because they have such short lives; the "buzz words" of today are the laughing stocks of tomorrow. They are mostly abstract terms (ending, in English, in *-ion*, *-ance*, *-osity*, *-ive*, *-ize*, *-al*, and *-ate*), but they sometimes take the form of concrete words that have been sapped of their original meaning. The reason for giving them a wide berth is that their meaning is seldom clear.

Jargon presents a similar pitfall. It has its place as the in-house language of occupational groups, and that is where it should be kept. It too consists mostly of abstract words, and by keeping to the concrete you can shut out much of it. But jargon is contagious, so it should be consciously avoided. Never use a word of it unless you are certain that it means the same to your reader as it does to you.

The combination of the active and the concrete will help to make your prose direct, simple, vigorous, and lucid. There is no special technique for making it brief; that is up to you.

The first step to conciseness is to scorn the notion that length is a measure of thoroughness. It isn't. Emulate Blaise Pascal, who wrote to a friend: "I have made this letter a little longer than usual because I lack the time to make it shorter."

Use your pen or pencil as a cutting tool. No piece of writing, no matter what its purpose or length, should leave your desk until you have examined it intensely with a view to taking the fat out of it. Strike out anything that does not add directly to your reader's understanding of the subject. While doing this, try to put yourself in his or her shoes.

Be hard on yourself; writing is not called a discipline for nothing. It is tough, wearing, brain-racking work. But when you finally get it right, you have done a service to others. And, like Shakespeare's cook, you can lick your metaphorical fingers and feel that it was all worthwhile.