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# *On Writing Briefly*

ONE important step toward clear and courteous writing is described by Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet:* "since brevity is the soul of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief." But what is brevity?

If a piece of writing tells the whole story, and only that, it is not too long. Being brief means that you will not use ten pages to tell a one-page story: but neither will you try to tell a ten-page story on one side of a sheet of paper.

A report of three thousand words may be brief, and a 100-word memo may be long: the first, if it comprehends many facts, several points of view, and some choices: the latter if it is devoid of necessary facts, woolly in its thinking, and indeterminate in its conclusion.

To use too many words to communicate one's thoughts is a sign of mediocrity, while to gather much thought into few words, clearly and accurately, stamps the person of executive genius.

Men in management positions have a special obligation. Sour notes are not sweetened because the writer dictated them from an executive's chair to an exquisite secretary.

What you have written may not be bad writing, but the chances are it is not the most effective plain talk either.

Have you written it too hastily? When you spend an hour seeking the answer to a correspondent's question or complaint, isn't it good economy to spend ten minutes expressing your answer so that it will be understood and appreciated?

When Churchill was directing Britain's war effort he wrote a memo containing this dictum: It is sheer laziness not compressing thought into a reasonable space.

## *Why are you writing?*

Before starting to write, you should know just what you wish to convey. Business men don't ordinarily write with the sole purpose of self-expression. They want to get other people to understand, to believe, to act.

A letter may fail of its purpose because of lack of target definition. The writer scatters his fire. He writes or dictates many words while wandering around in his mind looking for explicit thoughts. So one rule for the writer of letters is: reach a clear and definite agreement with yourself about the ideas you wish to convey.

You are not writing to be impressive, but to be understood. There is an obligation upon you to deliver your message in such a way that it will have the best possible chance to fulfil its mission. John Ball and Cecil B. Williams illustrate this in their book called *Report Writing* (Ronald's Press Co., New York, 1955): "The quarterback has to throw the ball where the receiver is, or the pass is not good. The quarterback can't catch the ball for the end, of course, or make him catch it — but he can put it in the end's hands. After that it is up to the end."

The thing needed in writing is to have something to pass along, and to use words the reader will understand, put up in packages small enough for him to grasp easily.

## *Be precise*

This is not a list of rules for letter writing, but no essay can avoid reference to some rules. One necessary prescription is: be precise.

When your writing is definite in its manner and plain in its language it is likely to be vivid, so that your words walk up and down in the mind of your reader. Brevity helps you to give movement to what you write.

The first virtue of a masculine writing style is brevity, and brevity is aided by use of the active verb and the concrete noun. What most appeals to people is life, action, sights and sounds — something happening. Note how carefully those exquisite short stories called the parables speak only of things you can touch and see, and what befalls them.

Your writing will be diffuse and pedestrian so long as you prefer abstract words to concrete words. But most business men are not that way at all by nature, so another rule is: be yourself. Directness and simplicity of expression will contribute mightily toward natural forcefulness. "One must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star," said Nietzsche, the German philosopher. The business man will resolve his chaotic thoughts into exact, concrete and brief expression.

## *Be graceful*

Brevity is not to be worshipped in a narrow way. The graces have their place in social correspondence and descriptive narration. Some irrelevancies should make their way into all letters designed to win friends. Brevity should be sought in the spirit of "as briefly as I can, saying what I wish to say, in the spirit I wish to convey."

Let our letters have something in them not common and ordinary. Every letter is entitled to depart from what is dictated by a strict rule of shortness: a departure that adds a personal touch in keeping with the purpose and content of the letter.

Your letters can be meaningful and significant and still be melodious and human and courteous. But it takes art and effort to do all this without rambling.

What is our ideal? All of us would like to write letters and reports and articles that have distinction of expression, brevity, dramatic quality, concreteness, beauty of rhythm and adventurousness of phrase and idea. We can do it. By paying attention and observing a few principles we can improve our writing little by little until one day we awake to the realization that we have achieved the mystery called "art".

## *Be clear*

Opposed to the grace and concreteness we have been writing about is what Professor Edgar Dale of Ohio State University brightly headlines on two of his essays: "The Art of Confusion" and "Clear Only if Known." It is unwise to send forth your thoughts like so much raw material for your reader to put into shape. The expert writer, the thoughtful writer, the writer who wishes his letter to accomplish something, will not leave to his reader the labour of disentangling the pertinent material and reshaping it in his own mind.

What is the first object of a machine? Effective work. The maker seeks to eliminate friction and tightness and looseness. The machine that runs with perfect smoothness transmits its power in production.

What is the first object of writing? To convey thoughts. The writer seeks to arrange words so that they shall suffer the least possible obstruction from friction in the reader's mind.

In both cases the object is to secure the maximum of disposable force by diminishing the amount absorbed in transmission. "Obviously," said George Henry Lewes in an essay on style more than fifty years ago, "if a reader is engaged in extricating the meaning from a sentence which ought to have reflected its meaning as in a mirror, the mental energy thus employed is abstracted from the amount of force which he has to bestow on the subject."

If your letter deals with products or ideas that are highly technical, take pains to interpret them simply. Remember that you are the specialist on the point you are writing about: your correspondent expects something helpful from you.

This does not mean that you must always write for the 12-year-old mentality. Do avoid ten-dollar words and do build bridges between one section of a topic and another. When "boiling down" your letter, be sure not to demolish the bridges, thus leaving the reader to flounder between two thoughts. Destroy confusing ornamentation; trim away the superfluous; remove images and expressions that are foreign to your train of thought and your purpose.

John Evelyn, the 17th century diary writer, told the story of Monmouth's rebellion in 68 lines, and he included all essentials and colour. Homer condensed ten years of adventure into his epic Odyssey, and Aristotle made a digest of it in 79 words. Lincoln's address at Gettysburg used only 266 words. The Ten Commandments use 297. The United States Declaration of Independence has 300. By contrast, said Walter Winchell, the United States columnist, a U.S.A. order to reduce the price of cabbage uses 26,911 words.

## *Effects of lengthiness*

People do not like to read a letter that is lazily long. They are likely to exclaim at the end, as an old philosopher did in a great Egyptian temple built for a little black monkey: "What a magnificent palace is here for such a ridiculous inhabitant!"

It is not good business to have that said of something one writes. Readers are likely to resent it if you take up their time by using superfluous words. Your purpose — selling goods, collecting money, answering criticism, or making friends — will be better served by letters

that are concise, dynamic, straight-to-the-point, and tell exactly what your reader wants to know.

Lengthiness can be expensive as well as ineffective. Suppose you write a memo to 1,000 people, perhaps your employees or agents. It takes you an hour to block out the memo: it takes your readers an average of five minutes to read and understand it. On the other hand, suppose you were to spend two hours in composing the memo or letter, writing it so simply and briefly that your readers can absorb it in only four minutes. You would spend 60 extra minutes and your readers would save 1,000 minutes: a good return in time, temper and friendly feeling.

## *Simplicity pays*

Great writers try to tell their thoughts as clearly and shortly as possible. Simplicity has always been a mark of truth, and we believe that it is now accepted as a mark of genius.

Simplicity is the outward sign of depth of thought. You cannot adorn simplicity. You do not achieve it by grammatical artifice. What will move your reader to your way of thinking is your sincerity manifesting itself through words that have human feeling akin to his own, and carry a meaning of interest to him.

Alas! there are many people who think that if they are dull enough and laboured enough they will sound scholarly. They take an ordinary proverb, like "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," and they change it to "Early retirement is a significant factor in one's physical development, pecuniary success and intellectual stature." They take an advertising slogan like "Ask the man who owns one" and turn it into "Make an inquiry of one of our purchasers."

Good style is not reached by such tortuous ways. Confused talk does not drum up business. Ornamentation wearies the eye and deadens the mind. The smooth and luscious in a business communication disgusts us. Every word that can be spared from the purpose and plan of the letter is hurtful if it remains.

Superlatives should be avoided. They are unnecessary and often misleading, deceiving not only the reader but the writer. The latter may be led to think when he writes "I have given the matter my closest attention" that he really has exhausted all avenues of approach.

Exaggeration expresses ignorance. We try to replace poverty of thought or language by the use of bombastic phrases. Our appeal will be more effective if we write gently, supplying facts in easily understood form, presenting our purpose in a charming and eager way.

We must be careful about adjectives, because the evil destiny of many who aspire to good writing abides in their indiscriminate use. Those who misuse or over-use adjectives fill their letters with affectation. They are like the painter who threw sponges soaked with several colours at a wall, expecting a beautiful landscape to result.

It is good practice to reserve adjectives for occasions when they make our meaning more precise, and to reject them when they merely convey emphasis. Concrete nouns, fittingly chosen, and active verbs, will usually give the desired strength and movement to what we write.

## *Words and sentences*

What do you write with? Words, sentences, and paragraphs. We should take a delight in calling forth the right words, in the right environment, to say what is in our minds to say.

The best words call up images with little expenditure of the reader's time and energy. It is a mistake for the business man to chase after a fine word instead of using the simple word that fits his needs. He lays himself open to two dangers: he may be seduced by the charm of some attractive word to write something he did not intend, or he may be tempted to seek a situation into which he may fit the word to which he has taken a liking.

It is obvious by now that brevity in letters does not consist alone in deleting words as one does in composing a telegram, but in choosing the right words to convey our meaning clearly and sharply. By using words that give light and shadow to our meaning we help ourselves toward writing pithily. If there are unusual words that express a meaning better than any others, we should use them. We should not fear long words if they are strongly expressive and have a familiar look and sound.

Let us cut sentences into bites we can swallow. The man who wishes to avoid suspicion of being a fuzzy thinker will prune his high-sounding phrases. Instead of adorning one thought about his firm or his product or himself in ten glorious sentences, he will fill ten simple sentences with ten significant thoughts.

The average length of sentences in five of the most popular magazines is 18 words. If you write long sentences, look for joints in their construction where you can break them into smaller pieces. You will be pleasantly surprised, if you examine yesterday's carbon copies, to see how simple it is. Look at all those "and" sentences that can be broken up. We seem to have a feeling of guilt when we write a short, simple sentence. Then we tack on "and . . . something or other."

The more words there are in a sentence the harder it is to read and understand that sentence. A sentence should, ideally, express only one thought. At the same time, we must try to have some melodious movement

in what we write: we cannot have our sentences always leaping and never flowing. Too many very short sentences tire us. We should vary the pattern. Each sentence should tell a situation which is part of a larger one, and move us on to the next.

Building our sentences into good paragraphs is an art not to be despised. We shall not go far wrong if we take for each paragraph one essential truth about our subject, or one point of view. By breaking our letters into short lengths in a thoughtful way we achieve two desirable results: we give our letters an airy and readable look, and we increase our points of emphasis.

## *Writing a letter*

Your letter will be well written if it fulfils these modest requirements: if it is effortless in appearance, showing no sign of strain in its composition; if it is untheatrical, making its points without needlessly sawing the air; if it is simple in its construction, making intelligible to the reader things that might be obscure; if its words fit your thoughts, not hanging like a giant's clothes on the limbs of a dwarf nor squeezing a man's frame into the clothes of a boy; and if all this is attained in the smallest space commensurate with the clear expression of what you have to say.

Think before writing. Just as perspective is the bridle and rudder of the artist, so a forward look is the guide of the writer. You should know your audience and your subject; you should have a clear conception of what you want your audience to learn about your subject.

If you do a little exercise in analysis it will help you to write briefly. Ask yourself: to whom am I writing? what knowledge has he about this matter, knowledge that I need not repeat? what is his feeling about it? on what points do we agree? disagree? what do I wish to add to his knowledge? what do I wish to influence him to do?

Begin your letter at the point of the reader's interest. It is discourteous to tackle the reader as if he must read what you write, and need not be wooed. No one is so wise or important that he can neglect being urbane.

In the body of your letter, make of the problem or plan an interesting situation to be told about. What is happening about that order, payment, delivery? what difference does it make to your correspondent? You must have something specific to say or you would not be writing: don't be coy about saying it. Keep this part of your letter compact, being sure, at the same time to cover the subject.

Be correct. Brevity is helped by exactness. There are times for severity of writing, with no frills or puffs, but even then — perhaps, indeed, more then than at other times — you need to be exact in your use of words.

## *Look it over*

If you have been led to believe that your correspondence, or that of your subordinates, can be improved, beware of seeking neat solutions. We do not know of any way of handling correspondence that is at the same time the quickest way and the best way. Efficiency in results demands some expenditure of time in preparation.

When you are checking a letter, read it with more than the discovery of typographical errors in mind. Does it convey your message to your reader in such a way as to provoke a favourable response along lines you desire? Does it tell as briefly as is consistent with courtesy and your strategy just what you have to say? Have you smothered any important points by loading them with detail? Have you discarded all unnecessary ballast? Is there anything in the letter whose presence or absence makes no discernible difference?

Shakespeare seems to have had a habit of roughing out his plays pretty large, and then cutting them down. He wrote at white heat, once the mood was on him. He did not pause at the end of every passage, to check back on the number of words he was using. But in the outcome his plays hew closely to the line of economy, considering not only the matter in them but the evocation of spirit they were designed to arouse.

Yours may be a similar method: to write at length and then shorten your manuscript.

Read your letter, too, with an eye to its effect on you. The discipline of striving for perfection of expression, your effort to do a good job with an economy of words, will have a beneficial effect. A sloppy way of writing may give rise to self-induced murkiness of thought, but strictness in expression will contribute to a tidy mind.

## *Appreciate good writing*

We should esteem good writing, and show our appreciation. There is magic in a word of praise.

Why not write, once in a while, to someone who writes you a letter, just to compliment him? Go into particulars; don't compliment generally. He probably knows that what he wrote was pretty good technically. Instead, tell him what it meant to you, how it gave you a new view-point, solved a problem, or added to your happiness. As André Maurois once remarked: "The general did not thank me when I talked to him of his victories, but his gratitude was unbounded when a lady mentioned the twinkle in his eye."

Out of your evaluation of others' letters will spring a new desire for distinction in your own.

It will be easy, then, to choose which comment shall apply to what you write: Maria's in *Love's Labour's Lost* — "The letter is too long by half a mile", or Sam Weller's in *Pickwick Papers* — "She'll vish there wos more, and that's the great art o' letter writin'."

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