



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 52, NO. 7

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, JULY 1971

Writing for All Occasions

EVERY PERSON is called upon sometime in his life to use all forms of written communication. It is well for him to know something of the different techniques needed. Then he can, without difficulty or distress, write a piece for a newspaper, a report for a club, an advertisement or a letter.

Seeking a topic to illustrate the various ways of writing about the same event in different forms, an ancient masterpiece has been chosen: the *Odyssey*, by Homer.

As Homer wrote it, the *Odyssey* runs to 11,000 lines, but here is a digest of it by Aristotle several centuries later, only 79 words long:

A certain man is away from home for a number of years, being closely watched by Poseidon and stripped of all his companions, while his affairs at home are in such shape that his money is being squandered by wooers of his wife, and his son is being plotted against. After being shipwrecked by a storm, he arrives home, makes himself known to some, and attacks the wooers, with the result that he is saved and his enemies destroyed.

"That," says Aristotle, "is the real story of the *Odyssey*. The rest is episodes." But what an array of episodes, so cleverly told!

The subject of the poem is the return of Ulysses from Troy to his home in Ithaca. He is the classic symbol of man's endurance and man's ingenuity. What saves the story from being merely the yarn of an unprincipled adventurer is the fact that Ulysses' guile was employed, like Robin Hood's, in the pursuit of heroic goals. What saves it from being merely a travel tale is Homer's skill in writing it.

Some people get paralysed when they think of taking up a pen to write a letter or an article. They picture the job as a huge one with innumerable small details, and frighten themselves into doing nothing. What they should do is think of the person to whom they want to write, or should write; think of a story to tell, and go to work.

See what is going on

The first point about Homer that will strike the novice writer is the evidence of his powers of observation. This gives to his similes their profusion, their vividness and their appearance of truth, thus leading the reader through scenes as if he were there in person. Homer had obviously developed a mood of mental expectancy, being always on the look-out for unusual aspects of events. The writer of today needs to approach everyday living in the same wide-eyed way, looking for and detecting vivid interest in little things.

To observe is to become informed. Writers are forever students; they never stop learning. To them, nothing is useless.

If the job at hand is the preparation of a brief on urban renewal the writer needs to know the facts about housing and land use, he needs to study what has already been written, and he needs to have observed personally the conditions about which he is writing.

Facility in thinking, organizing of thoughts, skill in expression: these may be derived from reading. No one who hopes to write well can afford not to read. This goes as much for the writer of business letters as for the author of novels. It is not enough to skim through or refer to encyclopedias and the like. True reading consists in imbibing the best of what has been written until it becomes part of your unconscious self, your guide, counsellor and friend in whatever situation you find yourself.

Know your purpose

Above the level of mere mechanics, writing cannot be reduced to rules. Every piece of writing has its distinctive character, and requires that you answer certain questions.

For whom are you writing? For what purpose is this piece of writing intended? Have you the necessary facts? What have you to contribute that is new, or are you going to bring together the existing knowledge in a novel or attractive way?

Anything you write should have as one of its purposes to make intelligible some part of society, or

brighten some fragment of life. It may inform, instruct, or amuse.

The person who wishes to write well should write often, for it is practice that makes for good performance.

Ulysses was never in greater danger from aggressive antagonists than from the charmers who tempted him to a life of ease: Circe with her voluptuous hospitality; the Lotus-eaters, in whose land there was nothing to do but relax on the beach, eating honey-sweet plants; the Sirens, against whose enchanting voices he stopped his sailors' ears with wax and had himself tied to the mast; and Calypso, divinely fairer than his wife.

Parallel charms lie in wait for all writers, enticing them to skim the conscientious workmanship that is the secret of good writing and to lose sight of their purpose. Even if what you are writing is not of the magnitude of an epic, pride in your craftsmanship will prevent your writing it with a slack hand, thus leaving your readers to take the strain of making something of it.

Whatever you write must have substance so as to be seen, and limitation, so that it can be all seen. This means saying what you have to say, covering the necessary facts of your subject in an understandable way, in the fewest possible words.

Brevity does not consist in using few words but in covering the subject effectively in the fewest possible number. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is sometimes used as an example of brevity. More important is the fact that it said all that needed to be said. That address illustrates another point. You do not need a specially-furnished, sound-proof, room in which to do your writing: Lincoln perfected his address on a train.

Having written, read your composition with care. Everything a writer produces looks around it with timorous feelings, like a new-hatched chicken unsteady on its feet and apprehensive about how it will be received. Give some solicitous attention to this new-born progeny of yours.

Do not be ordinary

The function of diction is (1) to make clear what is said, and (2) to lift it above the level of the ordinary.

In telling a story you have three choices: you can relate events so that they seem twice as big as they were; or about half as big as they were; or just as big as they were. It is a mistake to adorn a simple story. To push emotion and drama into a piece of writing which does not properly admit them is just as fatal as to leave sentiment out of a letter or a poem or an article where it properly belongs.

Some guile is needed in writing articles or letters designed to give information or help. But do not cut up your precepts too small in the effort to make them easy to swallow. A piece of writing that does not compel us to chew mentally is hardly worth bothering about.

In whatever writing you do, use fitting words. French and English are ancient languages, but they have the freshness of youth. They are as ready to hand for your use today as they were to Balzac and Shakespeare. They leave no excuse for drabness or cloudiness.

Often quoted is a maxim attributed to the Chinese: "A picture is worth a thousand words." But descriptive words fittingly used can conjure up a thousand pictures. Use action words and not passive. Use adjectives that appeal to the senses, including common sense. If they are put into the mix too liberally the result is a fruity and indigestible concoction.

Think of your reader

Your first and most important obligation is to consider your reader. What are his interests, what is his index of comprehension, and what meaning will he read into what you write?

Writing involves feeling as well as thinking, and both writer and reader have emotional needs which sometimes transcend the intellectual. Writers of good judgment who wish to move readers to action or fear or laughter or love know that they must appeal to the instincts, men's strongest driving forces.

If we wish to arouse attention and stir up interest we shall seldom use simple logic. We need to bounce the reader, to jog him into taking notice of what we say, and then to give him something that will satisfy the desire we have aroused.

Only an executive dictating a memo to his staff can be sure that what he writes will be read. Others have to win an audience, to catch, hold, impress and convince.

Do not start with general observations but with a concrete, easily visualized and interesting situation. Homer, after a few lines of introduction, immediately brings in a man or a woman with definite characteristics. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (which has been called "the finest work of sheer art in all fiction") opens with a single sentence stating the theme and then goes immediately into the famous introductory scene. One instructor in writing used to recommend as a perfect opening line: "Mr. Perkins opened the lid of the dust bin and looked out." This catches attention and raises questions which can only be answered by reading on: "What is he doing in the dust bin? What is he afraid of? What does he see when he looks out?"

Do not be ashamed of simplicity. It goes with naturalness of tone and freshness of viewpoint to make readable writing. But simplicity in writing is not gained by being simple in your thinking. To write an article or a letter that is easy to understand entails work and ingenuity. How cunning Homer is in his apparent simplicity!

Avoid the temptation to overstate or over-emphasize. Singers who add a great amount of body action, squirming, face-making, and such-like, are

compensating for their incapacity to transmit feeling and meaning through vocal ability. The writer, too, is displaying inferior skill who strains to incorporate big or unusual words, winds his phrases into performing snakes, or drags in unfitting scenes.

Writing requires a lively and controlled imagination. Nothing written is conjured out of thin air. The genius of Einstein does not consist in his creating something out of nothing, but in his associating a new thought with old knowledge and thus bringing forth a new idea.

Imagination is not a diversion, but a tool, for the writing craftsman. In great writing, such as that of Homer, there is hardly an idea or an event that is not commonplace, but the writer uses lively imagination and sprightly language. He takes an ordinary episode, say of how some mariners beached their ship, stowed sail, walked ashore and cooked their dinner, and makes it so graphically poetical that we linger over the tale.

By colourful writing you change a mere happening into news. "Colour" in the newspaper sense means something that gives a story originality, drama, romance, quaintness, humour, or a sense of the unique. The writer of distinction is true to the facts, but he adds spirit in telling them.

Writing letters

In his poem "To a Blank Sheet of Paper" Oliver Wendell Holmes speculates about what his pen will inscribe there: a love song, a satire, a sorrow, or a merry verse.

Having a sheet of paper and a pen, you will choose a subject in which you have some interest, on which you feel there is something to be said, and about which you believe that you have something to say.

Let us start with a letter to a friend. Subjects include an unusual event or combination of events, an amusing happening, a stroke of good luck, an interesting meeting with someone, or an adventure. But have the reader's interests in mind, think of what will give your friend pleasure.

Put a little sunshine into your letter, avoiding excessive mention of your troubles. Flatter your reader a little: when Ulysses came out of the woods to seek help from Nausicaä he compared her to the noble and beautiful Dian — "Never have I seen man or woman so fair."

Whether Nausicaä learned the art from Ulysses we do not know, but she displays it in this imaginary letter to his wife, Penelope.

When your husband came out of the woods where I was washing clothes in the river Ernonos he was so strong and so handsome and he addressed me in so becoming words that I exclaimed to myself: "Surely, here is one of the gods!" And now I am saying farewell to him so that you, too, may rejoice in him.

I introduced Ulysses to my father and my mother, and they entertained him in a way

befitting the King of Ithaca and the Hero of Troy. He told our people in public assembly about his exciting adventures, and when you hear them you will be everlastingly grateful that he has returned to you safely.

Despite many trials, your husband has not lost his skill in sport or his art in talking. At one of the many banquets in his honour a jealous youth twitted him on his not joining in the tests of strength and skill. Ulysses at once ticked him off: "Thy wit is small, and thy unmannerly words have angered me" — and then Ulysses seized a heavy quoit and threw it far beyond any other marks.

Ulysses has talked with me hour after hour about his homeland and about you, his beloved wife. He has seen much of the cities and manners of men, but he said most poetically that all his experience was but an archway wherethro' he travels to be reunited with you.

My father, King Alcinoüs, has ordered a ship and rowers to speed Ulysses on his homeward voyage, and I wish you and he all joy in your reunion. Our ship carries many gifts, but I know that Ulysses himself will be the greatest you could receive.

A letter concerned with business matters requires only quiet exposition courteously expressed, but once again the prime question is: "What interests the person to whom I am writing?"

When dealing with such concrete things as orders, shipments and payments, the dominant need is for clearness of expression. Technical writing demands exactness: the distance to be measured by the legs of the calipers is so many thousandths of an inch; the price is so many dollars and cents; the part required is numbered such and such. Sense must not be sacrificed on any other altar: brevity, colourfulness, sweet sound, clever phrasing or ornamentation.

Nevertheless, you can put into the letter, perhaps by way of expression, something that is not ordinary or common.

A news item

News has been defined as the timely record of any event of public or human interest. More simply, a city editor said: "Women, wampum and wrongdoing are always news."

People in public life, business, social services and other activities need on occasion to prepare items for newspapers. Newspapers want news. If you supply copy that measures up to the editor's standards of interest he will reach for it eagerly.

You can write news stories if you are alert to perceive ideas, willing to pay attention to them, clever in associating or contrasting them with other ideas to make an interesting account of human life and action.

As an example of a news story, here is a report as it might have been written for a world press service when Ulysses returned home.

ITHACA. The Near East, scene of the Greek expedition under Agamemnon which destroyed Troy, entered the news again today with the return to Ithaca of its King, Ulysses. He reached home friendless and alone, all his crew having been lost in adventures of many kinds on their homeward journey.

After Ulysses had disposed of more than a hundred men who occupied his palace while courting his wife, there was a community banquet, at which Ulysses was reunited with his father, Laertes, one of the last remaining Argonauts who sailed with Jason on the great voyage in search of the Golden Fleece.

It will be remembered that Ulysses became, like other princes, a suitor for the hand of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. These suitors pledged themselves to defend Helen from harm. Three years after her marriage to Menelaus she was carried off to Troy by Paris as a reward for his decision in Venus' favour in the affair of the Golden Apple, and the princes went to war to free her.

Ulysses was one of the heroes who entered Troy in the wooden horse, the contrivance which some authorities attribute to him.

Owing to many reasons, Ulysses' return was delayed for ten years, during which he wandered far and wide, having many hairbreadth escapes.

SPARTA. Interviewed in the home of Menelaus, her husband, Helen praised Ulysses for his courageous actions at Troy. She remarked that while Ulysses was patient under misfortune and had ready wit, he was devoid of scruple and took delight in deception.

Speaking of the wooden horse episode, Helen recalled that the Trojans were warned by Laocoon against dragging it into the city. He told the townsmen: "I fear a Greek even with a gift in his hand."

A feature story is one that appeals to the emotions. It has its base on solid facts, but touches the strings of human feelings. This type of item is particularly useful to community and social service organizations which seek to arouse public sympathy in their work.

As Ulysses approached his home he saw his dog Argus in the yard. In the old days Ulysses had raised Argus and the two were constant companions.

Before the dog had grown to his full, Ulysses sailed to Troy.

Today, after twenty years, Argus knew his master. Although too weak to approach, he wagged his tail and drooped his ears.

Then he laid his head down, and died.

Advertisements and reports

When writing an advertisement you need to catch attention, offer a benefit, prove your case, create

desire, and get action. You take something attractive and make it seem necessary, or you take something necessary and make it seem attractive. The *Manchester Guardian* provides an example: an advertisement in a restaurant which reads: "Have your meals here and keep your wife as a pet."

The appeal in the advertisement must be directed to the reason or to instincts: the choice should be suited to the person at whom it is aimed. It would have been fruitless for Ulysses to advertise wooden horses to the Trojans, but if he had gone into the business of making wooden horses he might have appealed with success to the cities whose streets were crowded with arrogant speeding chariots and plodding carts. "Here," his advertisement might have said, "is the ideal solution to the traffic snarls: mass transportation in wooden horses."

A formal report written by Ulysses would have been, like most modern reports, made up of the results of research. The infallible starting guide is this: what does the receiver need to know? Then give it to him in such form that he can use it easily.

Like so many other things often disliked, report writing is not particularly difficult if we break it down into small jobs. You define your objective: my purpose in writing this report is to tell so-and-so about the survey made of such-and-such. Then you determine the form: chronological or episodic. You search your sources: observe, experiment, read books and preceding reports. Finally, you do the writing, paying attention to completeness, conciseness, clarity and readability.

About winning readers

When you write a letter or an article or a report you are claiming kinship with every writer who ever lived. All of them learned the same lesson: to be a successful writer you have to win readers and give them something that will make them glad that they read what you wrote.

Welcome every opportunity for self-expression. It is beneficial in two ways: it conveys your ideas to others, and it clarifies your thinking. When you start to write with some interest prompting you, incidents and episodes and illustrative anecdotes and references are uncovered in the recesses of your consciousness.

Like Ulysses himself, Homer was a smooth talker, "a man nimble with words." His freshness and naturalness make us feel that he lived in a young and unjaded world, to which every sensation was a novelty, and melancholy and boredom were unknown. Really, he lived in a troubled world, as we do. He made the best of it by writing about it understandingly, vividly, and as accurately as his information allowed.

If all that could be said about writing for various occasions has not been said in this essay, recall the wise saying added by an executive to a memo to one of his staff: "Probably this does not exhaust the subject, but it will suggest materials for your consideration."