



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## ON MAKING OURSELVES UNDERSTOOD

**I**T is a long way from the crude hieroglyphics of primitive man, the smoke signals and marked trees of the Indians, and the drums of the African jungle to our modern daily newspaper and our business correspondence. But through it all there are these main themes — the passing on of knowledge, information and instruction, and the urge and the need of man to communicate with his fellows.

All of us who read can be in touch with centuries of human thought and with today's happenings in all parts of the world. Because we have language, we are not limited for knowledge to our own experience; we can profit by the experience of all who have gone before us. It is language that has made progress possible.

The spoken and written word is so familiar to us that we often forget what a power for good or for evil, for uplift or for insult, for clarity or for confusion it is. Words can crush or console, inspire or destroy; they can lead to wars, and they can be used to promote peace; they can increase sales or drive away customers.

### *A World of Words*

We live in a world of words, and very often these words are all too "wild and whirling." We listen to so many words, we read so many words, that we feel engulfed in verbiage; we speak words, and most of us have to write words. Much of what we write may be routine letters and reports, and we need not aspire to Shakespearean or Voltairian heights. But the least that we can do with words is to put them together so that our readers understand us.

There are few ivory towers left today, and only a hermit can disregard the advantages of using language well. Learning to express oneself is a fundamental of education, the mark of an educated man, and a necessity of business.

An article in *Saturday Night* said that most university students in Canada improve their English while at the university, but this, the article went on, is not gained so much by examinations in the subject, as by

contact with people who use good English. More consideration is given to knowing the date of Pope's *Rape of the Lock* or to the memorizing of Shakespeare's soliloquies than to the quality of language used in writing the examination paper.

Students in science, law, engineering and faculties other than that of arts often grumble at being made to take courses in self-expression through language. A little book written by Professor R. de L. French, of McGill University, called *Notes on Writing for Students in Engineering*, tells about the importance of good writing for professional men. He says that engineering, even in its most technical and specialized branches, is not a solitary profession. The engineer must be articulate, and a thorough command of language is important for two major reasons — because it is one of his professional tools and because it is necessary if he is to associate with others. Some universities in the United States are considering making study of writing a compulsory part of every course.

In August, 1947, the Bureau of Technical Personnel, Department of Labour, issued a survey of professional openings in Canada. Out of 1,334 employers interviewed, the majority — 850 — believed that there was a trend towards more free usage of university-trained young men and women. But one of the 15 firms employing the largest number of university graduates declared itself critical of most graduates "because many can't properly express themselves, either orally or in writing." If this is true of some university graduates, how much more must it apply to those with less education?

### *Languages Grow*

Because language is as vigorous as a healthy oak tree, expanding with the years, each age adds its own quota of new words and phrases peculiar to its time. Every new invention, like television today, brings with it a whole new vocabulary.

In 1846 the English dictionary contained only 47,000 words; today it includes 450,000 words, an increase of 12 new words a day. Milton knew 10,000

words; Shakespeare knew 15,000; the Bible contains only 5,000 different words. Today there are 30,000 kinds of butterflies, each with a different name.

At first a word imported from another language lives a lonely life; its acceptance or rejection depends on the force of public opinion, for, after all, language is a democratic institution. If a word is accepted as part of our speech, it becomes changed and coloured to suit our own peculiar needs.

Dean Swift attacked many words seeking admission into daily speech. He condemned "banter", "bully", and "sham", and the one which called forth his greatest rage was "mob", a contraction of *mobile vulgus*. Public opinion prevailed, however, and these words were absorbed into the English language. Lord Wavell, in our time, has proposed setting up an authority to decide what is worth preserving and what should be pilloried in the way of words, but it would be a difficult and delicate task to determine the fate of each one.

### *Jargon is a Menace*

Sir Alan Herbert, M.P., one of the most valiant fighters in the battle to preserve the best in English, says the language is "bulging with words like bolsters, and phrases like feather beds — fat Latin words like 'reconditioning'; phrases like 'the co-ordination of our economic resources.'" He goes on to say: "we are entitled to suspect the character and competence of any department, any party, any politician who stuffs the public mind with woolly, knobby, half-baked, flabby and slushy words."

What Sir Alan is referring to is known by various names: officialese, jargon, gobbledygook and Federal Prose are some of them. Whatever you may call it, it means a written output obscurely constructed, full of tiresome phrases, and encumbered with many ill-chosen combinations of words. H. W. Fowler, one of the editors of the *Oxford Dictionary*, defines jargon as "ugly-sounding, hard to understand, made up of technical terms, long words, and circumlocutions". Whatever its name, it is flourishing in many of the communications we receive daily, and perhaps we ourselves are sometimes guilty of writing it.

We are more hesitant in conversation; words of whose pronunciation we are not sure are replaced by shorter, more usual ones. We do not drone out endless sentences, full of top-heavy clauses, and obscure phrases. But we do seem to give in to temptation when we have a blank sheet of paper in front of us. The result is often a muddle of many-syllabled words which display neither thought, vocabulary nor erudition, and only serve to puzzle the reader.

### *Plain or Woolly?*

Sir Ernest Gowers, a distinguished civil servant, was recently asked by the British Government to write a short book on the subject of simple English for British officials. He called it *Plain Words*, and in it warns against the woolly thinking, the circuitous phrases and the abstractions that make up jargon. He deplores

the increasing use of such things as "it will be observed from a perusal" instead of "you will see by reading"; "participate" for "join"; "assistance" for "help", and so on. He disapproves of the invention of new words for perfectly good old ones, like "global" for "world-wide", "recondition" for "mend", and "terminate" for "end". Another version of this last is the horrible "to finalize".

The habit of using abstract nouns as verbs is increasing. "To contact", which excites Sir Alan Herbert to rage, is allowed by H. L. Mencken, author of *The American Language*. However, Mr. Mencken tells a good story against his own decision. An official of the Western Union, he says, forbade the use of "to contact" by employees of the company. This official said: "So long as we can meet, get in touch with, make the acquaintance of, be introduced to, call on, interview or talk to people, there can be no apology for 'contact'."

In the January issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Jacques Barzun, in commenting on the state of the language, quotes as an example of jargon a warning to the British cotton industry: "Unless all those working in the separate units are prepared, when necessary, to take into account the interests not only of the industry as a whole but also the broad interests of the nation, unless there is readiness both to agree and implement common policies when necessary for furthering such interests — there is little chance of a satisfactory outcome from any proposals." Mr. Barzun goes on to quote by way of contrast an earlier, and more courageous piece of prose: "Gentlemen, we must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately", which is the gist of the more complicated statement. The first leaves our feelings intact, and spares our imaginations, a characteristic of jargon.

It has been remarked that, as the world has become more cruel, language has become more mealy-mouthed. War has become "hostilities", and torture "mal-treatment". Eventually, as G. K. Chesterton has suggested, murder may be described as "life control".

Writing is inclined to ape science and technology by borrowing their terms. Reports from social welfare and educational bodies bulge with pseudo-scientific terms. Unofficial people talk glibly of controls, bottlenecks and allocations. The official makes us lose colour, warmth and personality by referring to us as personnel or individuals, not men and women. In turn, we try to increase our own stature by being representatives instead of salesmen. A rat-catcher in England proclaimed himself to be a Rodent Operative!

### *Three Simple Rules*

What can we do to purge our style of these growths which take away so much from the spirit and purpose of language? The first thing is to be aware that jargon exists, and to be on our guard against it. Become indignant, suggests Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, when someone who should know better writes to us: "as regards, with regard to, in respect of, in connection with,

according as to whether", and the like. And, of course, never, never use such phrases in our own correspondence.

Secondly, have something to say and say it, as well and as simply as you can. Imagine what the classic report of his naval victory given by Admiral Perry would look like in modern officialese. He said: "We have met the enemy and they are ours". In today's officialese it would probably begin "after effecting contact" and then lumber heavily onwards. Or put Winston Churchill's famous phrase upon his appointment as Prime Minister: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" into jargon. It would likely start out "In the event, I am compelled to say, subject only to . . ." and wind its way paragraph by paragraph to the ending which would surely be "finalized".

Thirdly, over all you write should shine the pure light of sincerity. Insincerity cuts the heart out of all writing and speaking. You may marshal your arguments and concoct your pretty devices of words, but if you do not believe what you say you are only a play-actor — a mere mummer reciting your own lines — and don't deceive yourself into thinking the reader will not know it.

It is widely acknowledged that the best rules for good writing are set forth in a book by H. W. Fowler. Though he calls it *The King's English*, its principles are equally good in any language. He says: "Anyone who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid. This general principle may be translated into practical rules in the domain of vocabulary as follows:

Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.

Prefer the concrete word to the abstract.

Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.

Prefer the short word to the long.

Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

"These rules", he added, "are given in order of merit: the last is also the least".

### *Simplicity Pays*

Rules like these cannot be kept separate; they overlap. In using the familiar word, you are probably using the shorter and more concrete word, and your readers will more readily understand you. In using the concrete word we will be following in the steps of Shakespeare. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch says: "no writer of English so constantly chooses the concrete word, in phrase after phrase forcing you to touch and see".

Take as an example an announcement made by a modern master of words on a very grave occasion. Mr. Churchill, in his broadcast of June 17th, 1940, began: "The news from France is very bad". He did not say "The position in regard to France is extremely

serious". He ended: "We are sure that in the end all will come right". He did not end: "We have absolute confidence that eventually the situation will be restored". His words were chosen from the concrete, the short and the familiar, and his great world-audience could quickly and easily understand the exact situation.

Just the same, if a word with several syllables is familiar to the reader, and is also expressive, writing will gain in force and strength from its use. Words like "inspiration, international, authentic" are not two-syllable words, but they are words to which we have become accustomed by seeing them every day in newspapers and periodicals.

Anatole France remarked that there are three requisites in all good writing. The first is clarity, the second is clarity and the third is — clarity. Words are of no use except to convey ideas. They are not posies to dress up vacancies of thought . . . They must reveal. The man who uses many or obscure words to explain a subject hides himself, like the cuttlefish, in his own ink. Plain and simple speech appeals to everyone because it shows clear thought and honest motives, and it conveys the impression that the writer knows what he is talking about. Also, in these days of rush and speed, it is a relief for the busy man to read it.

Simplicity pays off in other ways. "Simple advertising costs least and sells most", says Kenneth M. Goode in his book *How to Write Advertising*. It is an established fact that some of the slogans of one-syllable words are just about the best reminder ads there are.

Other aids to readability are short paragraphs. The old-fashioned paragraph was very long, almost an essay in itself. Short sentences too, help the writer to think clearly and the reader to grasp the meaning quickly. Marcel Proust deliberately used long, long sentences in his novels to create a dream-world atmosphere, but they have no place in the type of writing we are discussing.

Punctuation is important. Dr. Rudolf Flesch, in *The Art of Plain Talk*, calls it not a set of rather arbitrary rules from school grammars, but "the most important single device for making things easier to read". In business, and in much of the writing done in the various professions, it is necessary to punctuate properly, because the principal objective is clarity. Commercial documents may become involved in litigation, and it has been said that once a lawsuit was lost for want of a comma. Sir Edward Gowers tells us that Sir Roger Casement might have escaped hanging but for a comma in a statute of Edward III.

### *Good Business Letters*

The bulk of business today is carried on by correspondence, so one of its most necessary tools and most valuable opportunities is the good business letter. Too often business letters are encumbered with excess words and phrases, which rob the letter of all human warmth and personality.

What a good business letter should be is explained by C. W. Hurd in *Business Correspondence*, published by the Alexander Hamilton Institute. He calls the essentials of business correspondence the seven C's: Concrete, Candid, Courteous, Clear, Complete, Concise, Correct. "Without these qualities", says Mr. Hurd, "no letter can be credible, create confidence or inspire interest". Nor, he might have added, will it bring in orders.

Allowing for the more formal style of correspondence, the closer the tone of a business letter approaches conversation the better it is. In conversation our audience is all-important and never lost sight of. Let's carry a little more of this kind of awareness of a second party into our writing.

The first rule in writing a business letter is to remember our reader, consider him, try to understand him, and see how we can best serve him — and then write the kind of letter we think he would like best to read. If a letter is helpful and aimed at the reader's interests, and easy to read, he simply cannot find it dull. A good business letter is an evidence of good manners — thinking of others and endeavouring to understand them rather than yourself.

One might think that, with all these restrictions and restraints, nothing will be left in our written output but the bare bones, lacking in colour and style. It is not so. Good writing is born out of a free choice of words, and does not arise from the merely mechanical arrangement of words. The choice of this word rather than that, by artistry of the writer, may paint vivid pictures for the reader of what you are trying to say.

Arrangement is, of course, important, but if the right words alone are used, they generally have a happy knack of arranging themselves. Matthew Arnold said: "People think that I can teach them style. What stuff it all is. Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style". In a recent interview, W. Somerset Maugham, the master storyteller, was asked what style he would recommend for a writer. His answer was: "To write simply and clearly has been my own purpose, and one has to work very hard at it".

### *Here is a Standard*

A useful little book for those who wish to write clearly and forcefully is *The Art of Plain Talk* by Dr. Rudolf Flesch. In small space, this volume helps to teach the reader how he may write in plain style, and then, having written, how he may measure how difficult the reader is going to find what he has written. By a simple formula, it takes into account the length of sentences, the number of affixes, and the number of personal references. Dr. Flesch says that shorter sentences, fewer affixes, such as pre-, im-, de-, etc., and more personal references, such as names, pronouns and words that refer to human beings, make for greater readability in your writing.

Dr. Flesch takes as a middle point on the scale of Reading Difficulty the point he calls "Standard", the level of such writing as may be found in *Reader's Digest*. "Standard" is easy reading for almost everyone and even those who are used to more difficult material are happy to see "Standard". It is a saver of time, temper and money.

"Standard" sets as its ideal these qualities: sentences averaging 17 words in length; approximately 37 affixes per 100 words; and about 6 personal references per 100 words.

It may be of interest to mention here that our Monthly Letters are frequently tested by the Flesch formula, and that they maintain a fairly consistent level of "Standard". There are advertising departments which obtain a "Flesch rating" on all their copy before it goes to press.

The other side of the picture is revealed in a new and amusing little book called *Federal Prose: How to Write in and/or for Washington*. This is mentioned just in case you are interested in obtaining a mastery or even a working knowledge of how to write jargon. The two authors, trained at Harvard, went to work for the United States Government in Washington during the war, and soon found themselves writing a new language — one known to the specialist as Federal Prose. In their amusingly illustrated book they examine the rules and qualifications, the spirit and essence of this sort of writing, with many translations of English into Federal Prose.

They go on to say, however, that Federal Prose is not confined solely to Government: "it occurs in various other products of semantic art; in the writings and oral utterances of sociologists and educators, in the iridescent commentaries of theologians, in the texts of insurance policies, in reviews of plays and concerts, in advertisements of motor vehicles, novels, and tomato soup".

### *Both Languages Affected*

In an address to McGill students last autumn, Dr. H. N. Fieldhouse, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science, advised his listeners to return to the short and vivid language of Swift and the Bible. "One of the first signs of education," he said, "is the use of short, expressive English instead of the muddled jargon of eight syllables which reflects a muddled mind."

We in Canada are in a vulnerable position. Both official languages are subject to many outside influences — the United States radio, press, advertising, and movies all have their impact on us. We cling to many French and British traditions and forms in our daily life, and there is evidence of this in our speech and our writing. We are in a position to keep the best of the new expressions and to reject the worst. We can keep our languages alive, strong and useful, while guarding their fineness in the great tradition, pure, clear and flavoured with imagination and the traits of our own nationality.