



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 56, No. 5

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, MAY 1975

Keep It Simple

IT GIVES US A GOOD FEELING to escape out of the complexities of life into its simplicities, and then to find that its simplicities have solved its complexities.

We cannot blame the advancement in science that marks our age for all our difficulties and entanglements. Science does, indeed, produce complicated devices which we may use if we wish, but it also supplies us with simple things that make life easier and better and interesting. It is, for example, far simpler than ever before to be clean, to keep reasonably healthy, and to move from place to place. These benefits, represented by soap, disinfectants, and vehicles of transportation, are products of science.

People like to do simple things: dance, read, paint pictures, make bird houses, collect stamps, or trace their ancestry. It is when they indulge unnecessarily in projects that are complex that they begin to need psychiatric aid.

A good working definition of simplicity, applicable to writing a letter as well as to building a hydro installation, is given by some engineers: *a simple machine has no unnecessary parts*. The pleasure we enjoy when we are doing a job in a simple way is like the feeling of well-being we get when we discard our heavy clothes on a hot day.

In no other human activity is simplicity more needed than in the communication of ideas between people. Whether we are writing about a big catastrophe or a vacation trip we make our report easier to understand by telling the story in simple episodes. Simplicity in writing means that we are attuned to the reading level of our readers, neither puzzling them by expecting too much of them nor writing down to the level of a school primer.

Simplicity requires accuracy. The writer of a report or a letter needs to do preparatory work. His information must be geared to what is needed, or it cannot be informative. It must be well-expressed or it cannot be understood.

Elegance of language may not be within the reach of all of us, but plainness and directness are. Literary skill consists in using your ability to present a subject

accurately in such a way that it is easily understood in the spirit in which you write it.

Simplicity in writing and speaking is the outward sign of depth of thought. When people try to add novelty to their language they are led away from what is natural, and their words take on the look of affectation and conceit. They descend to the level of singers who embellish their songs by facial and bodily contortions.

A good writer will not write letters or make speeches that are too pompous for the sort and amount of information they give. Some people think it is bright to be profound. They do not speak or write simply about simple things, but "in depth". Instead of "I am glad to tell you" they write "It affords me great pleasure to inform you."

One must know

Of course one must know what one is writing about. Then the task is easy: tell what you know so that others may understand it.

What is involved in your progress from writing obscurely to writing plainly is that you collect knowledge, absorb it and digest it.

Research does not have to be very deep in order to solve some problems. An art gallery set up a team to examine its suddenly increased attendance. What cultural force was sweeping the community? Why were scores of men, women and children visiting the gallery this year compared with the dribbles of people who came last year? The explanation was simple and deflating: the gallery had added a rest room.

If there is something that you cannot put into simple language you probably do not understand it or you do not have all the information you need. There is something still to learn.

Many difficulties become simple merely through the process of definition. In fact, the most efficient way to get to understand a word, a question, an assertion or an order is to analyse and define it.

To be good, a definition must tell in what respects this subject differs from other subjects of a like nature.

If you define a man as a biped without feathers you might be technically correct, but to your reader you might be referring to a plucked chicken.

You can make things clearer and keep them in your mind in an orderly way if you classify the facts you learn, and associate them with similar facts already in your mind. The basis of classification of even a complex subject may be simple. Finger-printing, for example, has as its foundation the four heads of arches, loops, whorls and composites. Other subjects follow a progressive classification system, every section being broken down into sub-sections. Zoology, for example, has its subkingdoms, class, order, family, genus, species and variety.

Keep your thinking simple

You will find that you can keep your thinking simple no matter how involved the subject may be about which you intend to write or speak. Learn, first of all, what the thing is on which you are deliberating and shut your mind's door to everything else. One of the best-known ways of getting the jitters is to allow a simple problem or proposition to become enmeshed in subsidiary matters.

Do not try to round up all the factors, for they are unlimited. The introduction of topics or information that are irrelevant will complicate your thinking. Look for enough facts and major characteristics to make your point, and start writing.

The time to think is before putting words on paper. You cannot divorce accurate, informative and forceful writing from thought. "It is only as thought becomes clear that simplicity is possible," said Lin Yutang, Chinese-U.S.A. writer, but one may also say that it is simplicity that leads to clarity of thought. When you boil it down to essentials, the process of judgment (which is thinking brought to the point of action) is always a choice between two, and only two, ideas at any given time.

Not all of us can follow the problem-solving method of an eminent engineer, though it might be helpful if we could. When in difficulty about some report or project he would go to bed and stay there until he had thought out a way of conquering it, even if it took two or three days. The French statesman Talleyrand followed the same practice, excusing his absence from his office on the grounds of illness.

Keep your thinking simple. Clever ideas and ingenious plans and involved explanations of phenomena are all very well for lunch table conversation, but when we come to deciding and doing things we need unadorned simplicity.

Things should be thought of as they exist, and not always as they ought to be or may be in some Peter Pan Never-Never Land. Look steadily at the worst aspect of them today and at the worst that can happen, and figure out what to do now and then. By making up your mind in advance just what to do in this extreme, dealing with the actual event is easy and simple.

Be precise and be yourself

Sometimes simplicity consists of precision. The necessity to make things easily understood by a hearer or a reader leads professional and business people into what seems to laymen to be excessive pains in checking the smallest details. Saying things simply includes saying them exactly. As a Greek philosopher said: "Doth a man bathe himself quickly? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'quickly'. Doth he drink much wine? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'much'."

Simplicity in living is an attribute of the true philosopher whose business it is to discover or establish principles. It pays to disinter old principles from the centuries of academic disputation under which they have been buried and find the simplicities that have been the support of mankind's advancement.

When you are doing this you develop poise, and that is important. Poise helps to keep things straightforward, and this protects you from running into complexity and error.

The principles of wrongness and rightness are sometimes referred to as principles of common sense, because they are supposed to be common or universal throughout the whole human race. There is no substitute for common sense, although we must admit that some persons who boast of their "common sense approach to life" are merely disagreeable, obstinate and illiberal people.

Common sense is not all-knowing. It is only a judge of the things that come under observation by ordinary people. It rests upon experience and acquired knowledge.

People who are simple in their habits wish only to pass for what they are, and do not seek to appear what they are not. The Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland* does not seem to have had the knack of simplifying, but her philosophy was on the right track. She told Alice: "Be what you would seem to be — or, if you'd like it put more simply — never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise." Alice was compelled to admit: "I think I should understand that better if I had it written down; but I can't quite follow it as you say it."

Tell your story plainly

Tell a plain story plainly, and take pains to make everything you write meet this criterion. You will have noticed that humour is essentially simple, and while we cannot make everything that we write amusing we may adopt some of the humorist's technique. He keeps close touch with facts, not fancies. He has flashes of common sense which lay our ideas about things alongside their realities.

Some writing is so slow in motion and so lacking in colour that people will not try to take it in, but dull writing is not always the product of lazy thinking.

Some of it is necessary. Legal documents are difficult to follow because they are detailed in order to be unambiguous. It is a good exercise to take a paragraph of a document, say a lease or a bill of sale, and try to change the words and the construction into brighter form without changing the meaning or leaving loop-holes.

The sort of dullness that is to be avoided is typified by the muddled statement. Some persons try to explain things that seem most clear, and make them appear complex, as the Duchess succeeded in doing so thoroughly. Others think that they make their statements appear more profound by wrapping them in obscurity.

Another cause of confusion is the use of abstract words without making their meaning clear in the context. Abstraction is an intellectual faculty by which mankind differs from other animals. It is a great handicap not to be able to embrace an abstract idea, but to be confined always to thinking about tangible things.

There are people who by pursuing an abstract thought arrive at fundamental truths while the so-called "practical" people cannot get their thoughts off the ground. Dr. Hans Selye wrote in his *Introduction to From Dream to Discovery*: "In research, we soon learn that abstractions are often just as good as, or even more, effective than tangible, individual facts."

Abstraction is not, in this sense, the kind that gives your eyes that dreamy look as your mind retires from the company you are in to meditate on something visionary, but the abstraction that considers something as a general quality or characteristic apart from any concrete realities, specific objects or actual instances. For example, no one has ever seen whiteness: we may have seen white clouds, white sheets, white houses and white horses, but we never saw whiteness by itself. We abstracted the quality from various white objects.

Not all people have the ability to absorb abstractions readily, and this imposes a duty upon the writer to make them clear. Examples can be read in *Twelfth Night*. Using the abstract word "concealment", Shakespeare in an instant turns it into a visible worm "feeding" on a visible rose; then, having to use the abstract word "patience" he at once solidifies it in a tangible stone monument.

We sometimes fail to communicate because of our clever ideas. The itch for novelty lures us into surrendering to complexity. Instead of writing simply $2 + 2 = 4$ we set down the more learned-looking $x + y = y + x$, which means the same thing.

It has been said by people of more gravity than understanding that there is a rule for everything. Style in writing is such a variable thing that the only fixed rule is to keep it as simple as possible within the requirements of the occasion. Good writing has shed its youthful love of pomposity, virtuosity and literary showmanship. Its writer has learned to write so that his art appears artless.

Make things clear

When you have written a letter or an article, and have enjoyed a rapturous reading of it, get busy simplifying it. Tune out the static. Everyone else's receiver may not be tuned to receive the finer modulations of your message. See the essential points and make them stand out clearly. Give an account of happenings and information according to their proportionate importance.

In the interest of keeping things simple, learn respect for precision. You may not make the same judgments as your reader, but you are obligated to state precisely what your judgments are.

It is not always advisable to try to attain the simplicity and clearness of an advertisement. You can obscure a painting, a paragraph or a great thought, not by lack of light but by too much of it.

There are simplicists who annoy us by making themselves perfectly clear about trifles. They put two dots on every "i" so that no one will mistake it for some other letter of the alphabet. This too great striving produces insipid and trite prose or poetry.

People are accustomed to talking about painting and sculpture in terms of their beauty. Writing, too, has its aesthetic qualities. We can admire a paragraph by a great writer because of its simple construction that nevertheless conveys a rhythm attractive to the eye, the ear and the tongue. The plain and simple in writing can be as graceful as the sublime.

There are people who avoid saying a plain word. They feel bound to be something more than simple in their language: to be pungent, witty, or ornamental. Nothing whose sole purpose is to convey facts should be obscured by beautification. Its beauty is in its plainness.

A country's language is a horn of plenty crammed with every kind of word. It may be as disorderly as a basket of laundry, and you must search diligently to find words so true and simple that they oppose no obstacle to your flow of thought and feeling. Simple writing is when you give your reader words that he understands without translating them into some other kind of words.

Simplicity in writing is aided by observing these practices: prefer a concrete word to an abstract word; prefer a direct word to one that talks beside the point; use active verbs; prefer short words to long words. As examples, consider these words having for everyday use the same meaning: pay/remunerate; begin/initiate; give/render; learn/ascertain; try/endeavour; end/terminate; get/acquire; buy/purchase; about/approximately.

Boil it down

We hear on every hand demands for brevity. We want diamonds and cars bigger and longer, but anything written should be short.

The object of conciseness needs to be allied with that of making what you write complete in conveying the desired information in a way that is easily understood. Do not think of length versus shortness, but of long-drawn-out versus compactness. Anything more than is needed is too much.

The prize for compactness in a business letter might be awarded to the tenant who received a notice of eviction from his landlord. He checked his rights with the municipal housing authority and wrote: "Dear sir: I remain. Yours truly."

Brevity in writing is not, as some people profess to believe, always achieved by writing short, sharp phrases that use words as reluctantly as a miser would in dictating a telegram. Such a practice does not add to the simplicity of what you write if the topic is a complex one, because some things cannot be put briefly except by being put falsely. There are many occasions in science and business when shortness must give way to accuracy.

The rule is: eliminate everything that does not concern the topic or add to its interest or intelligibility.

The material substance of what you write should be drawn from your total life experience, but your piece should not recite all that happened to you. If you are asked to submit a report on the state of productivity in your factory or office, do not seize the opportunity to tell about the difficulties caused by labour slowdown, shortage of material and machinery breakdowns. Tell simply what is asked for: what the optimum productivity is; how much is going through the shipping door in a week; how much is going into stock, and how much is spoiled.

Over-writing is unproductive and self-defeating. During the Second World War the newspaper reporters with the invading forces had no means of sending their reports except by carrier pigeon. The pigeons were so overloaded that many of them fell back to earth.

Work simplification

To accomplish something we must take our minds off the end and start at the beginning. What is the simplest way to do this task efficiently? Two persons may argue vehemently about the best way to peel a sack of potatoes. The work will get done when some simple soul comes along and takes a potato out of the sack and starts peeling it.

Methods of work are prescribed by procedures, regulations or instructions in one form or another. An attempt to improve or simplify work methods must begin by examining these instructions alongside the work being done. Bad habits or careless methods or short-cutting will make instructions ineffective.

Here are some questions to ask about every detail of a job you are trying to simplify: Why is this operation necessary? Does it serve a useful purpose? Where, when and by whom can it be done most efficiently?

Is everything being done that is necessary? Is anything being done that is not necessary?

It is not good enough to answer the question "Why is this necessary?" by saying "It is our policy;" or "The manager wants it done this way;" or "We have been doing it this way for umpteen years." That is not work simplification but lazy evasion of responsibility.

So long as jobs are kept simple or broken down into simple parts to be tackled one by one they get done with ease. There is a popular opinion among certain sorts of workers that the harder you make your work look the better you must be working. If you emphasize the difficulty of a job to yourself or to others you are cultivating defeatism.

Points for managers

"System" and "simplicity" are related in more than sound: one is incomplete without the other.

Some managers bog down in needless complexities. When a matter of concern is raised, the simple way to handle it has five steps that have proven to be efficient: find out what the problem is; make sure that the problem is real; start research; throw the information into usable form; solve the problem.

It pays to make spoken or written instructions clear beyond doubt. If you say a thing simply people will be ready to accept your word, but if you enlarge upon it you open the door to implications that will be received with caution. To win attention, to get action, to gain support, talk and write in blacks and whites. Give orders clearly and decisively so that no one is left in doubt as to your intentions and requirements.

Do not become enamoured of deep research to the exclusion of doing the little things that are awaiting action. Do the best with what is at hand. The Wright brothers did not sit down at a draughting table to plot the details of a world-wide air transport system. They built an airplane.

Simplicity flies out the window when procrastination enters the door. Things that are postponed usually take on an added air of difficulty, and many problems that are put into a pigeon-hole because the solution does not present itself at once emerge with more problems attached to them.

It is smart to be simple

Do not be afraid to be simple. The energetic doing of little things in the most simple way will often lead to the accomplishment of big purposes. A tough problem can be tackled confidently by anyone who will take the trouble to resolve it into its simplicities.

Acting simply does not mean concentrating upon the obvious and the easy. It does not mean avoiding the difficult things, but simplifying them and eliminating what is not necessary. The simplicity that makes daily life run smoothly consists largely in avoiding tyrannical trifles.