



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

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### ON FINDING WORDS

**W**ORDS can work wonders that benefit all mankind; they can create untold wickedness; they can be "wild and whirling", clear and shining, or flat and dull. Words are our obedient servants to be used as we will.

We, in this Monthly Letter, are interested principally in the use of words in business and for everyday purposes, but they have far greater significance than that.

Such uplifting words as "I am the Light of the World" have inspired countless millions with unflinching faith and hope; the calculated and inflaming words of demagogues and dictators have hurled nations and people into darkness and disaster.

Do we fully realize the importance, the strength and the beauty of the world of words lying open to us?

The time we live in is referred to as the Atomic Age, but we who live in it can rightly call it the Verbal Age. Few of us can escape the ever-increasing stream of spoken and written words pouring from our radios, books, newspapers, correspondence and public platforms. We are so immersed in words that often we feel like the drowning man going down for the third time — we feel as if we were sinking in a whirlpool of words.

Let us defy tradition and come up again, and take a clear, calm look at all this verbiage.

#### *Our Unique Heritage*

It is language that sets us off most sharply from the higher animals. Without language we should be as dogs or monkeys, and because we possess it we are human beings, capable of good and evil and outstanding intellectual achievements. Or, for its lack, we may be dimly stupid. For better and for worse, words make us the men and women we are. Words are the stones out of which we built our civilization.

Gifted with language we, the ordinary people, make language, for language is nothing if not democratic. Scholars and men of learning enrich and cultivate it,

but it is from the common soil that language derives its strength, nourishment and vigour. With our need for expression of new ideas language grows, and new systems of thought and new ways of living originate new words and phrases.

As was so well said by Walt Whitman, language is not "an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground."

Since we, the people, are the possessors and makers of language we must look upon ourselves as inheritors of its glorious past, custodians of its present and guardians of its future. And we must use it well.

If we are truly conscious of our opportunity in this matter of language, we are better fitted to beautify and strengthen it. A writer of the last century said that language is the amber in which a thousand precious and subtle thoughts have been safely embedded and preserved, and that it has arrested ten thousand lightning flashes of genius, which, unless thus fixed and arrested, might have been as bright but would have passed and perished as quickly as the lightning.

Why do we talk or write? The purposes are many. We wish to describe objects and events, to express moods, to persuade, to please, to exhort, to explain, to make small talk, and often to lessen loneliness. And over all these lies the main reason for all our talking and writing — to transmit the ideas from our own minds to the minds of others.

#### *Thoughts are Words*

We need words even to communicate with ourselves. Simple thoughts such as deciding what to have for dinner, whether to buy the red or the gray hat, or whether to walk or take a tram, are formulated by yourself to yourself in some arrangement of words. Every writer or speaker who ever invented a new word had to explain its meaning by means of other words which people already knew and understood.

Communication is the vital chain between ourselves and our neighbours, our business associates, the people living in the next town, the next province, the next country and on the other side of the world. Words, spoken and written, are the golden links in that chain.

The cardinal principle of good communication is understanding. There is no satisfaction or accomplishment or, to be materialistic, gain, in meaningless and muffled words given out into unreceptive and uncomprehending air.

Here lies our main responsibility as a speaker or a writer. If our communication is open to more than one interpretation, or allows the listener or reader to say to himself, "What does he mean?" then we, at the transmitting end, have failed.

That a man will respond to some words while remaining indifferent to others is a well-known fact that influences all human affairs. The power of words is bound up with the images they evoke, and is not dependent on their dictionary meaning.

It is impossible for two persons ever to have learned the same word under precisely the same circumstances, at the same time, and with the same background of experience. Just as one person can never *be* another person, no matter how closely he is bound to him mentally, physically and spiritually, so with words.

Even such a simple word as "home" conjures up quite different pictures to different people, although the basic meaning is the same. Each person takes the word into his conscious mind ringed around with his own special and personal associations. For this reason, says Stuart Chase in his book, *The Tyranny of Words*, a student of Greek and Latin classics can never get more than a part of their meaning, for he can never personally live through experiences of the culture that fashioned them.

### *Our Opportunity*

Herein lies opportunity for the business man, the social correspondent, the public speaker, and the person who aspires to be accounted a good conversationalist. Their attention needs to be devoted to choosing words which convey accurately and vividly to the minds of others what is in their own minds.

To transmit what we have to say effectively we need, above all, to remember our audience. There is the important part of the interchange.

To reach our readers we must write with them in mind, in words *they* know and understand, in language that means something to *them*. If we are unable to do so it would be better if we laid aside our pens.

In the writing of business letters, for instance, it is essential that we study our market, the people who make it up, their likes and dislikes, their desires and demands — and then write to them in the words they want, in phrases they understand. As in so many other acts of unselfishness, this sublimation of self reaps rewards.

Keeping the reader firmly in mind, and with his interests at heart, how best can we appeal to him?

The heavenly twins of better communication could well be named Simplicity and Clarity. They have been called the art of arts, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters. Often before in these Monthly Letters we have pleaded their cause.

Clear, straight thinking must be behind the words we use. If you understand the proposition well, then your natural tendency will be to explain it in understandable terms. Thinking and wording cannot be dealt with separately, for they are cause and effect.

A man must analyze, group, marshal into order and define his thoughts before they can appeal with any force to his intelligence, or be used by him so as to appeal to the intelligence of others.

### *Not Easy: but Worth While*

To reach our readers, to maintain their attention and influence them favourably, we would do well to describe and suggest concrete, not abstract things. In the field of business writing, our words should always make it easy for the reader to picture the proposition, service or article, and its advantages and benefits.

To express one's thoughts accurately is not easy. To be precise may sometimes appear to be dangerous, and we may be tempted to prefer the safer obscurity of the abstract. But abstract words are more open to misunderstanding than concrete ones, and if we want to make our meaning plain we will avoid them.

"Thou canst not adorn simplicity", said Epictetus about 2,000 years ago, and it is still a fundamental truth.

Some people think that obscurity of expression is a sign of learning and lofty intellect. Gilbert and Sullivan satirized this attitude in their light opera, *Patience*, when they had Reginald Bunthorne sing: "If this deep young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me; Why, what a very singularly deep young man, this deep young man must be!"

The conviction that long words, which also aid and abet obscurity, make for learning and enhance our prestige is deeply ingrained in our culture, says an article in *Scientific Monthly*. Most of us remember Hans Christian Andersen's charming fairy tale of the artificial nightingale, who bore the grand title: "Chief Imperial Singer of the Bedchamber", and the music master who wrote five and twenty volumes about the counterfeit bird . . ." in all the most difficult Chinese characters. Everybody said they had read and understood it, for otherwise they would have been reckoned stupid."

### *What are "Good" Words?*

A struggle for life is constantly going on among the words and grammatical forms of a language. In the battle between short and long words the former seem to be winning, and this is a healthy sign.

But although wise men throughout the ages, from Aristotle to Winston Churchill, have emphasized the use of short and simple words, we should not shun all long words completely, says Sir Ernest Gowers in his valuable (and inexpensive) little book, *ABC of Plain Words*.

If the choice is between two words that convey the writer's meaning equally well, one short and familiar and the other long and unusual, of course the short and familiar should be preferred.

Sir Ernest goes on to point out that Mr. Churchill, an outstanding master of words, does not hesitate to use such a word as "liquidate" rather than the simpler "destroy", if he thinks that the less common word will be more effective in transferring what is in his mind into his readers' minds.

And C. E. Montague, in *A Writer's Notes on his Trade* (available in the Pelican series) says this: ". . . Clear out of your mind the notion that a language is, or ought to be, a finished and immutable system in which certain words are indefeasibly highcastes and certain other words are doomed for ever to be untouchables."

Good words are words the reader understands, whether they be short and Saxon, or long and Latin. Usually they are the former, but we need not feel ourselves pushed into using nothing else. The sensible thing is to use the word that fits the case. As Mark Twain wisely said: "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." It may mean, in modern terms, the difference between a sale and no sale, between a promotion and no promotion.

The right words convey the right meaning. Grammar and syntax are not nearly so important as the choice of words. The selection of one word rather than another may alter the whole weight and influence of a poem, or a passage in prose, or give a sinister meaning to a passage you intend to be a winner of friends.

Arrangement is, of course, important, but a happy sequence of choosing the right words is that they have a graceful way of arranging themselves. Sometimes it almost seems as if words have a life of their own; that they object to careless handling, and that unruly words actually struggle in the sentence.

### *Words Paint Pictures*

Every word and phrase we use in our writing, whether it be in our business letters, reports, articles or speeches, is as vital as the brush stroke of an artist. To make the picture real and appealing we do not use strange or mysterious words, technical terms, exaggerations or inaccuracies. We use words that are concrete, interpretive and vivid. Words paint pictures, but there is little room for "still lifes" in our gallery.

By making patterns with words and phrases that please the ear, we affect the emotions, move our readers, and thus drive home our point. Then we are well on the way to becoming artists in words.

Metaphors and similes, if they are simple and shining, help paint the picture. The New Testament is full of profound but simple metaphors. Compare "feed my sheep" with "teach my doctrine." Does not the former convey a far more human, tender and sympathetic picture? And in the simile, from the Psalms, "They shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb" — do we not see the picture much more vividly than if the writer had said "They shall perish"?

Clichés, those worn-out, bleached dry phrases, are to be avoided. Most of us use them daily in our conversation, and they do not seem particularly dead or even noticeable. In the written word they show up in all their exhaustion.

Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Clichés* contains some thousands of entries. But he points out in his preface that what is a cliché is partly a matter of opinion, and also a matter of occasion.

Sometimes a phrase such as "break the ice", or "cry over spilt milk" does express what you wish to say in the most fitting way. But it is well to think twice before we trot out the old familiar phrase. A new one — the fruit of a little more thought — might be better. Often the old expression may have become so blunted and blurred by constant use that it doesn't cut into the mind.

Slang is another "acceptable" in conversation that has little place in writing. The place for slang is in face-to-face conversation, where it may add wit and humour, increased vivacity and intimacy to our speech. But it is better to use it sparingly, if at all, in written communications.

Sometimes a slang word becomes a respectable citizen in the world of good English. If such novelties are accepted into the language then they have passed the test which we mentioned earlier in this article; the test that is set by the people. Usage can consecrate what may have originally been sprightly inventions and make them acceptable. In *The King's English* H. W. Fowler tells us that, during the probation period, they are words unfit for literary use.

### *Words are Beautiful*

Let us look for a minute, as a collector might look lovingly at his treasures, at the beauty of words. Hawthorne spoke of "the unaccountable spell that lurks in a syllable", and though we may not all have music in our souls, we can learn to appreciate the kind of language that comes from a combination of feeling, skill and artistic usage.

It has been said that words, like precious jewels, depend upon their grouping and the choice of neighbours. They may be strange or beautiful, amusing or tragic in isolation, but they will be doubly so when an author of judgment has put them in the right company.

Make this little test. Think of any familiar verse of poetry or passage of prose — even a business letter —

that you find pleasing, and then analyze your enjoyment of it. You will find that only a part of the enjoyment comes from contemplation of the situation to which it draws your attention. Much is aroused by the beauty of the words, considered solely as a pattern of sound and rhythm.

But we must not become intoxicated with words as words, easy though it can be, for our writing would be robbed thereby of the clarity we are striving for.

The two aims of a great artist in words must always be lucidity first and then melody.

### *The English Language*

What a wonderful instrument our language is! It is rich, because it is omnivorous; it takes words from other tongues and assimilates them, giving them a form and character so familiar that they seem to be of native stock.

It is expressive. Take the word "greed", for example. Doesn't it give off a feeling of fatness? Hasn't the word "sublime" a shimmer and a sheen? and doesn't the word "gloom" sound dark and foreboding?

Our language is vital. It evaluates, in a broad-minded way, new entrants to its huge vocabulary, and accepts or rejects them with complete fairness. It is not rigorously regimented, but truly alive and ever-growing.

And it is a poetic language. As Lord David Cecil of Oxford says, "English is ideally suited for the expression of emotion. There is no better language in the world for touching the heart and setting the imagination aflame."

The advertising writer and the direct-by-mail salesman have no excuse for not being able to make their points in written words; the public speaker can find in our language all he needs in the way of words, carefully selected and skilfully assembled, to move his audience.

Educators are united in placing special emphasis on the study of English. Good English usage is essential no matter what your profession. To mention Winston Churchill again, this time on the importance of English: "I would make boys all learn English; and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honour and Greek as a treat. But the only thing I would whip them for is not knowing English. I would whip them hard for that."

### *Enriching Your Language*

How can we add to our knowledge and appreciation of our language? One important way is to enrich and enlarge our vocabulary. By acquiring all the stock of words we can, we have a basis for weighing one word against another, for rejecting a word because we know a better one. We have a rich and full treasury upon which to draw.

The more words we know the more selective we can be. It is a paradox, but perfectly true, to say that without a large vocabulary we will often use six words instead of one.

Just as we can't make new friends if we never meet anybody, so with words. To build our vocabulary we must meet new words, and to meet new words we must read, the more the better.

The business man who reads Shakespeare or a comparable author can write better business letters than the man whose sole diet is cheap fiction — and the stenographer who reads Shakespeare will do better letters and be more of a participant in the business than the stenographer whose only literary food is chit-chat.

### *Books as Teachers*

Dr. W. E. McNeill in a convocation address at Queen's University a few years ago said that English Literature is the best single subject to provide a common element in the bewildering diversity of modern education. He went on to say that literature records the spiritual history of mankind, its joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, aspirations and defeats, the earthy worst, the heavenly best. It shows life whole.

Books enable us to "see with the keenest eyes, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all time." And, to continue this thought of James Russell Lowell, there is a choice in books as in friends, and the mind sinks or rises to the level of its habitual society.

To spend all our reading time on flimsy, fleeting stuff in a world that holds Shelley and Shakespeare, Shaw and Mauriac would be like choosing a piece of glass and rejecting a precious jewel.

### *. . . and Practise*

Robert Louis Stevenson was aware that facility of expression is gained by practise, when he said: "Though I write so little, I pass all my hours of field-work in continual converse and imaginary correspondence. I scarce pull up a weed, but I invent a sentence on the matter."

We can think of the world of words as a great and glorious garden. Like flowers, words have scent and texture and beauty. Like trees, they have strength, and grandeur and vitality. We are the gardeners, responsible for their cultivation and their fairest blooming, their arrangement and their disposition.

Let us toil happily in this garden, sowing the seeds of thought with care, and nurturing the tender blossoms that grow from them; and let us be ruthless in uprooting the weeds that threaten to choke and kill our language.

Ours will be the harvest. Words give us beauty and sustenance and self-expression; expressions of love and feelings of duty. They enable us to convey to others the philosophy by which we would influence them.