



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 51, No. 7

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, JULY 1970

Making Business Letters Interesting

THERE IS NO REASON why a business letter should read like a school essay in which the pupil writes down a heading and then tries to put something under it that will pass the teacher's inspection.

Business and industry are deeply involved in the art of communicating ideas. It is imperative to write letters which interest readers, capture their attention, win their approval, and get desired action.

The intelligence brought to this task by the letter writer does not need depth of learning, but the ability to correlate and co-ordinate facts and present them in attractive form.

A letter should do in ink what an artist does in oils — pick out the significant, the interesting, the appealing, and thus give the reader an intelligible representation of a slice of life. No one can teach this art, but it may be learned.

When an engineer takes the trouble to find out why and how his engine works, the way it does, he is a better engineer than if he knows only that to pull a certain lever starts the engine and to push a button stops it. When a writer understands how his mind works, and how the minds of other persons work, he will be in far better position to progress in his profession than if he knows only how to put words together grammatically. He will cease to be a human barrel-organ with a little list of tunes he plays over and over.

Not every topic that presents itself to a business writer has inherently attractive qualities. The proficient writer finds his satisfaction in taking a dull subject and giving it lively interest. There is as much joy in lifting an empty subject to its feet as in holding up a heavy one.

The writer of integrity will not do a shoddy job because he knows that the recipient must read the letter whether it is good or bad. This would be discourteous to the reader and it would give no pleasure to the writer.

Look at the opportunity there is for creative writing amid the practicalities of trade and commerce. As Robert Service puts it, there is "a hunger not of the belly kind." There is in every person a hunger of the

mind and hunger of the heart as well as a yearning for information. It is the privilege of everyone writing a letter to satisfy in some measure these desires of his reader.

Some guidelines

To succeed, it is necessary to answer these questions: what kind of person am I writing to? what is my attitude toward him? what does he want to know? what kind of firm do I wish mine to appear? what kind of person do I wish to appear? what response do I wish this reader to make to what I write on this special piece of paper about this special subject?

In writing anything from an acknowledgement of a routine report to the sponsoring of a revolutionary idea it is well to keep in mind that you are dealing not only with a situation but with a person. You need to act as interpreter of this piece of business to a reader who views the world not only in terms of facts but of personalities and emotions.

There is no business reason why business mail should be depressingly pedestrian or pedantic. Admittedly, there are limitations of matter, of style and of language, but one can be human while being also concise, exact and lucid.

Talent in letter writing is a matter of caring: caring about the accuracy of what we write, caring about being of service, caring about the esteem in which our firm is held, caring about our personal reputation, caring about the satisfaction in doing a job so well as to make us feel good.

A business letter needs more than a good stenographer. She can repair broken grammatical construction and put the commas in the right places, but she cannot supply facts, or add colour, or replace muddled language, or say what has to be said in a way more likely to appeal to the interest of the reader.

What is needed

What is urgently needed is the personal interest of the writer in what he is doing.

The first thing to do when approaching dictation

is to read the incoming letter attentively and thoughtfully. Without this you have as much hope of understanding your correspondent's wants as you would have of rewriting Darwin's theory of evolution by taking a holiday cruise to the Galapagos Islands.

From this attentive reading try to anticipate what your reader wishes to hear about. Take an over-all view and also give heed to details, just as, at an orchestral performance, you listen to the orchestra as a whole and at the same time select one instrument and follow it as its melody flows in and out through the other instruments.

Consider the things that concern the reader, his level of comprehension, his present understanding of the subject, any prejudices he may have, any blind spots which may make it difficult for him to accept what you wish to say, and the kind of language he will consider appropriate. Do not forget that he, like you, is not shut up in a compartment, but has thoughts that are in a constant state of flux, acted upon by outside influences, by domestic conditions, and by bodily and mental health.

There is no greater service a writer can give than to help a man to face life more confidently and happily. The aim should be to leave the reader with the feeling that he has gained something — information, exhilaration, or pleasure. An actor who had played the part of Rip Van Winkle for 35 years was asked how he satisfied himself with the same lines and part for so long. "The real business of the actor is not to please himself," he replied. "It is to afford pleasure to the audience. I stopped thinking about myself and started thinking about the people out front."

In answering troublesome letters, as in playing to a critical or tempestuous or apathetic audience, there are some techniques that may be of help.

You may change the shape of the subject matter, or give it a new twist, or shift the direction of emphasis; you may lessen the weight of what you say by streamlining it, or splitting it up into easily grasped sections, or subtracting some problems by explaining and throwing light upon them; you may substitute by bringing in new ingredients; you may exchange roles so as to present your ideas from the reader's viewpoint; you may blend your ideas with those of the reader so as to give him a new assortment.

Even if you have to announce a decision that will seem harsh to your reader, you may do so gently. Recall the principle of the tourniquet: release it every half hour to keep the circulation going. If you continue unbroken pressure on your reader you may indeed enjoy the experience of polishing him off, but that satisfaction quickly fades. The result of constructive handling of a troublesome situation, on the other hand, is delightful to contemplate.

Being direct, simple, brief and lucid does not mean being coldly efficient. If you wish to live with others and to influence them you will have to seem, sometimes, less superior and all-knowing than you are. A letter which knocks the reader on the head to drive in

a splinter of information is not so effective as a letter which deferentially relates the new knowledge to something that is familiar to him so as to give the reader a sense of rediscovering something forgotten in his mind.

Defer to your reader's judgment by using such phrases as: "If your experience bears me out" or "Doesn't that make sense to you?" When writing to convince a person who is difficult to satisfy, put him in the best position to see what you see and allow him to believe that he chose the seat for himself. This will make your letter at once soothing and convincing.

Have facts at hand

Dullness in a letter may be caused by lack of information. The introduction should rouse the reader's curiosity and the body of the letter should satisfy it.

No one can write interestingly about even the most exciting subject unless he has dug up information. No technique will take the place of factual knowledge; no pleasant words will cover up its lack; the writer who does not know his subject cannot hope to be believed in.

This is why every letter writer should have numerous contacts in the departments of his organization and outside it, persons he can call upon for information on the subjects in which they are particularly well-informed or personally interested. These key people ought to be spotted ahead of time; it is inefficient to start looking for them when a letter must be written.

There is no such thing as creation out of nothing. Imagination — the stuff which gives birth to creative writing — must have something on which to work. The more background knowledge the writer has stored away, the easier it will be for him to bring worthwhile fusions of ideas out of his mind.

The genius of an Einstein and the writing skill of a Dostoevsky and the political eminence of a Churchill arise out of associating a new thought with old knowledge and thus bringing forth a fresh idea. Absorbed through reading and study and perception, there are images in the writer's mind awaiting his summons to step into place in the letter he is writing.

Most of the things we store up come to us as things seen or heard or otherwise perceived. You need to keep the little monitor in your mind always on the alert, scanning your environment like radar for information, ideas, incidents, events and thoughts you can store up for use in your writing.

Examine the threshold at the door of your brain. Perhaps you have built it too high, so that it keeps out a lot that should be flowing in.

Writers who have the surest touch in conveying information charmingly are those who have seen and felt considerably more than the average run of human beings. They may have been brought up in the same town and educated in the same schools and made the same journeys, but they saw and observed and made their own more things to the square yard.

There is no reason on earth why the letter writer should imprison himself within the narrow limits of his desk. He is unfortunate who finds himself writing about the things that go on in his factory or office without ever having looked in the eye the people who do them.

It would seem, then, that those who write must be interested in people and things, curious about happenings, and attuned to significant events and possibilities. "The man who does not habitually wonder," said Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, "is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye."

Some literary aspects

Everything written, including the most routine letter, has literary aspects of consequence to the writer. Even when he knows that his reader is incapable of distinguishing between rough and finished work, he must do his letter thoroughly well out of respect for his own self-esteem.

Literary skill means the ability to present a subject as accurately and vividly as possible. A letter writer is not writing for posterity. He is writing to accomplish something here and now, but to do this he has to be winning and persuasive, and these were the qualities of the great writers of all time. They made even the most common matters picturesque by freshness of writing, not by dragging out old well-worn phrases, dusting them off, and inserting them when opportunity offered.

Some writers inquire about style. What is style? Merely the structure of the language and the choice of words expressing a thought. Besides being graceful, the writer's prose should be suitable to the occasion and purpose. Someone said that the great art in writing is to leave the reader believing that this is just the way he would have said it himself, without reminding him that he didn't.

A letter originally as flat as a bedroom slipper may be livened up in the hands of a competent writer so as to have a tremendous appeal. Vividness will make the picture clear, activeness will make it lively, and pleasantness will make it easy to look at. If these are left out there will remain only that cold accuracy which may be described in Tennyson's words: "Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

Writing is not a job in which you can take square and rule and compass and prepare a blue-print suitable for every occasion. Competence in writing consists in this: you use your skill in adapting an argument to the receptive system of your reader so that he will have maximum help against confusion, and against mistaking what is incidental for what is fundamental, and will easily follow not merely the facts but your estimate of their relative weight.

Bright, clear, simple

Dullness is an unpardonable fault in letter writing. It is inexcusable, because it is unnecessary. It may be

caused by laziness, weakness, lack of digging for information, or absence of background.

Good taste will guide the writer when he is adding brightness. He will select his words and phrases to sound like music when that is appropriate, or like the click of an engine when speed and precision are to be indicated, or like the blows of a sledge-hammer when power and strength are to be conveyed.

Place words so that they are agreeable to the eye and ear; vary the sentences so that light follows heavy; change the tempo occasionally, but be sure not to impair the harmony.

Do not jump around too much. There is need in the letter writer's work for attention to the three unities of the classical drama: of place, time and action. Bear in mind the old class-room formula: be clear on each point before going on to the next. Build your letter as a mason does a wall. Bind an idea to the one before it and the one that follows. Make succeeding statements say: "That is why" or "So you see" or "In addition" or "Naturally, then." This will give your letters integration, continuity and cohesion. Put in a few traffic signals such as: "On the other hand"; "Nevertheless" or "Then again" to show the reader that you are moving into another lane.

As to clarity, your own experience will tell you that words should not be garbled or vague. How often do we become exasperated by a letter! If only we could get the message that lies buried in this tangled prose we are sure that we should find it interesting. People who are unintelligible, we think, are not very intelligent.

To write clearly and simply does not mean that we write carelessly or untidily. A letter written so as to be understood by the least intelligent clerk should not offend the aesthetic sensibilities of the educated reader.

"Be brief" is advice often given as the supreme rule in the letter writer's manual. Shortness does not necessarily mean readability, for that depends upon understandability. The best way to attain brevity without ruining effectiveness and charm is to eliminate extraneous and superfluous and distracting facts and opinions. An amateur sculptor finished a statue of an elephant. A friend asked him: "What did you use as a model?" He replied: "I didn't have one: I just kept chipping off the pieces that didn't look like an elephant."

Some writers dislike writing letters because they think that the importance of their company demands that they use big words, and they feel uncomfortable in the presence of the royal purple of such language.

There is no affinity between the status of a firm and the bigness of the words used in its letters. A good business writer is using words to convey ideas, to reveal thoughts. He does not use war-club words when pin-sized words will do; when he has to use an unusual word he makes the context simplify it and illuminate its meaning.

It is unfortunate, though perhaps necessary, that specialists in any branch of human endeavour, scientific or business, should have a specialized language in which they communicate ideas, but this should be reserved for the initiated. A letter to a customer is not the place for the obscure patois of the workshop.

The worst form of illiteracy is butchery of the language, what the essayist E. B. White called "the language of mutilation." It is as out of place in business letters to use the sleazy words of light fiction as the rich, ripe words created for some advertisements.

Getting organized

After collecting the facts that are needed your thought must turn to devising the most effective way to communicate them.

All good writing implies selection and organization. Here is the reality of the matter you have to tell the reader: how are you going to relate this reality to his receiving system? Furthermore, how are you going to write conversationally so that you seem to say in your letter: "I wish I could be my letter and so go to talk with you"?

This is why every writer should have some knowledge of the motivations and probable reactions of people in various circumstances. Some acquaintance with practical psychology is the basis of the successful communication of ideas.

Most persons to whom business writers address letters are of some consequence in their offices. Many of them think that they are of more importance than we are pleased to concede. Nevertheless, it is the writer's first duty to obtain from these people, whatever their personal idiosyncrasies, the best possible response to his request, or to secure an order for goods, or to bring about the adjustment of a mistake. He cannot fulfil this duty unless he knows something about human nature.

A piece of writing is good if it is alive, not occupied wholly with cold certainties but shot through and through with men's hopes, aspirations, doubts, loves, and hates; the things that gladden, sadden and madden us.

People reading novels lose themselves in adventure, and a part of them participates in the events. It should be the aim of the letter writer to make true-life happenings and business matters as real to readers as are these fictitious situations. "That is a tall order," some may say, while others will declare flat-footedly that it is impossible. A great many impossibilities are achieved by men who try, and few of even the elementary possibilities are satisfyingly attained by men who will not put forth the necessary effort.

Look at how the mass media strain to interest readers and viewers. How much more should letter writers use human interest to further the advancement of their firms' business.

Many a languishing letter has been pepped up by introduction of something inconsequential to the

transaction in hand but closely interesting to the reader. "He is not only a person with a job at a desk," the writer says to himself. "He is a human being with hobbies and aversions and favourite talking points. Between him and me there is some overlapping of experience, philosophy and avocation."

Three qualities

There are three qualities to be cultivated by the writer of business letters: sincerity, a positive approach, and imaginative treatment of the matter in hand.

The cocoon of personal isolation guarding the letter writer from close contact with the people to whom he writes is not acceptable to the man who aspires to be a great — or even a competent — letter writer.

A letter should be affirmative, not negative. Some people think that it is clever to be negative: others have just fallen into the habit. No one is so interesting if he merely points out what is wrong as if he tells about positive courses of action.

Imagination in letter writing consists in presenting the common and routine in such a way that it will appear novel and interesting. Smallness of subject need not cripple interest-provoking power. Look at what Shakespeare did with hearsay of a little coral island: he edified it into his magnificent fantasy *The Tempest*. When we use sense perception of what is, and intuition to tell us what may be, we are using our powers of imagination and construction.

Purpose and result

What makes writing letters a happy job is the power we find in it of communicating ideas creatively so as to move people to action, or to add to their happiness. The proficient business letter writer touches life at many points, and to express his thoughts about life and affairs he writes with freshness, originality and imagination.

He knows that good letter writing does not require faking of colour and interest, but it does demand that the writer be conscious of the colour in life and alive to the need for saying what he has to say in an interesting way.

He is often up against that most difficult of tasks: writing when he feels that he has nothing to say. That requires enormous ingenuity, and he will have stored some spare thoughts in his mind for the occasion.

It is no sign of weakness or defeat that a typescript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers. Few artists or sculptors or writers are entirely satisfied with their finished work.

Some first efforts at a new human-interest sort of writing may appear as if they had been written with a very scratchy pen, but that is better than grubbing along through life in the same old stereotyped way.