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Let's Put Words to Work

WORDS may be fragile verbal tools, dulled by wrong usage and often not readily at hand, but they are the only medium by which we may make ourselves understood by other people.

They came to us from a slow-moving past, and our faulty use of them in this faster-than-sound age has much to do with our personal confusion and the disorder in human affairs. To discuss putting words to work is not to talk about a bookish frill, but about something needed for rational contact with the world around us.

Some business letters are sadly down at heel. Some seem to say things that do not need saying, in a way that shows the writer to have had no interest in saying them. Others look all right on the outside, being carefully typed on good paper with the proper margins, but they are as indigestible as a gaudily iced cake filled with concrete.

These things don't matter much to a writer whose loftiest notion about his job is to keep the paper flowing. Such a man is depriving himself of a great deal. His limp words rob him of the pleasure of communicating his thoughts and emotions, of attracting admiring attention, of moving people to do what he wants them to do.

One of the graces of a rich language like English or French is that its words may be put together so as to say the same thing in many different ways. There are earthy words, carrying weight; airy words as light as soap bubbles; missile-like words, speedy and explosive. All of these have magic in them, the magic of carrying your meaning weightily, lightly, or cracklingly into your reader's mind.

Language did not start in a grammar book: it started because people wanted to talk with one another. To build it up over the centuries has been a grand adventure in which we can still join.

We read with delight letters written hundreds of years ago. The writers' painfully labouring goose quills wrote words with meaning and feeling.

Consider the reader

Everything we write — except the occasional pieces we scribble just for the joy we find in putting words together — should take account of the reader's comfort, interest, and capacity to understand. His personality is more important than ours in dictating what words we shall use, but our own character, mood and purpose must show through. Apply that specification to sales letters, answers to complaints, welcomes to new customers and shareholders, and even to greetings and compliments, and you will find that it is a vital part of good communication.

The words you use will be different if you are writing a letter of exactly the same meaning to two persons of widely different position and interests: for example, a stockholder who has investments in a dozen concerns and a mother who spends ten minutes judging the relative value of two pairs of children's shoes with a price spread of a quarter. But this is a truth often obscured by our present passion for form letters and the low standard allowed to prevail in business correspondence.

Writing has no purpose save to meet the needs of the reader. Before the days of the pony express and airmail, communication on this continent was by smoke signal. When the Indian was making signals it was he and not the friend with whom he was communicating who got smoke in his eyes. Let's absorb the smog at the point of origin, so that our communications arrive crisp and clear.

We must choose our words so that the reader will be sure to understand them without waste of time and thought. They must tell the necessary facts on the vocabulary level of the reader. They must convey to the reader something of the way we feel toward him.

Give your letter some immediacy of impact. Get the recipient involved. If you talk too much about yourself, your firm or your product, you will find yourself talking to yourself. Try the dialogue form of composition, which invites the reader, whom you assume to be a person of intelligence and breeding, to join in the conversation. Don't start out by telling him what he told you in his last letter: he already knows, or he can look up the carbon copy. Begin by telling him something new.

Good manners enter into the choice of words, partly because they are due in propriety toward the reader and partly because his own dignity demands them of the writer.

When a man receives a letter with specific words aimed directly at his situation, he knows that some real, live human being has taken the trouble to invent sentences to convey a message specially to him.

Are the time and trouble involved in this carefulness justified in the writer's busy day? Look at it this way before answering: the only justification of a letter is the crucial five minutes when it stands, naked and alone, fighting the busyness and clamouring for the attention of the person to whom you addressed it.

Your choice of words is of vital value in this confrontation. The words need to convey a feeling of interest, a glow of friendliness, the assurance of sincerity, and the impression that you believe the message to be of sufficient importance to warrant the reader's attention.

Don't be foggy

No one can draft an effective circular, write a memorandum, frame rules, or dictate a letter unless he has a good sense of the fitness of words. You may not be blithe by nature, but you cannot be stolid and dull in your writing if you are to thrive in this competitive arena.

A fitting word is one that has meaning. It must represent the same thing to the reader as to the writer. A private meaning has no meaning at all. We recall the airman on a life raft in the Pacific who could feel sharks nuzzling his frail craft. He read aloud to them from a survival booklet describing how seldom sharks attack men. It wasn't their language and, in fact, it seemed to enrage them.

Words need to be meaningful. We must not think of language to the exclusion of ideas. The environment is important — the environment of the reader and the environment of your proposition — because it affects the sense of your words.

The secret is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. If you are going to soar into the freedom of using a word apart from its customary meaning, at least know what that meaning is and estimate the likelihood of your reader's understanding your modification of it. What do you gain, except perhaps a sort of childish amusement, by writing in an involved, pompous and tiresome manner?

Words need to be clear. Even if people do not agree with you, write so that there may be no doubt about what you are saying. To put a thing into appropriate words so that the message comes through clearly has the virtue of making it seem more real and possible and believable than if you say it muddily or smother it under ornament.

Even if you are dealing with an obscure subject, or if you are being stormily angry about a fault, or if you are being wide-eyed about a pet project: perhaps then more than at other times, use language that is not ambiguous.

Words need to be sharp. They must cut through superfluous matter to reveal what you wish to convey. Sometimes we feel frustrated by our inability to bend a word to express our exact thought. It isn't enough merely to scowl in vexation: find another word or use a phrase.

Every executive knows how annoying indeterminate words can be. Business and technical writing is dominated by the fact that specific meanings cannot be tampered with. The price is so many dollars, the replacement part is number such and such, the tolerance allowed is blank thousandths of a millimetre. To convey facts like these we must be specific. Generalities are acceptable only when they are appropriate.

Keep the reader awake

Words need to be vigorous. There is no excuse for having a letter come on to the stage with no more liveliness than a wet sponge and then slither out listlessly as the "Yours truly" curtain drops. Use of a virile word occasionally in a letter will impart a feeling of your aliveness. Use of active sentences will keep your audience awake.

Words need to be strong. Don't choose a word for its costume. It has to do something, so choose it for its muscle. Bleached-out, worn-out words do not make an impression on the mind.

Use strong words like urgent, crisis, fatal, grave, essential, and the like, for strong occasions. The inappropriate use of strong and long words debases them to the point where they no longer serve their purpose. When used on a thin topic, heavy words break through. They are as out of place as a driver on the green with the golf ball six inches from the hole.

Words should be simple. This is not to say that they should be in the primer class. People who demand immediate intelligibility without giving thought to what they read cannot hope to go far beyond comic strip or cartoon grade.

Writing simple words means expressing meaning as purely, clearly, definitely and shortly as possible. Churchill's famed "Blood, Sweat and Tears" would not have sparked the nation if "sweat" had been dressed up as "perspiration."

If there is a whiff of old-fashioned simplicity about your writing, that is perhaps a good thing. Consider William Harvey's *Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*, published in 1628, just eight years after a few of his fellow-Englishmen landed on Plymouth Rock. It was a significant book, defying the prejudices of several centuries, giving a new direction to the study of physiology. The magnitude of the subject might have justified the use of big words and bulging phrases. But here is how Harvey told his story: "I began to think whether there might not be a motion, as it were, in a circle. Now this I afterwards found to be true."

Words need to have rhythm. Whether you look at a landscape or at a painting, or listen to a brook or to an orchestra, you sense rhythm. There is harmonious flow. There should be rhythm in your use of words, too.

Many letters and other pieces of writing are made up of what used to be called in newspaper city rooms "ding dong" sentences. They have a constant chiming of the same structure in sentence after sentence, in which object follows predicate as surely as the clanging of a bell follows each stroke of its clapper.

Rhythm is not poetry but the pleasing movement and variation of syllables and phrases. It can be seen in the works of good authors of the past and present, and it can be learned from them.

Paint a word picture

There are three main sources of colour in language, and all of them involve words: vividness, activeness and pleasantness. The first makes the picture clear, the second makes it lively, and the third makes it easy to look at.

Colour words are not words in dress suits, nor tall opaque words, nor ornamental words, but words which tell better than any others the things the writer wishes to convey. Some good words appeal to more senses than that of sight, thereby adding to their force or understandability. If you say "he closed the door" that appeals only to sight; try "he slammed the door", which brings hearing into play. To "weep" is a visual verb; to "sob" has sight, hearing and movement.

Aesop Glim, a master copy writer, is quoted as having said that the reason for the Chinese slogan "one picture is worth a thousand words" is that it is so difficult to write a thousand words in Chinese. Your words, easier to write than Chinese, can become pictures when they are put together so as to call forth in the mind of your reader the scene, article or person you are writing about. Many a business letter would be improved if the writer took care to write about his product, factory or purpose as if he had seen and examined them, not merely read about them in catalogues or heard about them from fellow workers.

Bring down your thoughts from the abstract to the concrete. Note how much easier writing is to read when it turns its general ideas into physical form.

The Biblical Job does not say that he avoided destruction by the narrowest of margins: he says: "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth." When Solomon discoursed on the folly of excessive rest and relaxation, he put his warning into physical form with a reference to "folding of the hands to sleep." Horace does not speak of love, but of a particular girl; not of the austere life of old Italy but of sons carrying faggots in obedience to a stern mother. Shakespeare, in play after play, forces you to touch and see, because he chooses concrete words. When he has to use an abstract noun, for example "concealment", he immediately turns it into a visible worm "feeding" on the visible bud.

Use your imagination

Words can be put together so as to make metaphors, which are figures of speech in which the characteristics of one person or thing are ascribed to another. Metaphors are used to sharpen and extend the reader's understanding of a complex idea by presenting him with an image drawn from the world of sensory experience. Some examples are: the ship plowed the sea; the sands of his values are already shifting; he attempts to lash himself into the fury he thinks he should feel.

By using metaphor, our words can be made to appeal to all the senses. They play on colour, form, hearing, smell, touch and movement. In adjectives, for example, we can say: a blue outlook, a square deal, a ringing challenge, a rosy hope, headlong eagerness.

Metaphor should not be made obvious, nor should it consist of something incongruous. Consider these examples: a teen-age girl describes a school dance as a "disaster", while the bomber pilot limping home with a battered plane describes his mission as "quite a ball." Avoid, too, the absurdity caused by mixed pictures: "The target was handsomely beaten." (One strikes a target, beats a carpet.) A large heading in a newspaper said that Quebec had approved a bill "to increase the farm loan ceiling." (One raises the ceiling, increases benefits.)

Audacity is not the principal feature in good use of words; one requires imagination to use them in the right way to get the effect desired. Imagination detects the possibility of using some word, phrase or metaphor in such a way as to heighten interest in what is being said or to make clear something that may be obscure. It raises the ordinary events and communications of everyday life to a level where they are no longer commonplace.

Use of imagination does not mean that we become freakish. The tendency of business is away from all sorts of writing capers. A letter that seeks to snare attention by some peculiar and unusual layout, or by novel words used for the sake of novelty, labels itself the product of a childish mind.

Use active words

The most important characteristic of life is movement, and we show this in our writing by using active words. Our verbs should not be passive, but in vigorous action doing verb work.

Instead of writing "It was understood from you that shipment would be made by March 6th", write "You said you would ship by March 6th." George Washington didn't say about chopping down the cherry tree: "It was performed with a sharp edged instrument": he said: "I did it with my little hatchet."

Some people suggest that the desired sense of activity can be attained if you will just "write as you

speak," but there are some differences you need to keep in mind.

It is easier to get an idea across in speech than in writing. One reason is that in speech we can stress the right words and pause at the right places. In writing, all the words of a sentence are printed in ink of equal blackness, separated by the same amount of space. If we try to overcome this disadvantage by underlining words, capitalizing them, or putting them in Italics, we indulge in a lazy device that makes a page look ugly and makes reading difficult. The right solution is to put the rhythm and emphasis into the words and into sentence structure.

We have to be more careful in writing than in speaking because our slips show more. There is not a distinctive language for speaking and writing, yet words which are in daily conversational use are not always suited to writing.

This does not mean that we must construct our letters as meticulously as a Swiss watchmaker putting the works together. It is possible so to measure and arrange syllables as to construct grammatical sentences which nevertheless do not convey our meaning. There are no grammatical laws by which we can compose Iliads or write effective selling letters.

The practised writer may allow himself a certain old-shoe casualness with grammar, so long as his meaning is clear and the effect is what he desires. But he should at least know the rules, so that he can discriminate between good and bad and so that he knows how far it is safe to go from the base. Before trying to steal home he will have achieved competence in reaching third.

The minimum objective in any writing is to convey meaning, but beyond that are the really interesting objectives: precision, grace, logic and clearness.

Alliterate with care

A device like alliteration must be used cautiously. In abundance, it becomes tiresome. Overdone, it interferes with understanding.

Alliteration is a tool which can be used effectively only when the reader doesn't notice it. It will make effective use of alliteration easier to understand if we consider it not so much as the repetition of a letter as the echo of a sound. Subtle alliteration uses half steps, as in music. The alphabet used in shorthand is a good guide to these half steps: T and D, L and R, K and hard G, F and V, P and B, M and N.

Repetition of noticeable words is as irritating to a reader as is obvious repetition of sound. You can avoid it by enlarging your vocabulary, not only in the number of words you have at the tip of your pen, but in the diameter of the words so that you know the many meanings they have.

The first word that occurs to you may not be the best word. It may be very good, but a better may present itself when you invite it. Don't, however, allow the desire for a perfect word to become a passion which interrupts your flow of thought. Get your ideas on paper, and then polish up what you have written.

Keep a couple of reference books handy for this burnishing. One of the most useful, because it is so complete and so easy to handle, is *A Dictionary of English Synonyms* by Richard Soule, now available in paper covers. A second might be *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by H. W. Fowler. The first gives you a wide selection of words for what you wish to say, and the latter, written with gusto for the correct and severity for the incorrect, will help you to keep on the track of right usage.

It is better, even in a business letter, to have a slight odour of the study lamp than to have thoughts presented in shabby terms. A letter that is well written flatters the receiver.

Read what you write

Even after following all the best precepts in writing your piece, there is more to be done. You must read your script to ascertain whether the words are the right words, saying what you wish to convey, and whether the sentences are equal to bearing the strain you ask them to carry.

Ovid, the Roman poet who wrote at the turn of the Christian era, was not ashamed to admit this need. He said: "When I re-read I blush, for even I perceive enough that ought to be erased, though it was I who wrote the stuff." Thomas Jefferson spent eighteen days writing and rewriting the Declaration of Independence; Victor Hugo made eleven revisions of one novel; Voltaire was known to spend a whole night toiling over one sentence. Artists, too, make revisions. Leonardo was one of the first to welcome painting in oils instead of in water colour: he said it allowed of so many afterthoughts, so refined a working out of perfection.

There is a happy mean between being content with the first thing that comes into your head and the craving for perfection. The letter you write need not be excessively polished, but it must be workmanlike. Do your writing painstakingly, but don't let it show.

When a thing is thoroughly well done it often has the air of being a miracle. There is no miracle about successful use of words: just hard work gathering facts, hard work recalling precedent pictures; hard work fitting them into the present setting; hard work writing carefully and brightly. In short, most successes in writing can be explained by diligent work, seasoned by lively imagination and warmed by sincerity.

You should take for granted that everyone who reads what you write will look for the best he is capable of appreciating. That sets your goal: you cannot rest content with mediocrity when excellence is within your reach.

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