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WRITE WHAT YOU MEAN







# WRITE WHAT YOU MEAN

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FOREWORD BY

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LONDON

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## FOREWORD

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“The English language”, said George Orwell, “becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that this process is reversible.” The purpose of this book is to assist that reversal, and few purposes could to-day be more important. It is a commonplace that clear thinking must precede clear writing: Horace said it nearly two thousand years ago and it has since been repeated innumerable times. But few of those writers who have emphasised this truth, have given any guidance to their readers about how to set about thinking clearly. That no doubt is natural enough; it is easier to formulate rules of correct diction than to suggest ways in which orderly thought can be stimulated. It is easier also to obey rules than to think for oneself; thinking is very hard work, and paternal systems of government, under which the citizen has to do so many things by order and not by choice, are not favourable to the growth of the habit. Mr. Bell has taken the hard way. He signposts roads along which cogitation should go in order to arrive at that clarity of thought which is a prerequisite of clarity of expression. His concern is not only with what the writer should do when he takes the pen in his hand, but even more with how he should so prepare himself as to be able to use it effectively when he does. He does not neglect correctness, but puts it in the subordinate place that is proper to it.

Besides the merit of tackling an important task that is usually omitted because it is so difficult, the book is to be welcomed for another unusual feature. It is becoming fashionable to concentrate the charge of obscurity of diction on politicians and officials, and an illusion is being created that they are the only

section of the community that stands in need of reformation. Mr. Bell's book is intended primarily for business men, and so does something to redress a balance that is in danger of being unfairly tipped against those who govern us. After all, it is on business men that our future depends, and in the world of business even more than in Whitehall we need that vital element of efficiency that consists in writing what you mean.

ERNEST GOWERS

## PREFACE

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It is fortunate that there are so many good books on English usage. They are of special value to anyone who seeks to improve his powers of expression and to rectify any formal defects in his writing.

What is less adequately provided is guidance on how to set about preparing a document—how to ensure that the thoughts to be embodied are themselves clear and coherent, and that they will be transmitted fully and exactly to the mind of the reader.

Defects in these matters can be much more serious from a business point of view than failure to write correct English. Yet they are rarely admitted or seriously studied. More difficulty is inherent in preparing to write a document and in settling the question of approach than in the actual putting of words on paper. The faults of many documents spring from neglect to recognise this. To those who are willing to recognise it this book should prove of interest and, I hope, of assistance.

Most of what the book contains is based on a combination of the normal training in logical thinking which a lawyer receives and practical experience in administration.

The first two chapters deal with the work that must be done in preparing one's own mind—concentrating one's thoughts, gathering, classifying and considering sources of information, and drawing the conclusions to be presented. The third chapter gives general guidance on the manner in which documents should be composed. Much could be written on these matters, and these chapters do not, of course, claim to be comprehensive. Moreover, they deal with questions which are to some degree matters of opinion.

The application of general principles to specific classes of document is considered in Chapters V to VIII. Chapter IX attempts to set out some points which, if borne in mind, should diminish the difficulties sometimes encountered when documents later become the basis of negotiation or dispute.

These chapters are all based on first-hand experience. I must, however, acknowledge a particular debt to Professor I. A. Richards for the analysis of "meaning" into the four elements of sense, feeling, tone and intention. This analysis I have developed on my own lines in Chapter IV, and found it useful to apply in later chapters. Professor Richards in his book *Practical Criticism* has set out vividly the problem of misunderstanding. Vanity, he points out, is the chief cause of our unwillingness to recognise our shortcomings. "We are with difficulty persuaded that we have much to learn about language, or that our understanding of it is defective. And this illusion re-forms whenever it is shattered, though any efficient educational procedure ought to have no trouble in shattering it as often as is needed. The first condition for improvement in the adult's use of language must be to disturb this ludicrous piece of self-deception."

He recognises that there is a long way to go before a working method of study can be evolved, but he urges that "However incomplete, tentative, or, indeed, speculative we may consider our present views on this subject, they are far enough advanced to justify some experimental applications."

On this aspect of the matter *Write What You Mean* cannot claim to offer more than one of the experimental applications which Professor Richards considers to be justified. If it achieves no more than to set a wider circle of persons examining the problem and seeking solutions, it will have done something to diminish the inconvenience we all suffer from finding that our meaning has been misunderstood.

I express my special thanks to Sir Ernest Gowers who, amid the pressure of public duties, has found time to read the book and to write so generously about it in his Foreword.

R. W. B.

Richmond, Surrey  
August, 1953

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## INTRODUCTION

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There are some who believe that heaven and hell are two names for the same place. In our spiritual existence, so their theory goes, the thoughts of everyone are instantly apparent to and apprehended by everyone else. This causes no inconvenience to the saint, who perceives that he is in heaven. The sinner suffers perpetual embarrassment and decides that he must be in hell.

Fortunately for most of us, our earthly thoughts are unknown to the outside world unless we take steps to make them known. The process for doing this is cumbersome.

First we must separate the particular thoughts we wish to transmit, selecting them from the stream of ideas which constantly courses through the mind. Then we must arrange a series of words which in our opinion will adequately portray the thoughts to be transmitted. Next we utter or write those words.

When our words are heard or read by others, each one of those others creates in his own mind the thoughts that seem to him to correspond with the words. Here comes the real trouble—the thoughts are rarely, if ever, identical with those which were in the mind of the transmitter. What is more, every hearer or reader will have created for himself a slightly different version from every other.

### *Misunderstanding*

Most of our misunderstandings arise from being far too optimistic about the degree of exactness with which our thoughts are reproduced in another mind through the medium of the words we use.

Worse may follow. When we begin to discover, in the course of conversation or exchange of letters, that our thoughts have been defectively transmitted, we are apt to accuse the other person of distortion. We much dislike recognising that we may not have expressed ourselves clearly, though the clumsiness and

inadequacy of the other person's way of expressing himself are usually quite obvious!

Soon emotions are aroused on both sides. What was really no more than a human failing to select ideal words becomes magnified into a deliberate attempt to mislead. It is not long before the message fades into secondary place: the matter that looms largest is the opinion held by one party about the other's conduct, an opinion which deteriorates as misunderstandings grow. The process has only to happen often enough for serious ill-feeling to arise. In all too many cases mutual suspicion and distrust can be traced solely to this cause.

The success of any business or organisation depends chiefly on the day-to-day relationship of its members, both between themselves and towards others outside the organisation. On this ground alone misunderstandings due to defects in the transmission of thought are costly in efficiency and retard progress through the friction they create.

#### *Writer and reader*

We have, therefore, a clear principle on which to found our study. The relation between the writer and the reader, as individuals, will be profoundly affected by the way the writer expresses himself. If we keep this permanently in mind, we ought not to go far astray. We shall write always with this in view. The effect our writing has on relations will no longer be a handicap. By deliberately aiming at influencing relations we shall turn the handicap into an advantage.

The first duty of a writer is to study his reader. He must consider how he is to ensure that the reader will—

- (a) understand the message exactly as the writer understands it;
- (b) respond to it in the way the writer wishes, and in no other way.

It follows that the writer must have a particular reader or readers in mind. If he is writing a letter, he will consider the recipient; if a report, the board or other group to whom he

makes it; and so on. In each case he will put himself into the mind of the reader, drawing his document with a sensitive regard to the probable reactions.

### *Style*

One of the limitations of writing as a means of communication is its inflexibility. The whole message must be ascertainable from the written words alone. There are no opportunities for expansion or explanation. No tones of voice, gestures or facial expressions are available to soften or reinforce the impact of the words. The reader may, of course, re-read the document, but there is no guarantee that he will. The aim must be to ensure both that the first impression will be right and that the *whole* impression can readily be gained from the words alone.

It is in this connection that style becomes important—using “style” in its widest meaning, to cover the way a document is put together and the kind of language in which it is drawn.

If a reader is to get the right and full impression at first reading, the style of the document must be one which is easy for him, and preferably familiar also. A style which might be admirable for the report of a Royal Commission is likely to be unsuitable for a report to a board of directors. Unfamiliar styles are rarely popular for practical everyday purposes, unless the readers find them simpler and more effective than the styles they are already used to. Time is always short, and the reader responds eagerly to a document which he finds he can quickly and readily understand.

### *Colour*

Apart from style, we must consider the element of “colour” in the language we use. Particular words and phrases commonly have a special meaning for each person. This significance may be derived from the first time the word or phrase was learned, the context of that first use remaining indissolubly associated with it. A simple word like “garden” may arouse in different minds the most varied images, according to what type of garden they knew when they first learned to use the word.

Again, the significance may develop from the writer's own background, as when a specialist use of a word for professional purposes drives out the everyday significance. For example, "function" to the ordinary man means purpose, or action in fulfilment of purpose, but for mathematicians this meaning becomes displaced by a technical one—a particular relationship of one number or quantity to another.

Yet again, a word may derive colour from association with matters about which the reader has strong feelings. The word "profit", for example, may arouse quite different emotions in an experienced industrialist from those it arouses in an ardent collectivist, and their respective conceptions of what profit in fact is will differ widely.

As distinct from these cases of permanent colour attaching to words, phrases which are normally colourless can momentarily take on colour from the accident of their being applied to persons or objects about which the reader holds a decided opinion. If, for example, A writes to B that he believes C to be a skilled negotiator, the phrase "skilled negotiator" will probably mean much the same thing to both A and B, assuming that C is not particularly well known to either. But let us suppose that B knows C well; the phrase will at once take on colour. If B admires C, he may interpret it as confirming that C is a model of tact and diplomacy: if he has a poor opinion of C, he may take it as revealing that C is a master of duplicity and intrigue. When this sort of colour is introduced, as it repeatedly is in our daily affairs, the possibilities of misunderstanding become very high.

Among the most persistent causes of confusion are abstract terms which mean to each person almost anything he likes to make them mean. Such words as "democracy", "loyalty", "home", "modern", can carry meanings which are immensely different, and even contradictory. Often it is hard to be sure that we are clear ourselves about exactly what we mean when we use terms of this sort, and we are certainly not justified in relying on the reader's attaching to them the same meaning as we do. Careful thought may sometimes lead us to conclude that a term does not mean what we want our reader to understand by it, or

even that it is meaningless. The least we should do is to ask ourselves whether there is a describable object which corresponds with the term, and whether the reader will at once see that same object in his mind's eye.

The lesson of all these difficulties is, of course, the same—we must constantly consider the reader, and write in all respects for him. Only by deliberately putting ourselves into his mind and outlook, allowing for all we know about his thoughts, feelings and attitude, shall we effectively diminish the many chances of misunderstanding which beset our path. As reward for the trouble taken we should enjoy enhanced efficiency, harmony, speed and accuracy in our day-to-day affairs.



## PREPARING THE MIND

### CONCENTRATION: GATHERING MATERIAL

Of the many types of document used for management or administration all but the simplest demand as the first step deliberate preparation of the mind. The finished document should be an orderly exposition of facts and ideas, and probably of suggestions supported by arguments. The mental preparation will fall naturally into three stages—gathering the material; studying it and thinking about it; and selecting the facts, ideas, arguments and suggestions to be embodied in the document.

During all three stages we must concentrate on our task. There are many who find concentration difficult to initiate and sustain.

### CONCENTRATION

Concentration means no more than the ability to discard any mental activity except attention to the exact matter in hand and to ignore external distractions. It is not a superior or more intense method of thought; it is merely the power to keep one's brain thinking about one particular thing to the exclusion of others.

It is well to recognise at once that there are some things—acute worry, illness, fatigue, strong hunger or thirst—which are great deterrents from concentration. What is said in this chapter is intended to apply to persons in normal working conditions when they should be reasonably free from such handicaps.

The simplest matters to handle are external distractions—interruptions by telephone, by demands for one's presence elsewhere, by callers who must be dealt with at once. These are part of normal working conditions, and can be met only by switching the mind off the matter in hand to deal with the distraction and then concentrating again. This faculty is not hard to develop by

practice, and it is indeed an essential quality for a responsible person in business or administrative life. It is far better to recognise this and to cultivate the knack than to sigh for ideal conditions which can rarely if ever be attained. It is the fact that their working conditions have habituated them to unusual freedom from interruption that creates one of the chief difficulties encountered by some types of technical worker when they are expected to take over administrative responsibilities.

We need not be ashamed of making a virtue of necessity. The distractions, if not too frequent, may have value in refreshing the brain. Unbroken concentration is tiring if continued for more than an hour or so: if we bear this in mind, we shall find interruptions at least tolerable, even if not wholly welcome.

### *Will-power*

Turning now to the internal state of our mind, we are led to consider how we can most easily shake off distracting thoughts. The mind is often reluctant to engross itself in one subject, to persist in thinking about that matter alone. How can we discipline it and ally it to our will? All too often the mind seems almost to have a will of its own.

It is reassuring to remember that no one really understands how the mind works. The mechanics of its operation remain a mystery. If we find difficulty in concentrating, it is not because those who can concentrate have a better understanding than we have of the mechanics of thinking.

The truth is that concentration is a matter of will-power and habit. The greatest aid to concentration is interest. It is quite difficult not to concentrate on matters in which we are interested. All subjects are equally difficult or equally easy to concentrate upon. Those we are interested in merely seem to us to be easier. The other subjects would be just as easy, but our natural power to concentrate on them is diverted. There are other ideas at hand, more attractive to us, which leap into our mind and claim attention.

Our problem is to drive away these sirens and ensure that our mind is free to deal exclusively with the subject before us.



To do this is an act of will, and—there is no help for this—we have to practise it as such. But there are aids of which we may take advantage. A great aid is pressure of time. Working against a time limit is a stimulus to concentration. If a time limit be not forced on us by circumstances, we can help ourselves by fixing one. Concentration is more difficult when we are under-worked than when we have too much to do. The habit of always endeavouring to do work in the shortest time develops concentration as its natural companion-habit.

During slack periods in an office it is easier, and better for one's own efficiency, to work as fast as possible on such work as there is, and then to spend the remaining time in deliberate relaxation. Trying to spread the work out over a longer time weakens the habits on which our own efficiency depends and is likely to result in the quality of our work deteriorating. This is neither in our interests nor in those of our employers.

### *Interest*

We have already mentioned what a strong aid to concentration is to be found in the development of a special interest in the subject in hand. If this can be done, concentration follows naturally upon the interest. In most cases our reaction to subjects is immediate, and may be rather shallow. We all have a lazy streak and tend to favour familiar subjects. Knowledge that effort will be called for may discourage us from unfamiliar tasks. We feel no pull of real interest where there is no knowledge to beckon us to start.

If, however, we deliberately put to ourselves the question "What is there of real interest about this subject?", we shall rarely be able to answer honestly "Nothing". Once a reason for interest has been discovered, however slight, it can be developed. It is surprising how one point will lead on to another and how what appeared at first a most unpromising field will be found to contain a source of enough interest to make concentration fairly easy. It is the positive initial effort to find an interest in the matter that is the clue.

*Purpose*

Perhaps the most effective of all aids to concentration, however, is attention to the purpose of our study. The abstract thinker or the creative artist cannot invoke this aid, as he may have no immediate purpose in his thoughts or work. His mental discipline must therefore be the more severe. We, fortunately, never (or should never) have to concentrate on matters of which the purpose is not obvious. Usually we should find ourselves in sympathy with the task of seeing that purpose well fulfilled.

In this chapter we are concerned with preparing the mind with a view to drawing up a document. If, therefore, as our first step we consider what is the purpose of the document, examining that with close attention, concentration over the whole range of the subject will develop easily. There is in every one of us a creative instinct which is satisfied by producing something that fulfils a purpose. Turning the purpose over in our mind and pondering the way in which it can be most effectively discharged, we will find so much interest in the various possibilities that concentration, as a problem, will solve itself.

Difficulty of a task is usually a help rather than a discouragement. We may not feel much need to concentrate fully on an easy task: a hard one presents a challenge. As we perceive the nature of the difficulty and ideas present themselves for diminishing or overcoming it, we become engrossed and before long are concentrating without even being conscious of any effort in doing so.

While it is true, then, that concentration calls for an effort of will, we should not direct our will to concentration as an activity by itself. We should rather direct the will to bringing about a state of affairs in which concentration follows as a natural result of what we are doing. A few questions to ourselves should quickly bring this about—

What is the purpose of the intended document?

What reaction do I wish to arouse in the reader?

What materials are required to gain that reaction?

What are the matters of interest that will strike the reader?

What are the obstacles to success?

What do I need to find out, and present in the document, in order to overcome these obstacles?

By the time we have considered a few such questions, concentration is a problem no longer. We find ourselves embarking on the next stage of our task—collecting the material we require.

#### GATHERING MATERIAL

Our material may be drawn from various sources—documents, knowledge possessed by others, our own knowledge and experience. Before we start collecting, however, there are two conflicting demands to be reconciled. The first is that we must be much better informed about our subject than are those for whom we are writing the document. The second is that we must concentrate on the matters strictly necessary for our document and not waste time gathering material which, however interesting, will not be of direct use. In other words, how are we to ensure that our knowledge is ample for our purpose without flinging our net wider than the immediate occasion demands?

It is obviously important to get the balance right. If we fail to find out enough about the subject, we may draw misleading conclusions and we shall break down under questioning if we are asked to support our views in discussion. If we go to the other extreme, we may take too long in merely assembling our material, and leave ourselves too little time for reviewing it and drawing our conclusions.

There can be no hard-and-fast rule about the best way to resolve this dilemma. There is one useful guide—to relate our efforts closely to the purpose of the document. Everything necessary for that purpose must be fully studied, but we need not stray beyond it. It is essential, therefore, that we should fully and accurately know the exact purpose for which our document is to be used. Misconception on that point will lead us astray in assembling material and will frustrate those who use the document.

(a) *Documents*

The physical process of extracting material from documents is not difficult, provided that we abandon the idea that a document must be read from end to end in order to master it. This is rarely necessary.

The first essential is to find out what parts of the document will need most attention. A story is told of a busy Queen's Counsel who opened a consultation with his clients by apologising for having had time to read only half the brief. The instructing solicitor at once said "But how very unfortunate! The really important matters are dealt with in the second half of the brief". "I thought that might be so", answered the Queen's Counsel with a smile, "It was the second half I read".

This type of approach should be used for all documents. They are not to be regarded as august pronouncements through which we must methodically and respectfully plod from start to finish. A good plan is to pass the eye rapidly over the whole document, sidelining parts where it springs to notice that there is material worth studying. A word pencilled in the margin to link the passage with some feature of the task in hand is a great help. Then the marked passages can be read carefully, not necessarily even in the order they occur, but in the order most apposite for the immediate purpose. At the end of such a reading far more will be known about those contents of the document *which are relevant* than if a pedestrian reading had been undertaken. No time will have been wasted on passages which are of no direct value.

By this means also several documents can be handled at the same time and points in them compared directly with each other. The sidelining and pencilled heads (which can be briefly elaborated when the passages are carefully read) provide ready means of cross-reference. Without such aids, time can be wasted by the mind's remembering that it saw some point somewhere in a mass of papers but being naturally unable to trace it by a feat of memory alone.

If the documents in question are a series of letters constituting a correspondence, one of the questions to be carefully examined

is whether the letters in fact answer each other. It is common to find moments in a correspondence where a matter raised in one letter has been ignored or misunderstood in the reply, and yet the parties themselves have not perceived it. These points should always be noted, so that their influence can be assessed when the correspondence is reviewed as a whole.

Quite often parties are so obsessed by the situation they have reached as a result of correspondence (especially if they have reached disagreement) that the stages by which they got to that point may have passed from their minds. To analyse the false steps may be the means of solving an intractable situation.

In business and administration, reading should be undertaken only with a purpose. The sort of reading we do for pleasure or to improve our minds has no place here. Reading documents in an office should be a ruthless process, strictly related to one object and wasting no time on appreciating the document for its own sake.

Quick and accurate realisation of what need *not* be read is a quality to be cultivated. It involves the power to know at a glance whether a document contains anything of use or can be ignored. It involves deliberate turning aside from irrelevancies, however agreeable, if they do not serve the purpose in hand.

This is not mere "skipping". Skipping is a haphazard affair, a casual attempt to "get the hang" of a document without the bother of reading it. The selective type of reading advocated here is a very different thing, for the relevant passages, once marked, have to be thoroughly studied and mastered. The object is not to save effort, but to apply the whole effort to the best advantage.

Again we are brought back to the same guiding rule. It is useless to embark on collection of material unless the purpose for which it is needed is accurately defined. We must know, within reason, what we are looking for. We must have a clear enough conception of our object to enable our judgement to distinguish between what is likely or unlikely to be useful to us.

Thus we find that the very thing that we undertook first as an aid to concentration on our subject—study of the purpose of our document—is the same thing that has to be done before we start

to gather material for our task. So far, therefore, we are working to a coherent plan. The processes of preparing the mind help each other on, and are complementary. Nothing of our effort has gone to waste.

(b) *Personal contacts*

We can rarely gain all we require from documents alone. We shall need the knowledge and experience of others to supplement what the documents contain. This is most readily obtained by personal interview or contact by telephone. The information we seek may be fact or opinion.

The former presents little difficulty if we apply the rules given later for testing evidence of facts. Opinion, however, needs a careful approach, and here again the rules given in the next chapter should be followed. When one is handling matters of opinion, it is not at all easy to be detached in one's attitude. It needs discipline to keep emotion in check when we hear an opinion expressed with which we agree or disagree. Emotion is apt to colour our impression of what the opinion is. There is a risk that we may gloss over differences when we feel ourselves in general agreement, or impute prejudice when we disagree.

Again, the mere difference of personalities may affect our success in gaining information from other persons. The fact that some personalities are disagreeable to us may hinder us from making the best use of them as a source of information.

No more is necessary than to be aware of these risks and allow for them when we collect our material. They can be largely eliminated by deliberately analysing them and applying our own correctives, so that balance is restored.

A special problem arises when we are faced with experts as sources of information. Experts are not always skilful in explaining matters to the layman, and the layman is often too shy of exposing the full extent of his ignorance about the expert's subject.

Where an expert opinion has to be dealt with in our document, we shall be well advised to spare no pains in forcing the expert to explain matters to us so fully that we wholly understand

them—even at the expense of our appearing in the expert's eyes to be abnormally ignorant or stupid. The manager or administrator must have the art of using experts without being an expert himself. It is only by a thorough understanding of the *nature* of the expert's operations (rather than their content or technique) that he can achieve this.

It is understanding of the nature of the expert's operations, too, that alone can develop the power to criticise competently the expert's advice. Without this critical faculty the lay administrator may be led blindly to follow some expert theory which does not suit the facts of his own problem. In principle the expert ought never to put forward advice which does not take all the facts of the case into account, but in practice there are times when the expert, perhaps unconsciously, reverses the process and seeks to make the case fit his theory.

The layman's safeguards must frankly be stated—willingness to display ignorance, coupled with relentless insistence on testing expert advice against the facts.

### (c) *Using one's own knowledge*

Logically it would seem that our own knowledge of a subject should be considered as the first and not the third of our sources of information. This appears at first sight to be a reasonable suggestion, but if we are wise we will not use our own knowledge as an actual *source of information* until last.

The first use of our existing knowledge should be to guide us towards those matters which call for further study of documents or for consultation with other persons. In the course of that study and consultation our own knowledge will not only be increased, it will be corrected and modified. At the end of our preparatory work we are sure to find that there are several points on which our initial knowledge, had we relied on it in the first place, would have led to error.

In addition to its value for indicating the right sources of information, our own knowledge will be specially useful in enabling us to use those sources to the best advantage and in

helping us to marshal the assembled material during the next stage of preparation.

It will be understood, of course, that in Chapters I and II the most elaborate type of task is visualised. The full range of preparation suggested here will not be needed in those many situations in which no great research is called for or no complex purposes are to be served. If, however, we analyse what is needed for major tasks, our minor ones will seem all the easier. We can adjust our degree of preparation to the demands of each case.



## CHAPTER II

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### PREPARING THE MIND

#### CONSIDERING AND SELECTING MATERIAL: CONCLUSIONS

The material which we have assembled will consist of facts, ideas and opinions. Not all of them will be of equal value or importance. Not all of them will be based on equally valid evidence. Some will be highly relevant to our needs, others bordering on the irrelevant. We must, therefore, review all this material critically and assess its utility for our purpose.



#### FACTS

We are not entitled to regard anything as a fact unless we are satisfied that we have evidence which would convince any reasonable person of its truth. This evidence may take various forms—

(1) *the fact may be part of our own experience*

We may know it to be true because we perceived it directly with our own senses.\* If the evidence is our personal knowledge, we must of course be sure that we only describe as a fact some event or object which we actually perceived. We must not offer as a fact something which we merely inferred.

For example, if a man runs into me on a bicycle and knocks me down, I am entitled to state as a fact that he did knock me down, or as a fact that I recognise the man now before me to be the same man. If at the time of the accident he spoke to me and

\* Even when we perceive something with our own senses, we strictly are entitled to say only that we believe it to be a fact. We are sometimes deceived by our own recollection, as comparison of the accounts given by several persons of the same incident will quickly prove.

I observed that his speech was slurred and that he was unsteady on his legs, I can state those two matters as facts; but I cannot state as a fact that he was drunk, as that is merely an inference I drew from his slurred speech and unsteady gait, and it may or may not be a fact. Before his being drunk can be accepted as a fact, real evidence (such as that of a doctor who tested him) will be required.

To take another example, we may find that in our material there is evidence of repeated statements that, say, there has been a shortage of writing paper in certain departments of a firm at certain times. We can regard this as a fact. But we are not entitled, on these statements alone, to record as a fact that the stationery store has been failing to perform its functions. That is an inference which may or may not be correct.

Two rather crude examples have been used in order to make this point. It arises, of course, in many more subtle ways. In any attempt we make to state the facts of a case we should always check carefully that we are not presenting in any instance an inference as a fact. If we find ourselves using such a phrase as "it is evident that", we can take it as a sure pointer that we are leaving the realm of fact for that of inference.

- (2) *the fact may not be within our own experience, but may be part of the experience of some person on whose statement or written record we can rely*

Very large numbers of facts fall into this category—e.g. that Queen Victoria began her reign in 1837, or that the distance between the earth and the sun is 93,000,000 miles.

When we accept something as a fact on the ground of reliance on the integrity of a statement or record by another person, the validity of our fact can be challenged on the ground that the statement or record on which we have relied is unworthy of that confidence. The validity of the fact depends, in effect, on our ability to justify the source. Here again the question is "Will any reasonable person accept this as a reliable source of information for such facts?". If we are confident that the answer will be "Yes", we are entitled to treat the matter as a fact.

There is, of course, much room for difference of opinion about the reliance to be placed on various sources of information used in our daily life. We should remember that, over a wide range of facts, it is *our judgement* of the integrity of our source of information that is the real point in issue. We must not accept as facts information from any source unless we are sure that that source will be recognised as fully reliable on such facts.

Obviously, the source on which we rely must be appropriate to the facts: we may accept, for example, information about the properties of matter from a chemist which we could not equally wisely accept from, say, a historian.

It is also clear that, when several sources record the same thing, we can have much more confidence in accepting it as a fact. Further, if many statements in a source of information are corroborated by other reliable sources, we usually are justified in accepting as facts also the matters which are not corroborated. The corroboration of so many points by other sources enables us to feel greater reliance on the truth of the source on all matters it mentions.

Conversely, where reliable sources contradict each other, or modify each other's accounts of facts, we must form our own judgement of the situation. Matters on which the sources are unanimous can be treated as facts; other matters we must assess for ourselves, and it is our judgement of the evidence which is the cardinal point. On the soundness of our judgement, others will decide whether we ourselves can be regarded as "a reliable source".

#### OPINIONS

Weight is attached to opinions on two grounds, (a) as facts and (b) as opinions. If (to take a fictitious example) it is stated that "In Lord Horder's opinion bruises can be relieved by a cold-water bandage", there are two distinct matters of importance—

- (a) the fact that Lord Horder holds a certain opinion and the exact terms of that opinion;
- (b) the practical effect of the opinion

Under head (a) the facts that the opinion is on a medical matter and that Lord Horder is a recognised authority on medical matters are of supreme importance. The terms of the opinion are also vital: for example, the opinion as expressed above would be wrong in point of fact if what Lord Horder really said or wrote was "In my opinion bruises can be relieved by a cold-water bandage if it is applied immediately after the damage is sustained".

Under head (b) we are not concerned with fact. What matters about an opinion, as an opinion, is the weight it carries in relation to other opinions on the same question and whether or not we will apply the advice given to our own circumstances. Here again we come into the realm of our own judgement. We have to weigh the various opinions, consider them in relation to the situation or problem facing us, and decide whether to apply them, with or without modification, or to disregard them.

When considering matters of opinion, we must always discharge both duties—

- (a) we must verify the opinion as a fact, and
- (b) we must assess its utility, as an opinion, for our purpose.

In assessing the utility of an opinion we shall find it useful to ask ourselves a number of questions.

If the matter is a technical one, i.e. one on which expert opinion is necessary, we must consider the standing of the expert giving the opinion. Our question must be, will any reasonable person accept this expert as a recognised authority on the subject? We must also make sure that the whole of the opinion he expresses is within the scope of the subject on which he is expert.

Next we must consider whether his opinion is of general application or applies only to a particular set of facts. If it is general, we are entitled to apply it in any circumstances to which it is relevant. If it is appropriate only to a particular set of facts, then we cannot depend on it unless the facts in our own case are in all material respects the same. When an opinion is general, we must also take into account any qualification which

the expert may have expressed in giving his opinion; oversight of this point may result in our seriously misleading ourselves and those for whom we write.

In matters which do not call for an expert, the value of the opinion rests largely on the reputation of the individual expressing it. Here, of course, there is much scope for difference of view, and we cannot be certain that others will attach the same weight as we do to an opinion expressed by a particular individual. The difficulty is often emotional. We may unconsciously over-assess the value of someone's opinion because we have a high regard for his character. We may under-assess it for the converse reason. We may be influenced in our judgement by the fact that the opinion coincides with our own.

These and similar points must be carefully weighed before we commit ourselves to accepting such an opinion. We shall find, too, that similar considerations affect the judgement of those for whom we are writing. Even when we have done our best to assess the opinion impartially, others may be unable to do so.

In all cases, expert and non-expert, there are two further questions we must ask—

(i) *is the author of the opinion unbiassed?*

Bias is a matter we can judge from the general nature of the author's attitude to questions with which he is dealing. This general attitude can be gauged sometimes from evidence in the opinion itself, and sometimes also from information we may have about the author quite apart from his opinion. It is not easy to assess bias: one of the points to be borne in mind is that, if we ourselves are biassed, we may impute it to someone who is actually impartial. If several opinions concur, we need worry less about bias, unless we know that all the authors suffer from the same prejudice in common.

(ii) *on what does he base his opinion?*

The basis of the opinion may be first-hand experience, second-hand study, or mere speculation. Obviously we must make some attempt to discover how the opinion is arrived at. This point raises less difficulty where the opinion is that of an expert. In

other cases it is of the greatest importance, and we should not attach weight to an opinion without adequate knowledge of its basis.

#### INFERENCES

We have seen already that we are not entitled to present inferences as if they were facts. Yet inferences have a most important role of their own to play. When we have assembled and considered all the facts and opinions needed for our document, the process by which we reach conclusions upon them is the drawing of inferences.

It is our duty to make certain that the inferences we draw are surely based. One of the elements to which we must pay special regard is our own general attitude to the subject in hand.

There is an old story of an advocate who was anxious to impress on a judge the danger of drawing from circumstantial evidence inferences unfavourable to his client. He wished to emphasise the point by explaining that he would not be entitled to infer from seeing the judge emerging from a public house that the judge had had a drink there. "If", he said, "I saw your Honour coming out of a public house——". "Coming into a public house" at once interposed the judge.

Apart from the jest, the judge's point was a good one—our inclination to draw one inference rather than another may be brought about by a personal point of view. At all times, therefore, we must keep watch for any tendency in our mind which inclines us to accept an inference too readily—the sort of prejudice which whispers "I'm sure that's it—I know the man so well".

How, then, can we be sure of drawing correct inferences? The rule is well known and simple—we can draw any inference from facts which is not inconsistent with any of those facts. Obviously the value of our deduction will depend on the number of facts known to us about a particular matter. If we know all the facts, an inference which is consistent with every fact will be unchallengeable.

If, however, we only know some of the facts, we must qualify

our inferences, in case they may be inconsistent with some fact which we do not know.

Consider again our example about the shortage of stationery. If we know—that there was a shortage of stationery; that stationery was ordered from the store by the departments in sufficient time; and that at all material times there was sufficient stationery in store to meet the demands—we are entitled to draw the inference that it is likely that the stationery store has failed in the performance of its duties. But we cannot draw the inference that the store has definitely failed in its duties, unless all reasonable explanations have been exhausted—e.g. we must also know that the orders did in fact reach the store; and that the store has not issued in response to the orders stationery which has, through no fault on the store's part, failed to reach its destination.

It is fairly easy to see how the rule about inferences applies in a case of this kind. It applies equally in less obvious circumstances, particularly those arising out of individual conduct, where a natural explanation may spring readily to mind but must not be accepted as a sound inference unless it is the only explanation which fits all the facts.

A common error is to draw the inference that one event caused another merely from the fact that the second event followed the first. A man may feel ill, take some medicine and later feel well. He is not entitled to draw the inference that the medicine caused the change unless he has other evidence to justify his doing so—e.g. that when on other occasions he has felt the same form of illness he has continued to feel ill if he did not take that particular medicine and that he has become well whenever he did take it.

Of course, we can rarely know all the relevant facts about any situation, and to confine ourselves to drawing only "cast iron" inferences would lead to absurdity. When, however, the inference we draw may not be the only possible explanation, though it may be consistent with all the facts we can ascertain, we must take care to qualify our inference, indicating its degree of probability, or in some cases its mere possibility.

## CONSIDERATION AND SELECTION

We have now in mind the principles on which we may identify and record facts, verify and judge opinions, and draw inferences that are soundly based.

In the light of these principles, we should consider our material. Needless to say, the way in which we have divided up various matters in this and the previous chapter is a mere convenience for discussion. The division bears no relation to the process of preparing our document. We need to apply all the principles at every stage. When we collect our material in the first place, we must have in mind the principles affecting facts, opinions and inferences; we must concentrate at least as much at the end of our task as at the beginning; and the other matters we are about to discuss should be borne in mind as much in the earlier stages of the work as in the later.

The whole process of preparation is one. It is an easy flow, in the course of which we apply all our procedures as we need them. It is misleading to think of each procedure as if it were conducted in a watertight compartment. They interlock and interact—a point which becomes obvious when we remember that any well-prepared document is the fruit of reflection, of pondering upon matters and returning to them in thought several times before conclusions are reached.

## IMAGINATION AND RELEVANCE

There are two qualities which we should allow to guide us specially—imagination and a sense of relevance.

Imagination is the quality that enables us to produce an original and comprehensive document, instead of one that is pedestrian and inadequate.

It comes into play first when we think about the purpose of the document, enabling us to see beyond the mere statement of the object to the fuller intention that usually lies behind it. One of the reasons why we should always ask for further enlightenment about the purpose of the document, whenever necessary, is to ensure that our imagination is used fruitfully.



It helps us again when we are seeking to put ourselves into the mind of the reader, to picture mentally how the document will affect him and how it will assist his needs.

It aids us, too, both in our search for material and in the use we make of it. It guides us to sources that we might otherwise not have tapped. It leads us to link up matters where the connection is real but not obvious and, indeed, to bring out the truth more effectively than if we had not penetrated beneath things as they appear on the surface.

Finally, of course, it enables us to present our material and conclusions in the most vivid and lively way. This in itself is a great aid to those who must use our document.

Unrestrained imagination could readily lead us astray. The natural check on this is our sense of relevance—a quality which is a tether always plucking at our heel when we begin to wander too far from the real point.

It is not only a negative quality: it does not consist merely in rejecting material which does not bear directly on the subject. It is a positive sense of what is needed, an alertness which perceives the gaps and searches for means to fill them, and which detects the essential matters whether or not they be obvious. Sometimes reports or other documents are produced in which some important matter with a practical bearing on the subject has been overlooked. Usually it is a matter of which the connection is not obvious until pointed out. Imagination will prevent this kind of oversight, but it is the sense of relevance which in the first place detects a gap and sets the imagination working upon it.

On the negative side, there is a single test of relevance—is it essential for the purpose of the document that this matter be put into the reader's mind? Unless the answer is definitely "Yes", the matter should be left out. Everything should be discarded which does not pass this test of relevance.

This sounds an easy rule to apply. It is not. The catch is that we can only apply the test in the light of our own knowledge. If we had known more, we might have seen the relevance of some matter which we discarded as irrelevant.

There is a danger that, after applying the rule a few times and finding that through lack of deep enough knowledge we have omitted something of importance, we tend to insert things about which we are doubtful, merely in order to be on the safe side. This practice may well erode our sense of relevance. There are few qualities more valuable than ability to produce a strictly relevant document. It is, therefore, better to apply the rule given above and learn from our mistakes, bearing in mind that defects of knowledge are the easiest of all to cure.

Closely allied to relevance is the use of logic in argument. Our picture of a situation will be a mixture of fact and inference. We assess the situation, and on the basis of our assessment construct an argument or arguments pointing to the conclusion which we think right. That will, of course, be the conclusion we invite our readers to draw.

In the construction of arguments there are pitfalls. A knowledge of the elements of logic will guard us against these. The subject is too large to develop here, but one familiar trap may be mentioned—the *non sequitur*. This is an argument which on the face of it appears convincing, but is false because the propositions are not truly related to each other. In some forms this type of argument is obviously false—e.g. "All pennies are copper coins: this coin is copper: therefore this must be a penny". Yet how often do we hear the same kind of argument used, after this fashion—"Shop A is always complaining about the canteen. Here is another complaint about the canteen. Therefore Shop A must be at the bottom of this"?

We can guard against this error by a similar rule to the one which we applied to the drawing of inferences—the conclusion must be the only one consistent with all the propositions which lead up to it.

#### REFLECTION

Applying to our material all that has been discussed so far, we shall find ourselves automatically carrying out the most important part of our task—reflecting on the material. Madame de Maintenon defined reflection as "thinking attentively of the same thing several

times over". It is this reconsideration, this constant and repeated return to the same subject which is the essence of reflection.

It bears fruit in other ways beside the obvious ones. The obvious fruits are that ideas will spring up in the course of our attentive thought: we shall have doubts about the completeness of the material; we shall realise that there are some investigations which should be pursued further; we shall find our ideas crystallising on many points; the beginnings of conclusions will start to form in our mind.

During the course of reflection we must be stern with ourselves. We should be taking into account, as we reflect, the tests to which our material may be put later, the criticisms we are likely to receive. As each idea presents itself, we must put ourselves into an adversary's shoes and consider the objections he would be likely to raise and how we can answer them. Hardest of all, we may find ourselves unable to answer some objections and obliged to re-think some ideas, modifying our views until they represent what we sincerely believe to be the truth and to be defensible as such.

This may well be the most strenuous part of our work. It is real thought. No serious document has much worth unless there is real thought behind it. It is our personal contribution to the situation, and will be appreciated accordingly.

The less obvious fruits of reflection are borne unconsciously. However diligently we may apply our brain to the matter in hand, it will not do all the work by conscious thought. Much valuable thought is done by the unconscious mind. No-one understands the process, but it is most important to recognise its existence. There is no cause to worry because we seem unable to solve problems by conscious thought alone. The unconscious mind, given reasonable time, will often do the work; without explanation, a solution, an idea for further progress, or a new attitude to some intractable difficulty will present itself ready-made to our brain.

One thing only is necessary. The unconscious mind does not seem to work without stimulus. The strenuous thought we apply to a problem, the effort of will we make and sustain, are the

means of causing the unconscious mind to do its work. These efforts are necessary, even when they bear little or no immediate fruit in our conscious thoughts. We cannot just fold our hands and tranquilly await the answer from the unconscious mind. The conscious mind is the source of the material, and must do its share in feeding the process of unconscious thought.

#### CONCLUSIONS

After all our efforts, we shall find emerging the conclusions to be embodied in the document. We can, if we have fulfilled our task sincerely and fairly, regard them with confidence. We may be sure, in view of our work, that we know as much as our impending critics. We are satisfied that we have the best evidence obtainable for our facts, and that we have made good use of the soundest opinions available to us. We have balanced conflicting evidence to the best of our judgement. We have tested our inferences. We have taken care, where it is necessary that our readers should judge for themselves, to set out impartially any conflict of fact or opinion.

Our conclusions are drawn soberly, without bias or neglect of difficulties. The whole work is as solid and responsible as we can make it. It remains but to test our conclusions, and we should ask ourselves the following questions—

- (1) have we in our conclusions covered the whole ground required?
- (2) are there conclusions on additional matters which should be presented because, although not asked for, they are necessary for forming a sound judgement on the subject?
- (3) can the conclusions be supported by
  - (a) provable facts;
  - (b) effective arguments?
- (4) are the conclusions consistent throughout?
- (5) where there is conflict of evidence or opinion, are the conclusions impartial?
- (6) have we been as constructive and positive as possible throughout?

## COMPOSING THE DOCUMENT

When proper care has been taken over preparation, the task of composing the document is greatly eased. With all the material thoroughly considered, the arguments marshalled and the conclusions drawn, the form of the document begins to emerge fairly clearly and almost without conscious planning. Moreover, our awareness of the purpose of the document will have all the time been at work, prompting us towards the most effective form.

It is from the angle of the reader, however, that we need to consider the presentation of our material. He may know little or nothing of all that we have been studying. The object of our work is to put him, as quickly and effortlessly as possible, in as complete possession of a situation as we are ourselves. We cannot assume that our reader knows anything of the matter unless we have evidence that some points are already within his knowledge. If we have no sure evidence, we will be wise to assume that he does not know.

Whatever the type of document, three principles apply—

- (a) we must ensure that the reader receives everything he needs to know for his purpose, and nothing he need not know;
- (b) we must present material in a logical order, easy to follow and flowing naturally from one part of the document to another;
- (c) the conclusions ought to appear as the natural—if possible, the inevitable—outcome of all that leads up to them.

### ARRANGEMENT

The first page of the document is crucial. It will either invite or repel. Our aim must be to make it inviting. The first page of

any substantial document should set out the following particulars—

- (1) the date,
- (2) the nature and subject of the document,
- (3) who wrote it,
- (4) to whom it is addressed,
- (5) what the document contains.

Item (5) should be a summary of the way the document is laid out, so that any part of it can be rapidly referred to.

It is a common modern practice to give the conclusions at the beginning and to let the evidence supporting them follow in the body of the document. If this be done, each conclusion should have (in the margin or at its end) a reference to the part of the document on which it is based. This aids any reader who may want to check the grounds for any conclusion with which he may at first sight disagree.

The document should be regarded as a mere tool or facility for the reader. A business document has no worth as literature: there should be no author's pride about it in the literary sense. The only pride the writer should take is in producing the simplest, clearest, handiest, most readily usable document he can design. Nothing matters so much as making it easy for the reader. His needs should be forestalled at every point, and success in achieving this should be the principal aim.

When the subject to be handled is complex, the document must, of course, be divided into parts. These should be related to the purpose to be served. For example, if the document were a review of overseas trading, it could be sectionalised according to commodities if it were for the use of departments organised on that basis: if the departments were organised by territories, then it would be more convenient for the review to follow that pattern. Again if the document were for the use of a board of directors who wished to contrast the overseas position with that of home trading, a division would be needed which would enable like to be compared with like.

There is usually a difference of importance between the various

matters dealt with. This should be recognised in the conclusions by separating main from subsidiary matters. It is often desirable, too, to separate matters which have financial consequences from any which have not.

The document should not be all on one dead level. There are usually highlights which deserve special emphasis. These should be given prominence in any of the usual ways (underlining, indentation, etc.). It is better to let them remain in their natural position in the document and not to attempt to group them all together. They will be all the more effective for those who read through the whole. The summary on the first page will ensure that none of them is missed by the heavily pressed reader who has time only to "gut" the document, or who wishes to look only at the parts of it which are outside his existing knowledge.

#### STYLE AND EXPRESSION

The style should be factual, crisp, vigorous and lively. Not a word should be wasted. Remembering the reader, make every sentence and paragraph easy for him to read. Banish monotony and sluggish writing.

A few rules for achieving this are well known, but insufficiently observed—

(a) *Prefer the active to the passive*

"Boys and girls go out to play" is better than—

"Recreation is taken by juveniles in open-air conditions".

(b) *Prefer the positive to the negative*

"It is difficult to make sure that empty cartons are returned" is better than—

"It is a matter of not inconsiderable difficulty to obviate the non-return of empty cartons".

(c) *Prefer the personal to the impersonal*

"I will write to you again on Monday" or

"I will see that you get a fuller letter on Monday" is better than—

"It is being arranged that you should be further communicated with on Monday".

(d) *Prefer the human to the mechanical*

"Poultry-keepers have banded together to protect their own interests" is better than—

"A voluntary association has been established among poultry-keepers for the purpose of protecting their interests".

Above all, the document must be clear and unambiguous. Where opinions or feelings are recorded, it should be made clear whose they are. Situations should be described completely. Let us take an example—

"Recent events connected with the withholding by native producers of a proportion of their crop have caused considerable discontent in the district. It is felt that collecting officers should not be expected to secure 100 per cent collection and that a reasonable provision for native retentions would be desirable."

This leaves us with many unsolved queries. What were the events? How much of the crop was held back? Who is discontented? Who feels that some should be left in producers' hands? How much ought to be left, if any?

The draftsman here suffered from both mental laziness and timidity. His meaning is obscure. He was reluctant to commit himself and indifferent to the needs of his reader. He could more helpfully have written—

"Recently native producers have been keeping back some 20 per cent of their known crop. Consequently the full amounts expected could not be distributed in the closely populated parts of the district. This has caused discontent among the inhabitants. Collecting officers consider that they should not be expected to collect 100 per cent, but that producers might be allowed to retain a reasonable amount, say 5 per cent, of a crop."



In choosing our manner of expression, simplicity and lucidity, coupled with observance of correct English usage, are the chief points which concern us. A few reminders are given in the Appendix.

#### METHOD OF PRESENTATION

The method of presenting material in a document cannot be the subject of generalisation. Every type of document needs different treatment. For this reason nothing will be said in this chapter on this subject. It is dealt with as required in Chapters V to VIII.

#### LAY-OUT

By this is meant the physical features of the document as they strike the eye. Lay-out can enhance or mar any document, whatever other care be given to its preparation and arrangement.

The vast majority of business documents are typewritten, and the quality of their lay-out depends on the mechanical condition of the typewriter and the skill and taste of the typist.

The former is a matter of buying first-rate machines, using the makers' services to keep them in proper mechanical order, and depending on the pride of the typist in her work to do her part in keeping the machine clean and in good trim.

The latter is a matter of training. There are established rules about margins, spacing of lines and words, placing of headings, proportion of typescript to page, and many other such technical details. Observance of these rules adds greatly to the pleasure which a document gives to the eye. That a document should be mechanically, as well as mentally, easy to read is of marked advantage. The simplest method of ensuring the result is to ascertain from an expert source what the rules are, to lay them down as a standard, and to require all typists in the organisation to observe them.

Where documents are put into print, the same principles apply. Printing is not usually undertaken unless the document is to be widely distributed. For this reason a high standard of lay-out

should always be observed. This can rarely be obtained by sending a text to a printer and leaving the lay-out to him. Expert advice on such matters as paper, type size, leading, treatment of covers and headings, etc., is easy to obtain and ensures the achievement of an impressive result.

The same care should, of course, be taken over the printing of headed notepaper. It is surprising how common are letter headings which have obviously been arrived at by letting the printer please his fancy. He usually does so by introducing as many styles of type as he thinks fit and paying little or no regard to the effective use of space or proportion. Yet the notepaper heading is normally the first thing that a recipient looks at. It seems inconsistent, therefore, with the principle of maintaining good relations to tolerate in headed notepaper anything less than a distinctive degree of dignity and clarity.



#### STATISTICS AND FIGURES

A team was sent to the United States by the Anglo-American Council on Productivity to study Management Accounting. This team has recorded that in Britain we lag behind American practice in the use of figures and graphs as a means of conveying information.\* We have discussed matters up to this point as if the only method of transmitting information was by words. This is far from true: for many purposes figures are much simpler and more effective.

We should not, therefore, hesitate to use figures whenever they are better than language for our purpose. In the term "figures" we may include all the kindred forms of accounts, tabular statistics

\* "The ready acceptance by American management of new ideas and methods has resulted in the collection of statistical data and the application of statistical techniques on a much greater scale than in British industry. From top management to foremen and chargehands, familiarity with numbers has removed all fear of figures, and there is a marked ability to absorb information in tabular or graphical form as quickly as, if not quicker than, from a written text." *Productivity Report on Management Accounting* (1950), p. 57, para. 11: 1.

and graphs. There are indeed only two limitations we need observe—

- (a) we must be satisfied that the particular readers will apprehend the information from the figures at least as easily as from written explanation;
- (b) we should not embarrass our text with such extensive figure-material that the document becomes hard to follow.

Within these broad limitations we shall often find figures a ready means of conveying easily and accurately information which might otherwise call for much effort and many words.

For the benefit of readers who are used to handling figures, the full range of figures ought always to be made available. Not everyone agrees about the inferences to be drawn from accounts or statistics. Although we may extract figures from tables, insert them in the text and comment upon them, we will be well advised to include in an appendix the full data.

In general, we may handle material presented in the form of figures in the same way as material in the form of words. We should treat the figures like any other fact—verifying their source, satisfying ourselves that they are based on adequate evidence, and being on our guard against confusion between fact and inference.

Needless to say, all our readers may not be equally adept at handling figures. For this reason it is unwise to present material in figures without any comment at all. Verbal guidance towards the significant figures will be welcome. We should seek to provide a blend of statistical data and comment which combines the advantages of both methods.

## MEANING

When a reader finds it hard to understand a document, he may say to himself "What does it mean?". Far more usually he says "What does *he* (or *she*) mean?". There has been no meeting of minds between writer and reader. If we analyse what is the "meaning" of a document, we find that the term implies more than merely interpreting words according to the dictionary.

Most documents are intended to convey facts or ideas. They seldom do so without conveying also (intentionally or unintentionally) certain by-products of the process of communication. In order to understand how errors in this process arise, we should consider first the writer's share in making his meaning clear.

There are four elements in what the writer sets down—sense, feeling, tone, intention.

*Sense* signifies the facts, ideas or state of affairs which the communication is intended to present to the reader.

*Feeling* signifies the feeling of the writer about the facts, ideas or state of affairs which he is communicating; the writer's language reflects his own emotional reactions to what he is describing.

*Tone* signifies the attitude of the writer to his reader. The language of the communication varies in accordance with the relationship in which the writer feels himself to be towards the reader.

*Intention* signifies the aim or object which the writer is seeking to promote in or through the reader, i.e. his purpose in making the communication. The language he uses is adjusted to this purpose.

Henceforward in this book the four words will normally be used as signifying what is set out above for each. Some examples may illustrate the elements more clearly.

Here, in the first place, is a statement which contains *sense*, but no feeling and no tone—

“In the later part of the year the leaves of the trees become brown, shrivel and fall to the ground.”

It is a bare statement of fact. It tells us nothing about the writer's feeling (if any) towards the subject. It says nothing about his attitude to the person to whom he is giving the information.

Now let us consider this example—

“How strange and awful is the synthesis of life and death in the gusty winds and falling leaves of an autumnal day!”

Here the reader learns that autumn is accompanied by gusty winds and falling leaves. He also learns what are the writer's emotions about these facts. *Feeling* is present, as well as *sense*.

Thirdly, let us look at this—

“Never prate to me about the beauties of autumn! It is the season of sorrow, reminding me always of my own declining days and the onset of death. As a dutiful son, you should spare me such depressing thoughts.”

From this we learn that autumn has beauties, the feeling of the writer about them and the writer's attitude to the person addressed. *Sense*, *feeling* and *tone* are all present.

In this third example *intention* is also conspicuous.

These examples deal with simple, homely matters, but in everyday work the same elements are present in written communications. Whether recognised or not, they influence results. The writer has a duty to be conscious of them and to provide for them in the document.

Each element should reach the reader just as the writer intended. Often some do not. In extreme cases none may reach him. The object should be to ensure that, if any of these elements does not reach the reader, it is only because the writer so intended.

Most writers are conscious of *sense* and *intention*. The usual

fault is to neglect feeling and tone. Yet when the document reaches the reader, it is often feeling and tone which affect him most. If these are not right, the document may be misunderstood, and relations between writer and reader will be harmed.

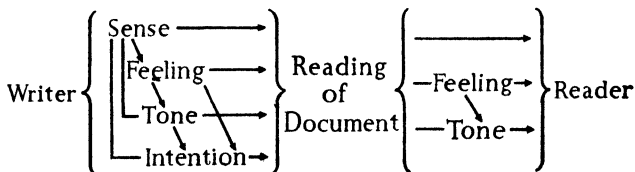
The writer can best safeguard his meaning by remembering all four elements, and by asking himself, before he dispatches the document—"Is it just what I want it to be in sense? feeling? tone? intention?"—all four points in turn. It is even more important that he should project himself into the mind of the reader, asking not only "Does it satisfy *me* on all four points?", but "Will it appear *exactly the same* to my reader?"

#### THE READER'S SHARE

Having analysed what happens up to the point at which the document leaves the writer's hand, let us turn to the reader's share in the process.

The elements of meaning may reach the reader direct, but they are more likely to be influenced by *his* feeling and *his* tone. He may have his own feelings about the facts in the communication. He may have his own ideas about his relationship with the writer. Either or both of these will affect his mind when he reads the document.

We can illustrate this by a diagram—



The left-hand part of the diagram shews what happens when the writer draws up the document. He may try to convey any of the following—

- (1) sense alone
- (2) sense + feeling

- (3) sense + tone
- (4) sense + intention
- (5) sense + feeling + tone
- (6) sense + feeling + intention
- (7) sense + tone + intention
- (8) sense + feeling + tone + intention.

The right-hand side of the diagram<sup>8</sup> shews what happens when the reader reads the document. The message, in any of its eight forms, may reach the reader—

- (1) direct
- (2) through the reader's feeling
- (3) through the reader's tone
- (4) through the reader's feeling and tone.

This gives us, assuming sense as a basic element in each case, thirty-two different routes and as many possibilities of misunderstanding or error!

In business and administration, sense is normally a basic element, as facts or ideas are almost always dealt with. For the sake of completeness, it is perhaps worth recording that some communications, of course, do not aim at conveying such matters, but may convey merely feeling or tone, or both, usually with easily perceived intention. Examples are letters of thanks and love-letters.

At least we know, from the complete analysis, where the risks lie. We can visualise the whole process between the writer's mind and the reader's. By remembering all these stages a writer can foresee the pitfalls and guard against them. At the same time he becomes a more discerning reader, able to interpret a document with fuller understanding of its meaning.

To sum up, the writer should never forget his reader's difficulties. Some of these are—

- (a) Failure to make out the sense of the words;
- (b) Reaction to what he thinks is the meaning, instead of to what the meaning really is;

- (c) Prejudice, favourable or unfavourable, towards the writer, his feelings or his attitude.

The main safeguards for diminishing these difficulties are:—

- (i) Trying to make the *whole* meaning clear;
- (ii) Using plain, simple language;
- (iii) Estimating, while writing, the way the reader is likely to react, and expressing the message accordingly.

Up to this point we have been discussing general principles, analysing the problems of communication as a process and determining the considerations to be borne in mind if the process is to be effective. We now turn to the application of these principles to particular kinds of documents, and in the ensuing chapters the reader will be directly addressed.



LETTERS

Letters, because they are intended for persons outside the organisation, form an important element in any organisation's public relations. Next to the employees themselves, they are the best ambassadors an organisation can have. They are a continuous and strong influence on the relation between the organisation and each person or body with whom it has dealings.

An organisation may well be judged, and usually is, by the type of letter it sends out. The reputation some organisations have for being "impersonal machines" is due chiefly to the letters they issue. Quite apart from any other points, therefore, you will wish to look at any letter you are responsible for dispatching and consider "Is that the best sort of letter for the organisation to issue?"

The writing of a letter may be considered under three main heads—(a) construction, (b) form and (c) tone.

(a) CONSTRUCTION OF A LETTER

No letter, even a routine reply, is too unimportant to justify your taking care over its construction. Even a simple letter which need contain only one paragraph is better if that paragraph be set out in a logical and straightforward manner. For example, if you have received a letter telling you about some service which the writer can render, giving details of it and suggesting that he should call to discuss the matter further with you, you could write—

Thank you for offering to come and see us about the proposals set out in your letter of 8th May and for giving details about the possible application to this firm, but we do not think a call by you would be justified at present, as the question

## WRITE WHAT YOU MEAN

„g this type of service has not yet been considered by the  
ard.

It would, however, give an impression of clearer thought if  
you were to write—

Thank you for your letter of 8th May giving particulars of  
your service and details of how it might in your view be applied  
to this firm. The Board, however, has not yet considered the  
question of using services of this type, and it would therefore  
be premature for you to call at present.

[In longer letters, dealing with more complex matters, construc-  
tion is of even greater importance. Brevity is a virtue specially  
worth cultivating in letters and, even where the matter is com-  
plex, the letter should be kept reasonably short. This sort of  
brevity can best be obtained by using plain, simple language and  
taking care over the construction of the letter.] many letters  
contain repetitions which could easily have been avoided if more  
thought had been given to logical construction.

[In writing a letter you wish your reader to follow your train of  
thought. You must, therefore, take him along with you, so that  
the steps which lead you to your conclusions can be followed by  
him.] Test what you have written for the very common error of  
leaving out one of the steps in your argument. It is easy, when  
you have reached your conclusion, to assume that some of the  
steps by which you got there will be apparent without indication  
to the reader. This is rarely true, and is a risk not worth taking.

[In letters, as in other documents, be quite sure that you have  
conveyed exactly the *sense*. Clear unequivocal expression of this  
is essential. There is no virtue in using polite conversational  
phrases which may be misunderstood by your reader.] Some letter  
writers think it appears brusque to state exactly what they mean,  
and that convention demands some wrapping up of the exact  
sense they wish to convey. This is a thoroughly bad practice,  
which causes much misunderstanding and subsequent needless  
correspondence. If, for example, you have been asked how much  
of some goods ordered from you can be delivered within the

month, do not write "a considerable proportion of your order will be delivered at an early date". Say rather "(60) per cent of the order will be delivered by (date)". [Not only will precision help the process of communication by letter, it will improve relationships, giving your correspondent satisfaction through knowing where he stands.]

[In any correspondence in which more than mere information about facts has to be given, you will require to consider specially the element of *feeling*.] Often you have to convey not only information but your own or your organisation's reaction to the situation described. [The feeling you express in your letter may have an important influence on your reader's attitude to the situation. You must, therefore, give careful thought to just what feeling you wish to convey, and how you expect or intend your reader to react to the situation plus your feeling about it.]

Suppose, for example, you receive a letter from a customer who has had on order for a long time a car which you cannot yet deliver, consider the effect on him of the following alternatives—

We acknowledge your letter of 10th July asking when we shall be able to deliver the car you ordered in August 1947.

then either—

We regret that, owing to shortage of supplies over which we have no control, we are still unable to deliver this car.

or—

We are much concerned at the inconvenience which we fear you are suffering through delay in delivery. Deliveries have been held up owing to shortage of raw material supplies—a matter beyond our control—and we have had regretfully to disappoint a number of customers. You may be sure, however, that your need for this car is fully in mind, and that we shall deliver it to you as soon as we can fulfil our orders.

The second alternative, with its indication of the supplier's feelings about the situation (including his customer's share in it) and its indication that the customer is not the only one to suffer,

is likely to fulfil its aim better than the bare unsympathetic statement of the facts.

〔You are, of course, at liberty to relax the rule about brevity to the extent necessary in such cases〕

### ✓(b) FORM OF A LETTER

〔Letters are of two kinds, formal and informal. The distinction of style between the two used to be even more marked than it is to-day. The straightforward and homely language common in the informal letter is invading formal correspondence, with good results〕 “Thank you for your letter of 30th January” is the modern improvement on “I beg to acknowledge with thanks your esteemed favour of the 30th ult”.

〔Although the line of demarcation between the two styles is less rigid than it used to be, it still exists. In management and administration a mastery of both styles is needed. In the higher ranges of administration important correspondence takes place in a less formal style, and the ability to handle that style is just as valuable as ability to write a formal business letter. Delegation of letter writing often takes place in the upper levels of an organisation and the capacity to write for someone else the sort of letter that he himself would write, and to vary it as he would according to the occasion and the recipient, is a useful asset〕

#### *Informal Letters*

The style of an informal letter is determined wholly by the relationship between the writer and reader. It may range from “Dear John . . . Yours ever” through “Dear Jones . . . Yours very sincerely” to “Dear Mr. Jones . . . Yours sincerely”. The formula which any individual wishes to use must be known, and the style of the letter between the chosen start and finish must be in harmony with that formula.

Apart from this very broad principle of internal harmony in the letter as a whole, it is hard to give rules for informal letters. They should reflect the character and preferences of the originator, and therefore there are really no rules, as every man is an

individual. It is important, however, that styles of phrasing suitable for formal letter writing are not used in informal letters. They upset the atmosphere of the letter, and normally the purpose of writing an informal letter is to secure that the communication is read in an atmosphere associated more with the writer's individual personality than with his official capacity.

When you are yourself writing an informal letter, no further guidance is necessary—you will use your own natural style (paying regard, of course, to the rules given in this book) and it will serve its purpose well.

When you are asked to write an informal letter for someone else, in addition to applying the same rules, you must know something about the writing style of the person in question. You should pay sufficient regard to that style to secure that any draft you produce is in harmony with it. No more is normally required than to avoid using phrases which the person signing would obviously not himself use because they are "out of character". Short of that, your draft is not likely to be far astray if it follows any good informal style with which you are familiar.

It is important that, when informal letters are used for business purposes, they are just as precise and clear in the message they convey as a formal letter should be. Informality is a matter of *style*, not content. Loose, careless phraseology, bad construction or inattention to feeling and tone are as fatal in an informal as in a formal communication.

### *Formal Letters*

The almost universal modern start and finish to a business letter are "Dear Sir (or Dear Madam) . . . Yours faithfully". Rarely, where a body of persons is being addressed, the style "Gentlemen . . . I am, (or We are,) Gentlemen, Yours faithfully" is still used.

In the civil service, letters written formally to members of the public conveying a decision begin and end "Sir . . . I am, Sir, Your obedient servant"—this is said to remind civil servants that they are not the masters of the public.

If you are initiating a correspondence, start dealing at once

with the matter about which you are writing. There is no need to waste an opening sentence or paragraph on breaking the ice. Your correspondent wants to know what you are writing to him about, and has no desire to spend time on a meaningless sentence or paragraph before reaching the real subject of the letter. If the subject interests or concerns your correspondent, he will realise it at once, and a straightforward opening will not seem to him abrupt.

Often, of course, you are answering a letter received, and in that case the opening sentence of your letter may seem tiresome, as many *clichés* are associated with it. To start every time "Thank you for your letter of . . ." becomes monotonous; to make no reference to the letter under reply may be thought discourteous, or may sometimes leave doubt in the reader's mind whether his letter has in fact been received; repetition of what the letter under reply says may seem ridiculous (the reader must know what he wrote to you)—such snags as these make even practised writers hesitate if they wish to avoid a hackneyed opening.

In fact, there is no need to worry too much about this. All readers expect a formalised start, and to waste time trying to be out of the ordinary is not worth while. So long as you do not start all your letters to the same persons consistently in the same way, it will not matter much if you ring the changes on only a few themes such as—

"Thank you for your letter of . . ."

"Your letter of . . . has been (*say how it has been dealt with*)"

"The information kindly supplied in your letter of . . . has been (is) . . ."

"We are glad to inform you that as a result of your letter of . . . (*or that the question raised in your letter of . . . has been dealt with by*) (*say what has been done*)"

"I acknowledge your letter of . . . which has . . ."

"You kindly enclosed with your letter of . . . particulars of . . . for which we thank you"

—and so on.

Enough has been said already about arrangement of material

and construction of a letter to make it unnecessary to say more here about the body of a formal business letter. Numbering of paragraphs and use of cross headings are not desirable, save in circulars or in long letters dealing with more than one subject or several aspects of a subject, to which future reference by paragraph may be necessary.

One point, however, deserves special mention—remember that your correspondent has a filing system. If you must write him on more than one subject, deal with each in a separate letter. If you do not, your correspondent will usually have to waste his time having copies made of the whole or parts of your letter.

Although it is the writers of manuscript letters who are most prone to overlook this point, it is surprising how often it is also neglected by the writers of ordinary business or official letters. The manuscript writer can observe the requirement with no more trouble than writing "Dear Sir" and "Yours faithfully" more than once. For the dictated letter the trouble is even less. Yet the time saved and convenience afforded at the receiving end are out of all proportion to the trouble taken by the writer to ensure this small courtesy.

For typed letters an alternative (specially useful for interconnected subjects) is to enclose a carbon copy of the letter for each additional subject dealt with, so that the correspondent can place each on a distinct file, if he so desires.

### *Conclusion*

When you reach the end of the letter—stop. There is no need to put in any "winding-up formula" or conventional phrase. Always avoid those ungrammatical phrases (suspended participles) such as "Trusting that the foregoing will receive the kind consideration of your goodselves" and the like. If your letter is well composed, why spoil its impact by some piece of meaningless verbiage between what you have said and your signature? When the body of the letter has been concluded, all that remains is to add the words "Yours faithfully" and the appropriate signature and description.

The letter should, of course, be signed—a point too obvious

to mention, but for the fact that practice as to the method of signature varies.

In the civil service there are rules which define the right of officers of various grades to sign letters. The principle is that the officer himself signs his own name. His personal responsibility for the letter is thus fixed, although responsibility for what it contains will be borne by the department. The rank of the signing officer is not normally disclosed.

In the local government service the widespread practice is that letters are signed by or in the name of the chief officer of the department. Some authorities permit the use by subordinates of rubber stamps to impress a facsimile of the chief officer's signature. The latter practice gives a remote and impersonal touch to the correspondence.

Business usage normally calls for signature of a letter by the person writing it, though he may often indicate higher authority for the letter by adding "for Sales Director" or whatever may be the appropriate departmental head, instead of merely his own official description.

The important thing is that, unless the letter is a mere circular or routine acknowledgement-card, it should bear the actual signature of the writer. No recipient likes getting less than that. Sometimes, alas, letters are sent which end in some such fashion as this—

"Dictated but not read by Mr. Bounder,  
and signed in his absence,  
U. R. Mudd,  
Secretary".

The implications of such a formula seem to be—

- (1) I am a most impressively busy person and can only wait to sign my really important letters, of which this is not one;
- (2) You should take it as a compliment that I dictated this letter, instead of handing it to one of my subordinates as I should have been justified in doing;



- (3) My secretary is so unreliable that I dare not trust her to type my dictation correctly on a signed sheet of blank paper.

When the letter has been dispatched on a Friday, inferences are drawn even less flattering to the writer.

The method of signing a letter is, needless to say, an integral part of its tone, a matter which we are about to consider fully. There is no point in expending care and thought on the tone of a letter if the effect is to be neutralised by a piece of bad manners at the end.

#### (c) TONE OF A LETTER

The tone of a letter conveys to the reader the writer's conception of the relations between them. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance. The tone you use will indicate not only what you think the relations are but what you intend them to be in future.

If you give no thought to tone, you may unintentionally create a relationship very different from what you desire. Your letter may provoke a reply quite unexpected in nature, and even puzzling to you, if the tone you use is at variance with the relation you wish to establish or maintain with your reader. Worse still, the sense and feeling which you have been at such pains to convey in your letter may never reach the reader's mind in their true form if he is emotionally upset by the tone.

Analysis of tone is an extremely difficult matter. There are no stock tests or rules-of-thumb. You can apply the test "How would I react to the way this letter is expressed if I received it from a man who stood to me in the same relation as I do to my reader?". If you are in doubt, get a colleague to give his reaction to the letter, explaining to him that you want him to judge it from the point of view of tone.

Emotion enters constantly into human affairs. You need to be careful about arousing it, because it nearly always affects the intellectual reaction of the reader. Only very well-balanced, or rather cold, persons can discount emotion completely and

prevent themselves from being influenced by it: and you are not justified in assuming that every reader is such a person.

It is perhaps easiest to illustrate the problem of tone by considering an example. Let us suppose that A is in a position to give B general guidance in certain matters, and that he has accordingly made a request that, among other things, certain appointments on B's staff shall not be made without consultation with A. Let us further assume that A learns, indirectly, that B has made such an appointment without that consultation. Suppose further that A wishes to convey to B that he is aware of this breach and feels that it calls for an explanation.

A considers what he wishes to convey, and decides that, in addition to the sense of his message, he should indicate his feelings about the occurrence. What tone should he adopt?

If he is unfriendly to B and wishes to remain so, he may write this—

(1) Dear Mr. Jones,

I understand that, despite my clear instruction of 19th June last that I was to be consulted before anyone of the grade of Departmental Sub-manager was appointed, Mr. Smith has, without my knowledge, been recently appointed to such a post in your Department.

If you have any explanation to offer, I shall be glad to receive it at once.

Yours truly,

This may be just and effective, but Jones's emotions are not likely to be cordial.

If A is friendly and desires to remain so, he might write—

(2) Dear Jones,

I hear that Mr. Smith has been appointed a Sub-manager in your Department. You will remember that on 19th June last I asked to be consulted before appointments of this kind were confirmed. I should like to know more about this case, and perhaps you would kindly write me about it, or better still come to see me.

Yours sincerely,

or—

(3) Dear Jones,

Can you confirm whether I am rightly informed that Mr. Smith has recently been appointed a Sub-manager in your Department? I don't remember your telling me about this appointment, as doubtless you would have done under the arrangements for consultation established last June.

Yours sincerely,

Examples (2) and (3) convey just as effectively as (1) the sense and the writer's displeasure at the situation. But, by the underlying suggestion of doubt or oversight and the way the matter is put, they avoid giving Jones the impression that he has been prejudged as a wilful delinquent. •

If the relation between the parties were more on an equality (e.g. that between the managing director of a company and the managing director of one of its subsidiaries) the tone might be modified even further—

(4) Dear Jones,

I am told that Mr. Smith has recently been appointed Sub-manager of the . . . works. As you know from our correspondence last June, I am most interested in appointments of this kind. I would, of course, have been glad to know about Mr. Smith's appointment before it was made, and should be pleased to have any particulars you can give me about it now.

Yours sincerely,

This is only one simple example of gradations of tone, but it is sufficient to bring out the point that it is the relationship, present and future, between writer and reader which determines the tone.\* As letters are a prime means of establishing and main-

\* In (2), (3) and (4) the prefix "Mr." is omitted, as is usual when individuals are in close association, especially in the public service. Many business men, however, prefer to insert "Mr.", even when writing to close associates, as an indication that the letter is to be treated as official and not personal.

taining relations, this question of tone enters into all of them. A letter should never be dispatched without being checked for tone. Where relations are delicate, exceptional attention should be paid to it, because the more delicate the situation the more readily will quite small errors in tone adversely affect relations.

#### CIRCULARS

The rules already given for the writing of letters apply equally to circulars, but the following additional matters need attention.

Circulars may be sent to persons with whom the organisation has as yet no formal relation. The kind sent out to gain new customers is a conspicuous example. For this type of document an unwilling reception must be assumed. The presentation of contents must be such that it attracts a reluctant or even hostile reader. This art belongs more to the technique of advertising than to that of normal writing, and it will not therefore be further dealt with here.

Administrative circulars, conveying instructions on the basis of an existing formal relationship, may be issued e.g. by a company to its provincial offices or by a government department to industrial concerns or to local authorities. The most important rule for this type of circular is to *use an idiom familiar to the recipient*. Much of the criticism of government circulars arises from their being written in civil service idiom instead of in the idiom of those who will receive them. Acceptance of guidance in a circular is much readier if the receiver can see at once that it is written in his own "language". Use of the reader's own idiom also makes it more likely that the *sense* will be correctly understood.

Second only in importance is the need to watch the *tone* of the circular, and especially to avoid the kind of patronage which results from stating the obvious. Sir Ernest Gowers once quoted a vivid example from a circular on war gas—

"It may be stated with some confidence that, though it is possible for a blister gas bomb to fall in a crater previously made by an H.E. bomb, the probability of such an occurrence is small."

and commented—

“There is fine confusion of thought here. One might say, if one wanted to enunciate the obvious, that it can be stated with some confidence that this will not happen, or with complete confidence that it is improbable. But to feel only some confidence about its improbability is carrying intellectual timidity almost to imbecility.”

The third matter of importance is to make the *intention* clear. This is indispensable in circulars which will form the foundation of administrative action. The rules given in Chapter VIII should be applied, as in this respect circulars are akin to orders and regulations.

By their very nature, circulars set pitfalls for the draftsman. They do not establish direct contact in the same way as an individual letter. A circular carries authority without personality. This weakens the draftsman's sense of his own responsibility; he is tempted to pontify, to lay down the law in a way he would not venture to do on his own. He may over-assess the need for comprehensiveness, and underrate the capacity of his readers.

One result of this tendency is the inclusion of too much detail in circulars. This saps the initiative and discretion of the recipient, and insults his intelligence. It also creates local difficulties, as the draftsman cannot be omniscient and prescribe details to fit every contingency. In consequence, efforts may be made to clear up problems or obscurities by telephone, which is extremely wasteful of time and money.

On the other hand, the draftsman may not always hear of his errors. Folly in a letter is usually rebuked in a reply, but fatuity in a circular rarely evokes the avalanche of disapproval it deserves. The recipient is more likely to file it with a muttered imprecation, and to try to forget it.

Circulars often ask for the periodic supply of statistics or other information. These periodic returns are irksome to prepare, and you should not ask for them without having ascertained exactly how much labour will be involved. Needless to say, they should never be demanded unless the information is

essential for your needs, and the purpose to which you will put it justifies the time, cost and effort of compilation.

Few such returns need be made permanently. It is a good practice, therefore, in all but these few cases, to specify a date after which the return should be discontinued. When this is done, many tiresome returns are found to die a happy and unnoticed death as soon as their purpose has been served.

Finally, and perhaps most important, you should always consider carefully whether the circular need be sent at all. The frequent issue of circulars brings the whole series into contempt. Each circular should be issued reluctantly, as a last resort. Before despatching it the draftsman should ask himself these questions—

- (1) Is the circular as short as I can make it?
- (2) Is the language simple, clear and familiar to those who will read it?
- (3) Have I been positive and helpful throughout?
- (4) Have I cut out of the circular every inessential matter, and especially all detailed points within the competence of those I am instructing?
- (5) *Need I send out even what is left?*

RESPONSES

In the last chapter we dealt chiefly with situations in which the initiative rests with the writer. We have thought of him as the originator of the first communication. We now turn to the act of response—of handling a situation which has been already created by a letter or other document which you receive from another person.

The commonest situation calling for response is, obviously, the need to answer a letter. Where the letter is clear and the answer easy to give, there may be no more to do than to ensure by careful reading that you have fully grasped the sense and intention of the letter to be answered and then to write a plain reply. There is a wide range of simple business correspondence in which problems of feeling and tone do not acutely arise. Nevertheless, you should always keep those two elements in mind, even when writing a routine answer.

The letter, however, may not fall into an easy category. It may pose problems of feeling and tone: its intention may not be clear: there may be points on which the sense is inadequately conveyed.

The first task is to read the letter carefully, bearing in mind all the matters dealt with in Chapter V (it will be obvious that that chapter relates to all letters, including those written as replies). The writer of the letter may not have considered any of those matters. Faults or displeasing features in his letter may be due to ignorance rather than design. Your study of the letter should be sympathetic and directed to ascertaining, and understanding as completely as possible, the full meaning of the writer under all four of our familiar heads.

Having done this, you have at least done all you can to be fair to the writer.

Yet there is one more thing you should do. Bearing in mind "the reader's share" set out in Chapter IV, consider what your

own reactions of feeling and of tone to the letter may have been and allow for them before drafting your reply.

After taking all the care you can, you will often find points on which the meaning of the letter is not clear. Always state exactly in your reply the interpretation you have placed on the letter. The best means of preventing misunderstanding is to nip it in the bud. This is most effectively done by both—

- (a) making sure that there is absolute clarity of meaning in your own letter;
- (b) exposing all doubts you have about your correspondent's meaning.

You may then hope that your own letter will form the starting-point of an unambiguous correspondence.

In other respects, all that is necessary is to follow the rules already given for writing letters. If, however, you have to handle a request or complaint, the suggestions in the remainder of this chapter should prove helpful.

#### REQUESTS

Common examples are—

- (i) requests for the reader's discretion to be exercised in a particular way (e.g. promotion for the writer, increased pay, or other forms of personal favour by the reader);
- (ii) requests for the reader to cause the powers of the organisation to be exercised in a particular way (e.g. grant of a licence, issue of a facility);
- (iii) invitations (other than strictly formal ones issued in the conventional third person).

Where there is no obstacle to acquiescing in the request, there is no problem. It is more difficult, however, if the response you have to make is the one which your correspondent hopes not to get. Conveyance of this type of response calls for delicate handling of sense, intention, feeling and tone.

*Sense* and *intention* are important because the reader will be



emotionally expectant. As soon as he understands the general nature of the reply, disappointment or pleasure will step in and blur the sense of what he is reading, so that he may mistake the intention. A second reading of a response often shews that the intention of the reply is different from what the reader took it to be when he first read it through. You cannot safely assume that the second, less emotional, reading will take place, and you must, therefore, take special care to safeguard your intention by making the sense clear, in case the reply is read only once and in a frame of mind influenced by emotional reaction.

*Feeling* is important because, if your response is a refusal, your reader is bound to think you unsympathetic. He will, therefore, be over-sensitive to anything in your reply which will foster that impression. This reaction must be foreseen and allowed for, so that, unless lack of sympathy is to be deliberately conveyed (which may sometimes be necessary), he does not receive an unsympathetic impression.

*Tone* is important because your correspondent may assume (often wrongly) that the relation between him and you is one of the factors which influence your reply. It may be a formal relation (e.g. senior and junior in the same organisation) or a personal relation arising from temperament or previous contacts. In any event, this factor will colour his attitude to what you write. If your personal relations are specially cordial and a refusal has to be sent, the disappointment will be greater because your correspondent expected the relationship to influence you towards acquiescence. If the relation is senior to junior, the reader may fear that the cause of refusal is some misinterpretation of relationship on his part which has given offence. These rather delicate reactions must be taken into account when you consider the tone of your reply.

As with other documents, your response should be carefully checked for sense, feeling, tone and intention before despatch.

### *Basic approach*

The essence of the art of response is to write while imagining yourself to be the writer of the letter under reply—putting

yourself as wholly as possible in his thoughts. It is important to remember the things he will *not* be able to think of or have in mind, as well as those which he expresses.

A good procedure is—

- (i) Read several times the letter to be answered, in order to be sure that you have got “under the skin” of the writer;
- (ii) Try to visualise the writer’s whole thoughts on the matter, taking account of gaps in his thoughts or knowledge;
- (iii) Decide precisely what response you wish to make and for what reasons;
- (iv) Set out candidly the reasons, balancing your expression of them with proper restraint of feeling (N.B. candour as to reasons is of special importance in preventing misunderstanding and obviating further needless correspondence);
- (v) If your formal relation is that of senior (you) to junior (him) equalise the relationship as much as possible in your reply, and use the friendliest proper form of opening and closing the letter. (This will reassure your reader against imagining wrongly that relationship has influenced the nature of your decision.)

You should picture in your mind a cloud of emotion obstructing the passage of your message to your reader. The advice given above should help you to dispel that cloud. You should be able, by analysing the situation from your reader’s point of view, to detect the sources of his emotion and couch the opening part and the general style of your reply in such a way that his emotion is, so far as possible, neutralised.

Once the cloud of emotion is dispelled, your task is to deal with reason untainted by emotion. In order that your response shall satisfy your reader, he must feel the force of reason behind the decision you convey. Here the key to the situation is the matters known to you and unknown to him which convince you that your decision is the right one. Bring these out strongly in your reply. Nothing is so convincing to the originator of a request as a reason which he would have recognised as sound had

he been aware of it. Your task should be, therefore, to complete the gaps in your reader's thought so that, seeing the situation afresh with fuller knowledge, he will accept as inevitable your conclusion.

Although you should, in fairness to your correspondent, take into account the considerations suggested above, there is no reason for your response to lack clarity or directness. Indeed, whenever occasion requires, your answer should be firm, and the element of firmness should not be disguised. Relations are not improved by fencing or by oversensitiveness about making your own attitude clear. Your object should be to leave your correspondent in no doubt about where you stand, yet with a sure feeling that you have fairly appraised and understood his own position.

#### *Exceptional cases*

These rules apply to the normal case, but there are two exceptional types of situation where different treatment is required.

The first is where you have to deal with a writer who, on account of prejudice or some fault of mind or character, is incapable of accepting a reasonable reply. You are not likely to recognise such cases until further correspondence has ensued, unless you have had previous experience of the individual. It is worth while always sending a reasonable reply in the first instance, as this gives a clear statement of your position which would be convincing to any third party who might become embroiled in the matter. If the reasonable reply be not accepted, and you have good cause to suppose that this is not due to ordinary misunderstanding, you may feel free to dispose of your correspondent in whatever terms seem best designed for the purpose.

The second type of situation is that which is best met by deliberately not replying to the communication. Cases calling for this treatment are not frequent, but they are important when they do occur, and you should, therefore, always be ready to consider the possibility. The two most obvious cases are—

- (1) letters which clearly have discharged their main object for the writer by giving vent to his emotions, irrespective of

what reply he may get. Abusive letters as such, not calling for any action on the recipient's part, are clear cases of this type.

- (2) letters from someone who evidently wants to extract from you a reply which he can use to your disadvantage. A common variety of this letter is the announcement by the writer of intention to take a course of action which he thinks will embarrass you, in the hope that you will be drawn into committing yourself to some course of action which he can misrepresent to others.

In both these cases deliberate non-reply to the letter may not only safeguard your position but, more often than not, will frustrate the writer, so that no more is heard of the matter.

#### COMPLAINTS FROM OUTSIDE THE ORGANISATION

In dealing with any complaint of this kind the reply should be

- (a) prompt
- (b) candid

and it should display

- (c) readiness to apologise, but
- (d) a convincing factual defence of the situation (whenever practicable).

In short, the first task must always be to decrease the emotional tension by accepting the writer's right to complain and by conveying a conciliatory attitude to his complaint. Then should follow the reasoned defence—the appeal to the complainant's reason which will come into full operation when his emotions have been cooled by conciliation.

The art of successfully handling complaints is to give reasons, not excuses. Reasons convince, excuses irritate. Candour is essential in giving reasons, for lack of candour will often turn what might be a good reason into a poor excuse.

It follows, of course, that the response must be constructed

on the pattern suggested above—i.e. the part designed to decrease the emotional tension must always precede the part in which the appeal to reason is made.

#### COMPLAINTS FROM WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

This heading is intended to be wide enough to cover all communications of a recriminatory kind; whether they be in the form of reproof from a high level or be complaints, either by an individual or an association, from a lower level. Many, of course, arise between one department and another.

The special importance of this group of responses is that their handling directly and powerfully affects the relationships upon which successful administration depends. Even the best-run organisation must give rise occasionally to complaints, expressed internally, and if these are handled aright they stimulate good working and decrease friction; badly handled, they are a leading cause of administrative failure.

Fortunately, the rules for dealing with them are not difficult; they are—

- (a) the rules laid down in Chapter VII for the drafting of explanatory reports;
- (b) the rules given in this chapter for handling complaints coming from outside an organisation.

To these must, however, be added a further rule—deal with the matter as often as possible by direct contact and oral discussion rather than in writing. If the matter has to be dealt with in writing, an offer of oral consultation should always be included in the reply, and sincere efforts should be made to follow it up.

Complaints within an organisation arise among individuals or groups who are under a common discipline. The reason for the rules here given is a common-sense one: in such a situation the needs of the whole organisation override other considerations and call for a particularly co-operative attitude on the part of all parties to a complaint.

## GENERAL SUMMARY

Only a few examples of situations demanding written response have been examined, but the following summary of rules may be taken as having general application in the more difficult cases—

- (1) First analyse the emotion of the writer of the communication under reply, and decide on what is necessary to neutralise that emotion.
- (2) Next analyse the thoughts of the writer, and concentrate on dealing in your reply with those matters which are important to the situation but which he does not know or has not thought of.
- (3) Consider specially your relation to the writer, and ensure that the tone of your reply discounts any undesired reaction that might distort his reception of your response.
- (4) Take special care that your *intention* is clear, and that part of it is obviously a sincere desire to satisfy the person to whom you send the reply.

## REPORTS, MEMORANDA AND MINUTES

For these three kinds of document there is one common principle—the purpose of the document determines the manner of writing. In short, the guiding influence here is *intention*.

*Reports and Memoranda* may be—

- (1) *Informative*—e.g. report on the working of a department during the past month;
- (2) *Persuasive*—e.g. report to a board of directors recommending a proposal for further development of a department or the establishment of a new department;
- (3) *Explanatory*—e.g. report in response to a request by a board of directors for a report on the losses made by a department during the past month;
- (4) *For Record*—e.g. memorandum of an interview between an executive of a company and a representative of an outside concern.

*Minutes* are formal records of the proceedings of a meeting, and their main purposes are—

- (1) to record briefly and accurately the decisions taken;
- (2) to form the basis of action to give effect to those decisions.

In this chapter the term “minutes” will be used in the formal sense defined above. In the civil service the term “minute” is used for any communication on an official matter by one civil servant to another. There are conventions about civil service minutes which need not detain us; subject to them, civil service minutes are governed by the same general principles as apply to memoranda and letters.

## REPORTS AND MEMORANDA

The following general rules should be observed in writing most types of reports and memoranda.

1. The first thing a busy reader wants to know is the scope and lay-out of the report. He can then go straight to the parts he wants to study if he has not time to read the whole. A cover-sheet is therefore useful, indicating—the date of the report; its nature and subject; whom it is by; to whom it is addressed; and the manner in which it is set out.

Quite apart from its usefulness to the reader, the statement of the manner in which the report is set out is a good test of the soundness and integrity of your report, and the best means of checking inconsistencies in its composition.

2. Do not start writing the report until you have finished the processes described in Chapters I and II. If you spend enough care on these, the report will “write itself”, and your flow of composition will not be interrupted by finding suddenly that you are dealing with a point for which your preparation has been inadequate. Many reports must be written under great pressure of time: when this is so, try not to let the pressure deprive you of adequate time for Preparing the Mind.

3. Write all or as much as possible of the report at one time. This will assist continuity of thought and style. If time allows, return to the draft with a fresh critical mind after a day or two.

4. If you have a lot of material which must be put in the report but is secondary to the main thread of argument, use the device of setting it out in appendices. By this means you comply with the requirement of keeping your report brief and crisp, yet nothing essential for full study of the problem need be left out. This is especially desirable if much of this material takes the form of figures or tabulated information.

5. Paragraphs should always be numbered individually. Cross headings should be used and, if necessary, numbered *separately* from the paragraphs.

6. Never produce a report in essay form. Brevity and accuracy, without frill or ornament, are the key to good report writing.



Having considered these rules for writing a report, you must study the approach you are going to make to the task. You will decide your method of approach according to the purpose of the report—this must always be the determining factor.

(1) *Informative Reports*

An informative report should confine itself to statements of fact together with such further information as is necessary to understand the significance of the facts. Needless to say, speculation and imaginative description are quite inappropriate to such a report. If the report is advisory—i.e. you have been asked to assess a situation and give an opinion on it, either as an expert or otherwise—you will naturally give your opinion at the end, confining yourself in the earlier part of the report to an account of the facts, and probably of your method of investigation. Apart from advice of this nature, the writer's opinion has normally no place in an informative report.

On the other hand, where the existence and nature of opinions are facts which the reader needs to know, you should record them as facts.

In an informative report you are not trying to persuade the reader or to justify the writer; therefore you should concentrate your whole effort on conveying the sense, leaving out of account feeling and tone.

Arrangement of the report will depend on the kind of information you have to convey.

If you are giving an account of activities, e.g. a visit you or others have paid, the narrative form is best. Describe the visit in the order in which events took place (presumably you so arranged your itinerary that this is also the natural order for reporting on it).

If you are giving an account of a situation or state of affairs, deal first with general or background matters, including any previous history which is necessary for your readers. Then turn to the features of the situation you wish to describe, setting out first the matters of chief importance which your readers are eager to know, and following them with the less important matters.

These are broad rules for guidance; they should not be blindly applied. Any method of presentation is good which you know will make it easy for your readers to absorb the information. You are writing for their use, not your own fancy: this is a fundamental principle.

You may feel the temptation to display your narrative or descriptive powers. Resist this temptation firmly. Omit all flowery language, keep to simple, straightforward words and sentences, and use paragraphs and cross-headings in such a way as to make it easy for the reader to gain the essence of your report by a quick glance over it if he has not time to read in detail. Readers of reports in the course of business or administration are nearly always overloaded with material to absorb and cannot afford time to wade through long or ill-composed documents. They are looking for information, not entertainment, and anything you do to make it easy for a keen mind and practised eye to pick out the essential information with the least effort will enhance the value of your report—and your own reputation!

This does not mean that you are to be dull. On the contrary, make your report vigorous and lively, for those qualities will help your reader by capturing readily his attention.

You may even make a discreet use of humour, provided that these conditions are fulfilled—

- (i) it must be natural for you to use it, and in no way forced;
- (ii) you must know that your readers have no prejudice against a lighter touch here and there;
- (iii) it must be appropriate to the subject, and not be mere facetiousness.

## (2) *Persuasive Reports*

Here a different problem offers itself and a different approach is needed. A mere statement of the facts, however well presented, will rarely do all that is wanted. Such a statement must, of course, be the foundation from which you argue.

As a preliminary to composing the report carefully, you must pay exceptional attention to Preparing the Mind, for a persuasive

report automatically encounters the test of criticism. You need to have your answers ready; so far as you can, you should answer criticism in advance, in the report itself.

Above all, you must *assess the feeling and tone of your readers*, and decide to use that manner of presentation which is most likely to succeed with those readers. You could ignore feeling and tone when writing your informative report: in your persuasive report they are fundamental.

Before you begin to plan, you need to know all there is to be known about the persons to whom the report is going, their probable attitude to the proposal you want to put forward, and (where they will reach a decision as a group) what is the distribution of opinion among them. Then try to draw your report in such a way as to make it as easy as possible for those who favour your point of view to convince those who do not.

Examine the case you are going to put up as if you were a hostile reader. If you know the kind of prejudice any of your readers will have, try to foresee what form it will take, and think out the most effective counter to it. Try to put yourself in the mind of the hostile reader, and consider what argument you could bring forward which *he* might accept as a satisfactory answer to his criticism.

If you know that there is a weakness in your case (and there usually is a weak point, as few proposals can be ideal) *deal with the weakness early in the report*. Be strictly honest with yourself over the weakness and, if need be, alter your recommendation to meet or diminish it. This honesty with yourself is a severe test, as it may force you to re-think ideas on which you have convinced yourself at the outset.

If, despite everything you can do, there must be a weakness, expose it quite boldly, but in your own language, which will be less harsh than the hostile reader might use. Then set out your arguments—e.g. to shew that the weakness will in fact have no ill effect; or that every solution to the problem has some weakness, and that this is the least objectionable.

By dealing thus early and in your own words with the strongest point against you, you should gain the double advantage that

(i) the matter is discussed in terms most favourable to your point of view and (ii), if that main obstacle is overcome, the rest of the report should have an easy passage.

### (3) *Explanatory Reports*

In this kind of report your approach is affected by the basic fact that you are on the defensive. The reason for your report is that there is something requiring explanation by you. The initiative, unlike the case of the persuasive report, is with the recipient of your report, not with you.

The approach here is to assume that the criticism is justified, and to consider what you would deem to be a satisfactory answer if you were the critic. You might well put to yourself the following questions—

- (i) is the criticism true?
- (ii) is there justification for the situation, although the criticism is true?
- (iii) if the answer to (i) is “yes” and to (ii) is “no”, what can you do at once to ensure that the same cause of criticism does not arise again?

(i) If the criticism is untrue, explain why shortly and unequivocally. Usually this is all that is needed.

(ii) If the criticism is true, but there are good reasons for the situation, *start by stating that the criticism is well founded*. This will create an immediate and favourable reaction in the reader and he will be ready to do full justice to your explanation. Put your explanation in terms in which the facts so far as possible speak for themselves and you do as little “explaining” as possible.

(iii) If the criticism is true and there is no justification, *start by stating that the criticism is well founded*, then set out immediately the steps you *have already taken* to ensure that the occasion for it will not recur.

Explanatory reports should always be—

- (a) short and lucid,
- (b) candid.

The reader is much more interested in the cure for the situation than in a long-winded personal explanation.

(4) *Memoranda for Record* -

If all that is needed is a record of the bare facts, set these down briefly, clearly and accurately under a series of logical headings, regardless of the order in which they may have occurred during the meeting or interview. Record the facts in whatever order will ensure that they will be most readily grasped and seen in their proper relation to each other.

Make sure that your language does not colour the facts, and especially that you do not record more than was actually said. Disputes readily arise over records which, ostensibly setting out facts only, include inferences or deductions by one party not justified in the opinion of the other.

You may, however, be called upon to make quite a different form of record—not merely the bare facts, but matters of opinion—e.g. the sort of person who was interviewed, the atmosphere of the discussion, the tension or otherwise of argument between the parties. In such a case you need not be so brief, and it may be important to record matters in chronological order. For example, if a point is made and accepted early in the discussion and then found to be unsound much later in the discussion, it may be important for the record to shew that the intervening part of the discussion took place on a false assumption.

When atmosphere and other imponderables are being recorded, the record should always make clear whose opinion of the imponderables is expressed.

Often memoranda are used for recording informal agreements.

Formal agreements must, of course, be embodied in the right type of legal document. There is, however, a large range of informal but effective understandings which rest in practice on "heads of agreement" or other memoranda intended to record arrangements between parties, or even on an exchange of letters.

Records of this kind ought to contain the following distinct parts--

- (1) *Date and parties* to be bound by the arrangements;
- (2) *Introductory record* of the situation with which the parties agree that they are dealing;
- (3) *Operative provisions* of the agreement, comprising accurate statement of the exact arrangements agreed, including any qualifications or modifications which are to be applied in specified circumstances;
- (4) *Duration* of the agreement and any provision for its periodical review.

These four matters always need covering, and the parts of the document dealing with them should be readily identifiable.

Draft the record in brief, clear and absolutely unambiguous language.

Take care that no "false concords" are included. Sometimes parties, differing in view but anxious to agree, cannot settle a satisfactory form of words. This usually means that, in fact, they are not in agreement at all. In such circumstances beware of the ingenious formula which is acceptable to all parties *because each can interpret it in his own way*. This is a false concord, a mere disguised disagreement, and will be a certain source of trouble later. The only safe course is to continue negotiations till genuine agreement is reached, or to refer the matter to a third party for settlement.

Needless to say, the operative provisions are the core of the agreement, and are likely to take up the greatest part of the document. They should be broken up into numbered paragraphs, each dealing with a separate matter. The paragraphs should be arranged in a logical order, the most important provisions being set out first. Where qualifications are introduced, they should appear in the same paragraph as the matter to which they relate: general qualifications, not relating to a particular matter, should constitute separate paragraphs by themselves.

#### MINUTES

The dual purpose of minutes—a record of decisions and a basis of action—has been mentioned. It follows that minutes must be—

- (1) *written in language of the highest precision and as brief as possible*;
- (2) *unambiguous* (i.e. wholly incapable of more than one interpretation);
- (3) *consistent* (i.e. the form used must always be the same);
- (4) so far as the resolution is concerned, *self-contained* (i.e. the reader must be able to understand it fully without having to look at any other document).

The best form of minute is simple—

- (a) number and subject;
- (b) introductory paragraph;
- (c) resolution or decision.

Every minute should contain these three parts. The rules relating to each part should always be observed.

(a) *Number and subject*

Minutes should be numbered consecutively, the series carrying on from meeting to meeting. Usually a new series is begun each year, and the minutes can be referred to as 53/1, 53/2, etc. Reference by number is convenient both within the minutes themselves and in all associated papers.

In the heading the number of the minute should appear first. Next after it should be placed the subject. Titles for the subjects of minutes should be carefully chosen, so that a matter which may recur at intervals can always be appositely minuted under the same heading. The title should not be in such narrow terms that it needs constant alteration as a matter progresses: conversely, it should not be so vague that essentially different matters could be included under the same heading.

It is helpful to put in brackets after the title of each minute the number of the last previous minute on that subject.

(b) *Introductory paragraph*

The purpose of this paragraph is to record the circumstances which call for the resolution. These are likely to comprise—

(i) *a document presented to the meeting, or an event or situation reported to it:*

Every letter or other document presented to a meeting should be copied, and a copy kept in the set of papers which ought to be maintained, parallel to the minutes, comprising all documents presented to meetings. These copies should be given reference numbers, so that the documents may readily be referred to by number instead of by description. It is a convenient practice, when the document is first referred to in a minute, to add a few words describing its nature as well as giving the number.

A useful system is to give all the documents serial identifying numbers as they come forward for presentation. For example, all the documents presented to board meetings of (say) the Amalgamated Financial Company could be numbered AFC 1, AFC 2, etc.

When, however, meetings receive a series of reports or returns, presented from time to time by a particular officer, it may be more practical to exclude these from the general series and to give them distinctive references of their own—for example, one of a series of reports by the Staff Manager might be minuted thus—

“Report St.M. 53/3 was considered.”

If there is no document, the event or oral statement should be minuted as shortly as possible, e.g.—

“The Chairman raised the question of annual leave for staff.”

More than this may be needed where such an important statement is made that it will be of value to have a record in the minutes of the points which were in fact laid before the meeting. In such a case, the summary of the statement should be as succinct as essential completeness will allow.

(ii) *the discussion in the meeting itself:*

When the minutes are those of a formally constituted body, meeting at regular intervals, it is not necessary for minutes to record discussion, and the best practice is not to do so.



Where, however, the meeting is constituted *ad hoc* (e.g. a mixed delegation or a conference), a record of the different points of view may be needed, and to that extent discussion should be recorded. Even then it is better to indicate the course of discussion by tabulating the points raised and the parties supporting them, rather than to produce a rambling paragraph made up of sentences beginning "Mr. X then said . . .".

Brevity and clarity should characterise the introductory paragraph of any minute, whatever form it may take.

(c) *Resolution or decision*

The resolution or decision should always follow a stock form such as—

"Resolved (or "It was decided" or "Agreed") that . . . ." (then set out exactly and shortly

- (i) the decision, and
- (ii) the action to be taken).

The resolution must be self-contained, e.g.—

"Resolved that—

- (i) in each year fourteen working days' leave with pay be granted to all employees who have completed not less than two years' service with the Company;
- (ii) the Staff Manager give effect to this minute as from (date)."

Never use the form—

"Resolved that the Staff Manager do give effect to the recommendation in his report St.M. 53/3";

nor, worse still, draft introductory paragraph and resolution thus—

"The Staff Manager recommended the course of action proposed in his report:

*Resolved* that this be approved."

It is bad practice to draw minutes so that the resolution is understandable only if other documents referred to are studied at the same time.

There are good reasons for this rule. One of the strongest is that there is no better way of issuing instructions than by directing the secretary to transmit to the person who is to take action a copy of the actual resolution. If that resolution be not self-contained, it is useless for this purpose.

Moreover, in the documents or statements recorded in the introductory paragraph there may well be material which is confidential. A resolution which is not self-contained cannot be distributed as an instruction without disclosing this confidential material, and disclosure may be undesirable.

The need for a paragraph instructing an officer to take action can be avoided by putting, in brackets after the resolution or in the margin opposite, the name or title of the officer to take action. A minute must, however, be passed, and made known to all concerned, declaring that that is the intention of this procedure.

A good practice, when time allows and there are many decisions to be taken by a meeting, is to draft alternative resolutions in advance and have them typed in double spacing. As discussion proceeds and you find the meeting moving in the direction of one of your draft alternatives, you can start editing it during the closing stages, and often be ready with a final version when the conclusion is reached. Then read this version out and get it agreed on the spot.

This is a valuable procedure if the question has been a difficult one, and prevents later arguments about the accuracy of the minutes.

Minutes are reports of past action. The past tense should, therefore, always be used throughout. In the sample resolution given above, the word omitted (as is customary) before "be granted" and "give effect" is "should" not "shall".

## ORDERS, REGULATIONS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The following are the matters needing special attention when orders, regulations and announcements are being drafted—

- (a) as the prime purpose is to get others to take further action, the issue of these documents is part of the actual process of administration. Faults in them have more direct internal consequences than result from faults in other documents. *Intention* is therefore of the first importance;
- (b) special care is necessary to ensure that the *sense* is fully and accurately conveyed, so that there may be no doubt about the results;
- (c) as they are addressed to members of the same organisation, subordinate to the issuer of the document, the *tone* must be right.

### ORDERS

Orders are the operative links in the chain of command and they give rise to the problem of *progressive interpretation* of the message. The instruction issued at the top may be short, clear, general and simple, but it has to be expanded as it goes down. The application in greater detail to each set of circumstances will be elaborated, department by department and level by level, till the actions of the ultimate operatives carry it out. It is all too easy for this interpretative process to distort the original message. It may be interpreted differently in different departments, or differently by individuals in the same department. The intention of the originator may be modified in the process; anomalies and inconsistencies may creep in; in extreme cases the policy may even be frustrated entirely. This type of occurrence is a fruitful source of administrative troubles.

It is not sufficient to take care to convey the exact sense. Following the exact sense of an order, no more and no less, leads to over-rigidity—the attitude sometimes imputed to civil servants—unwillingness to stir a hairbreadth beyond the strict letter of an instruction.

Clearly, therefore, more must be conveyed than the exact sense of the order. The recipient must also be told enough about the background that caused the issue of the order, and the spirit in which it was given. He can then place on the order, when he relays it to his subordinates, an interpretation which is fully in tune with the original intention.

With this in mind, we can now establish rules for guidance in drawing orders—

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| (1) be sure to convey precisely the sense;  | <i>sense</i>       |
| (2) convey it in language of the right tone;  | <i>tone</i>        |
| (3) convey enough about the background of policy behind the order to make certain that the recipient will interpret it intelligently and in sympathy with the policy;   | } <i>intention</i> |
| (4) take steps, as part of your system of administration, to see that the above principles (1), (2) and (3) are understood at all levels under you, so that your subordinates will in their turn safeguard the effective relaying of the order. |                    |

#### *Precise conveyance of the sense*

Many persons aim at issuing orders which can be understood. This is futile and dangerous. Make it your rule to do better than that—to issue orders which cannot be misunderstood. This is more than a matter of simplicity, clarity and brevity, important though these be.

One of the main pitfalls is over-familiarity with the subject-matter in hand. It is easy to forget that the other man does not know all that you do. Test your orders by trying to cast all the background out of your mind and reading them as if they were instructions sent to you without your background knowledge.

Better still, get a colleague who is unfamiliar with the subject to read your order and tell you what he would do on receiving it—the revelation can be startling!

### *Language and tone*

The essence of a successful order is that it causes the recipient unhesitatingly to identify himself with the purpose of the order. The instruction should be one which he himself adopts as something he wishes of his own volition to carry out. It is a great hindrance to this attitude if there be any reason for him to have reservations about the relationship between himself and the person giving him the order. Your relation to your subordinate may be conventionally laid down in the hierarchy, but by adopting the wrong tone in your orders you may impair that relationship. Then your orders may indeed be obeyed as emanating from a higher authority, but it may be done grudgingly or with some resentment about the manner in which they are conveyed.

The safeguard against this danger is to draft your order in such a way that it appears not as your personal demand but as the inevitable outcome of a situation to which both you and your subordinate are subject. Even unpalatable matters can be successfully handled on that basis. Ideally the giver of an order should appear to be merely a channel for imparting knowledge of a situation to which the order itself is an obvious solution. If your order conveys that impression, it is sure to be given the most favourable effect.

If your subordinate has to carry out your order by the issue of further orders in his turn, it is equally important that he and others under him should understand and work on the same principles. If they be applied throughout the chain of command, success in the execution of orders should be as nearly complete as it can be in fallible human affairs.

### *Structure of an order*

Structurally an order falls into three parts—

- (i) statement of the situation;

- (ii) interpretation of the situation ;
- (iii) statement of the action necessary.

*These parts are always there.* Failure to recognise this, and the ignoring of any part or the assumption that it does not apply in the particular case, always lead to imperfect conveyance of the order and imperfect results.

Some of these elements may appear from outside the order itself—e.g. the statement of the situation and alternatives for its interpretation may be provided by the recipient of the order, who may be asking for instructions. Even if the order need consist apparently only of part (iii), you ought to make sure that enough is included to make clear to your subordinate what is in your mind on any matters under (i) or (ii) which are relevant to the order.

Where the first two parts of the order are arrived at in consequence of negotiation or discussion before the order is issued, the order should state the fact that discussions took place and between whom they were conducted.

In drawing the actual text, the rules given in earlier chapters about the need for presenting matters in logical sequence and for precision of language should be applied.

It is advisable to avoid any commanding tone, i.e. anything that might appear peremptory or discourteous. It will be obvious that, if the situation and its interpretation be properly set out in the order, any commanding tone will be out of place. The contents of part (iii) will present themselves as the logical and readily acceptable outcome of parts (i) and (ii).

#### REGULATIONS

In general you may apply the same principles in drawing up regulations as in drafting orders, but bear in mind that—

(a) orders are usually *ad hoc*, i.e. given to deal with a particular instance, but regulations are general, i.e. intended to apply to the same kind of instance, in whatever circumstances it may occur ;

(b) regulations may have to be interpreted without reference

to the originator, in circumstances which the originator could not foresee, and thus give rise to dissatisfaction if different interpretations lead to different results;

(c) regulations often cover matters, such as restrictions on personal conduct, which are less readily acceptable than other forms of instruction.

For these reasons, the following modifications of the rules given for drawing up orders should be observed—

1. The rule that the order must be capable of only one interpretation may be too strict for regulations. Interpretations may be required which differ to meet different circumstances. Here it is necessary to resist the temptation to draw a regulation loosely with this contingency in view. Looseness makes it harder for the interpreter, not easier. The better way is to make clear exactly what the object of the regulation is, and then to specifically lay down by whom and within what limits interpretation to meet particular circumstances may take place. Thus the regulations themselves become guides and instructions to those who have to interpret them. The interpreters know just how far they can go. Because the regulations themselves contemplate local interpretation, there is no danger of the argument being used that they cannot be given any effect save what they literally state.

2. The requirements laid down for parts (i) and (ii) of orders apply equally strongly to regulations, and in some cases even more strongly—e.g. where observance of the regulations will call for something which on the face of it would be unacceptable. Acts of Parliament, which are themselves a type of regulation, open with a “preamble” which is intended to set out why it is necessary to pass the Act. Similarly, regulations should have a preamble, but fuller and clearer than in an Act of Parliament, explaining the situation which gives rise to the need for the regulations. The drafting of this preamble deserves at least as much care and thought as do parts (i) and (ii) of an order.

3. When regulations are the fruit of discussion between various groups to whom they will apply, the preamble should, of course, deal with this fully, as recommended in the case of orders. A

preamble is a better device than an announcement or an explanatory memorandum, as there is no risk of its being separated from the regulations. Moreover it is a useful means of drawing attention to the need for revising regulations when the situation described in the preamble is no longer up to date.

4. There is no special language appropriate for regulations. The simplest is best, here as in other cases. Many regulations brought out under official auspices are drafted in a needlessly complex form and terminology. The approach to drafting a set of regulations should be quite straightforward. They should follow a logical order, be set out in numbered paragraphs and be given cross headings as necessary to break them up into suitable groups. Consistency and precision of language throughout any one set of regulations are important, and the rules for drawing up minutes and orders should be followed in this respect. The aim should be to make them readily understandable by any normal person: legalistic language should be avoided.

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

The following suggestions relate to administrative announcements, not to those, e.g. to customers, where an element of salesmanship or the like calls for specialised treatment.

As we have seen, orders are used for giving instructions on specific matters, and regulations for exercising general control over subordinates in relation to aspects of their official conduct. Announcements sometimes contain an element of exhortation, but for the most part they are concerned with conveying information. Thus they do not form such a direct link in the system of administrative control, though they may provide information which makes control more acceptable and therefore easier.

The principles to be observed in drawing up announcements are the same as those given in Chapter VII for informative reports, but the following special features must be borne in mind—

- (1) the readers may be indefinite in number and various in status, and the announcement must be drawn to suit that fact;



- (2) the effect of an announcement is simultaneous at all levels of an organisation ;
- (3) announcements are normally identified with the highest managerial level, and have therefore an important influence on the relationship between the top and bottom of the organisation.

There are many types of announcement, such as—

- (a) of policy for the future (new developments);
- (b) of past achievement (current production records);
- (c) of personal nature (staff appointments);
- (d) for prevention or correction of rumours;

and so on.

Whatever the type of announcement, the object will remain constant—

- (i) to convey accurate information;
  - (ii) to maintain good relations;
- and in some cases—
- (iii) to induce general adoption of a desired attitude or course of conduct.

Presentation is an important matter, and the form will vary accordingly as the information is likely to be favourably or unfavourably received.

If favourably, confine yourself to a simple description of the facts and, if any comment be necessary, let the comment follow that description.

If unfavourably, open with a careful preparatory statement, then announce the facts in simple, clear terms. For the preparatory statement follow the rules already given in Chapter VII for persuasive reports and in this chapter for parts (i) and (ii) of orders.

In neither case is it wise, in stating the facts, to try to express them in language which will soften the impact of the facts. That sort of language always leaves some room for ambiguity, and

at once rumour and argument arise as to the facts of the case, and false reactions to the announcement are engendered.

If there has to be in your announcement some passage in the nature of exhortation, observe the following rules—

- (a) keep the exhortation to the end;
- (b) above all, avoid pomposity or patronage (the British Railways poster “More good news—your trains running again for Easter” was a classic example of failure to observe this rule);
- (c) present the desired course of action as an inevitable consequence of the situation announced rather than as an indication of the desires of the management or a parading of their own opinion or attitude.

In making announcements which affect intermediate levels of your organisation (as all in fact do), take care that the intermediate levels get to know the contents of the announcement at least as soon as it reaches the lower level. This maintains good relations and enables the intermediate levels to throw in all their aid towards a favourable reception at the lower level.

Announcements are perhaps the class of communication in which least distinction need be made between the oral and the written form. Wartime announcements by Sir Winston Churchill, although delivered orally, are models of what written announcements should be, allowing in some cases for the differences in presentation which spoken delivery involves and allowing also for the extent to which facts were already known to his listeners. The announcements he made as Prime Minister, from taking office to the fall of France, exemplify the rules suggested in this chapter and are worth study as illustrations of method of presentation, clarity, tone and the subtle conveyance of feeling. As an example of all these virtues, with the addition of brevity, the following complete announcement, broadcast on 17th June, 1940, could scarcely be bettered—

“The news from France is very bad and I grieve for the gallant French people who have fallen into this terrible misfortune.

Nothing will alter our feelings towards them or our faith that the genius of France will rise again. What has happened in France makes no difference to our actions and purpose. We have become the sole champions now in arms to defend the world cause. We shall do our best to be worthy of this high honour. We shall defend our island home and with the British Empire we shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of mankind. We are sure that in the end all will come right."

CRUCIAL DOCUMENTS

Most documents prepared for ordinary business intercourse are meant to expend their effect when read by the person or persons for whom they are intended. For these documents concentration on the immediate readers and their needs is sound.

It is obvious, however, that not all documents complete their task when read by the addressees. The documents may be preliminaries to the decision of some disputed point, or to the conduct of oral negotiations. In such cases regard must be had to the ultimate as well as to the immediate purpose of the document. It will no longer suffice to think of the person to whom you are writing: you must think equally, or perhaps even more, of the person who, in the end, is going to judge your document either by itself or as one of a series. Such a document is a crucial document.

The most extreme instance of this situation is, of course, when the parties are on the brink of litigation. At that point the safeguarding of legal rights is so important that the advice of a lawyer should normally be obtained on the terms of any document written to other parties. But before that situation becomes inevitable there have as a rule already been exchanges of documents. Often, when the stage of seeking legal advice is reached, it is found that they might have been better expressed. It is with these earlier documents that we are now concerned. They are not necessarily documents which may be given their final interpretation in a court of law. They may have to be considered by some less formal tribunal, or perhaps by a negotiating body made up of representatives of various parties concerned.

The paramount rule is to bear in mind not only what the immediate reader will think and feel as a result of the document but what an entirely independent person will think and feel.

“What”, you should ask yourself, “will be the reaction of someone who knows nothing of the background of this matter and is unprejudiced?”.

It is wise to keep the following objects prominently in mind—

- (1) Do not put in the document anything which is capable of being interpreted unfavourably to you. You do not want any ambiguous statement, of which you may later have to say, “I didn’t intend it that way; it was intended to mean something different”. Absolute clarity of sense is a prime object.
- (2) Present your case throughout in such a way that an unprejudiced third party, reading the document, would feel as convinced as you wish your reader to be. It will not be enough to put things in a way that you think will satisfy your reader. The document must stand the scrutiny of a stranger to the business, unprejudiced may be, but unwilling to accept your statements or arguments without criticism.
- (3) Never write more than you must. Do not put anything in the document that is not absolutely necessary. Many persons accused of crime have lost their chance of acquittal by making unnecessary statements: a stray remark may have led the prosecution to the clue they needed. Many a plaintiff has lost an action merely by giving his opponent information which he would otherwise not have had. You may not be engaged in a law case, but the principle remains sound. You do not want later the mortification of having turned against you an argument your opponent could not have used but for your supplying the material.

#### STUDYING THE TRIBUNAL

Let us call the third party who is going to judge your document—whether an individual, a group or a court of law—the tribunal. It is the tribunal that you must consider as carefully as in earlier chapters you have been encouraged to study your reader. Consider the composition of the tribunal, its attitude to the type of

mer in dispute, its previous decisions on similar instances, its possible prejudices for or against you and your opponent. These and all kindred matters should engage your attention, so that when your document does come before the tribunal it is, so far as foresight and care on your part can make it, one that will enhance your side of the case in the tribunal's eyes and, at the least, do no good to that of your opponent.

#### RESTRAINT

If you are writing to a reader in the ordinary way, you can express yourself as vigorously as you think suitable to that reader. You can put forward your own feelings and adjust your tone in whatever way you think most effective for your purpose. If, however, your document has a tribunal to face, you cannot allow yourself so much freedom. You must always bear the tribunal's reactions in mind, and be careful not to put in your document anything which the tribunal might consider, or be persuaded to consider, derogatory to your case. The style of expression should be moderate, your feelings indicated with restraint, and your tone firm but conciliatory. All these features can at a later stage be used as illustrations of your reasonable attitude; and there is much advantage, before any tribunal, in being able to appear as a wholly reasonable man.

Beware of putting anything in the document, however strong the temptation, that could later be made to appear mean or even slightly unfair to your opponent. You are fully entitled to be just to your cause and maintain your position in its integrity: but harm can result from appearing to press home an advantage which does not spring from the merits of the case but from some accident of circumstances. It will do more good later to be able to point out, if need be, your own restraint in not having done so.

#### PRESENTATION OF FACTS

In this matter accuracy is of the first importance. Errors of fact will not be pointed out or corrected in a friendly way. They may be the subject of cross-examination and their presence in your

document may be used to prejudice you in the eyes of the tribunal. A single error of fact may have the unfortunate effect of casting suspicion on everything else in the document.

Next to accuracy, and equal with it in importance, is logical and convincing presentation of the case. Nothing more should be necessary, however, than a strict application of the suggestions made in Chapters I, II and III, and of the rules given for persuasive reports in Chapter VII.

#### PRESENTATION OF FEELING

We have seen how important it is to consider in ordinary writing the presentation of feeling to your reader, and how its presentation will influence his attitude to your communication. In crucial documents you should express only such feeling as will be likely to gain for you the sympathy of the tribunal. You may have deep feelings of annoyance, or a sense of an injustice having been done, but you should not express these feelings more strongly than necessary. For example, in the letters quoted in Chapter V, the very sharply worded example given first in the series\* might in some circumstances be justified, and the writer might feel convinced on that point. Yet, if an unprejudiced tribunal were considering the correspondence, it might form the view that the writer was hot-tempered or hasty, or hostile to his colleague, and that view would colour its attitude to his words and actions generally.

This does not, of course, imply that you are to be colourless in expressing your case or leave feeling out of it. On the contrary, you should take full advantage of the emotional as well as the rational aspect. You are entitled to do all you can to gain the emotional as well as the mental sympathy of the tribunal. That sympathy, however, is unlikely to be gained if you reveal yourself as a person of violent feeling or prejudice. The maxim already given about restraint applies forcibly, therefore, to the presentation of feeling. Natural feeling, moderately expressed, will seem just to an unprejudiced tribunal and therefore gain its sympathy.

\* P. 60.

## TONE

Tone, the expression of your relationship to the other party or parties, will influence a tribunal's attitude to you. You must, therefore, take equal trouble over turning it to good account. Much prejudice can be done to an otherwise good case if the other party can complain that the attitude is at fault. In negotiations between employers' and workmen's organisations this question of tone often takes a major place in the discussions, and the issue may in some cases depend on the "attitude of the management" or the "attitude of the union". All that arguments about "attitude" amount to is assertion that one party or the other has adopted the wrong tone. In view of the influence this matter can have on some kinds of negotiation, you are justified in paying special attention to it.

The best way to check tone in a written document is to put yourself mentally in the recipient's shoes. Then imagine yourself criticising the document before an unprejudiced tribunal and trying by your criticism to establish that the writer was adopting an unreasonable, harsh, offensive or other unsuitable attitude towards you. If, really putting yourself into the recipient's frame of mind, you find it none too easy to devise such an argument, you may feel confident that the tone of the document is satisfactory.

Needless to say, you judge your tone not by what your reader will think of it but by what the tribunal will think of it. If your tone is unlikely to seem objectionable to an unprejudiced tribunal, you need have little fear of its being wrong for your reader. Objections raised by him in such cases are likely to give the tribunal the impression that he, rather than you, is the prejudiced party.

## DEALING WITH THE CASE AGAINST YOU

So far we have been discussing the presentation of your own point of view. Equally important is the legitimate task of damaging as much as you can your opponent's case. Here you must bear in mind a prime distinction between documents and oral pleading.



When you are arguing in the presence of a tribunal the whole process is instant. You have to be ready to deal with points as they arise. Defects in your opponent's case can be exposed then and there. You can and should cause discomfiture to your opponent by ready verbal response in contradiction of any faulty proposition.

Where, however, you are exchanging documents before the stage of oral presentation is reached, the picture is very different. You are under no need to contradict or correct all your opponent's propositions. If you do so, you may be largely the architect of his case, for, pondering over your replies and thinking further, he will be able to strengthen his position by correcting the faults you have pointed out to him.

In general, you need not correct any errors of your opponent except those which you must correct as part of your own case. For example, if various inaccurate statistics are quoted, you must disagree with those which in their corrected form will be the basis of your own case, but other errors you can ignore, and use them later, during argument before the tribunal, to confirm the general inaccuracy of your opponent's statements. You should always bear in mind the situation before the tribunal, and keep in hand, for use in the actual discussions, anything that is prejudicial to your opponent but not an essential part of your own case.

There is an important qualification of this rule. You must be fair to your opponent and not make use in this way of an inequality of position. Thus, if in the example quoted you have facilities which are not available to your opponent for compiling or checking the statistics he quotes, you will be wise to correct his material errors. If you do not, he will be able to complain that with your superior resources you placed him at an unfair disadvantage, and you will be prejudiced in the eyes of the tribunal, which will consider your conduct ungenerous.

This qualification of the rule applies only to matters of fact. In matters of argument you can and should be quite merciless. If your opponent makes a false deduction or unjustified inference or puts forward a proposition based on prejudice instead of reason, you should have no compunction in exposing it. But here

again, do not do so in the documents unless it is essential to your own case *at that stage*. Where demolition of the argument will be more disconcerting to the other side if done in the presence of the tribunal, wait until that time. You can in the document cover yourself by disagreeing with a proposition without indicating exactly how you intend to destroy its validity.

All your opponent's propositions should be tested by two questions—

- (1) is that true?
- (2) if it is not true, how will I *prove* it to be false?

The second question is the more serious. It is no use contradicting your opponent unless you can *prove* him wrong. You should give special thought to the means by which you will convince the tribunal that it must accept your version.

You may also have to consider a very difficult question—to what extent are you justified in deliberately seeking to prejudice in the eyes of the tribunal not merely your opponent's propositions but your opponent himself? This is a matter akin to what the lawyers call cross-examining a witness "as to credit". The underlying idea is that in some situations the case for the other side can only be undermined by establishing the fact that the other party is not speaking the truth, and that his past conduct and general attitude to life are such that the tribunal is entitled to assume that his word is not to be relied on.

Such a situation can, of course, arise outside a court of law, and you are entitled to seek to discredit your opponent, as distinct from his case, in any of the following instances—

- (1) If you know him, *and have means of proving him*, to be a liar;
- (2) If he tries to discredit you by unjustly attacking your integrity;
- (3) If he seeks to take a dishonest advantage of you in his presentation of argument.

Each of these needs different handling.

In case (1) your attack is fundamental and at the earlier stage (exchange of documents) you will have had a chance to consider

carefully whether it should be made at all. Obviously it is not a course to take except as a desperate measure, where you cannot establish your case by other means and where you are certain of being able to prove not only that your opponent is unreliable but also that you were justified in attacking him on this ground. The slightest weakness in your position will be fatal, because your opponent will be able at once to secure for himself the sympathy of the tribunal by pointing out that he has been unjustly accused. Failure of such an attack is certain to be a lethal boomerang.

In case (2) you must judge whether to attack him or not by your own assessment of how you are likely to stand with the tribunal. If you are not likely to be suspected of any lack of integrity, the best defence may be to ignore the attack or to repudiate it without further comment, leaving it to the discussion before the tribunal to make capital out of your opponent's unfairness in having attacked you in that way. It is rarely worthwhile counter-attacking your opponent's credit, unless the conditions for (1) above are fulfilled. You do yourself no good if you merely get into a "pot *v.* kettle" argument.

In case (3) you will rarely need to do anything at the document stage. The point can best be taken before the tribunal, by restrained comment on your opponent's attitude, indicating him in moderate language as someone not quite fair in his methods. This calls for a delicate touch. A tribunal is quick to take such a point and no heavy-handed treatment is needed.

#### THE ONUS OF PROOF

Both in your case as a whole, and in each of its propositions, you should consider where the onus of proof lies—that is to say, you must answer the question—"Is it I or is it my opponent who will have to satisfy the tribunal that this proposition should be accepted?". In almost every case the burden of establishing something lies with one party or the other. In legal actions the burden usually rests with the plaintiff, but it may change from time to time in the course of the trial, and vary with individual items in the case.

The importance of the matter is this. If the onus lies with one party, the other party does not have to prove anything: all he has to do is to shew that the party on whom the onus lies has not discharged his duty, that the proposition has not been established. You can see at once that in many cases this makes the process of resisting a proposition much easier. Instead of having to put forward and prove a counter-proposition of your own, you can content yourself with shewing that your opponent has not made out his case.

This line is always appropriate where your case is that things should be left as they are and your opponent is proposing to alter them. It is a strong position because, as you advance no counter-proposition, there is no case of yours for your opponent to attack, and your burden is the lighter.

In preparing documents which may become crucial, the question of onus should be kept constantly in mind. It will help you to detect those matters of which you must be ready to produce complete proof to the tribunal, and also it will save you from wasting energy and skill on advancing counter-propositions in those matters where the onus lies with another party.

Every proposition you advance is a potential field of attack for your opponent. If, therefore, you want to maintain your position at its strongest, always consider how little you need to put forward, and how far you can succeed merely by denying your opponent's discharge of his onus. The fewer flanks you expose in your documents, the better will be your situation before the tribunal itself.

## APPENDIX

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### TEN REMINDERS ON USE OF LANGUAGE

#### FIRST:

*There is no one "right" style of language*

Every communication must be fitted for its reader and must use language which will be easily understood by *that reader*. There is no virtue from this point of view in the document having literary merit. If, to the same reader, a message can be sent equally well either in plain, homely language or in language which has some claim to literary style, the latter is no better than the former. The style should be suited to the reader. There is no point in putting literary merit into a business document unless it must be done in order to get the right reaction.

The test is—"Will the reader easily understand the words used?". In every case the style chosen should be the simplest and most straightforward possible.

The corollary of this rule is that the writer should be able to adjust his style according to his readers. This is not so difficult as it sounds, for the adjustments will rarely be extensive and in any event a second rule comes to our aid.

#### SECOND:

*The language must be natural and easy for the writer*

When the document reaches the reader, it must ring true. It is no use, therefore, trying to adopt an artificial style. In management and administration this risk should rarely arise, as the writer should normally be familiar with the kind of language which will be clear to the persons to or for whom he has to write, and he should be quite at home in using it.

It is unfortunately true that some people believe that to write in simple language is undignified. They imagine that a document

for business purposes must be "dressed up a bit" in what they consider to be stylish language. This belief is a great handicap to these writers. It is also the cause of much impatience on the part of those who receive their documents.

The unselfconscious style in which one would write to any intelligent friend is normally appropriate to business or administrative needs.

:

## THIRD:

*The language must be correct*

Needless to say, there should be no errors of grammar or of syntax. Words must be used in accordance with the rules of grammar and sentences must have their parts properly put together in accordance with the rules of syntax.

Anyone receiving an ungrammatical or ill-punctuated document, or one containing sentences incorrectly constructed, gets a bad impression of the writer, and this hinders effective communication. For the writer language is a precision tool. Just as a carpenter would never use a chisel for the work of a screw-driver, so should a writer take pride in never misusing language. The rules of grammar and syntax which all of us learned at school should give full protection against any risk of this sort, if coupled with study of good modern books on English usage.

Nevertheless, there is no need to be enslaved by the purist. In order to achieve the most lucid expression, you may take minor liberties with the strict rules of construction; but they should be deliberate and inoffensive. For example, beside a path in the grounds of King's College, Cambridge, is a notice bearing the words—"Beyond this is private". The construction of this sentence may be open to argument: its clarity and brevity are not.

## FOURTH:

*Use short, simple words*

Choose the shortest and simplest word available, provided that it signifies only the particular thing you have in mind. Sometimes

a longer word has to be used because the short word is not precise enough, but this is uncommon.

Always choose words which you know your reader will understand—and remember that words familiar to you in your business or occupation may mean something quite different to someone unfamiliar with your kind of language. For example, “sanction”, which in lawyers’ language means “penalty”, means to the ordinary man “permission”. It is failure to recognise this kind of thing that makes many letters and instructions from official sources obscure to the layman.

Never use rare words or difficult or specialised terms in an effort to display to your reader what a wonderful vocabulary you have.

Never use jargon (words or idioms current within a particular circle of persons and having a special meaning for them only) unless you are writing to another person in the same circle of jargon-users—and even then only if it achieves a saving of time and makes it easier to convey your message (which is not always so!).

#### FIFTH:

##### *Use simple sentences*

Simplicity and clarity are helped by keeping the sentences short. Shortness, however, is not the only consideration. Complicated construction is the chief enemy of clarity, and it is quite possible to write fairly long sentences which are simply constructed and, therefore, readily understood.

There is no objection to putting a series of ideas into one sentence, if they flow naturally from each other. The objectionable sentence is one which contains too many insertions of secondary thoughts interrupting the main idea. These parentheses tire the reader by holding him in suspense. The aim should be to get each idea into the reader’s mind as quickly as possible, without wearying him in the process.

There are devices for avoiding cumbersome sentences, and these are clearly explained by Sir Ernest Gowers in his well-known book *Plain Words*.

SIXTH:

*Make your paragraphs match your thoughts*

Paragraphs, like sentences, should be kept reasonably short. This encourages the reader from the moment he glances at the document.

Yet all the sentences embodying one process of thought should be included in one paragraph. To break the same thought into a number of paragraphs irritates the reader by repeatedly disappointing his expectation that you have finished with that thought and are going on to a fresh one.

Cross-headings and numbered paragraphs should be used in long documents. If the cross-headings are numbered, the paragraphs should be numbered *separately* from them.

SEVENTH:

*Disregard fetishes*

Many writers worry about the observance of rules that are of no real worth and of doubtful authority. The sooner these are put in their proper place the better. Examples are—

(a) *The Split Infinitive*. It is still widely believed that to split an infinitive (i.e. to put an adverb between the word 'to' and the verb) is a literary sin. This is not so. Applying the so-called split infinitive rule often causes writers to contravene two principles of good communication—freedom from ambiguity and the placing of words in their easiest and most natural order. For this reason it cannot be slavishly followed. When the rules of effective communication so require, you should split the infinitive without hesitation. It is better to deliberately split an infinitive than to so arrange your words that your reader becomes conscious of your effort not to do so.

(b) *Refusal to end a sentence with a preposition*. The best modern opinion advises disregard of this "rule". If the preposition comes naturally at the end of the sentence, let it stay there. A neat comment on this fetish is attributed to Sir Winston Churchill:



"That is the sort of pedantic nonsense up with which I will not put".

(c) *Aggregate nouns*. These words—e.g. "the crowd", "the Government", "the Committee"—may raise doubt about whether they should be followed by a singular or a plural verb. Here again, disregard arbitrary rule; use whichever seems the more natural. But, of course, be consistent in your practice. A good rule is to make the verb follow the emphasis in your own thoughts—e.g. "John Smith's family was a small one, but they were very fond of their old, rambling home".

A source of error is the phrase "a number of", which is generally used as if it were an adjective, yet can lead to absurdities such as "a number of persons was arrested". Obviously it was the persons who were arrested, not the number, and a plural verb should have been used.

At the other end of the scale are the words "none" and "neither"—both of which are singular and should be so used—e.g. "none of the battalion was wounded", "neither of them was hurt". This is a simple matter of grammar.

#### EIGHTH:

##### *Avoid pomposity*

Pomposity may take several forms. Examples are—using more solemn language than the occasion demands; using language clearly unfamiliar to the kind of reader you are addressing; writing in such a way (e.g. by stating the obvious) that it is evident that you consider your reader to be on a lower mental plane than your own.

Pomposity has a patronising flavour which is fatal to effective communication. It is unfortunately still common in documents and statements issued for the guidance or exhortation of the public. If allowed to creep into communications used for management or administration, it is certain to upset relations.

A useful broad test is to consider whether you are expressing yourself as you would if the reader were present. Language

unfitted for that purpose is unfitted for a document addressed to him.

#### NINTH:

##### *Avoid vagueness*

It is a mistake to be vague, unless you deliberately desire the reader to do nothing as a result of your communication. Even then, it is better to tell him so! If you find yourself being vague, consider why it is so. If it is due to your having failed to make up your own mind, make it up and then write definitely what you mean.

Sometimes, unfortunately, you may find that you must be vague because a decision has not been reached by higher authority, or because the only instructions you can obtain are vague. In that case try to explain the situation to the reader, and give him reason to expect a definite communication later.

The most dangerous form of vagueness is the unconscious kind, where it is unintentional and springs from the habit of using vague phrases. Many such phrases are current and ought to be banished from the writer's tool-bag. Writing "the position which has arisen in respect of hard currency" when meaning "the shortage of dollars" is an example of a common type of vagueness. Such phrases can easily be picked up by the memory and used in moments of mental laziness.

Refer directly to the most concrete (i.e. physically real) object in mind. In the example given "dollars" are that object. "Hard currency" is only a term of art for dollars. "Position in respect of" is meaningless, unless you assume that the reader knows already what the situation is—which you ought not to do. Concentration on the physically real object is a protection against the error of vagueness.

#### TENTH:

##### *Beware of unconscious absurdity*

This usually arises from the habit of using phrases or words so often in their secondary or metaphorical meaning that the

primary meaning is entirely overlooked. A ridiculous mental picture may result from reading the words in their original meanings. The influence of writers on economics tends to encourage this error, because they freely invent new metaphors and use primary meanings less often than the average man.

A few examples from various sources serve to make the point clear—

“The target was handsomely beaten”

“Bread rise puzzles bakers”

“This sum will fall to be raised by the local authority”

“The prolonged shortage of raw materials”

and, from an official letter to a blind man—

“I should be glad if you could see your way to call here next Tuesday”.

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