

*These Organizations Are the Federal
Security Agency*

Social Security Administration

Bureau of Old Age and Survivors Insurance
Bureau of Public Assistance
Children's Bureau
Bureau of Federal Credit Unions

Public Health Service

Office of Surgeon General
National Institutes of Health
Bureau of Medical Services
Bureau of State Services

Office of Special Services

Bureau of Employees' Compensation
Employees' Compensation Appeals Board
Food and Drug Administration
Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

Office of Education

Saint Elizabeths Hospital

Federally Aided Corporations

American Printing House for the Blind
Columbia Institution for the Deaf
Howard University

*The Agency as a whole is headed by an Administrator
His staff is referred to as—*

The Office of the Administrator

*Getting
your ideas across
through writing*

"Ours are human programs in the Federal Security Agency, imbued throughout with the common human touch—for people, by people. Let us carry over that sense of warmth and humanity into our official communications day-by-day."

Oscar R. Ewing
OSCAR R. EWING,
Administrator.

THIS booklet is not a text on the art of writing. It is intended, rather, as a practical guide to writing without art—the hard, plain job of getting ideas across to others. Putting this booklet together was one of those “hard, plain jobs,” and one that I could not have done without the help of many people in the Federal Security Agency. I am especially indebted to Mr. Louis Browdy for his painstaking review of the manuscript.

MILTON HALL.

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What this
booklet
is about

Part 1

THIS BUSINESS of writing may be taken casually or regarded as tremendously important to the success of an organization—depending on how you look at it.

If we look upon writing as an end in itself, without regard to its practical purpose, it is unimportant to us; we do not pretend to be literary artists. If we look upon writing solely as a matter of grammar and composition, we can give it no more than cursory interest. We are not concerned here with split infinitives or dangling participles or whether a preposition is a good thing to end a sentence with. We are concerned here only with effective ways of communicating ideas in our daily business.

Our view of writing here is quite different, for example, from that of the general counsel about whom a division head of another agency complained recently. After many hours of work on a document, this division chief sent it to the general counsel's office for review. When the document finally came back, it carried a memorandum that passed over the legal problems but wordily criticized some points of grammar. It even pointed out that one sentence ended with a preposition. At this the division chief blew up and sent back this reply: “When this program was submitted to the legal division it was to obtain advice on legal points, and not on syntax. As for the criticism that one sentence ended with a preposition, that is one thing *up with which we don't intend to put.*”

We Carry Out Our Programs Through Writing

Writing becomes immensely important when we realize that it is a major means by which we carry out our programs.

Many of us must depend largely on the written word to get our work done. Through written statements of one kind or another we tell executives and employees of our policies and plans. We must depend on countless memoranda for giving directions and for exchanging essential information. We keep one another informed by means of written reports. We get people to follow procedures by sending them written guides. We tell them how to do their jobs by providing them with instruction manuals.

Whether we like it or not, we must depend on the written word as a chief means of training people and operating a program. It's something we just can't get away from, and we can learn to make the best and most of it. In fact, in some jobs your writing can make, or nearly break, you.

An official in our Washington office complained bitterly of the failure of field employees to follow a simple procedure that was described in a written guide. Another official was disturbed over the time lost by employees who continually write in for information they could get from the manual that sits on their desks. In both instances the reason was clear: Relatively simple procedures were described in a way that was just too hard to understand. It was easier to write to the Washington office than to struggle with the instruction manual.

Some of us conduct much of our business by means of letters to cooperating organizations and to the public. And the taxpayer's impression of the quality of the services he pays for is very often determined by the letters he receives.

Each letter with incomplete information, or information that is hard to understand, adds weight to the familiar charge of inefficiency in Government. Each letter written in an obsolete style, with its "we wish to advise," "enclosed herewith," "as per your request," and similar phrases, suggests to the citizen that the agency is run by superannuated employees clinging to antiquated methods. Each letter written, no matter how unintentionally, with an arbitrary tone or an attitude of indifference, may convince the reader that the agency, which presumably exists for his welfare, is in fact bureaucratic and dictatorial.

Quite literally, the success of our programs depends in no small part on the effectiveness of our writing.

Communicating Our Ideas to Others

Most of our jobs have two sides. First, we have to be expert in some field; for example, in some phase of public health, education, social security, inspection, or business management. Second, we have to be able to communicate our ideas to others. No matter how great our knowledge and skill in a specialized field, our effectiveness can be no greater than our ability to communicate that knowledge.

Naturally we have given the greater part of our effort to developing our abilities in our specialized field. Some of us have taken our writing skill for granted. When we express ourselves, we too readily assume that the intended effect is made on the reader. We simply have not thought enough about our writing as a means of transmitting ideas to other people. For these and other reasons we may not be aware of weaknesses in our written communications.

Here, for example, is the way a statistician explained to hundreds of people in cooperating State agencies how to prepare a certain report:

States which analyze only a sample of intrastate payments should multiply each figure in the resultant sample distribution obtained for columns II, III, and IV of section B by a factor equal to the ratio between the total number of intrastate first payments issued during the quarter and the total number of intrastate first payments found in the sample, and should multiply each figure in the sample distribution obtained for columns II, III, and IV of section C by a factor equal to the ratio between the total number of intrastate second and subsequent benefit periods compensated during the quarter and the total number of second and subsequent benefit periods found in the sample, thus deriving and reporting an estimated distribution of the total number of benefit periods covered by intrastate payments issued during the quarter.

This statistician is a very able man. He sent out such incomprehensible instructions only because his mind was on statistics and not at all on communicating ideas. When he looked at his writing critically and put himself in the place of his readers, he understood why they didn't make out the reports right.

Few of us can expect to become really adept writers. Writing is a career in itself, and one of the most difficult. Even if we had the gift, we would probably not have the time to turn out polished literary pieces.

This booklet is intended for those who have other jobs to do but who want to take stock of their ability to write the direct, useful, and readily understandable kind of writing that will help them get their jobs done better.

Check Your Writing

Can you answer "yes" to the following questions about each piece you write? Is it:

1. COMPLETE?
 - a. Does it give all necessary information?
 - b. Does it answer all questions the reader may raise?
2. CONCISE?
 - a. Does it contain only essential facts?
 - b. Does it include only essential words and phrases?
3. CLEAR?
 - a. Is the language adapted to the readers; are the words the simplest that carry the thought?
 - b. Do the words exactly express the thought?
 - c. Is the sentence structure clear?
 - d. Does each paragraph contain only one main idea?
 - e. Are these ideas presented in the best order?
4. CORRECT?
 - a. Is the information accurate?
 - b. Do the statements conform with policy?
 - c. Is the writing free from crudities of grammar, spelling, punctuation?
5. APPROPRIATE IN TONE?
 - a. Will the tone bring the desired response?
 - b. Is the writing free from words that may arouse antagonism?
 - c. Is it free from stilted, hackneyed, or legalistic phrases?

How Effective Is It As a Whole?

Is it unsatisfactory—needing revision?

Is it *passable*—containing weaknesses, but good enough to get by?

Is it fully *satisfactory*—does it, thoroughly and directly, *get your ideas across*?

Standards for effective writing

Part 2

A good piece of writing in our kind of work is:

COMPLETE
CONCISE
CLEAR
CORRECT
APPROPRIATE IN TONE

The discussion of these standards is built around the *Check Your Writing* chart on the opposite page. People who have used this device report that it has helped them take stock of their writing habits and has shown them how to concentrate their efforts on improvement. Supervisors have found that the appraisal chart helps them to make a critical yet constructive review of the material written by their employees and to indicate the need for revision point by point.

1. *Is it Complete?*

Does it give all the information necessary to accomplish its purpose? Does it answer all questions the reader may have in mind? Obviously we need to check the completeness of the things we write.

Not long ago a Washington office sent out some administrative instruc-

tions to field stations. Within two weeks thirty-three memos came back asking for guidance on points that the instructions failed to cover. Most of this waste and loss of time could have been avoided had the writer *put himself in the place of the people in the field* and asked: What do they already know about this subject? What will they have to do about it? What problems will they have to face in doing these things? What more do they need to know?

A common kind of incompleteness is illustrated by a memo that asked for a further report, declaring that "The report submitted does not contain all the information required." What information was missing was not specified. To supply it required further correspondence and consequent delay.

An understandable cause of incompleteness is the almost timorous caution that Government service seems to breed in many of us. Too often we hesitate to take a positive position, to give a clear-cut yes or no, to commit ourselves unequivocally. Many writers hide what they have to say with overcautious language, under a kind of Casper Milquetoast complex. Weasel words and phrases—"it is reported," "it might appear," "it is not too clear," "it may be observed"—give the reader the impression that the writer is hedging, evading responsibility, or avoiding taking a stand at all. In any event, the reader is left up in the air and his questions are left unanswered.

In answering memos or letters, we need to watch out particularly for questions that are only implied or not plainly stated. By anticipating further inquiries, we can reduce the correspondence to be exchanged on the subject.

2. *Is it Concise?*

Long-windedness is the curse of much writing in Government.

Look at this typical sentence from one of our inside communications:

If a reserve officer is called to active duty and ordered to report at his first station on a certain date, his first day of active duty shall be the day he commenced travel from home to first duty station, but not prior to the day he would have been required to commence travel by railroad in order to arrive at his first station on the date specified in his orders.

Surveys have shown that the length of typical reports, letters, and instructions can be shortened from 20 to 50 percent and made more effective by omitting unessential ideas and words.

Not that using two pages to say what can be said in one is a crime in itself. The point is that if we want to get a message across, we must get people to read—and ponder—what we write. The longer it is, the less likely they are to read it. The hazard of the long memo or report is that it may be lightly scanned and put aside—not really read at all.

Then, too, we have an obligation to save the reader's time. Most people in responsible jobs spend a large part of the day ploughing through a mass of written material. If we cut down this mass of words by only a tenth, we release thousands of hours for productive work.

The two items under "Is it Concise" on the Check Your Writing chart suggest the two main reasons why a piece of writing may be too long.

Item a, "*Does it contain only essential facts?*" reminds us to check and see if we have included any ideas that the reader need not be burdened with. Here's a small illustration:

We are wondering if sufficient time has passed so that you are in a position to indicate to us whether favorable action may now be taken on our recommendation for the reclassification of Mrs. Josephine Blank, junior clerk-stenographer, CAF-2, to assistant clerk-stenographer, CAF-3.

The reader already knows about the clerk-stenographic and CAF business, and he need not be told about the writer's wonderment. The one idea that needs to be expressed can be written briefly:

Have you yet been able to take action on our recommendation to reclassify Mrs. Josephine Blank?

Most of us, too often, tend to give the reader more than he needs. We tell everything *we* know about a subject, rather than what he needs to know. By guarding against this tendency, we can save our readers a lot of time and unnecessary work.

Item b, "*Does it include only essential words and phrases?*" asks us to be thrifty with words in expressing the ideas that need to be presented.

The word is thrifty—not stingy. A labored effort to be concise may result in a curt tone or in a concentrated style that is hard to understand. Most of us, however, can well afford to look critically at our writing to see whether we spend words too freely. Let's try to keep it crisp and *make it move fast*.

For example, we all have picked up any number of windy phrases that may be used unnecessarily in place of single words. Like these:

On the occasion of when

In view of the fact that	since, because
Make inquiry regarding	inquire
In the amount of	for
With reference to	about

Or we may still be using that roundabout, indirect way of saying things that was once the accepted style in Government writing. This is the style that forces us, for example, to say "It is the opinion of this office that" when we mean "We think." Or "It is requested that the Federal Security Agency be furnished with two copies . . ." when the idea can be expressed more directly in fewer words: "Please send us two copies . . ." Writing concisely is so important that we shall deal with it more fully in part 3.

3. *Is it Clear?*

Our first aim in any written communication is to convey ideas so that they will be understood—or better yet, so that they cannot be misunderstood.

In organizations like ours we have a related aim—to write so that readers will understand our material *as quickly and easily as possible*. We are not competing with True Story Magazine. Many of the subjects we write about are hard to understand, and no kind of writing can make them easy. But we can try to make our writing as *easy as possible* to understand—so that other people will be more likely to read our message and so they can understand it without spending time and thought unnecessarily.

Because the writer of a message is himself dealing with familiar ideas, he is likely to be the last person to realize that his material is hard to understand. He understands it, so he assumes that others will.

One bureau, for example, wrote the following paragraph to at least 100,000 inquirers:

In order to be fully insured, an individual must have earned \$50 or more in covered employment for as many quarters of coverage as half the calendar quarters elapsing between 1936 and the quarter in which he reaches age 65 or dies, whichever first occurs.

No one without mastery of the technical jargon of the bureau could possibly understand this paragraph, yet the people in the agency used it for seven years before realizing that fact. (There is the well-authenticated story of the innocent citizen who said with some concern: "I am no longer in covered employment. I have an outside job now.")

The lettered items under "Is it Clear" on the Check Your Writing chart suggest the specific points to look at in judging the clarity of your writing.

a. *Is the language adapted to the readers; are the words the simplest that carry the thought?*

Why should a busy field official, without legal training, be expected to puzzle through instructions like these:

It is requested that the Washington office be furnished with three authenticated copies of the deed, in pursuance of which the title to said building was conveyed unto the realty company. The authentication of a written instrument is such official attestation thereof as will render it legally admissible in evidence.

Or why should busy Congressmen have to bother with some of this verbiage to pass on to a troubled constituent:

That auditory prostheses are very expensive is well known and the controversy over the prices charged for all types of prostheses has been going on for some time. If Mr. Smithers purchased the device on the recommendation of his otologist . . .

Lawyers, doctors, accountants, social workers, and members of other specialized groups quite properly use technical terms or professional jargon in communicating with others within their group. The trouble comes when they use their specialized words in attempting to communicate with others outside the group. To make themselves readily understood, they must adapt themselves to the language of their readers:

A great barrier to quick understanding is the unnecessary use of complex or unusual words. For example, the man who wrote, "After a comprehensive appraisal of all the circumstances pertaining to the case . . ." could have expressed himself as precisely and more simply by "After a careful review of the facts." There is little point in writing "We shall endeavor to ascertain the data," when we mean, "We shall try to find out the facts."

The best-educated reader is slowed up by a stream of long words even though he understands the meaning of each word. We can help him and ourselves by choosing the simplest words we can think of that carry our meaning.

b. *Do the words exactly express the thought?*

Our emphasis here is on choosing "*words that carry our meaning.*" Take

a look at the following sentence:

The new requirement is thus *reflected* in the *totality* of the deficit *in relation* to which the payment is made.

It doesn't make much sense because the writer chose such vague and broad words to express his thought.

Old favorites like "effectuate" and "implement" may be condemned on the same grounds. When a man writes, "Steps will be taken to implement the policy," he doesn't tell us very much. What, exactly does he propose to do about the policy? We must suspect that he really doesn't know and is covering up by using an impressive-sounding but pretty empty word.

Unconscious humor, undesirable in that the reader laughs *at* us rather than with us, sometimes results from thoughtless use of habitual words. For instance:

Dairy cattle, usually and commonly embraced in dairying . . .

The problem of extending coverage to all employers, regardless of size, is not as simple as surface appearances indicate.

Though the proportions of all males and females in ages 16-45 are essentially the same . . .

c. *Is the sentence structure clear?*

Here's where we really make it tough on readers. Long and involved sentences are perhaps the greatest single cause of obscurity and misunderstanding. See how unnecessarily hard this sentence is:

Accumulated sick leave is granted to permanent and temporary employees when they are incapacitated for the performance of their duties by sickness, injury, or pregnancy and confinement, or for medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment, or when a member of the immediate family of the employee is afflicted with a contagious disease and requires the care and attendance of the employee, or when, through exposure to contagious disease, the presence of the employee at his post of duty would jeopardize the health of others.

The ideas expressed in this sentence really are pretty simple and they become clear when the sentence is broken up:

A permanent or temporary employee is granted accumulated sick leave in these circumstances: (1) The employee is unable to work because of sickness, injury, or pregnancy and confinement. (2) He (or she) must be absent to be examined or treated by a doctor, dentist, or eye specialist. (3) He is needed to take care of a member of his immediate family with a contagious disease. (4) Or he has been exposed to a contagious disease and might jeopardize the health of others.

The original sentence was just too involved to be grasped readily. Another chief cause of obscurity is the impersonal, indirect, passive style of writing once (and, in some bureaus, still) so customary in Government. Here is a familiar sample:

It is suggested that the voucher be rewritten with the explanation that official business was performed on December 13.

Who suggests? Who should rewrite the voucher? Who performed official business? The reader doesn't have to guess the answers when we write the sentence this way:

We suggest that *you* rewrite the voucher, explaining that *Mr. Smith* performed official business on December 13.

When we have reason, on occasion, not to be too clear (and there are such times), the impersonal and passive way of writing serves well. We should use it sparingly, however, when our purpose is clear communication.

Part 3 gives additional suggestions for making clear sentences.

d. *Does each paragraph contain only one main thought?*

This item reminds us to check the clarity of our paragraphs. Sometimes we forget that a paragraph should convey one principal thought and that all the sentences should bear on this one thought. The physical unit of type prepares the reader to find it a thought unit. To include in a paragraph sentences that do not contribute to the principal idea is often confusing.

e. *Are the ideas presented in the most effective order?*

The structure of a piece of writing as a whole is important to its clarity. Giving the reader at the outset an understanding of what he is going to read about, constructing paragraphs so that each is a complete thought unit, arranging these paragraphs in a logical order, placing important ideas in important positions—all these help the reader get the message

clearly and quickly. These topics will be dealt with more fully in part 5 on *Planning*.

4. *Is it Correct?*

Is the information accurate? Do the statements conform with policy? It is self-evident that we must check our writing on these points. Misstatements of fact and policy may cause no end of trouble.

It is obvious that if writing is to be correct, the writer must start by having his facts and figures straight to the last detail. Regardless of his facility in writing, he must first of all know his business. He can never afford to fall back on the excuse of lack of time for failing to dig up all the facts; he will save time in the end by making sure. He needs to keep thoroughly abreast of policies that guide his work. Above all, he needs to check every statement for accuracy whenever there is the slightest doubt.

Grammar, spelling, and punctuation, as a matter of course, should also be reviewed for correctness. Grammatical errors, subtly but surely, lessen the respect of the reader and divert his attention from the message. More important, they may cause actual misstatements. For example, observe the difference that resulted from misplacing one word:

These positions *only* will be filled through the Civil Service Commission.

These positions will be filled *only* through the Civil Service Commission.

5. *Is it Appropriate in Tone?*

Tone refers not to what we say but *how* we say it.

This "how" may get our material read or cause it to be discarded as too dreary to bother with. Tone may make friends for our organization or it may make enemies who, in some cases, can do it substantial injury. It may build harmonious Federal-State and Washington-field relations or may damage those relations. Tone is particularly important in writing that goes to people outside our immediate organization.

Inappropriate tone usually results from our failure to consider "how it will sound" to the reader. Here are some excerpts that show how easily an inappropriate tone can creep in:

Arbitrary: We do not see fit to change the procedure as you propose . . .

Tactless: Your statement about the treatment you received from one of our employees is indeed surprising because we instruct all our employees to be civil, kindly, and thoughtful, even under the most trying circumstances.

Indifferent: The responsibility for administering the Blank State law belongs to the State. This agency is interested only when the matter affects Federal laws.

Grudging: We have to advise that you may defer this action.

Flatly contradictory: Mrs. Brown, whom you recommended for appointment, is not qualified for the position. (The Congressman thought she was.)

Insulting: Frankly, your contention is so ridiculous that we are completely at a loss to understand it. It seems perfectly evident that you were confused . . .

Bossy: You are to keep your social security card with you . . . You should write to or call at that office as we instructed you in the letter of August 24.

Impertinent: Do you actually mean what you state in your last sentence?

Weak and apologetic: We regret the necessity of again calling your attention to this matter . . .

Offensive: You misunderstood the statement in our memorandum of November 25.

Talking down: From the information contained in your letter, we infer you have reference to . . .

Implied criticism: Your undated letter . . . If your inquiry is prompted by a specific question, we are sure that the local office will be glad to assist you.

Implied doubt: You *claim* that you did not receive the statement.

While there are times when a formal style is entirely appropriate, a very common error is the use of a formal tone when the situation does not call for it. Many people tighten up when they sit down to write or dictate. They become stiff and unnatural. They become very impersonal and choose pretentious words that they would never use in talking. In this

kind of writing; people never *get jobs*; they "secure employment." *Before* and *after* become "prior to" and "subsequent to." Nobody *knows* anything; they are "fully cognizant." As a result, the writing sounds dull, stuffy, even pompous—and is less likely to accomplish its purpose.

"Writing," said the celebrated Tristram Shandy, "when properly managed, is but a different name for conversation." Many of us need to relax and write more nearly the way we talk. Tone is weakened also by hackneyed phrases that destroy naturalness and forcefulness of expression. Carried to the extreme, this "business English" or governmentese gives us the performance of the section chief who, upon being asked to say grace at dinner, prayed "Dear Lord: We are in receipt of your favors of recent date and wish to advise that we are fully appreciative of same. Hoping to merit your continued courtesies we remain . . ."

Check Your Writing

Begin now to check your writing. Apply these standards to some things you wrote long enough ago to have become "cold." Then apply the standards to your current material. Be sure to rate the effectiveness of each piece of writing as a whole. To what extent is it likely to accomplish its purpose? Is it unsatisfactory; that is, does it have major weaknesses requiring revision? Is it passable; though containing minor weaknesses, is it good enough to be approved in view of the pressure of work? Is it fully satisfactory?

Unless you are a rare bird indeed, you will find some specific shortcomings in your writing that you will want to correct. The rest of this booklet is devised to give you some practical help by suggestions and expedients that have proved helpful to others. The points of attack are indicated by the titles: Part 3, SQUEEZING OUT THE AIR; part 4, PUTTING WORDS TOGETHER; part 5, CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORD; part 6, ON PLANNING.

*Squeezing
out the air*

Part 3

H. I. PHILLIPS, in his column "The Once Over," gives us this picture of how we sometimes look to others.

"A DIRECTIVE"

"It all began with the following:

Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn:
The cows are in the meadow,
The sheep are in the corn;
Where's the boy who looks after the sheep?
He is under the haystack fast asleep.

"Ultimately a Washington bureaucrat took over:

"In accordance with the act of Congress of June 6, 1923, as amended, we have conducted an extensive inquiry into the need for an adequate signal system in meadows and adjacent territories. The whole matter of stabilizing practices in these areas is being processed with a view to attaining the objectives as stated in the directive of July 7.

"Considering the matter in the over-all aspect, it is the conclusion of our policy committee, following repeated hearings, that the following steps are necessary to restore confidence and maintain morale:

1. Immediate stimulation of the entire horn-blowing project.
2. A study to determine standards with reference to the proper number of blasts to be blown when cows are in the meadow.
3. A signal system requiring a signal easily distinguishable from the former when the sheep are reported in the corn.
4. Authorization for a complete study of the whole farm situation, and a check-up of the bugle crisis, with possible freezing of bugle calls at April levels in accordance with the so-called Little Haystack Formula.
5. A congressional inquiry to ascertain the number of meadows in the country, the square miles of corn patches and the wandering habits of sheep and cattle.
6. A census to determine how many boys in the country are under a mandate to look after sheep.
7. A study to determine whether these boys are subject to abnormal indolence or excessive slumber.
8. An appropriation of five million dollars to provide adequate handling of the haystack matter, to assure an adequate distribution of horns and to take all necessary steps to integrate, codify and coordinate all authorized operation.

"For the purpose of keeping our files accurate, will you inform us of your correct name? It appears on our records as L. Boice Blow, Little B. Bloo and L. Ittle Boybluh.

"U. S. COW, SHEEP & HAYSTACK ADMINISTRATION,
Washington, D. C."

Mr. Phillips is unfair in that he singles out Government people in ridiculing a failing that is common to many people with a kind of verbal facility—in or out of Government. But if we can take a little kidding, many of us have to admit that we talk too much on paper. Like Mr. Phillips' "bureaucrat," we take an idea and blow it up out of proportion to its importance. Knowing a subject thoroughly, we tend to tell all we know rather than what the reader needs to know.

Of course other people are long-winded in their writing. What about you? Maybe you're not, but better play safe and keep on asking yourself some such questions as "*Am I saying anything that doesn't have to be said HERE?*" Will this idea divert the reader's attention from the *important* idea?"

How to Write It in Fewer Words

Look at this draft of one of our letters (with the proper nouns obviously camouflaged):

DEAR SENATOR STRONG:

Reference is made to your letter of February 18, 1949, transmitting copies of medical certificates from Heligrad physicians in respect to the physical condition of Dr. Giulio Gello, who is an applicant for an immigration visa at the American Embassy, Heligrad, Heligaria.

It is noted that both you and Dr. Gello are desirous of having the chest X-ray films forwarded to the Public Health Service here in Washington for interpretation and advice as to the appropriate certification in connection with Dr. Gello's application for an immigration visa.

Please be advised that I am this day informing the Chief, Visa Division, Department of State that this office will be pleased to review the chest X-ray films in the case of Dr. Gello and advise whether a class "A" or class "B" medical certificate would be appropriate in connection with his application for an immigration visa.

This might well be cut down from more than 140 words to 75, with added clarity when the clutter of words is removed:

We shall be glad to review the chest X-rays in the case of Dr. Giulio Gello as an applicant for an immigration visa at our embassy in Heligrad, Heligaria. On our check of the X-rays, along with the medical certificates you enclosed with your letter of February 18, we can advise the State Department as to whether Dr. Gello should get a class A or class B medical certificate. I am writing to this effect to the Chief, Visa Division.

Your first job is to avoid burdening the reader with ideas that need not be expressed at all. You have the further job of saying what you must say *in the fewest words* consistent with clearness. Here, for further example, is a fairly typical piece of Government writing. Certainly, it is no "horrible example."

The air conditioning is now in operation in both the Federal Security Building and Federal Security Building, South, for the summer months. As in previous years it is requested that all

windows be kept closed and that window ledges be cleared in order that maximum benefit and comfort for the greatest number of employees may be obtained.

In getting our jobs done, we don't have time to squeeze out every last unessential word, and it would be silly to try. But after one develops habits of conciseness, it's just as easy and quick to write:

The air conditioning is now on. For the benefit and comfort of everyone, please keep the windows closed and window ledges clear.

These are generalities. Here are some concrete suggestions:

1. Reduce groups of words to single words

Very often a single word will do the work of a whole mouthful of words—and often do it better. A little connecting word, for example, may often take the place of a group of words, like these:

of the order of magnitude of	about
for the purpose of	for
in the nature of	like
along the lines of	like
prior to	before
subsequent to	after
in connection with	by, in, for, etc. (give the connection)
with respect to	about, in, etc.
with reference to	about
with regard to	about
in the amount of	for
on the basis of	by, from, etc.
in accordance with	by
on the occasion of	when, on
in the event that	if
in the case of	if
in view of the fact that	since, because
for the reason that	since
with a view to	to
despite the fact that	though

Do you habitually use any of these or similar windy phrases? They may be second nature to you; but for the sake of people who have to read your material, why not start now to break the habit?

Many writers have picked up the habit also of using a group of words for a simple verb. For example:

give consideration to	consider
have need for	need
give encouragement to	encourage
make inquiry regarding	inquire
comes into conflict	conflicts
give instruction to	instruct
(he) is of the opinion	believes
make an adjustment in	adjust

Sometimes you can make a word do the work of a whole phrase or even a clause, like this:

is due <i>in large measure to</i>	is due <i>largely</i>
information <i>which is of a confidential nature</i>	<i>confidential</i> information

2. Avoid roundabout constructions

"We expect Congress to cut your budget." This kind of sentence construction is brief (and all too clear). It is "the shortest distance between two points" in writing. But for some strange reason we prefer too often the long way around, by way of the passive verb, and write, "It is expected that your budget will be cut by Congress." If you are addicted to this roundabout way of writing, why not start now to break that habit by revising the following sentences:

A survey of the nursing service at Freedmen's Hospital was made by the Office of Nursing.

In order to handle more effectively the increasing quarantine load, a reorganization of the work was effected.

All letters prepared for the signature of the Administrator will be single spaced.

We need this passive construction at times, but get rid of it where you can.

Be suspicious of too-frequent use of sentences beginning with "There are . . ." "There exists . . ." and "It is . . ." See how this roundabout construction wastes words:

It is our understanding that We understand that

There are two questions which must be answered	Two questions must be answered
There are many cases where the employee	In many cases the employee
There exists a condition that	A condition exists that

Also avoid, whenever possible, the roundabout "the . . . of" construction, as in:

By <i>the</i> maintenance of records	By <i>maintaining</i> records
Difficulties in <i>the</i> administration of	Difficulties in <i>administering</i>

3. *Avoid unnecessary repetition*

Repetition for emphasis is sometimes useful, but repetition often serves no purpose, as in these cases:

~~This will enable the States to get started sooner than if they wait until some later date.~~

Unemployment compensation ~~benefits~~ (or unemployment benefits).

The study is nearly complete ~~at the present time.~~

Here are some for you to edit:

As a matter of interest, we shall be interested in knowing . . .

The situation calls for quick and expeditious action.

The Executive Assistant is authorized to do and perform the following designated duties and functions.

4. *Cut out remaining underbrush*

Often we clutter our message with extra words that serve no purpose, other than to slow up the reader. In letter or memo-writing we may repeat much of the incoming letter when only an allusion to it is needed. Or we make obviously superfluous statements like, "We have received your letter" or "This will acknowledge receipt of your memorandum."

In any kind of writing, we are merely warming up when we say, "This is to inform you that . . ." Here are some illustrations of cutting off useless words:

~~You are advised that the schedule should be sent directly to this office as promptly as possible.~~

~~Your attention is directed to section 7 which says . . .~~

~~Attached there is sent to you for guidance and information . . .~~

~~It will be observed that all messages emanating from the Washington office . . .~~

~~Enclosed herewith . . . Attached hereto (Where else would it be attached?)~~

Now try your hand at squeezing the air out of the following passage. In addition to cutting off superfluous words, you will want to (1) reduce groups of words to single words, (2) avoid roundabout construction, and (3) avoid unnecessary repetition. You should be able to reduce the paragraph by about fifty percent without trying very hard and by more than seventy percent with extra effort:

Although the Central Efficiency Rating Committee recognizes that there are many desirable changes that could be made in the present efficiency rating system, in order to make it more realistic and more workable than it now is, this committee is of the opinion that no further change should be made in the present system during the current year. Because of conditions prevailing throughout the country and the resultant turn-over in personnel and difficulty in administering the Federal programs, further mechanical improvement in the present rating system would require staff retraining and other administrative expense which would seem best withheld until the official termination of hostilities and until restoration of regular operations.

More important, try these suggestions on your own writing. Use them on your rough drafts and try to keep them in mind as you write. Breaking old habits and building new ones take time. But after one has developed habits of conciseness, writing becomes easier and quicker.

All of us will be better off if we have less to read. So let's get together and try to write for others as we would have them write for us.

Putting words together

Part 4

HERE is where educated, literate people have the greatest difficulty in making themselves readily understood. They know enough words and their grammar seldom slips. But too often they put words together into sentences that are just too hard to understand.

The suggestions discussed here are based on a study of the things that make much of our writing less effective than it need be.

1. *Write Shorter Sentences*

Let's start with an illustration. Here is a sentence from the income tax instructions (sentences don't have to be *this* long to be baffling):

In the case of individuals other than farmers, if 80 percent of the tax (determined without regard to the credits for tax withheld on tax-free covenant bonds and for Income and Victory Tax withheld on wages) exceeds the estimated tax (increased by such credits), and in the case of farmers, if 66 $\frac{2}{3}$ percent of the tax (determined without regard to such credits) exceeds the estimated tax (increased by such credits), there shall be added to the tax an amount equal to such excess, or equal to 6 percent of the amount by which the tax so determined exceeds the estimated tax so increased, whichever is the lesser.¹

¹ We are indebted to Rudolf Flesch for this illustration. If you are interested in straightforward writing, you may want to read Dr. Flesch's *The Art of Plain Talk* (Harper).

Understand that in less than five readings? Of course not. The sentence deals with a complex and difficult subject, but see how the light begins to dawn when we merely break the long sentence into short ones:

If 80 percent of the tax exceeds the estimated tax, a fine shall be added to the tax.

The amount of this fine shall be equal to such excess, or equal to 6 percent of the amount by which the tax exceeds the estimated tax, whichever is the lesser.

"Tax" in this section means tax determined without regard to the credits for tax withheld on tax-free covenant bonds and for Income and Victory Tax withheld on wages.

"Estimated tax" means estimated tax increased by such credits.

In the case of farmers, 80 percent is reduced to $66\frac{2}{3}$ percent.

While we are at it, we had better finish cleaning up this horrible example by having it address the reader and by simplifying the words:

If your estimate turns out to be less than four-fifths of the tax, you will have to pay a fine.

To figure out your fine, subtract first your estimate from four-fifths of your tax. Also subtract your estimate from your whole tax and take 6 percent of the difference. The smaller of the two figures is what you will have to pay as your fine.

By "tax" we mean here your tax regardless of your credits for tax withheld on bonds or wages.

By "estimate" we mean your estimate to which we have added these credits.

If you are a farmer, we cut four-fifths down to two-thirds for you.

Most of us tend to write sentences that are too long. The average Federal Security Agency sentence is almost twice as long as the average of people whose writing must earn them a living. Even for technical material, sentences should not *average* much over 20 words. Sentences of more than 30 words should be looked at with some suspicion. Look at this mouthfiller:

Expenses for consultants or special services incurred by patients

being treated at facilities not operated by or under contract to the Service or for dental treatment other than emergency measures to relieve pain when furnished by other than Service dental officers or designated dentists, shall not be allowed except when authorized in advance by the headquarters of the service or, in extraordinary cases, when subsequently approved by such headquarters upon receipt of report and satisfactory explanation as to the necessity and urgency therefor.

You may want to check your own sentences to see where you stand. If they are too long, try the following ways to shorten them:

(a) *Add some periods*

Sometimes we merely forget to stop for breath as we string together idea after idea. The remedy for this kind of long sentence is to pause and put a period after each idea:

I should appreciate first obtaining clearance with your bureau, subsequent to which I plan to send this preliminary draft through appropriate channels to Mr. Blank of the Tennessee State agency, asking him for information we need in order to discuss the statistics for the entire year, and also inviting someone in the agency to participate as joint author of the final article.

I should appreciate first obtaining clearance from your bureau. Then I plan to send this preliminary draft through appropriate channels to Mr. Blank of the Tennessee State agency, asking him for information we need in order to discuss the statistics for the entire year. I plan also to invite someone in the agency to participate as joint author of the final article.

(b) *Put qualifying ideas in another sentence*

Often it is necessary to qualify and restrict the central idea of a sentence. To do this we sometimes add so many clauses and phrases that the reader becomes confused. We give him so many ideas to grasp at one time that he loses some of them. We even qualify the main idea before he can know what is being qualified. The remedy here is to put some of the qualifying ideas into one or more additional sentences:

TOO LONG

Except for newly appointed employees who may join Group Hospitalization within sixty days of their appointments, and veterans, who may enroll any time within six months after their discharge, opportunity to join this group is available only when membership rolls are opened, usually once a year.

BETTER

Opportunity to join Group Hospitalization ordinarily is available only when membership rolls are opened, usually once a year. New employees, however, may join within sixty days of appointment, and veterans may enroll within six months of discharge.

(c) *Express the idea in fewer words*

Sentences often can be made shorter and easier to understand by expressing the idea in fewer words. A whole clause or phrase sometimes can be reduced to a single word. ("The form which is enclosed . . ." becomes "The enclosed form . . .") Unessential words and repetition can be eliminated, like this:

TOO LONG

In view of the difficulties outlined above, which would be attendant upon the moving of this Section to any building in which the direct current is not available, it is requested that consideration be given to permitting the Blank Section to remain in the first floor of the Octagon Building and to keep necessary storage space in the basement of the Octagon Building.

BETTER

Because of the difficulties in moving this Section to a building without direct current, we ask permission to remain on the first floor of the Octagon Building and to keep storage space in the basement.

The important thing is to apply these devices to your writing. But you may start by taking the following sentences apart at the joints:

While the number of cases of poliomyelitis was not large, it represented an increase of more than 10 percent over the median

for the preceding 5 years, and with the exception of the year 1945, when 128 cases were reported for these same 4 weeks, the current incidence was the highest for the corresponding weeks in the 20 years for which data are available in this form.

Since the printing in the Federal Register of executive orders, proclamations, and regulations of general interest and applicability does not constitute in some instances a sufficient distribution to meet the needs of the various departments and establishments, the Government Printing Office has made arrangements to print, on paper 8 by 10½ inches, three columns to a page, from the type used in printing the Federal Register, a sufficient number of copies of such orders, proclamations, and regulations to meet the distribution requirements of the departments and establishments.

Skillful professional writers can make long and complex sentences clear, and sometimes use long sentences for special effect. Even professionals have to tinker to make these sentences come out right. But few of us (including the writer of this booklet) have time to develop that much skill. We don't have time to tinker and we have no need for literary effects anyway. The best and easiest way for us is to write reasonably short sentences.

2. *Prefer the Active to the Passive Form*

If George Washington were to take a job today in any one of many Federal agencies, he would not for long write, "I did it with my little hatchet." Oh, no! His supervisor would change this direct statement to "It was done with a little hatchet." ("It was performed with a sharp-edged instrument" might be even safer.) The supervisor would call him aside and explain that "in this agency an 'impersonal' style must always be used."

We don't really have to write that way. As the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service has said, "I understand that many members of our staff have the impression that they are supposed to write in the impersonal and stilted style typical of much writing in Government. *That impression is wrong.* I see no reason, for example, why anyone should write, 'It is suggested that consideration be given to the report attached hereto,' when he means, 'We suggest that you consider the attached report.'"

This misguided effort to deny the existence of human beings accounts partly for the large amount of passive writing in Government. Not that this something-is-done-to-something kind of construction is always bad.

Occasionally in order to emphasize an important word we may deliberately use the passive so we can make that word the subject of the sentence. The trouble is that we use the passive even when the idea is, or should be, active.

The case against the frequent use of the passive can be summed up on three counts:

1. Often it is hard to understand—in fact is easily misunderstood. For example, a field official blundered seriously as a result of these instructions:

It is desired that every effort be made to have this matter brought to the attention of the Governor.

He would have known exactly what to do if the Washington office had written:

Mr. Blank wants you to bring this matter to the Governor's attention.

2. It lacks vigor, vitality, movement—"passive" is the word for it. The last example illustrates this point, too.

3. It is roundabout and long-winded, as we saw in part 3.

Often we can make instructions addressed to employees more clear by directly addressing the reader. From the way the following excerpt from a stenographic manual is written, you would hardly guess that the writer wants the reader to do the things described:

When one or more enclosures accompany the communication, the total number is indicated on all copies. Each enclosure is numbered and described briefly. The enclosure itself is identified in pencil. If the enclosure consists of more than one copy, an additional number is placed . . . etc.

If you were *telling* a stenographer how to do a job, you would never use this "is numbered" construction. You would give instructions the way a cookbook writer does: ". . . add 2 cups of flour. Mix well. Bake in a moderate oven." Let's try it on the stenographic manual:

When one or more enclosures accompany the communication, indicate the total number on all copies. Number each enclosure and describe briefly. Identify the enclosure itself in pencil. If the enclosure consists of more than one copy, place an additional number . . . etc.

You might try it on this passage from another manual. While you are at it, you should be able to cut the number of words sharply:

If it is found that the employer is delinquent, a Form 00 should be secured. The employer should be given a full explanation of his responsibilities with respect to the maintenance of adequate records, and should be advised to secure the account numbers of all employees who have worked for him. The completed Form 00 should be transmitted to the Collector of Internal Revenue with the original and two copies of Form 000 marked "DELINQUENT." Two copies of the Form 000 should be transmitted to the Accounting Operations Division and one copy maintained in the field office file. The employer card will then be placed in the pending section of the employer file awaiting the assignment of the identification number.

3. *Make the Verbs Work*

The verb makes the sentence go. It provides the action that carries our readers along with us. It will, that is, if we give it a chance to work.

We have seen already how the passive construction substitutes a stationary "is" or "are" for action. The following kind of construction also takes the life out of verbs:

"The act *has a requirement* that States must . . ." Why do we take a good verb like "require," change it into a stationary "requirement" and stick a little "has" in front? It's just a bad habit. Let's write "The act *requires* States to . . ."

4. *The Hero of the Sentence*

The subject of a sentence is the "hero" of the story that each sentence tells. The "subject" is what the story's about. For some strange reason, we often pick the wrong hero, as in this sentence:

The function of the Food and Drug Administration is the enforcement of five statutes to insure the honesty and purity of foods, drugs, devices and cosmetics. (This is the opening sentence of a pamphlet.)

Who cares to read a story about a "function"! The Food and Drug Administration is the hero of this story, so let's make it the subject: "*The Food and Drug Administration*" (Let's make the verb work, too.) "*enforces* five statutes . . ."

Of course we cannot take time to fiddle that way with each sentence.

Many of us need to change our habits, however, because we habitually go out of our way to select the wrong subject. *People like to read about people and concrete things*; yet often we twist the sentence around so that the story appears to be about an abstraction.

Most of all, people like to read about people. Yet readers of Government writing must get the impression that no human beings exist, anywhere. Our sentences tell stories about functions, policies, grants, conditions, factors, abstract ideas, and "it"—especially "it." Everything but people. *Ours are programs for people, administered by people*, yet often we write like this:

Employment in manufacturing recorded increases, while there were declines in trade and domestic service. (More *people* were working in manufacturing, and fewer in trade and domestic service.)

When we do admit that people exist, we often treat them as mere appendages to abstract ideas. Sometimes we seem to go out of our way to keep from making them the subject of our sentences, like this:

The *protection* afforded industrial workers is far from complete. (Many *industrial workers* are not protected.)

General assistance or relief accounted for nearly all the remaining recipients of public aid. (Nearly all the other *people* getting public aid were receiving general assistance or relief.)

Here are some more sentences in which the real "hero" has been subordinated. Just to focus your attention on the advantages of keeping people and relatively concrete things as the subjects, you may want to revise these sentences. You can make the verbs work more effectively, too.

Responsibility for satisfactory working relationships within their organizational units rests with operating supervisors.

Refusal of employment of women workers is common on the part of employers.

There has been much opposition to the measure on the part of educators.

Choosing the right words

Part 5

LET'S begin by looking carefully at how one Government worker used words:

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day to day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labelled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productivity to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.²

We might have expressed those ideas in some such manner as this:
* * * "It is evident that substantial numbers of persons have inadequate financial resources with which to purchase the products of agricultural communities and industrial establishments; and in consequence of this deficient purchasing power, other elements of the population are

² From Franklin D. Roosevelt's second inaugural address.

deprived of gainful employment. It would appear on the basis of available evidence that for a substantial segment of the population there are inadequate housing facilities and that an equally significant proportion is deprived of the proper types of clothing and nutriment."

Now, we can't expect to write like a master, but we can learn a few lessons from him: He uses words that convey his meaning sharply and exactly, so the reader doesn't have to search for it. He gains a dignified simplicity and strength by using fresh and vigorous words. He avoids fancy, pseudo-technical terms in favor of more commonplace words that are every bit as precise in meaning. Of course he wasn't writing on a "technical" subject; and since that is one of our big problems, let's look at it first.

Technical Terms

Certain expressions are peculiar to each profession or occupational group and may customarily be used in communications between members of the same group. For example, it is convenient and practical for a doctor or a lawyer to use technical terms in writing to a fellow member of his profession. These professions have developed precise, short-cut phrasings of their own. And an accountant will know what you are talking about when you ask him to "reconcile fund balances" or to "apply apportionment percentages to administrative costs."

It is dangerously easy, however, to fall into the habit of using our specialized terms in communicating with people who are not at home with them. These terms become so familiar to us that we tend to assume that everyone knows just what they mean. The result is that other people, even within the organization, find it hard to understand us. And the taxpayers are not only bewildered but, if we can believe the editorial writers, would like to throw us out of our jobs because we don't write plain sense.

For the sake of breaking down barriers to communication, you may find it worth while to isolate the terms peculiar to your work and then to find ways of expressing the ideas in plain English. Here is a sample from a list prepared in one office. It includes terms that—while useful within the office—are not generally familiar or clear to outsiders.

Has sufficient quarters of coverage to acquire an insured status.	Has worked long enough (under Social Security) to become insured in the system.
Survivors' benefits.	Family insurance payments.
Covered employment.	A job covered by Social Security.

Deceased wage earner.

Worker who has died.

To file a claim.

To apply for insurance payments.

Aged workers.

Workers past 65.

Without questioning the usefulness of technical terms or office lingo, we must suspect a tendency to build technical vocabularies beyond real needs. Some groups may do this in a self-conscious effort to gain distinctive status. Some personnel people, social workers, accountants, and others have been thus guilty; unfortunately the only effect has been to build a language barrier between them and other people.

When Donald Stone was head of the Administrative Management Division of the Bureau of the Budget, he lectured the management experts on this point. He said in part: "One of the greatest barriers to clear understanding of objectives and methods by both officials and employees, and the citizen public, is the growing tendency of administrative officials to clothe their thoughts and directives in a specialized language. The deeper we get into this specialized language, this jargon of high-sounding words, the farther we remove our ideas from the understanding of most readers . . ."

"In trying to combat this tendency, I have wondered what could be the motives toward the use of this jargon. Is it an attempt to make administration sound mysterious, difficult, and complicated? Does it spring from the prevailing reverence attached to something termed 'technical'? Do officials think they will dignify their status . . . if they place an impenetrable veil of words over their work? . . . I think we are mature enough to see through any such faulty reasoning."

Elaborate Words

Mr. Stone brings us to an important point. Let us face it. Many of us are addicted to fancy, overformal, pseudotechnical language that seriously hampers our writing. These words are not really technical and cannot be justified as such. Nor are they precise, as ordinarily used. "When the forms become obsolete, they should be consigned to the receptacles utilized in disposing of your daily accumulation of trash" says nothing that isn't better said by, "When the forms become obsolete, *throw them away.*"

In this kind of writing, people never "do" anything; they always "perform" it. Nor do they "begin" a project; they "initiate" or "inaugurate" it. Then they don't merely "end" it; they "terminate" or "consummate" it.

Mr. Roosevelt's "farm," "factory," "try," and "one-third of a nation" become "agricultural unit," "industrial establishment," "endeavor," "substantial segment of the population."

Phony formality drives us to substitute stuffy words for plain ones: "with respect to" for "about," "secure" for "get," "utilize" for "use," "effectuate" for "carry out," "numerous" for "many," "presently" for "now," "subsequent to" for "after," "render assistance" for "help," "deem" for "think" or "consider," "ascertain" for "learn" or "find out," "substantial" for "large" or "big," "restricted" or "limited" for "slight" or "small."

People with considerable verbal facility are often the worst offenders. They pick up and retain words easily, but too often use them without enough discrimination. Many employees get the idea that they are *supposed* to use this lofty kind of language. Anxious to conform, they work hard to master the stilted vocabulary that seems to be approved.

Maybe it will help these people to relax if they know that even Supreme Court justices will write the way people talk:

"I do not suppose the skies will fall if the court does allow Arkansas to rig up this handy device for policing liquor on the ground . . ." (Mr. Justice Jackson in *Duckworth v. Arkansas*.)

"The world is even more upside down than I had supposed it to be, if California must accept aliens." (*Edwards v. California*.)

"Nor are we justified in rewriting the statute to iron out possible logical inconsistencies . . ." (Mr. Justice Douglas in dissenting opinion, *Scripps-Howard v. F. C. C.*)

A determined effort to keep your writing free of unnecessarily elegant and stilted language will pay good dividends. This kind of language is harder for *anyone* to understand. It takes longer to read and raises roadblocks against communication. Moreover, to those who are not used to it, it sounds stuffy—even pompous. Try saying aloud some of the things you write. You will find that it is hard to say with a straight face many things we put on paper. Try this (which, you will see, is not an exaggerated example):

Voucherable expenditures necessary to provide adequate dental treatment required as adjunct to medical treatment being rendered a pay patient in inpatient status may be incurred as required at the expense of the Public Health Service.

Choose the simplest word that clearly carries your meaning, for simplic-

ity is the essence of dignity and strength.

The Long Arm of the Law

All our operations are based on laws, and lawyers have key places in most agencies; so it is not strange that many legal terms have seeped into our general writing. These terms impart an undesirable legalistic flavor. As one general counsel has told his staff, "This flavor is singularly unappreciated by the laity, who have been complaining about the style of legal writing since the time of Shakespeare, if not before."

We can't blame the lawyers. In fact, the more progressive lawyers are trying to free their own writing from archaic terminology. Philip Nichols, Jr., Chief Counsel of the Federal Bureau of Supply, has given these instructions to his staff: "Any words or phrases that you would not use in a personal letter to a friend should be regarded with suspicion. In writing prepared by us for the signature of administrative officials, the lawyer's hand should be evidenced only by the absence of legalistic phraseology which would be virtually certain to be there if the letter were prepared by a layman. Let the laymen write 'prior to' when they mean 'before.'"

Well, let the laymen ditch this "legalistic phraseology," too. Here are some typical terms that may have seeped in from the law. In addition to sounding legalistic, they are stuffy; and some are hard to understand.

pursuant to our agreement	as we agreed
in lieu of	in place of
the other <i>party</i>	person
you are <i>advised</i>	(Your lawyer may give advice; you probably are <i>informing</i> .)
hold in abeyance	wait, postpone action
interrogate the claimant	ask (question) him
promulgate the regulation	issue the regulation
be cognizant of	know, notice, be aware of
such agreement	this agreement
said application	this application
the subject typewriter	this typewriter
herewith	
hereto	
herein	
hereby	
thereof	
therein	
thereon	
the aforesaid	

(Let's ditch this whole tribe, "forthwith.")

The Right Word

Most of this section has been about what *not* to do. Don't use elegant words, don't use legalistic terms, and so on. Many of us can improve our writing fairly easily by breaking a number of bad habits.

Yet we must recognize that good writing requires more than the breaking of bad habits. It requires enough mastery of language to enable us to choose words that convey our meaning accurately. Look back at the quotation from Roosevelt's second inaugural address and you will see that its chief quality is the right choice of words.

Failure to choose words that exactly express the thought the writer has in mind results in many a minor mystery for the reader, like this one:

In this connection a member of the staff addressed the group, emphasizing, in the interest of professional ethics, the necessity for the worker to operate against the background of an integrated personality, or where necessary, of a guardian-ward relationship capable of its own choices and decisions.

Lack of sensitivity to the full meaning of words as they reach the reader often results in the wrong tone, as in this sentence: "We found no information not previously considered that would *cause* us to change our former decision." Substitute "enable" for "cause" and the tone is improved. Similarly, the man who wrote, "You claim that you did not receive the statement," would not have made an enemy for his bureau had he sensed the implication of doubt in the word "claim."

A great deal of unclear writing results from the use of too many broad, general words—those having so many possible meanings that the precise thought is not clear. The reader consequently has to take time to figure out exactly what the writer has in mind.

For example, connectives like "in relation to," "relating to," "with respect to," and "in connection with" usually are too vague. They tell the reader only that some relationship exists between two ideas. Usually he needs to be told what the relationship is. For instance, the statement, "His testimony *related to* the proposed legislation," takes on meaning when we substitute "favored," "analyzed," or "attacked" for the fuzzy "related to."

Good writing is hard work, and it is hard chiefly because of the effort needed to choose words that carry the exact meaning.

Mastery of Words

Many of us can improve our writing by working a little harder in choos-

ing words. But we must recognize that, fundamentally, good writing depends on our mastery of our language.

Those of us who learned English as children are likely to take our words for granted. We have known them so long that it seldom occurs to us to examine them carefully to make sure we really know what they do mean. Some of us use the commonest words with only a rough idea of their meaning and only approximate correctness.

Can you, for example, define the differences between correct, accurate, exact, and precise? Apt, likely, liable? Effective, effectual, efficient? Between evidence and proof? Resist and oppose? Verify and confirm? Modify and qualify? Practical and practicable? You need to know these differences if your writing is to be sharp and clear.

It may be that you need to increase your mastery over words. If so, you have a tough job ahead. The suggestions for better writing given so far in this booklet are relatively easy to carry out. Increasing one's mastery over words takes more time and effort, and—let's recognize it—depends on the quality of one's mind.

Perhaps the best way to gain greater command of language is through study of the way acknowledged masters use words. Read widely. Observe the meaning of words in their context; compare this meaning with your own understanding of them. Your own understanding will become sharper, more precise.

You will find, also, useful words that are familiar to you but that are not part of your *working* vocabulary. They are more like passing acquaintances than friends on whom you can rely. Unless your memory is unusual, you may wish to build a list of these words, together with examples of their use. Practice their correct use and introduce them into your conversation and writing until they come readily to your tongue when needed.

A good desk dictionary is an indispensable tool in increasing one's mastery of words. Use a dictionary to check the meaning of words—particularly of familiar words that you are not entirely sure of. Form the dictionary habit.

One road to language mastery is the study of synonyms—words that are similar yet not identical in meaning. Study of words in groups enables you to see the distinctions among them and to understand the exact meaning of each. You sharpen one word against another.

For example, you might profitably study the different shades of meaning expressed by the synonyms of a general word such as "said:" When should "maintained" be used instead of "said"? Under what conditions would "claimed" be more appropriate? Observe the different effects produced when these words are used in place of "said" in the following sentence:

He said (maintained, asserted, claimed) that the section is doing a good job.

Likewise a different thought is conveyed when any of the following words is substituted for "said:" supposed, implied, assumed, asserted, believed, insisted, imagined, and suggested.

The better dictionaries provide suggestive word groups or synonyms for your study.

You might try your hand at revising the following passage. It is full of unnecessarily fancy words that, at the same time, are used in a vague and inexact way:

This office is gratified to know that the allocation process has been accelerated somewhat and hopes that additional measures can be undertaken further to expedite this process.

A procedure which might be initiated with a view to improving the classification problem would be to establish a practice whereby the analysts of the Civil Service Commission, prior to classifying a position at a grade lower than that recommended, would personally survey the position and afford the operating bureau an opportunity to discuss the proposed action with the Commission. If this were followed, misunderstandings surrounding the nature of duties involved in positions would be clarified and the institution of reconsideration and appeals processes might be precluded. Frequently the time lapse between the submission of the initial class sheets to the Civil Service Commission and the time the Commission has prepared to make final allocation has resulted in the development and crystallization of additional plans involving new responsibilities for the unit. A further investigation by the Commission analysts with the operating bureau might adduce more recent information which would affect classification of the positions. With respect to this problem it is anticipated that the imminent conferences with the Civil Service Commission will contribute to a better understanding.

On planning

Part 6

LIKE most activities, writing can profit by sensible advance planning.

Know Exactly WHY You're Writing

Every piece of writing you do has a definite aim. This aim may be to tell employees of a new procedure or a changed policy; to gain the cooperation of another agency in some program; to justify the purchase of new office equipment; to obtain certain statistical information; to turn down someone's request without losing his good will.

Taking time to clarify in your own mind the specific purpose of each piece you write makes it easier to do a good job. To be sure the purpose is clear, say it to yourself *in words* before you begin to write. Keeping the purpose firmly in mind as you write keeps you on the beam and increases the chances of accomplishing the purpose. It reduces the chances of including unessential ideas.

Put Yourself in the Place of Your Readers

Too often when we write we are thinking of ourselves and of what *we* want to say. Actually we tend to forget that we are writing for others. We give *expression* to our ideas with too little attention to the *impression* we should make upon the minds of our readers. *They* are the all-important people. Our writing accomplishes nothing unless they become informed, gain understanding, or are moved to action.

To write effectively, strive to put yourself in the place of your readers. Try to get a mental picture of the reader. Visualize his problem, his knowledge of the subject, his interest, what he is like. Then *talk to him*.

The ability to get outside of one's own skin and think in terms of other people's needs and interests is a chief quality of mental and emotional maturity. Some of us have more of this ability than others, but we can make the most of what we have.

Let's look at a case that demonstrates how visualizing the reader can help a person write better. A woman sent this letter to an office of the agency:

I would like to have the information on a case of this kind immediately.

My husband has loss his memory. He has been working at Newport News, Va., making good wages, he has a social security No. ——. His name is John W. Smith. He got signed up at Pikeville, Ky., at unemployment office along about June 28 for work at Louisville, he left for work, but I never heard from him until the Department of Assistance wrote me from Beckley, W. Va., July 15 about them having John W. Smith there and he had loss his memory.

I have two small children. If he never gets able to work and has to stay in an institution would I be able to draw any benefits from the time he has been out of work up to present time. I don't know how I am going to live and raise my children since he is disable to work.

Please, give me the information on this at once.

And she received this answer:

This will reply to your recent letter regarding social security benefits.

State unemployment compensation laws do not provide any benefits for sick or disabled individuals. Under all State unemployment compensation laws benefits are paid only to persons who are able to work and available for work. In other words, payments under unemployment compensation laws are limited to unemployed men and women who, though desiring work, are unable to obtain it. Benefits under the Federal old-age and survivors insurance program are not payable to an insured worker until he reaches age 65 and is otherwise qualified. In order to qualify for such benefits an individual must have a

certain number of quarters of coverage, the exact number depending upon when he reaches age 65. A quarter of coverage is a calendar quarter after 1936 in which wages of \$50 or more have been received from covered employment. Should you have any further questions we suggest you visit the field office located at

We are enclosing a leaflet explaining provisions of the Social Security Act relating to unemployment compensation.

If the person who wrote that reply had taken even five seconds to visualize this distressed woman and her problems, he couldn't possibly have written her such an unsatisfactory letter.

Certainly, if he had seen her face to face and sensed her anxiety, he could not have talked to her in such an impersonal, legalistic way. Nor would he have used a language—with its "quarters of coverage," "insured worker," "covered employment"—that she couldn't conceivably understand.

Certainly, if he had been thinking about *her* problem, he would not have dragged in the unessential material about old-age insurance. And if he had pictured a mother without means to care for her children, he would have told her where she might get help—namely, from the local public assistance office that handles aid to dependent children.

We must keep in mind our obligation to the reader. Good manners (as well as good sense) demand that we give him the information he needs without requiring him to wade through unessential detail. They demand also that we save his time and energy by writing clearly, simply, and concisely. And if courtesy is not enough, our ultimate self-interest requires that we consider the reader whom *we* want to inform or move to action.

Make a Mental or Written Outline

Many people find it helpful to jot down a brief outline before starting to write. In such an outline each important idea is expressed in a word or phrase and these are arranged in the most effective order. For example, in replying to a request for approval to change a certain procedure, one man jotted down this outline on a scratch pad before writing his memo:

- Commend initiative.
- Advantages of changes.
- A disadvantage.
- Suggest revise.
- Keep it up.

The advantage of this simple kind of outline is that it makes the job of writing easier. Each point in the outline becomes a paragraph that you can develop without being handicapped by trying to hold a number of topics in mind. The outline frees you to concentrate all your mental energies on developing one idea at a time.

Making an outline compels careful organization of thought. It forces you to decide on the important ideas to be communicated and to consider the best order for their presentation.

The outline or plan enables you to catch at a glance any illogical order of ideas, repetition, or backtracking. It is much easier to catch these weaknesses in an outline than in a long piece of writing—and much better to catch them before writing than after.

For long or detailed documents, a written plan reduces the chances of omitting essential facts. It also reduces the chances of including material not closely enough related to the subject and purpose to justify inclusion.

A written plan is merely a device to ensure good organization of thought; like any other means to an end, it should be used only when it serves a practical purpose. But certainly no one should begin to write until he has at least a mental plan—until, in other words, he knows the major ideas to be included and the order in which those ideas should be arranged.

Tell the Reader What It's About

One point on organization deserves special mention: At the *beginning* tell the reader what the piece is about. Although this rule does not hold for all kinds of writing, it is essential in the kind of writing we are usually called on to do. Suspense is important in some forms of writing, but rarely if ever in ours. The "whodunit" writer aims to mystify; we aim to inform.

People learn more quickly when they know what they are supposed to be learning. Subordinate ideas take on more meaning to a person when he receives them against a background of the whole idea. Here is a simple illustration taken from another booklet in this series.⁵

Try this little quiz on yourself (without looking at the answer below, please!):

⁵ Staff Development—The Supervisor's Job. Training Manual No. 6.

Suppose an elevator starts at the first floor with six passengers, and stops at the next floor where four people get out and two get on; it continues upward to the next floor where three get on and no one gets off, but at the following floor two get off; at the next floor two get on and three get off.

The question is, how many times did the elevator stop? Of course you would have had the answer at once if you had known the purpose before reading the details.

A Summing Up

Let us be honest with ourselves. The word "gobbledygook" was invented because it expressed an idea that had become generally accepted. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary gives it as "inflated, involved, and obscure verbiage characteristic of . . . officialdom." If Government writing is the butt of many jokes and editorial comments, these are not simply the product of malice. Let us frankly admit that a lot of the writing that issues from our desks, both interoffice and to the long-suffering public, is "inflated, involved" and often obscure. The examples in this booklet culled at random from our actual writing are fairly typical exhibits of our vast written output. We have deliberately omitted from these pages the more extreme examples that were at hand.

A common characteristic of these examples and excerpts, you may have observed, is a kind of *elevated* style—cautious, wordy, and stiff. Though most of us aren't aware of it—because of sheer habit—we often write like a man walking on stilts. We may do it quite skilfully, but the effect is still stilted. (There are a number of reasons for this habit, which we could discuss for several pages; but what were once quite understandable reasons are now out of date.) Many of us are so practiced in this high-treading style that we can casually pace off a sentence of 50 words without knowing it. That kind of performance just slows up the job at other people's desks. And if it reaches outside the Federal family, it wins no warm welcome from our ultimate boss, the public.

Now you may flatter yourself (or kid yourself) that none of this applies to *your* writing. But none of us is entirely free from these impediments to getting our ideas across. And this applies especially if we have been diligently pushing papers at a Government desk for a long time. After reading this booklet, you might look over some of your recent correspondence or your latest report with a frank and critical eye. Check these, point by point, against the chart on page 4. If you come out with something less than a row of plus marks, you can turn to the suggestions and devices that will help correct your particular shortcomings.

These suggestions are meant to serve as a practical guide—not as a strait jacket to cramp your freedom of expression. They are not offered as a series of dogmatic *don'ts* and *nevers*. They may free you, with a little effort on your part, from some writing habits of which you have been scarcely conscious and which you will want to shake off.