

DDS 55-10000A

Approved For Release 2003/07/29 : CIA-RDP80B01676R001000050039-6

7-11-55

Ret

Honorable Edmund F. Mansure
Administrator,
General Services Administration
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Mr. Mansure:

Thank you for calling your handbook "Plain Letters"
to my attention.

I am pleased to advise that some weeks ago arrangements
were made to provide Central Intelligence Agency personnel
with copies of this very worthwhile publication.

Sincerely yours,

Allen W. Dulles
Director

SA/DDS/WHM:ep (22 June 1955)
Distribution:

- ✓ Orig. & 1 - Addressee
- 2 - DCI - *up basic*
- 2 - DD/S

CONCURRENCE:

[Redacted Signature Box]

STAT

I. K. WHITE
Deputy Director
(Support)

Date: JUN 22 1955

Approved For Release 2003/07/29 : CIA-RDP80B01676R001000050039-6

JUN 25 1955

Honorable Edmund F. Mansure
Administrator
General Services Administration
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Ed:

Thank you for calling your handbook "Plain Letters"
to my attention.

I am pleased to advise that some weeks ago arrange-
ments were made to provide Central Intelligence Agency
personnel with copies of this very worthwhile publication.

Sincerely,

Allen W. Dulles
Director

SA/DDS/WHM:epr (22 June 55)
Rewritten: O/DCI/[]ekt (24 June 55)
Distribution:
Orig & 1 - Addressee
1 - DCI
✓ 1 - ER w/basic
2 - DD/S

STAT

162

6-25-55

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION ⁰⁸⁵



Washington 25, D. C.

JUN 10 1955

Honorable Allen W. Dulles
Director
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington 25, D. C.

Re: "Plain Letters"

Dear Allen:

Our handbook called "Plain Letters," enclosed,
has caused very favorable comment in Government.

Copy of Secretary Humphrey's letter, enclosed,
is typical of the reactions we have been receiving.

Possibly you may want to pass this information
on to your folks.

Cordially yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "C. Mansure".

CLARENCE F. MANSURE
Administrator

Enclosures - 2



THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY
WASHINGTON

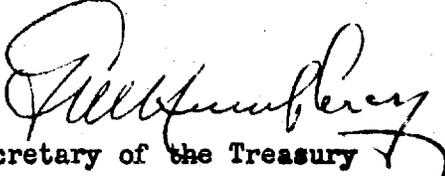
MAY 24 1955

To Heads of Bureaus

Treasury Department

I think the enclosed handbook on "Plain Letters" is good. I suggest that you send copies to all letterwriters, regardless of rank, in your bureau and tell them that we are 100 percent in favor of plain letters in the Treasury.

Short, simple letters will save time, save money, and improve service to the public.


Secretary of the Treasury

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
Washington 25, D. C.

April 21, 1955

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION CIRCULAR NO. 103

TO: Heads of Federal Agencies

SUBJECT: Records Management Handbook: Plain Letters

1. General. The General Services Administration has published a new handbook entitled "Plain Letters" which is now available to all Government agencies. This publication is the third in a series of handbooks developed by the National Archives and Records Service as technical guides to reducing and simplifying Government paperwork.

As the title suggests, "Plain Letters" deals exclusively with suggestions for improving the efficiency of Government letters by writing them in simple, workaday English. It contains the basic rules for writing letters that are easy to understand, and provides numerous examples of the practical art of letterwriting.

2. Availability of Copies. A few copies of this handbook are being transmitted to the liaison office in each agency as reported under subsection 102.06, Chapter I, Title 3, Federal Records, Regulations of the General Services Administration. It is suggested that agencies bring this handbook to the attention of their employees who have staff responsibility for correspondence.

The handbook is available as a General Services Administration stores stock item and will be stocked exclusively by General Services Administration Region 3, Federal Supply Service, Stores Depot, Washington 25, D. C., at the current price of \$0.13 each. The Stores Stock Catalog number of this publication is 35-F-624-425.

The handbook is available to the public from the Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D. C., at \$0.30 per copy.



EDMUND F. MANSURE
Administrator

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE DIRECTOR

Mr. Mansure sent you his handbook "Plain Letters" and advised it had caused favorable comment and reaction in the Government.

Recommend signature on the proposed reply which thanks Mr. Mansure and advises we had arranged for distribution of this handbook to our people some weeks ago.

[Redacted Signature Box]

L. K. WHITE
Deputy Director
(Support)

JUN 22 1955
(DATE)

STAT

RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOK

Managing Correspondence

PLAIN
LETTERS

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
RECORDS MANAGEMENT DIVISION

35-F-624-425
Federal Supply Service

RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOKS are developed by the National Archives and Records Service as technical guides to reducing and simplifying Government paperwork.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOKS:

Managing correspondence: *Plain Letters*.....1955...47 p.
Managing correspondence: *Form Letters*.....1954...33 p.
Managing noncurrent files: *Federal Records Centers*.....1954...25 p.

FOREWORD

TO THOSE WHO WRITE AND THOSE WHO SIGN GOVERNMENT LETTERS:

An estimated one billion Federal letters a year are now passing through your hands. In appraising the quality of this vast amount of paperwork, the recent report of the Hoover Commission Task Force on Paperwork Management had this to say:

From an analysis of hundreds of thousands of letters written during the past several years, the staff members of the task force are forced to conclude that many Government letterwriters well deserve the reputation they have earned for long sentences, long paragraphs, and long words. Government letters abound with legal terms, abstract nouns, passive verbs, and dense subordinate clauses. There is a prevailing opinion that this is, in fact, "Government style." The net result is:

1. Letters are often hard to understand, causing additional unnecessary correspondence.
2. Letters are unduly long, causing additional unnecessary cost.

It is the purpose of this handbook to help you improve the efficiency of Government letters by turning them out in plain, workaday English. The book was written for the General Services Administration by Mona Sheppard, staff specialist in correspondence management, with the advice of numerous craftsmen in practical letter writing. Grateful acknowledgment is made to those Federal agencies and those publishing houses which have contributed so many of the example letters.

Waynel. L. Foster

ARCHIVIST OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 15, 1955.

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I. STYLE

Once when Franklin K. Lane was Secretary of Interior he happened to see a very ornate letter to an Indian. That letter, in Mr. Lane's own words, was "so involved and so elaborately braided and beaded and fringed" that he himself could not understand it. So he sent it back to its author with this pithy advice: Use straightaway English.

We don't know the rest of the story. But if the author took Mr. Lane's advice we can easily imagine how he slashed through the trappings that hid the meaning of his letter. He cut out lazy words and cut down big ones. He woke up passive verbs and made them active, straightened out roundabout phrases, and shortened long sentences. Then he tied all his sentences together.

When the author had done slashing and straightening we can imagine that the Indian letter was transformed. From beginning to end its meaning shone clearly in every single word. It may not have been a literary masterpiece, but it was easy to read and easy to understand. It was a *plain* letter.

THE PRINCIPLE

Now good writers like Franklin K. Lane are not the only people who prefer plain letters. Indeed, most of us, in and out of Government, welcome straightaway English with a sigh of relief. Our preference for plain writing does not come from literary taste alone; nor does it stem solely from the fact that simple language is easy to read. We also have a dollar interest. Everybody knows that spendthrifts in words are spendthrifts in dollars. Without benefit of measure it is safe to say that needless words pile up needless costs, and foggy meanings exact their tolls from the tax bin.

Despite these facts, many people have the notion that plain letters are not stylish in Government. There are those outside the Government who think that the Government nowadays avoids plain language like the very plague. They tell us we habitually wind off long involved sentences weighed down with big meaningless words. Showing us all the things wrong with our writing, they point to letters that abound in legal terms, abstract nouns, passive verbs, and dense subordinate clauses. But then they say, after all, *that's* Government style.

The wonder of it is that some people inside Government seem to believe as our critics do. There are those people in Government who can write plainly, but oftentimes don't. After all, they say of their own writing, *that's* Government style.

And there are others in Government who do write plainly, but who think of themselves as exceptions to the rule. After all, they say of the other fellow's letter, *that's* Government style.

Keeping company with these people in their notion is the man who gets a hard-to-understand Government letter. To be sure, he is peeved upon being muddled by a phrase such as "noncompensable evaluation heretofore assigned," but he is seldom really mad. After all, he says, *that's* the way the Government writes.

Here, seemingly, is a rut so deep it's hard to see the way out. But the rut, mind you, is in the way of thinking. There is no real obstacle in the way of writing good Government letters. The old "beg-to-advise" clichés are in mothballs; grammar is sound. The men and women who write Government letters are better prepared than ever before to write clearly. Moreover, we have the means within Government for showing them how it is done. We have only to shake off the complacency in the way of thinking to make plain letters the prevailing style.

FROM PRINCIPLE TO POLICY

We can begin by adopting a firm policy on letter style. If we agree, as we surely do, that the principle of plain letters is good for American Government, then let us convert this principle to policy. Let the word go down from the highest places in Government to the lowest: Use straightaway English—*that's* Government style! Let the virtues of plain letters be preached by voices that can be heard. Then, when all letterwriters know the policy, let them be reminded again and again of what they already know.

Above all, those officials who sign mail must be always respectful of plain letters. When evidence of their respect seeps through to the men and women who ghostwrite Government letters, the policy on style will be firm.

FROM POLICY TO TECHNIQUE

Of course, style policy will not of itself make plain letters the prevailing style. There must be light on the subject so that all may see what plain letters are and what makes them so. The light is shed by a few basic guides—the lamps of the craftsman. It shines from old books on rhetoric and from modern-day writing formulas, from complete college courses, and from "ten easy lessons." The craftsman's lamp is not an Aladdin's lamp. It does not transform involved writing to straightaway English like magic. It simply lights the way to letters that are easy to read and easy to understand. Once the way is clear letters are bound to improve.

The basic guides to writing plain letters will be found in part II of this book.

FROM TECHNIQUE TO EXAMPLE

Robert Ascham, a wise teacher in the time of Britain's first Queen Elizabeth, once said, "One example is more valuable than twenty precepts written in books." That principle is as true today as it was three hundred and fifty years ago.

Someone up the line is likely to make an example of a poor letter by returning it to the author for rewriting. That is a common and a sensible practice. How uncommon, though, and yet how equally sensible, is the practice of making examples of good letters! The official up the line who takes time to make an example of a good letter is certain to be rewarded with more like it. The point is, he lets the ghostwriter know what he means by a good letter; he gives the author a standard for comparison.

Good plain letters can be found any day in any department of the Government. Some of them are printed in part III of this book. Why not subscribe to old Ascham's principle, and try to break our bad writing habits by making examples of our good ones?

GETTING AT THE ROOT OF THE TROUBLE

While shedding these lights we should look for the reasons why we get bad letterwriting habits in the first place. Otherwise, like the gardener who prunes the bush without digging the roots, we may rid ourselves of one crop of jargon while a new growth flourishes.

The real root of our trouble, we may well believe, is the "official language" handed the Government letterwriter along with the other badges of office. Official language is not talk. It is the written word passed out as rules: the so-called "administrative issuances," often as abstruse as the very name, and always ringing with the authority of impressive sources.

Laws and rules are the stuff that Government letters are made of. The letterwriter apes the language of rules because he is not sure of its meaning, or because he is loath to simplify language attributed to a higher source. Yet the language of rules—formal, legalistic, and frequently obscure—is as out of place in a letter as a dinner jacket in an office.

This is not to say that the proponents of plain letters should take it upon themselves to simplify the language of rules. It is to say that so long as the language of rules is incompatible with that of plain letters we must find a way for keeping it out. There are two suggestions for doing this. The first is to make letterwriters feel free to paraphrase. The second is to make sure that letterwriters know so well the subjects they write about that they can discuss them correctly and naturally.

SETTING THE STYLE

All that has been said adds up to the fact that it takes unceasing drive to strip the braids and beads and fringes from letters. Is the task seemingly so ambitious as to discourage practical Government administrators? What is needed in the way of additional personnel? Will the time and effort pay off?

Let's review the suggestions that have been made:

Adopt a firm policy on letter style.

Shed light on plain letters by examples and by guides in craftsmanship.

Rout the language of rules from letters by encouraging paraphrasing and by making sure that letterwriters understand the rules well enough to write about them naturally and correctly.

Now consider some possibilities for carrying out these suggestions:

Give an able employee authority to drive for plainer letters; give him the top management support needed to spur the drive.

Let him, in cooperation with the agency's training program, see to it that classroom training in plainer writing is available at all times, whenever and wherever it is needed.

Let him, in cooperation with supervisors, see to it that on-the-job training in letterwriting and in the meaning of laws and rules is part of everyday's work.

Let him dispel the notion that a letterwriter, because of rank, need not be told how to improve letters. Poor letters are not respectful of rank.

Let him see to it that a system is established for circulating copies of good plain letters; let him encourage up-the-line officials to return copies of good letters to their authors with a simple note, such as *I like this letter*.

Tie up every loose end through which poor form letters slip into print.* Have all printed letters written by the agency's best writers.

Surely, it is not contemplated that the ambition to improve letters will lead to endless rewrites and research for fit and shining words. On the way to improvement passable letters must be passed; moreover, the way is not the way of a literary venture. The goal, for the most part, is for short, clear, and sincere letters. The task, for the most part, is to make plain language fashionable in letterwriting circles.

Plain language can be made the fashion without hiring a single new employee. But some of our people must become our fashion experts. Others with voices that can be heard must proclaim the style. And the style must be shown over and over again by the right people in the right places. Then, because of that penchant we all have for prevailing styles, if for no other reason, the odds will certainly favor plainer letters.

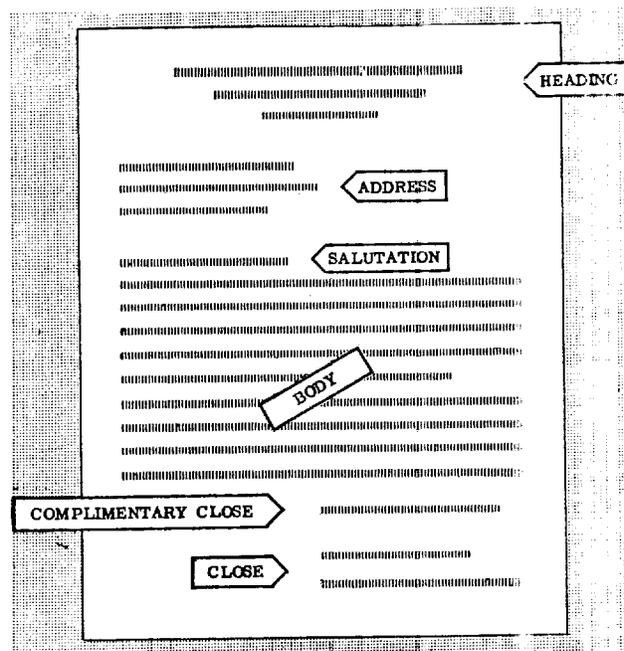
*See Records Management Handbook: Managing Correspondence—*Form Letters* (General Services Administration 1954).

II. CRAFTSMANSHIP

WHAT MAKES A LETTER *PLAIN*?

Take a minute to look at a letter. There it is: a simple parcel for carrying a message. So characteristic is its appearance you know at once *what* it is. It has a head to show *where* it came from and *when* it was written. An address tells its destination. The close serves to prove *who* sent it; the body is its *why* and *how*. Custom adds a couple of frills: a salutation to greet the reader and a complimentary close to show him respect.

So there you have a letter, parts and parcel! Had you ever thought how neatly the parts are parceled, and with what deference to that dictum for clarity, "what, where, when, who, why, and how!"



Because of this neat arrangement you can get off to the business of writing a letter at once. Don't let the frills trouble you. If your agency or the person who signs the letter has a preferred salutation and complimentary close, respect that preference. Otherwise, you will show good taste by using *Dear Mr., Mrs., or Miss* with a surname as a salute, and *Sincerely yours* as a compliment. *Gentlemen* is appropriate for saluting several men; *Ladies*, for several women. When addressing both men and women the etiquette books would have you mention the ladies first, as *Ladies and Gentlemen*. A salutation like *My dear Mr. President* or *My dear Mr. Secretary*, and a close like *Respectfully yours*, are reserved for very formal letters. Use them sparingly lest they become unduly unctuous.

When in doubt about a proper salutation and complimentary close, ask your stenographer. That is really her business.

THE 4-S LETTER

It is your job to write the message, the body of the letter. If you do your job well, people who read one of your letters know at once why you wrote it without their being at all conscious of how you wrote it. In other words, you write plainly.

Some of us have the notion that we impress our readers, or perhaps our bosses, with big words and long involved sentences. We think the more we say and the more pompously we say it, the more distinguished our letters will be. That is far from the truth as any good letter craftsman can tell us. Good plain letters are the kind our readers like to receive. And they are the kind our Government profits by, because they are efficient as well as satisfying.

Suppose we look at a sample of a good plain letter. This one was written by that master of simplicity, Abraham Lincoln, nearly a century ago.

DEAR SIR: Your note about the little paragraph in the "Republican" was received yesterday, since which time I have been too unwell to notice it. I had not supposed you wrote or approved it. The whole originated in mistake. You know by the conversation with me that I thought the establishment of the paper unfortunate, but I always expected to throw no obstacle in its way, and to patronize it to the extent of taking and paying for one copy. When the paper was brought to my house, my wife said to me, "Now are you going to take another worthless little paper?" I said to her evasively, "I have not directed the paper to be left." From this, in my absence, she sent the message to the carrier. This is the whole story.

Yours truly,
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The simple exposition in this letter leaves no doubt that the difficulty, whatever it may have been, originated in a mistake. The tone of the letter is courteous and friendly without being obsequious; sincere and strong because it is forthright. And the words—all of them useful to the message—are plain, everyday ones!

Note, then, that simplicity is not the only virtue of plain letters. A good plain letter merits this 4-S badge of honor:

4-S Shortness
Simplicity
Strength
Sincerity

THE 4-S FORMULA

Read the first version of the letter on the opposite page. Like the Lincoln letter this one was written to explain a mistake. But unlike the Lincoln letter it is stilted, wordy, and exasperating. It is a typical example of our worst letter-writing habits.

Now read the second version of the same letter. Of the two versions, which do you prefer? Which makes you feel more sympathetic toward the person who made the mistake?

Of course, few people have the talent for writing with the simplicity of Abraham Lincoln. And the chances are you will never be able to emulate his superb style. But like the person who rewrote the letter on the next page you can write naturally. If your letters are complex and wordy you can make them simple and short. You can strengthen your sentences and improve the tone of your letters by your very sincerity. You can do it by sticking to this formula:

FOR SHORTNESS

Don't make a habit of repeating what is said in a letter you answer.

Avoid needless words and needless information.

Beware of roundabout prepositional phrases, such as *with regard to* and *in reference to*.

Watch out for nouns and adjectives that derive from verbs. Use these words in their verb form more frequently.

Don't qualify your statements with irrelevant "ifs."

FIRST VERSION

Washington, D. C.

September 10, 1954

Dear Mr. --- :

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of September 5, 1954, enclosing an application for --- and stating that this application was previously submitted to this agency on August 25, 1954, but was returned without evidence of any action having been taken thereon.

A thorough search of the records of this office indicates that you are correct in your assumption that no action has been taken on the application in question. Therefore, it would appear that due to an inadvertency, you were not informed that the application failed to meet the requirements for evidence in accordance with regulations promulgated under Public Law --- as amended January --- . Accordingly, it is necessary that this office again return it with a supplementary form attached.

If you desire to reapply it is necessary that the supplement be completed in accordance with the instructions printed thereon, appended to the original application, and returned to this office at the address shown above. When the form is received in this office, properly completed and duly executed, you may be assured that prompt action will be taken.

Any inconvenience you may have been caused is sincerely regretted.

SECOND VERSION

Dear Mr. --- :

You are due an apology for our error in returning your --- application as we recently did. You had every right to expect a letter of explanation. The fact is, your application had to go back to you for more information, but somehow it got into the mails without our letter telling you this.

We are now sending you a supplement which we should have sent you in the first place. You will see that the form you filled out is an old one. It does not call for all the facts that are needed since the law was changed last January. The supplement tells what is needed and how the additional facts are made part of your application.

As much as we dislike causing you more delay, this office must have all the facts before it can act on your claim. If you will let us have your application once more, with the supplement, we shall see that it gets prompt and careful attention.

Sincerely yours,

FOR SIMPLICITY

Know your subject so well you can discuss it naturally and confidently.

Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs.

Be compact. Don't separate closely related parts of sentences.

Tie thoughts together so your reader can follow you from one to another without getting lost.

FOR STRENGTH

Use specific, concrete words.

Use more active verbs.

Don't explain your answer before giving it. Give answers straightaway; then explain if necessary.

Don't hedge. Avoid expressions like *it appears*.

FOR SINCERITY

Be human. Use words that stand for human beings, like the names of persons and the personal pronouns *you, he, she, we*, and so on.

Admit mistakes. Don't hide them behind meaningless words.

Don't overwhelm your reader with intensives and emphatics.

Do not be obsequious or arrogant. Strive to express yourself in a friendly way and with a simple dignity befitting the United States Government.

The 4-S formula contains the rules for correcting the common faults of Government letters, but it does not contain all the advice for writing good letters. Some good advice is omitted for the simple reason that no craftsman can tell you how to make use of it. A craftsman can tell you, for instance, that the information in letters should be correct and complete, but he can give you no specific rules for making it so. That's up to you.

Other advice is omitted because it leads to rules for correcting faults not usually found in Government letters. There are the basic rules of grammar, for example, which most Government writers observe. This does not mean that we must be purists to write good plain letters. We may occasionally split an infinitive or leave a participle dangling without spoiling the efficiency of a letter, offending the reader, or detracting from the dignity of Government. It does mean that the quality of our grammar must be such that it is always acceptable in polite company.

APPLYING THE 4-S FORMULA

FOR SHORTNESS

The length of a letter is not to be measured by lines or pages. A two-page letter may be short, while a ten-line letter may be long.

There are only two tests for telling whether a letter is too long. One is whether it says more than need be said. The other is whether it takes too many words for what it must say.

In applying the formula for shorter letters, it is well to remember that letters can also be too short. Those that convey their meanings in telegraphic language are unbecomingly short. Information that will give the reader a clearer understanding does not add length, and words that lend courtesy of tone are not useless.

Don't make a habit of repeating what is said in a letter you answer

Do you wind up when you begin answering a letter? Does this sound like your own style?

This is in reply to your letter of January 10, 1954, in which you request a copy of the publication entitled "The Craftsmanship of Letterwriting."

When you have answered one question do you wind up again before you begin on the next one, like this?

Information is also requested in your letter as to the approximate publication date of the stenographers' manual.

If you repeat questions you may do so for the sake of transition: to build a bridge between the inquiry and the answer. But when you talk to people do you repeat their questions before answering them?

Letters of reply can begin easily and naturally if they are treated conversationally without any device for bridging the question and the answer. The following letter, for instance, should come as no surprise to the person who asked for the publications:

We are sorry to tell you that we have no more copies of "The Craftsmanship of Letterwriting," which is out of print.

The stenographers' manual will be published in the late fall. We shall send you a copy as soon as it is ready.

Perhaps, though, you have another reason which you consider a good one for referring to the incoming letter. Perhaps you wish to emphasize the subject, or perhaps you think acknowledgment is a polite convention that should not be tossed overboard. Then try these suggestions for brevity and naturalness:

Avoid stilted openings as *Reference is made to your letter*, *This is in reply to your letter*, and *We are in receipt of your letter*.

Keep out of the trouble that comes from beginning with *In reply to your letter* or *Replying to your letter*. Where will you go from there? To complete a correct sentence you must go on with *we wish to say* or *you are informed*, or something similar that supplies the noun to support the opening phrase. This is awkward.

Refer to the inquiry by its date only, as *Thank you for your letter of June 10*, or,

Mention the subject of the inquiry in as few words as possible. Get variety in the opening sentence this way:

Make the inquiry the subject of the opening sentence, as *Your interesting letter of September 3 telling about your experience in soil conservation would hearten any farmer*.

Refer to the inquiry indirectly with a subordinate clause, as "*The Craftsmanship of Letterwriting*," which you asked for in your letter of May 23, is out of print.

Don't describe an incoming letter as recent, particularly when the description doesn't fit. If you are embarrassed by the age of the inquiry, apologize for the delay in answering. For example, begin by saying *We are sorry to be so long in answering your letter*.

Whenever possible start on a pleasant note. If you should thank your reader for something, begin by thanking him. If the reader is right about one thing and wrong about another, begin by telling him wherein he is right.

In interoffice mail use the subject line for a brief statement of the subject and be content with that. The word *Subject* is printed on the Government memorandum, Standard Form 64, to eliminate the necessity of stating the subject in the body of the letter. The date of the inquiry may be added to the end of the subject line, as: *Subject: FY 1954 budget (your memo 9/7/52)*.

A number of opening sentences illustrating these suggestions are printed on the next page.

Avoid needless words and needless information

If the words are heaped up, the thoughts become more and more obscure. . . . A word too much always defeats its purpose. . . . True brevity of expression consists of everywhere saying only what is worth saying, and in avoiding tedious details about things every man can supply for himself.—Schopenhauer

From Schopenhauer's advice we can make two good rules for letterwriters:

Cut out words that add nothing to the reader's understanding or to the sentence structure.

Leave out "beside-the-point" information.

Let's try the first rule on the following sentence:

If you want a refund, please complete the enclosed application — *Isn't this obvious?*
form, Request for Refund, over — *The form shows this.*
your signature, and return it to
this office at the above address. — *"return" implies this.*

Cut out words that are not worth saying, and the above sentence is reduced from 27 to 12 words. It now reads:

If you want a refund, please complete and return the enclosed form.

FOR A BETTER BEGINNING

Stiff and wordy

This is in response to your letter of November 15, 1954, in which you request information in regard to the recent amendment to Title — of Public Law —.

In accordance with the authority contained in your letter of April 9, 1954, the records of this office have been amended to show your name as James Henry Smith instead of John Henry Smith.

Reference is made to your letter of June 3 to the Honorable — which has been referred to this office for attention and reply in connection with your interest in a position as proofreader.

This is in reference to your letter of June 17, 1952, in which you express your opinion regarding the difficulties you are encountering because of prevailing economic conditions.

This is in reply to your letter of May 2, 1954, expressing concern over the fact that you do not have a birth certificate, and asking if your Bible record of birth is acceptable proof of age.

It is with the deepest regret that I must decline your kind invitation to speak at the luncheon meeting of the — Association to be held on March 14.

Reference is made to your letter of April 7, 1954, enclosing the receipt for —, which was requested by a letter from this office dated April 4, 1954.

In reply to your letter of August 10, please be informed that this office does not keep statistical data on the number of people in domestic employment, but it is suggested that you inquire at the Department of Labor.

An examination of the catalog of this Service reveals a pamphlet on transition entitled "Word Bridges," which appears to be the book to which you make reference in your letter of October 4, 1954.

It appears from your letter of September 2, that you are under a misapprehension about some of the eligibility requirements of Public Law —, although your understanding of the citizenship requirement is substantially correct.

Natural and to the point

We are glad to send you the information you want on the recent change in the Social Security law.

After getting your letter of April 9, we corrected our records to show your first name as James rather than John.

Senator — sent us your letter to him of June 3, with the thought that we may have job openings for proofreaders.

Your letter about the high cost of living touches on a subject of real concern to most of us.

The Bible record of your birth mentioned in your letter of May 2 may be all you need to prove your age.

As much as I dislike doing so, I must decline your invitation to speak at the — luncheon on March 14.

Thank you for your promptness in returning the receipt for —.

We are sorry we cannot answer your question about domestic employment. This agency has no statistics of the kind. We believe, though, that the Department of Labor can help you.

"Word Bridges" may be the book you had in mind when you wrote us on October 4.

As you say in your letter of September 2, only citizens of this country may receive —. There are several other points, though, that we should like to clear up.

The following letter illustrates how "beside-the-point" information as well as needless words can be cut out. The person for whom this letter was intended asked only one question: How do I apply for a refund of retirement deductions?

Unbecomingly formal

This is in reference to your letter of June 16, 1954, in which you ask how to obtain a refund of money held to your credit in the Civil Service Retirement fund.

Tactless

Unfortunately, you left employment in this agency without giving the Personnel Division an opportunity for an exit interview, which would have enlightened you on the subject of civil service retirement rights.

Tedious, needless detail

The Civil Service Retirement Act provides that an employee who is separated from the service after less than 20 years of service, may elect to receive a refund of any amounts held to his credit in the retirement fund, provided such employee has not attained age 62 and completed 15 years service.

Surely, the reader knows this

The records of this office indicate that you have had less than 20 years service but more than 5. Your attention is therefore called to the fact that the law provides the option of an annuity, payable at age 62, to persons with more than 5 years of service under the act. By withdrawal of credits in the fund, rights to annuity are nullified, unless the individual making the withdrawal is later reemployed in a civil service position.

—but this in a personal, friendlier tone may be a helpful reminder

Long-winded with details the reader can supply for himself

If you decide to apply for a refund, it will be necessary for you to complete the enclosed form, Application for a Refund of Retirement Deductions, in accordance with the instructions printed on the form, and send it to the Retirement Division, United States Civil Service Commission, Washington 25, D. C.

Why begin this sentence so pompously?

We take this opportunity to wish you success in your new employment with the Telephone Company.

By an informal reply, which becomes a letter to a former employee, at least 100 words can be cut out. The writer of the following letter avoids tedious detail, saying only what is worth saying. At the same time he spends a few words to improve the friendliness of tone, although these words are not essential to the meaning.

Here is the form you will need to apply for a refund of your civil service retirement deductions.

We are sorry you left before we had an opportunity to talk to you about your retirement rights. We wanted to remind you that you may be eligible for a small annuity at age 62. Your right to an annuity is forfeited if you take a refund, and may not be regained unless you work again in a Federal civil service job.

The little book enclosed will help you figure what your annuity would be. Of course, age 62 seems a long way off to a person as young as you. But if you believe a small annuity will come in handy some day, you may not want to withdraw your credits. For more exact information, write the Retirement Division, United States Civil Service Commission, Washington 25, D. C., before sending them your application.

Our best wishes go for success in your new job with the Telephone Company.

The above letter reminds you that the diet of words is not one of bare necessity. Information that may aid the reader is offered freely, even though he does not request it. Words that lend transition, such as adverbs and conjunctions, are not sacrificed. And, except in the hands of a skilled craftsman who knows how effective an occasional fragmentary sentence can be, sentences are complete with subject and predicate.

Beware of roundabout prepositional phrases

One of the most noticeable traits of Government letterwriters is the use of roundabout prepositional phrases. They are so easy to recognize and replace with single prepositions or other parts of speech that there is little excuse for habitually using them. Here are a number of them with some replacements shown in parentheses:

In regard to (about, concerning)
With regard to (about, concerning, on)
In relation to (toward, to)
In connection with (of, in, on)
On the part of (for, among)
With reference to (on, about, concerning)
In view of (because, since)
In the event of (if)
In order to (to)
On behalf of (for)
In accordance with (with, by)
By means of (with, by)
In the case of (if, in)
In the matter of (in)
In the amount of (for)
For the purpose of (for)
In the majority of instances (usually)
In a number of cases (some)
On a few occasions (occasionally)
In the time of (during)

Sometimes a group preposition may be omitted with no replacement, as in this sentence: *Please tell us how many man-hours are spent (in connection with) auditing vouchers.*

When a preposition is needed you can shorten and sharpen your sentence by using a single one like the ones substituted in the following sentences:

The Administrator spoke to me this morning *in regard to* (about) your proposal to reduce the clerical cost *in connection with* (of) auditing travel vouchers.

In the case of (in) the current reduction in force there is no reason for alarm *on the part of* (among) the employees of our Department. (Better still: Our employees have no reason to be alarmed by the current reduction in force.)

His attitude *in relation to* (toward) his work is good.

On a few occasions (occasionally) we had trouble getting train reservations, but *in the majority of instances* (usually) we reached the field offices in time to begin conference at 9 a. m.

Watch out for nouns and adjectives that derive from verbs

Many English words have both a noun and verb form, or both an adjective and verb form, or all three forms. Sometimes the word is identical in its noun form and in one of its verb forms, as the words *reply*, *study*, *answer*, *end*, *estimate*, *index*, and *profit*. You can name dozens of others without opening the pages of a dictionary.

There are other words that derive their noun and adjective forms by adding endings like *-ion*, *-tion*, *-ing*, *-ment*, *-ent*, *-ance*, *-ence*, *-ancy* and *-ency*. Thus *examine* becomes *examination* and *conclude* becomes *conclusion*. *Tend* is a forbear of *tendency*, *statement* comes from *state*, and *ruling* derives from *rule*. *Suit* may turn out as *suitable*, *act* as *action*, and so on.

You work with words like these whenever you write a letter. And you often have the choice of using the verb form or the adjective or noun form. If you choose the nouns and adjectives oftener than the verbs your writing is cluttered.

There are six meaningless little verbs that aid and abet Government letter-writers more than any others in choosing the noun and adjective forms of words. They are *make*, *take*, *give*, *hold*, *have*, and *be*. Watch them steal the place of the basic verbs that might be used in these sentences:

When we *held the meeting* (met) the division chief *made the decision* (decided) that Mr. Hatchett should *take action* (act) on the case at once.

The rapid growth of manufacturing *had a tendency* (tended) to draw workers from rural areas to cities.

He *is negligent in* (neglects) the details of his work.

The chief counsel *made the reply* (replied) that the claimant, rather than his representative, should *make an appearance* (appear) at the hearing to *give his answers to* (answer) the charges.

Make, *take*, *give*, *hold*, *have*, and *be* are not the only little pick-up verbs that link nouns and adjectives to a sentence. You may *put an end to a letter* that will be just as final if you *end* it; *reach an agreement* that will be just as binding if you *agree*; or *show an inclination* that will be just as perceptible if you *are inclined*.

Nouns that derive from verbs are not the only nouns that can be replaced by verbs. Many nouns and verbs with different roots express the same meaning. *He made a talk* may be expressed as *he spoke*, or *these results give the impression that may be expressed as these results seem to*.

If you have a heavy hand with nouns and adjectives, you can go a long way toward straightaway English by avoiding those nouns and adjectives linked to your sentences by the six little words: *make*, *take*, *give*, *hold*, *have*, and *be*.

Don't qualify your statements with irrelevant "ifs"

This rule might have been part of the rule on avoiding needless information. But so many letterwriters qualify their statements unnecessarily that the "if" problem must stand alone.

Having said that something is (or more likely *may be*) so, it is an easy matter to think of the "ifs" that stand in the way. To be sure, "if" sentences and clauses are often essential to the reader's understanding or to the Government's protection. On the other hand, they can also become a welter of useless detail. Eagerness to be on the safe side can lead a letterwriter even to confuse the conditional with the problematical. That's what happened to the writer who closed his letter with this sentence:

You are advised that this information is furnished on the assumption that there will be no changes in the law prior to the time you become eligible for benefits.

Knowing when to leave off the "ifs" is more than anything else a matter of good judgment. The man who wants information about his pension at age 65 need not be told what happens if he dies. The veteran who is told that his insurance account is in good order may know, without being told, that he must pay premiums on time to keep it that way. On the other hand, a reader with only 30 days to file a claim has a current interest in knowing what will happen if he is late, even though he does not ask.

One of the best ways to avoid pointless "ifs" is to avoid explanations that begin by saying the *law provides* or *regulations provide*. In any general statement under a law or regulation you may be forced into a series of "ifs" to be strictly accurate.

FOR SIMPLICITY

Know your subject so well you can discuss it confidently and naturally

Two thousand years ago the Roman poet Horace said, "Knowledge is the foundation and source of good writing." How obvious this becomes when you compare the letter you wrote on a familiar subject with one on a subject you were not quite sure of.

Even the person who writes the most unnatural Government letter is apt to write a friend in natural, simple terms. You may say that writing a personal letter is quite another thing. You know your reader. He knows you. You need not please a number of people as you must with your Government letters. That is true. But these differences affect a letter's tone more than its clarity. The personal letter is easy to understand because the writer understands it so well himself. A Government letter may turn out hard to understand when the writer, not quite sure of his subject, plays safe by sticking to the language of rules and laws.

Let Letterwriter X show you what happens. Not sure of the meaning of a regulation he wrote this sentence in a memorandum:

"PA" means that you are classified with those employees currently serving under absolute or probational appointments in positions held by the employee on a permanent basis, including preference eligibles in excepted positions under appointments without time limitations.

Mr. X's boss, sure of the meaning of "PA" and the status of the person to get the memorandum, might rewrite that sentence to say:

You are on the "PA" list because you have a permanent civil service appointment.

There is a notion common in business letterwriting that for all practical purposes is sheer nonsense. That is the notion that good letters are to be had by writing just as we talk. Mark Twain reminds us, "Spoken speech is one thing, written speech is quite another. . . . The moment talk is put into print you realize that it is not what it was when you heard it." Haven't you experienced the bitter truth of these words when the letter you "talked" came off the typewriter?

The fact is that a good plain letter is no more colloquial than it is formal. It is some of both. It is plain because common speech is its language ingredient. Plain speech, however, must be put together pleasingly and with grammatical accuracy. It must be factually correct with a mark of dignity suiting our Government. Unfortunately, the average person's talk is not up to all of these standards. A good plain letter takes a deal more planning and restraint than most of us use in everyday talk.

From these truisms come five suggestions:

Study all new laws and rules that you will be called on to explain. If you are not sure of their meaning, ask somebody who is. And don't wait until you get a letter on the subject. Be ready.

Discuss new subjects with your fellow employees.

Learn the practical art of clearing up knotty problems with examples. Do this by making up questions and answers in advance. You'll find the ready-made examples handy in writing letters.

Harness common, everyday speech and put it to work in accurate sentences that go well in writing.

Watch out for the rough edges of common speech, but don't avoid it. Polish it.

Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs

Our everyday speech is full of little words. No matter how many big ones we know, most of us talk most of the time with little ones. If we don't—if we load our talk with big words—people are apt to say we are stuffy. People say the same thing about letters loaded with big words. Yet, strangely enough, we find it hard to show little words the same respect in our letters as in our speech. None of us talks about his *remuneration*. It's plain *pay*. We wouldn't dream of saying we are *domiciled* in nearby Virginia. We simply *live* there. But let us begin dictating a letter and the big words rush in ahead of the little ones.

An *error* becomes an *inadvertency*. To *issue* is to *promulgate*. *After* is *subsequent*. And believe it or not, perfectly good little words like *lapse* and *visit* at times are stretched to *lapsation* and *visitation*. Part IV of this book has many other examples of big words that keep bobbing up in Government letters. You can see for yourself how easily and naturally they are replaced with short, meaningful synonyms.

If it's good taste to talk with little words, isn't it also good taste to write letters with them?

As short words make letters more talkable, short sentences make them more readable.

Talk is not notable for short sentences. A speaker may run his sentences together with conjunction after conjunction. He may interrupt their natural flow with parenthetical remarks. He may do this without losing his listener for only one reason: voice inflection.

Writers sometimes forget that their readers are not guided by voice inflection. They try to say too much in one sentence. Then the reader, without a voice to guide him, may have to read the sentence several times to get its meaning.

The most popular modern-day writing formulas recommend an average sentence length of not more than 17 to 19 words. Such a strict formula is difficult for most people to follow in writing short compositions like letters. With so few sentences in a letter, several longer ones can easily cause the writer to overshoot his mark; and a series of short ones may sound choppy unless the writer is skilled in transition. Practical experience shows that sentences averaging 21 words are a fair goal for most letterwriters.

Long paragraphs may not be as hard to understand as long involved sentences, but they can be just as tiring. The very sight of them is forbidding. Actually there is no need for lengthy paragraphs in letters, nor is there need for rules to write short ones. All sentences in a paragraph should relate to a single idea, but that does not mean all sentences related to one idea must be kept in one paragraph. Try to break your paragraphs so that they average not more than 7 lines.

Your solution to this problem, if it is yours, will not come from counting the syllables in words, the words in sentences, and the lines in paragraphs. That takes time and helps only in recognizing the problem. A quicker way to recognize the problem is to estimate the length of sentences and paragraphs by simply looking over the page. Do many sentences run over two lines and few under? Do the paragraphs look forbidding? Similarly, you can appraise your use of long words by spotting the big ones. Do you know shorter, plainer words to use next time?

Practice in the use of synonyms and other practices for shortness and simplicity are the solution to the problem.

Finally, here are a few grains of salt for seasoning your diet of words and sentences: A word that conveys a meaning better than any other should not be cast aside just because it is big; and a good plain sentence that moves straight ahead need not be frowned on because it is long.

Be compact. Don't separate closely related parts of sentences

You will remember that the grammar books say a verb is the key word of an English sentence with the subject and object closely related to it. Words in the sentence that make more exact the meaning of a verb or noun or object, or even an entire statement, are called modifiers.

Single-word modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) cause trouble when they get out of place in a sentence, changing the meaning:

He *only* came to the office on Tuesday. He came to the office *only* on Tuesday.

The most troublesome modifiers, however, are groups of words known as relative clauses, adverbial clauses, prepositional phrases, and so on. These group-word modifiers should read easily and naturally, as in the following sentences:

In filling out your application, you overlooked question number 12.

We sent the papers to the address you gave in your letter of January 5, but they were returned unclaimed.

When group-word modifiers are wordy, express several ideas, or are misplaced, our letters become heavy, involved, or even humorous:

Heavy The Board, *after careful consideration of all the facts in the case, including the information submitted in your letter of November 13, 1954, to the Honorable _____*, reaffirmed its decision of September 3, 1954.

Involved An individual, or his estate in the event of death, may, *by application to this Commission within 90 days following the date of the damage alleged to have been sustained, or by June 30, 1953, whichever is the later date, and by submitting such documentary evidence as may be required by the Commission*, establish entitlement to reparation in an amount not exceeding the amount of the fair market value of the losses proved to have been sustained.

Humorous The list of essential occupations does not include workers engaged in the extermination of rodents and predatory animals *except those in Government service.*

Here are four ways to control those troublesome modifiers:

1. *Boil them down, shortening the sentence as well as simplifying it.*

Change clauses to phrases

Mr. Harris, *who is the attorney for the defendant*, said he would appeal to the higher court at once.

The Committee, *which was established to study Federal records problems*, meets the first Tuesday in each month.

Please read the instructions on the form carefully *so that you will get all the facts.*

Mr. Harris, *the defendant's attorney*, said he would appeal to the higher court at once.

The Committee *on Federal records problems* meets the first Tuesday in each month.

Please read instructions on the form carefully *for all the facts.*

Change clauses or phrases to single adjectives or adverbs

The question *that is in doubt* is whether your company can perform the production miracle in the time you suggest.

The delay in answering your letter, *which is to be regretted*, was not because of our lack of interest.

The *doubtful* question is whether your company can perform the production miracle in the time you suggest.

The *regrettable* delay in answering your letter was not caused by our lack of interest.

He taught us some new methods *that save our time and that can be used* throughout the Section.

He spoke *in a manner that was courteous and appealing.*

He taught us some new *time-saving methods, useful* throughout the Section.

He spoke *courteously and appealingly.*

Change long phrases to shorter ones

We were given two weeks *for the completion of* the report.

You will lose your right to an annuity *by the withdrawal of* your credits.

We were given two weeks *to complete* the report.

You will lose your right to an annuity *by withdrawing* your credits.

2. *Keep the key verb near its subject and object or within easy reading distance.*

Instead of this

Applications *from handicapped persons in the nearby cities* were also accepted.

close ranks like this

Applications were also accepted *from handicapped persons in the nearby cities.*

and instead of this

The supervisor believed, *as did members of his staff during the rush season,* that it was necessary to work overtime.

go straight forward like this

Like members of his staff, the supervisor believed that it was necessary to work overtime *during the rush season.*

3. *Don't try to say too much in one sentence.*

Instead of this

When a disability annuitant recovers, his annuity is continued for a period not exceeding one year, *provided he is not reemployed by the Government during this period,* in order to give him an opportunity to find a position.

make a new sentence out of the qualifying clause

When a disability annuitant recovers, his annuity is continued temporarily (not more than one year), to give him an opportunity to find a job. If he is reemployed by the Government within the year, his annuity stops.

4. *Keep an unmistakable kinship between the modifier and the modified.*

If a prepositional phrase, makes the kinship doubtful

Historians may be cheated of many valuable papers *by hiding them in file cabinets.*

cut out the preposition

Historians may be cheated of many valuable papers *hidden in file cabinets*.

If the trouble comes from the position of the modifier

The enclosed booklet explains what the family should do *when the worker dies* to collect insurance.

all the sentence needs is twisting around

The enclosed booklet explains what the family should do to collect insurance *when the worker dies*.

Tie your thoughts together so your reader can follow you from one to another without getting lost

Easy-to-read sentences do not make an easy-to-read paragraph unless the sentences are connected. No matter how simple the sentences, the reader may have a rough time—he may even get left—if the connections are bad. Writers instinctively recognize the need for tying thoughts together. The trouble comes from the way they go about it. There are really only three ways to tie thoughts: *parallel construction*, *“echoes,”* and *“guideposts.”*

With parallel construction the reader is prepared by one statement for whatever follows. The following sentences are then constructed in the same or a similar way. A letter from our ambassador in London in 1857 gives an excellent example of thought connections aided by parallel sentence structure:

<i>Preparation</i>	The worse apprehensions are fast seizing upon the merchants. The Bank of England raised her interest on discounts to 10 percent yesterday. Several heavy failures have been announced. . . . Not a ray of sunshine breaks upon the gloom from any quarter as yet. Men look as if they were beneath an impending avalanche and scarcely dare to breathe.
<i>Similar sentence structure</i>	

Parallel constructions work well in letters of report. Other letters may appear loosely woven if this technique is overworked.

Word echoes make transition easier for the average reader. An echo word may be one repeated from the last sentence, a word (most often a pronoun) that stands for a word or words in the last sentence, or words that suggest a relationship to the last sentence. Watch how the echo words weave these sentences in John Jay's letter to Rufus King in 1794:

<i>“It” stands for treaty.</i>	I send by the packet the fruit of my negotiation—a treaty. I wish that I could go with <i>it</i> , as well that
<i>“Draught” suggests treaty.</i>	I might again be in my own country, as that I might answer questions on the subject. The <i>draught</i>
<i>“This” stands for last statement.</i>	has undergone several editions, with successive alterations, additions, etc. <i>This</i> shows that time and trouble have not been spared. . . .

For conciseness, echo words that are clearly understood may be omitted, as in the last of the following sentences:

She is entitled to an annuity beginning the first of the month after her husband's death. *It* will be paid to her until she reaches age 50, remarries, or dies. The rate (*of her annuity*) is one-half of her husband's annuity.

When connection words appear at the end of a long sentence the reader is kept suspended in midair:

Bad connection Your employer should refund to you the excess amount withheld from your wages. If a statement fully explaining the reason for the credit is attached to the next quarterly tax return, Form 941, *he* may take credit for the amount *refunded* to you.

Better connections Your employer should refund to you the excess amount withheld from your wages. *He* may take credit on *his* next quarterly return, Form 941, for the amount refunded to you, provided he attaches a statement explaining the credit.

Guideposts are also words. But unlike echo words they have no kinship to the last thought when they stand alone. They are usually adverbs and conjunctions that prepare the reader for the turn the new thought will take. The most common guideposts in letters are those that point to these turns: *exceptions, cause or effect (conclusions), time or place, and additions*. Here are the signs they give the reader:

EXCEPTIONS

Guideposts signifying an exception to what has just been said or implied:

The question was easy; *however, (still, yet, but, even so, nevertheless)* none of us knew the answer.

CAUSE OR EFFECT

Guideposts putting the reader on notice that the new thought states the cause or effect of what has just been said:

We found no Federal codes to govern these cases; *thus (therefore, consequently, hence, accordingly, so)* the State laws alone must decide them.

TIME OR PLACE

Guideposts telling the reader where he is in order of what has gone before:

The property was first appraised. *Next (then, afterwards, subsequently, secondly)* the question of ownership was settled.

ADDITIONS

Guideposts warning the reader that more is to be added to the thought in the last sentence:

The letter is too long; *besides (moreover, furthermore, what's more, and, too)* look at the misspelled words!

These examples are only a few of the many words in the English language that act as guideposts. Despite the wide choice, the adverbs *however* and *therefore* enjoy such a popularity with letterwriters that one would think them indispensable. Some letterwriters even use these adverbs indiscriminately; beginning a new thought with *however* when there is no exception to make; and reaching for *therefore* when logic does not suggest cause, effect, or conclusion. See what happens:

The critics of the new system have been quick to see its disadvantages; *however, we should look for its bad points.*

The writer meant to *add*, not to *except*. His meaning would have been more exact had he said *We, too, should look for its bad points*.

The omission of a guidepost can be as disconcerting as the use of a wrong one. Add a guidepost to the second sentence of the following example and see how it weaves the thoughts together:

Unrelated Throughout the month we operated with a 10-percent reduction in personnel. There are only 25 unanswered letters in this office today.

Related Throughout the month we operated with a 10-percent reduction in personnel; *even so*, there are only 25 unanswered letters in this office today.

Transition between paragraphs is achieved in much the same way as connections between thoughts. Friendly, informal letters may be well written without paragraph transition. The paragraphs then stand alone like chapters in a book.

The letter exhibited on the next page is a striking example of a natural technique for tying together sentences and paragraphs. Connections cannot always be made so easily, but you can write naturally and lead your reader straight ahead if you will remember to do these things:

Keep words that echo your last thought near the beginning of the new one.

When guideposts are needed, select those that convey your exact meaning, being careful not to overwork *however* and *therefore*.

FOR STRENGTH

Use concrete, specific words

The weak writer says:

It is believed you will be interested to know that the Commission which was recently sent up to Alaska to look into the Alaskan Railroad matters has just returned. A favorable report has been made by the engineer of this Commission, whose background and experience qualifies him to appraise the conditions on the road. He expressed the opinion that the amount expended on the construction project appears to compare favorably with similar undertakings. He further stated that it is his opinion that provisions for the workers and facilities for safeguarding health were better than normally is the case in similar projects. His report indicates that instances of disease are infrequent, and there is no evidence that intoxicating beverages are allowed in the immediate construction area. The hospitals seem to be efficiently managed, and the compensation plan is apparently satisfactory to the participants

Compare this letter with the one on the opposite page by Franklin K. Lane who knew the power of words. What's wrong with what the weak writer says about the Alaskan road? Why do you find Mr. Lane's letter more satisfying?

The difference is not so much in what the two writers have to say as in the way they say it. The weak writer gives you a general idea of conditions on the road, but Mr. Lane gives you an exact picture, etching it out with specific, concrete words. The weak writer deals in abstract nouns like *experience* and *opinion*, and nonspecific words like *disease*. Mr. Lane chooses concrete, specific

Washington, September 21, 1917

To Hon. Woodrow Wilson
The White House

My dear Mr. President:

It will interest you to know that the Commission which I sent up this year to Alaska to look into the Alaskan Railroad matters has just returned. The engineer of this Commission was Mr. Wendt, who was formerly Chief Engineer of the Pittsburg and Lake Erie Railroad, and who is now in charge of the appraisal of eastern roads under the Interstate Commerce Commission. He tells me that our Alaskan road could not have been built for less money if handled by a private concern; that he has never seen any railroad camps where the men were provided with as good food and where there was such care taken of their health. They have had no smallpox and but one case of typhoid fever. No liquor is allowed on the line of the road. The road in his judgment has followed the best possible location. Our hospitals are well run. The compensation plan adopted for injuries is satisfactory to the men.

I have directed that all possible speed be made in connecting the Matanuska coal fields with Seward. This involves the heaviest construction that we will have to undertake *** but by the middle of next year, no strikes intervening, and transportation for supplies being available, this part of the work will be done.

Faithfully and cordially yours,

FRANKLIN K. LANE

A word from the first sentence

The pronoun standing for Mr. Wendt

The pronoun standing for men

A word repeated

Parallel construction

Pronoun standing for the last statement

(Used by permission of Anne W. Lane.)

words like *Mr. Wendt* and *smallpox*. Instead of smothering his reader's perception with a phrase such as *seem to be efficiently managed* he cuts through the fog with the simple, meaningful phrase *well run*. He is not satisfied with saying that cases of disease are *infrequent*. He specifies that there was only *one case of typhoid fever*.

Abstract nouns name qualities, conditions, actions, or relations. If they were not useful they would not be part of our language, but letterwriters frequently use them when verbs or adjectives would be more forceful. For a simple example, take the word *pride*. It loses none of the shining quality of words in the sentence: *Pride goeth before destruction*. But say *he is a man of pride*, and the shine dims. The adjective form is better: *He is a proud man*.

Take the overworked abstract noun *opinion*. That noun is robust enough in a sentence like this one: *Opinions on the efficiency of the new typewriter vary sharply*. Set *opinion* in this sentence, though, and it is less forceful: *I am of the opinion that the new typewriter is efficient*. The verb form *I believe* or *I think* is stronger.

It is foolish to believe that Government letters can be rid of any great number of abstract nouns. Abstract nouns name too many of the subjects with which we deal: *ratings, eligibility, rehabilitation, systems, cooperation, labor, management*. You can name hundreds of them. In any event, many abstract nouns have come to suggest a picture. Others are made more specific in context, as *efficiency of the new machine, on-the-job training, reckless speed*.

Far more damaging to letters and much easier to replace than abstract nouns, are generalities. A letter by its very nature lends itself to specific treatment. It is intended for one person. It often deals with his problem alone. The reader who has waited impatiently for his claim to be settled is not soothed by such a general statement as *This office is making every effort to handle claims expeditiously*.

There is no excuse for telling a man that his *application must be filed within 30 days of the date of his letter or within 90 days of the date of his original application, whichever is later*, when facts show that his time limit is June 15 or some other specific date. And for the man whose claim is denied you really cloud up your explanation of the denial by saying *Denial of the claim is premised upon the obvious proposition . . .*

If you don't know whether your reader is a household maid or a household cook, *domestic workers* may be a handy term. If you do know, be specific. If you are writing about 20 men who fail to prove their cases for 20 different reasons, *absence of satisfactory evidence*, stuffy phrase though it is, may get by. But if you are writing about one man, be specific. And if you are hard put to it for something to say in acknowledging a "crackpot" suggestion, you may be forgiven for saying *your expression of opinion will receive consideration when the occasion arises*. But if you file away such a suggestion, you may be forgiven for that, too.

Use more active verbs

Another way to strengthen your letters, and at the same time to shorten your sentences, is to use fewer passive verbs and more active ones. The very word passive suggests that too many verbs of this form weaken letters, while the word active suggests that verbs of that form make them stronger. The following sentence is written with both forms. Is there any question in your mind as to which is the stronger?

Active

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation

Passive

Fourscore and seven years ago a new nation was brought forth on this continent by our fathers

That, you may say, is unthinkable! Who would spoil the natural order of Lincoln's immortal lines?

We may never write immortal sentences, but we can do a thorough job of spoiling the natural order of prosaic, every-day sentences like these:

Active

Mr. Jones was at the meeting.

In the X case, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decision that the defendant was negligent.

Passive

The meeting was attended by Mr. Jones.

In the X case, the decision of the lower court that the defendant was negligent was upheld by the Supreme Court.

Don't get the idea that passive verbs are to be avoided like poor grammar. Passive verbs are useful:

When the doer or the action is less important than the recipient

The defendant has three children. The oldest child *is called* John. (Here, the recipient of the action, *the oldest child*, is more important than the doer who may be *they* or *he* or the child's *parents*.)

When needed emphasis is gained by putting the name of the act or of the doer at the end of the sentence

Divorce laws *are enacted* by the States. (Here, the passive voice helps the writer emphasize that the laws are not Federal.)

When the doer is not known or may not be named

Much *has been said* for and against the Taft-Hartley Act.

Oftener than not, however, you may lapse into the passive voice thoughtlessly, sapping strength from your sentences and adding to their length. Be especially alert for sentences which make the doer or the action a "byproduct," or hide the doer behind an impersonal passive. Were it not for the preposition *by*, that little friend of the passive voice, and for impersonal passives, this topic would lose much of its importance. Watch how they work:

Your constituent's letter was read *by the Manager* with interest. (See how you make your manager a byproduct? Yet, he is the doer. Why not say *the manager read*?)

It is believed that his profession is that of broker. (Why hide the doer behind the impersonal passive *it is believed*? Why not say *I believe* or *we believe*?)

Don't explain your answer before giving it. Give answers straightaway; then explain if necessary

Suppose you ask a fellow worker, "What time is it?" Suppose the fellow worker begins to tell you what make his watch is, how many jewels it has, and why it keeps accurate time. Finally, having exhausted the subject, he says, "It is now 11 o'clock."

To yourself you might say, "Whew! That fellow is long winded! He takes forever to get to the point!" On the other hand, if he tells you the time and then tells you about his watch, you may find him not such a bore. He may say as much in each instance, but in the second instance he does not keep you waiting for the answer. He does not tax your patience.

By developing a letter this way you can tax your reader's patience just as much as the office bore taxes yours:

This is in reference to your application for (*you then mention the kind of application*)

Public Law—provides (*you then quote or explain the law to show who is eligible for what and in what amount*)

And at last you say: In accordance with the above, your application has been approved for payments in the amount of \$——, effective —.

Begin your letter

Your application for —— has been approved. You will receive (*amount and kind of payment*) beginning (*date*)

and your reader will be far more patient with whatever else need be said.

Don't hedge

By hedging, a letterwriter gives himself a loophole to escape from statements that are slightly doubtful or not fully inclusive. Hedging is often legitimate. Many letterwriters, though, hedge their statements as a matter of habit rather than for any legitimate reason. They habitually use such expressions as *apparently, normally, and ordinarily*.

Hedged statements lose forcefulness. Besides, the reader may get the idea the writer doesn't know what he's talking about:

Apparently, you failed to enclose the money order for \$15 mentioned in your letter of September 8.

Perhaps the writer of that sentence had some doubt as to whether the reader actually did enclose the money order. In that case he might have turned the statement to a sure fact: *We did not receive the money order mentioned in your letter of September 8. Did you forget to enclose it?*

At worst, needless hedging leads to needless correspondence by raising needless questions in the reader's mind:

The reader begins thinking of reasons why his report is not normal. *Normally*, a good work progress report shows both workloads and man-hours. While your report shows the total number of vouchers audited

The report does or doesn't include this figure. Why hedge? during the quarter ended June 30, 1954, it does not *appear to* include the total number of personnel on duty during the same period.

In dictating letters, think twice before you weaken them with words and phrases like these:

Apparently
It appears
Seemingly
It seems
Normally

Ordinarily
Usually
As a usual case
Generally
In general

As a rule
In most cases
In many instances
Seems to indicate
Commonly

FOR SINCERITY

The craftsman can't tell us how to make a letter ring with sincerity any more than he can tell us how to be sincere. He can assume, and rightly so, that Government letterwriters are genuine people eager to write letters reflecting the Government's honest interest in public problems. And he can point to things we do unwittingly that muffle the ring of sincerity.

Be human

In the first place the craftsman may tell us that we muffle the tone of our sincerity by making our letters completely impersonal; that we talk about *claimants, applicants, veterans, and suppliers*, when we might say *you, he, she, or Mr. Jones*; that we say *applicants for these positions must file application by June 30, 1954*, when we might say *you must apply by June 30, 1954*. Having divested our reader of his personality, we remove ourselves from the scene by avoiding the pronouns *I* and *we* as if we ourselves were not people. We refer to ourselves as *this Board, this agency, or this office* as if we were machines. With both the reader and the writer out of the picture it is hard to make any letter sound human.

If you want your sincerity to shine through your letters, write in human terms. Use personal pronouns like *you, he, she, we, I, our, my, your, his, and hers*. Use the proper names of the people you write about, *James Smith, Mr. Jones, Mrs. Green*. Use names that stand for human beings, *child, father, mother, son, daughter, wife, husband*, and so on. Use words like these frequently, whenever it is natural and fitting to do so.

Another robber of the personal touch is the impersonal passives (*it is believed, it is understood*) discussed in the topic on active and passive verbs. Innocuous though they seem, impersonal passives can chill the friendliest statements. Don't hide behind them. Write in the active voice with *I* or *we* as subject or, as a last resort, make your agency the subject:

I believe
We understand
This Board recommends

Admit mistakes

Of all letterwriters the most misguided are those who believe mistakes can be ignored, glossed over, or rectified by meaningless words. Perhaps they think it would disillusion the reader to learn in plain words that his Government made a mistake. Or perhaps they loose a smokescreen for the boss's benefit, believing any boss would be unhappy facing the bare facts. Whatever the reason, the result is likely to be a letter that sounds more machine-like than human-like.

Let us suppose that John M. Smith is notified of a shortage on his account, which was actually a shortage on John N. Smith's account. Discovering the error the ignorer of mistakes writes John M:

Please disregard the notice forwarded to you on April 1, 1954. The records of this office indicate that your account is in good order.

The trader in meaningless words says to John M:

It is the practice of this office to periodically review all accounts for the purpose of ascertaining their current status. From such a recent review, it was discovered that you were notified on April 1, 1954, of an outstanding

shortage on your account of \$25, whereas the account is, in fact, in good order.

It will be appreciated that the large volume of work with which this office is confronted and the current personnel shortage, render it virtually impossible to completely eliminate small errors of this nature, particularly those originating because of a similarity in names. This office wishes to assure you, however, that every effort is being made to give ----- the best possible service and to prevent the recurrence of errors.

Any inconvenience which you may have been occasioned by reason of the notice of April 1 from this office is sincerely regretted.

"Ignorers" and "glossers" and "traders in meaningless words"! There is no reason why these terms should apply to any of us. We have only to remember that the people to whom we write and the bosses for whom we write, like ourselves, sometimes make mistakes. They are none the happier about mistakes that are ignored, glossed over, or bolstered by meaningless words. They are more interested in what we do about mistakes than in why we made them.

As a matter of practical psychology, the writer who admits mistakes in plain language is surer of convincing others of his sincerity. Compare the following letter with the ones above. Which would you prefer to receive? Which writer would you feel more kindly toward?

We made a mistake in notifying you on April 1, 1954, that your account was overdue \$25. Our notice must have been confusing to you, because you have always been prompt with your payments. The fact is that your account is in good standing with no payment due until July 1, 1954.

Please accept our apology and our assurance that this office will be more careful in the future.

Don't overwhelm your reader with intensives and emphatics

Words that intensify your meaning are not so effective in letters as you might think. Intensives include adjectives and adverbs like *highest, deepest, very much, extremely, undoubtedly*, and so on.

Say to the caller at your desk, "The Administrator was extremely pleased to get your letter," and the caller himself is pleased. Say the same thing in a letter and *extremely* may lose its effect. The reader may get the idea you are putting it on pretty thick. Instead of convincing him of your sincerity, as you would wish, you may leave him in doubt.

Similar to intensives in effect on the tone of a letter are emphatics which call special attention to a statement. Emphatics overworked in Government letters include *it is to be noted, we would like to point out, an important consideration is, as a well known fact, and we call your attention to the fact*. An occasional well chosen emphatic, like an occasional intensive, will have the desired effect. But useless emphatics give the reader the impression we are laboring to put our facts across. They may even lead him to believe we are trying to convince ourselves.

Instead of using a trite emphatic, rephrase the sentence to place the emphasis on the important words:

We call your attention to the fact that you must have your report in this office by June 30 to meet the deadline.

To meet the deadline, you must get your report to this office by June 30.

Do not be obsequious or arrogant. Strive to express yourself in a friendly way and with a simple dignity befitting the United States Government

This is a rule for letter tone. It may not be the rule for the tone fitting an advertising letter or a sales letter or a letter to the folks back home. It is a special rule for the tone of a Government letter.

Tone-deaf writers turn out arrogant letters, chilling even the friendliest reader with their "we-are-smarter-than-you" overtones. Bending too far in the other direction, they grovel before their reader, whining obsequy in every line they write.

Fortunately, few letterwriters are tone deaf. Most people detect the harsh sound of words like dissonant music. They are far too sensitive to the dignity of Government to fumble their performance with obsequious overtures. Unfortunately, however, any letterwriter can get off-pitch, unintentionally offending the reader or simply displaying poor taste.

Off-pitch tone suggesting arrogance As we told you in our last letter, this agency has no jurisdiction over tax matters.
We are at a loss to understand why you directed this letter to us.

It should be clear from reading the application that you must have two persons, not just one, witness your signature. We assume that you are aware of the fact that the witnesses must be persons not related to you by blood or marriage.

We suggest that you acquaint yourself with all the facts in your case before writing this agency again.

Off-pitch tone suggesting obsequy It is a real pleasure to be of service to you. We do hope you will write us whenever you have occasion to do so.

This agency is anxious to be helpful in any way possible. If we can be of further service to you, please do not hesitate to call on us.

Please call on this office whenever we can be of assistance to you. We stand ready to help you in every possible way.

The off-pitch tones of the above sentences vary in intensity. Some of the disturbing tones are easily detected; others suggest "taste" more than "tone." The sound of a letter is pleasing if it is simple, dignified, and friendly. Here are four suggestions for improving letter tone:

1. Don't appear to argue by point blank statements that the reader is wrong, misunderstands, or has not made himself clear. For example, don't say *you are apparently under the misapprehension that the Federal Government makes old-age assistance payments directly to individuals*. In practice, this kind of misunderstanding is answered with enough information to explain how the program really works. Avoiding implied criticism or condescension, the kind of reply actually used is simple and affirmative:

You are right in thinking that the Federal Government is concerned in old-age assistance. But it does not make payments directly to individuals. That is the responsibility of the State Government. The Federal Government helps the State by paying part of the cost. The State uses both this Federal contribution and its own money to provide old-age assistance payments for those entitled to this aid under the State's assistance law.

2. Don't make high-handed statements that appear to tell the reader to "shut up." Don't say with scathing aloofness *this office has no jurisdiction over* whatever the reader is interested in. If you know who has so-called jurisdiction, tell your reader. If you don't, tell him you are sorry you can't help.

3. Don't get the idea that every letter needs a finishing touch, such as *please let me know if I can be of further assistance*. For what purpose other than serving the public do we hold our jobs? Let the genuine quality of your service make its own pleasant speech. Write a prompt, pleasant, efficient letter, and the sincerity of your purpose will sound through every line. Write a tardy, toneless, muddled letter, and perhaps the reader does need to be reassured, but mere words are not convincing.

4. Don't gush with superlatives, indulge in slang, or trade in trick phrases. Tricks for attracting attention, useful enough in advertising and sales writing, strike a false note in Government letters. Key the tone of your letter to simple dignity.

BEFORE

This is how one letter read before the writer started applying the 4-S formula.

Dear Mr. --- :

Reference is made to your letter of June 25, 1954, relative to a 1953 income tax refund check drawn in favor of John -----.

Inasmuch as Mr. ----- filed a 1953 Form 1040 with this office as a single person with no dependents and the refund check was therefore correctly drawn in like manner, it appears the alleged Mrs. ----- has no interest in same. This return was filed with the assistance of the Legal Office, Camp ----, -----.

It is suggested the enclosed Form 6570 be forwarded to the authorities at ---- ----- with a statement of fact and request for their assistance in obtaining a power of attorney for Mrs. ----- relative to negotiation of the check.

If a joint amended return should be filed by Mr. and Mrs. ----- in accordance with the community property laws of the state of -----, the refund check should be returned for cancellation with the amended return. Any overpayment determined would then be certified for refund in joint account and the interest to the check would be joint and several. A joint return must be filed and signed by both parties.

AFTER

This is how the letter read when the same employee stripped it down to essential facts in plain English.

Dear Mr. --- :

The 1953 income tax return of John ----- was filed as the return of a single person with no dependents. We cannot, therefore, make his refund check payable to any other person.

If Mrs. ----- will have the enclosed power of attorney, Form 6570, completed by her husband, she will then be able to cash the refund check.

THE MAIL MUST GO OUT!

How can you practice the 4-S formula without slowing down the mail? That is a fair question from any letterwriter. Certainly, you cannot spend your time rewriting passable letters while the backlog grows. The mail must go out! But while passable letters are passed you can ready yourself for better letters next time:

Review your letters critically. Before you release a dictated letter, appraise it by the 4-S formula.

Periodically, for a short time, have an extra copy made of your dictated letters. Note the copies with the 4-S rules that will improve your writing.

Before dictating, think your letters through. If need be, keep before you the rules you need to apply.

Listen to your sentences as you dictate them. Do they sound natural, as you would talk in a careful manner? Are you trying to say too much in a single sentence?

Think less about trying to write up and down to the level of a reader's understanding. The craftsman who suggests "visualizing" the reader sets a well-nigh impossible task for letter ghostwriters. Think more about writing all your letters in simple, straightaway English. The letters will then be appropriate for readers at any level of understanding.

Make letterwriting a teamwork between yourself and your stenographers or typists. Don't rely on them to rewrite your bad letters, but encourage them to make suggestions and correct obvious errors.

Read thoughtfully every good letter that comes your way, no matter who wrote it.

Above all, know the subjects you write about. Know them so well you can discuss them easily and surely.

III. EXAMPLES

Plain letters are an American heritage. They come to us from statesmen and soldiers whose names we know so well, and from men and women whose names we never heard. In histories and biographies, in archives and file rooms, they are to be found: evidence of good plain letters in the best American tradition, from a struggling Continental Congress to our own atomic era.

It is impossible in one short book to bring you more than a few examples of these letters. The ones selected will exemplify not only the practical art of letter-writing but also the six common purposes of Government letters. These purposes are:

- To ask for information, evidence, or action
- To answer inquiries
- To report
- To acknowledge comments, suggestions, and opinions
- To transact ordinary business
- To amend or adjust

ASKING LETTERS

The following little asking letter from President Lincoln to the Secretary of War may cause us to wonder why we can't be more informal in writing one another in the Federal service:

It is a question whether we shall accept the troops under the call of Governor Curtin for 9-months men and 12-months men. I understand you say it rests with me under the law. Perhaps it does; but I do not wish to decide it without your concurrence. What say you? If we do not take them after what has happened, we shall fail perhaps to get any on other terms from Pennsylvania.¹

Asking letters have a twofold duty: (1) to state *what* is wanted, and (2) unless the reason is obvious, to tell *why*. An asking letter that is clear and courteous—and, if need be, persuasive—is surer of getting results.

Whether an asking letter should begin with *what* or with *why* depends both on the subject matter and the letterwriter's ingenuity. When the reason is compelling, the reader is better prepared and perhaps more receptive if the reason is stated first. Sometimes, as in the following letter signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the request is suggested at the beginning but is actually drawn as a conclusion:

*Suggests
what*

Following the submission of the Baruch rubber report to me in September, I asked that mileage rationing be extended throughout the nation. Certain printing and transportation problems made it necessary to delay the program until December first.

Why

With every day that passes, our need for this rubber conservation measure grows more acute. It is the Army's need and the Navy's need. They must have rubber. We, as civilians, must conserve our tires.

The Baruch Committee said: "We find the existing situation to be so dangerous that unless corrective measures are taken immediately this country will face

¹ New Letters and Papers of Lincoln, compiled by Paul M. Angle (Houghton Mifflin, 1930).

both a military and a civilian collapse In rubber we are a *have-not* Nation.”

Why

Since then the situation has become more acute, not less. Since then our military requirements for rubber have become greater, not smaller. Since then many tons of precious rubber have been lost through driving not essential to the war effort. We must keep every pound we can on our wheels to maintain our wartime transportation system.

What: the conclusion

We must do everything in our power to see that the program starts December first because victory must not be delayed through failure to support our fighting forces.²

The following letter addressed to his fellow workers by Mr. H. V. Higley, Administrator of Veterans Affairs, exemplifies the use of simple human words in letters of persuasion:

Our business is people. The VA exists only to help people who have helped their country, and those dependent on these veterans. In our relations with these human beings who come to us for help we must act, speak, and write with the human touch. Too often we are not doing this in preparing letters to claimants. And yet most of our contacts with people are through the written word.

When we use cold, stiff, formal language we give the impression that we are dealing with a “case,” and not an individual who sought our help. Recently such a letter to a veteran’s widow was sent to my office for signature. It was curt to the point of being brusque. I could not sign such a letter. It was returned to be written in simple human language. I fear that every day too many letters like that one—cold and impersonal—go out to the people we are here to help if we can.

We deal in service and the VA has a place only for employees who can give service with patience, sympathy, and understanding.

I know from contact with employees that they have a genuine interest in serving veterans. In order that veterans may understand how we in the VA feel about them, it is important that we write to them with the same warm cordiality with which we meet those who visit us to discuss their business.

I want each of you, wherever you may be in our organization, to strive toward this end. You may be assured of my continued personal interest in how well we humanize our relations with veterans and their dependents.

REPLY LETTERS

The Social Security Administration contributes this reply letter from its files of recent years:

I regret that pressure of work has delayed my answer to your letter of March 21st. And I am genuinely sorry that I cannot be of more practical

²The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, compiled by Samuel I. Rosenman (Harper & Brothers 1942).

help in solving the financial difficulties that you and your wife are facing. Rising living costs are certainly a problem, and I know they fall most heavily on those who, like you, must live on a modest fixed income. It is small comfort, too, to point out that you would be even worse off if social security benefits had not been increased last fall. As you probably know, Congress is not now considering further social security amendments so that there is little prospect of further increases in the near future. And though stabilizing prices is a matter of grave concern to the President and the Government, we all realize how hard it is for incomes to catch up with expenses.

In spite of all this, I do want to make one suggestion which might lead to something. If you have not already done so, get in touch with your local public welfare office or write to the State Department of Welfare in Indianapolis. I make this suggestion with the thought not so much that you might qualify for old age assistance as that there may be other sources of help in your community. . . . The people in your local welfare office also know about private agencies that might offer help of one kind or another. This possibility is at least worth investigating.

Let me say again that I sympathize with the problem you, and others like you, are facing.

And here is a modern-day letter exemplifying the art of replying "no".

You make me feel very much at home in Pittsburgh. I like the people I meet there; and I am enthusiastic about the job you are doing. But I would be showing rank favoritism if I were to move to go out there to start off your Institute. I have to catch up with my obligations in other parts of the country. I am, of course, flattered that you asked me to come.

Thanks for sending me your talk on housing and recreation. It was a good piece, and I think the way you are working it out in Pittsburgh is excellent.

The following businesslike letter gave a straightaway answer to a question about the status of an insurance account:

Premiums on your \$5,000 ordinary life insurance policy are paid through March 31, 1950. Your account is therefore in order, and your insurance will remain in force as long as you pay your premiums on time. Your next quarterly premium of \$26.95 is due April 1, 1950.

Law, like any other subject, can be explained with a clarity that makes the letter easy to read and understand. Note how clearly Thomas Jefferson explains the law in this paragraph from his businesslike reply to Albert Gallatin:

Our laws permit a foreigner to hold any property in our country, except lands. A foreigner may contract for a ship to be built for him, so that she will be his from the time of laying the keel; or he may contract so that she shall be his only when launched, or when rigged, etc. The act of delivery to him or his agent fixes, in that case, the moment she becomes his property. . . .³

³ The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, vol. xliii (Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904).

Few of us will be called on to write letters grappling directly with the problems of world leaders. But even the writer of letters on commonplace subjects can profit by studying the style of these men. In this letter written in 1915 by Walter H. Page to Edward M. House note how neatly Mr. Page refers to the letter he answers:

The sinking of the *Arabic* is the answer to the President and to your letter to me. And there'll be more such answers. You said to me one day after you had got back from your last visit to Berlin: "They are impossible." I think you told the truth, and surely you know your German and you know your Berlin—or you did know them when you were here.

The question is not what we have done for the Allies, not what any other neutral country has done or has failed to do—such comparisons, I think, are far from the point. The question is when the right moment arrives for us to save our self-respect, our honour, and the esteem and fear (or the contempt) in which the world will hold us.

Berlin has the Napoleonic disease. If you follow Napoleon's career—his excuses, his evasions, his inventions, the wild French enthusiasm and how he kept it up—you will find an exact parallel. That becomes plainer every day. Europe may not be wholly at peace in five years—may be ten.⁴

REPORT BY LETTER

On concluding the treaty with England in 1794, John Jay reported to Rufus King in words simple and sincere:

I send by the packet the fruit of my negotiation—a treaty. I wish that I could go with it, as well that I might again be in my own country, as that I might answer questions on the subject. The draught has undergone several editions, with successive alterations, additions, etc. This shows that time and trouble have not been spared.

I have just finished a hasty letter to Mr. Randolph. It will be thought slovenly, but I cannot help it. The packet must go. If I entirely escape censure, I shall be agreeably disappointed. Should the treaty prove, as I believe it will, beneficial to our country, justice will finally be done. If not, be it so—my mind is at ease. . . .⁵

A report letter should be direct, forward moving, and as interesting as the writer can make it. In 1857 Ambassador Dallas wrote the Secretary of State that there was little to report. He nevertheless holds the reader's interest by making the most of his topic:

The worst apprehensions are fast seizing upon the merchants. The Bank of England raised her interest on discounts to 10 percent yesterday. Several heavy failures have been announced, among them the great firm of Dennistoun, of Glasgow; and others are hourly expected. Not a ray of sunshine breaks upon the gloom from any quarter as yet. Men look as if they were beneath an impending avalanche and scarcely dare to breathe.

⁴ The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page, Burton J. Hendrick (Doubleday, Page, 1925).

⁵ The Life and Writings of John Jay, vol. iii (J & J Harper, 1833).

This applies to the great banking houses without exception, whose names I will not trust to paper, but whose deep anxieties are manifest. . . .

I have written only because of my wish to send you a line by every leading steamer, for I really am left by the extreme dullness of the times without topics for letters.⁶

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

The letters in this category are actually answers, but of such a distinct character that a separate classification seemed appropriate. They acknowledge letters which offer comments, suggestions, or opinions: the voice of the people. There are no more important letters in American Government than those in this category. Of them, Thomas Jefferson had this to say in a letter to a Committee of the Merchants of New Haven:

I have received the remonstrance you were pleased to address to me on the appointment of Samuel Bishop to the office of collector of New Haven The right of our fellow citizens to represent to the public functionaries their opinion on proceedings interesting to them, is unquestionably a constitutional right, often useful, sometimes necessary, and will always be respectfully acknowledged by me.⁷

With this letter President Theodore Roosevelt acknowledged the voice of a "good, straight American."

I like your letter because you are what I hope I am too—a good, straight American. If any Christian was being oppressed and you had power to stop it, I know you would stop it just exactly as quick as if he was a Jew: and I would be ashamed of myself, under reverse circumstances, if I did not act in the same way. And, my dear fellow, neither you nor I are of the type that patronizes anybody!⁸

In acknowledging a voice, Federal Trade Commissioner Lowell B. Mason wrote this refreshing letter a few years ago:

Thank you for your letter of June 18 stating the reasons for maintaining the present status of Section 2 (c) of the Robinson-Patman Act.

They are the usual arguments in favor of this law, but you have expressed them so well, so carefully and in such an open and friendly manner that I confess not only admiration for your presentation, but complete agreement with many of your points.

There is, however, more to the problem than either you or I have covered. With your leave, I shall search out in a later note some of the pros and cons of this most interesting subject which we might consider together.

June has been a heavy month for me, so I expect to take a short vacation, what Walt Whitman described as the "white spaces in life." You will hear from me the latter part of July.

Letters from children come to us as the voice of young America. Through our simple acknowledgments we can play a small part in helping children become

⁶ Letters from London, Dallas (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1869).

⁷ Memoir Correspondence, Etc., of Jefferson, Randolph, vol. iii (Charlottesville, 1829).

⁸ The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, vol. iii edited by Elting E. Morison (Harvard University Press, 1951).

good citizens. The tone for a child's letter may be captured from this one by Abraham Lincoln:

Your friend, Leroy C. Driggs, tells me you are a very earnest friend of mine, for which please allow me to thank you. You and those of your age are to take charge of this country when we older ones shall have gone; and I am glad to learn that you already take so lively an interest in what just now so deeply concerns us.⁹

ORDINARY BUSINESS

These are the letters written by hundreds of Government offices throughout the country in the course of their ordinary business transactions.

There is, for instance, the letter about a job application. In this cordial and helpful letter from the files of today the writer shows the alertness of a "talent scout":

Before completing his assignment as Acting Director of _____, Dr. _____ called my attention to your letter of September 1 on the release of _____ Policy No. 7.

Both Dr. _____ and I were impressed not only with your qualifications but also with your earnest wish to be of greater service to your country and mankind. As your interests are primarily in the area of _____, I took the liberty of discussing your availability with Mr. _____, Personnel Officer of _____ Administration. At Mr. _____ suggestion I referred your letter and its attachments to him in Room 118, _____ Building, _____, Washington, D. C.

I trust that the _____ Administration can take advantage of your experience and enthusiasm.

Hundreds of thousands of letters each year are written as notices of the approval or disapproval of applications and claims. These letters are most effective when brief and businesslike, as this one was:

We have approved your application for a loan on your \$5,000 ordinary life policy, effective June 1, 1952. A check for the amount of the loan, \$200, will be sent to you by the Treasury Department.

Note that the above letter does not start with *reference is made to your application*. That introduction is entirely superfluous, as it would be in the following letter:

Your application for reinstatement of your \$10,000 level premium term National Service Life Insurance has been approved with premiums paid through _____. There is an unapplied credit of _____ on your account which you may deduct from a future premium payment.

Note the directness of this form letter about an ordinary tax transaction:

The credit you claimed for excess social security deductions on your income tax return has been disallowed since you had only one employer during the year. Only those excess deductions which result from having two or more employers are allowed as a credit on an income tax return.

⁹ New Letters and Papers of Lincoln, compiled by Paul M. Angle (Houghton Mifflin, 1930).

Your employer should refund to you the excess amount withheld from your wages. He may take credit on his next quarterly return, Form 941, for the amount refunded to you, provided he attaches a statement fully explaining the credit.

You can receive any additional assistance you may need from the nearest branch or headquarters office of the District Director of Internal Revenue. You will find the locations of our branch offices on the reverse of this letter.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Letters are used in a number of ways to set the record straight. In one way or another this means amending or adjusting.

"Pouring oil on troubled waters" is the way of making amends to those we sometimes unwittingly offend. To allay General Meade's surprise and vexation at Lincoln's show of disappointment when General Robert E. Lee's Army escaped, Major General Halleck offered these words of reassurance:

I take this method of writing you a few words which I could not well communicate in any other way. Your fight at Gettysburg met with universal approbation of all military men here. You handled your troops in that battle as well, if not better, than any general has handled his army during the war. You brought all your forces into action at the right time and place, which no commander of the Army of the Potomac has done before. You may well be proud of that battle. The President's order of proclamation of July 4th showed how much he appreciated your success.

And now a few words in regard to subsequent events. You should not have been surprised or vexed at the President's disappointment at the escape of Lee's army. He had examined into all the details of sending you reinforcements to satisfy himself that every man who could possibly be spared from other places had been sent to your army. He thought that Lee's defeat was so certain that he felt no little impatience at his unexpected escape. I have no doubt, General, that you felt the disappointment as keenly as any one else. Such things sometimes occur to us without any fault of our own. Take it altogether, your short campaign has proved your superior generalship, and you merit, as you will receive, the confidence of the Government and the gratitude of the country. I need not assure you, General, that I have lost none of the confidence which I felt in you when I recommended you for the command.¹⁰

Then there are the mistakes, as inevitable as they are human, for which letters offer apology or make amends. From the files of today come these two garden-variety letters on subjects common to all agencies:

I am very sorry indeed that you were sent five copies of a bulletin on _____ when you requested copies of our mimeographed report on _____. Copies of the latter report were distributed to State officials only and the supply has been completely exhausted. Thinking, however,

¹⁰ The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade, vol. II (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).

that you probably have immediate use for this material, I am glad to lend you our office copy.

We are sorry to learn from your letter of November 13 that the volume for Mrs. _____ was sent to her express collect.

Your records are indeed accurate, and your account shows you have a balance of \$2.78 still available for the payment of shipping charges. We are at a loss to explain why book post was not used. In explanation of our failure to use this method, we can only plead the great volume of interlibrary loans handled by the section. If you will let us know the amount of the express fee, you will be promptly reimbursed for the charge.

We trust there will be no recurrence of such an unfortunate incident.

And once again let us turn to the letters of Abraham Lincoln; this time for an example of the simple graciousness of saying "You were right—I was wrong":

WASHINGTON, JULY 13, 1863.

MAJOR GENERAL GRANT.

My Dear General: I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgment for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg, I thought you should do what you finally did—march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports, and thus go below; and I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I, that the Yazoo Pass expedition and the like could succeed. When you got below and took Port Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join General Banks, and when you turned northward, east of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right and I was wrong.¹¹

Yours very truly,

A. LINCOLN.

¹¹ Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. viii (Lincoln Centenary Association, 1907).

IV. THE WATCHLIST

Watch for the words and phrases on this list. Some of them are overworked. Others are used incorrectly. Many are longer than need be.

- ABEYANCE.** *Held in abeyance* is a pompous phrase. *Wait* and *postpone action* are more natural expressions.
- ABOUT.** *He will arrive at about nine o'clock* is not a correct sentence. Use *at* or *about*, but not both.
- ABOVE** should not be used in the sense of *more than*. *His wages are more than (not above) \$5,000 a year*.
- ACCOMPANIED BY.** The preposition *with* is usually better, as *his letter with (instead of accompanied by) the application*.
- ACCOMPLISHED** may be expressed as *done*.
- ACCUMULATE.** *Gather* is a good plain word to replace this one.
- ACQUAINT.** Instead of *acquainting* your readers with facts, *tell* or *inform* them.
- ADDITIONAL.** Vary the use of this overworked adjective. Use *added*.
- ADVISE.** *Tell, inform, and say* are fresher words for letters. *You are advised* is a useless phrase in any letter.
- AFFECT, EFFECT.** *Affect* is always a verb meaning to modify or influence. *Effect* may be noun or verb. As a verb it means to accomplish or bring about; as a noun, outcome or result. Both *affect* and *effect* are overworked, correctly and incorrectly.
- AFFORD AN OPPORTUNITY.** *Allow* is suggested as a replacement for this overworked phrase.
- ALL-AROUND** is not correct. Use *all-round*.
- ALL OF.** Say *all the workers*, not *all of the workers*.
- ALL READY, ALREADY.** The first is an adjective phrase, correctly used in this sentence: *When the hour came, they were all ready*. The second is an adverb that oftener than not should be omitted: *We have (already) written a letter*.
- ALTERNATIVE, CHOICE.** *Alternative* refers to two only; *choice*, to two or more. Since there is only one alternative to another, don't say *the only other alternative*; simply say *the alternative*.
- AMELIORATE.** Why is this big word so popular? It's a good word, but so is the commoner word *improve*.
- AMOUNT, NUMBER** are often used loosely. An *amount* is a sum total; *number*, as a noun, refers to collective units. You have *an amount of money*, and *a number of errors*.
- ANTICIPATE** means to foresee or prevent by prior action. Don't use it when you actually mean *expect*.
- ANXIOUS** is proper only when anxiety actually exists. We are *eager* to write good letters, not *anxious*.
- ANY.** Don't follow superlatives with *any*, as *Lincoln's letters are the best of any*. When used in a comparative statement, *any* must be followed by *other*, as *that letter is better than any other he has written*.
- ANY PLACE** is not good usage. Say *anywhere*.
- APPEAR.** A woman *appears* to be young, but she *seems* to be intelligent. *Appear* usually suggests that which is visible.
- APPRECIATE YOUR INFORMING US** is a clumsy phrase that can be replaced with a simpler one, as *please write us or please tell us*.
- APPROXIMATELY** is overworked. Why not say *about*?
- APPARENTLY.** This is a "hedger" to be avoided.
- APT.** Don't use this word when you mean *likely*. *Apt* suggests predisposition. *A tactless person is apt to write a blunt letter, but delayed replies are likely (not apt) to damage public relations*.
- AROUND.** *Around ten dollars* is incorrect. Say *about ten dollars*.
- ASCERTAIN** is a big word often used when the little word *learn* is better. Don't use *ascertain* unless you want to put over the idea of effort in getting facts.
- ASSISTANCE.** Let's have more *help* and *aid*, and less *assistance*.
- AT—**
- ALL TIMES. Say *always*.
 - THIS TIME. Say *now*.
 - THE PRESENT TIME. Say *now*.
 - AN EARLY DATE. Won't soon do?
 - YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE. Do you mean this? A convenient time may not come.
 - THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE MOMENT. This may be the moment the letter arrives.
- ATTACHED—**
- PLEASE FIND
 - HERETO
 - HEREWITH
- } Worn out letter language. *Attached* is adequate.

ATTENTION IS INVITED or **ATTENTION IS CALLED** should be needless. If a sentence doesn't make its point without these emphatics it needs rewriting.

BALANCE. You may have a *balance* on an account, but that which is left after something is taken away is a *remainder*, as *the remainder of the year, the remainder of the office force.*

BASIS. Instead of saying as a *basis for*, simply say *for*.

BE BACK in the sense of return is not preferable. Say, *he will return to (not be back in) the office Tuesday.*

BETWEEN, AMONG. *Between* properly refers to two only. *Among* is used in referring to more than two.

BIANNUAL, BIENNIAL. *Biannual*, like semi-annual, means twice a year. *Biennial* means every two years.

BIMONTHLY means every two months. Semi-monthly is used to express twice monthly.

CLAIM. Do not use *claim* as an intransitive verb. *Claim ownership*, but don't *claim to be efficient.*

COGNIZANCE. Avoid this big word both in its legal meaning of *jurisdiction* and in its common meaning of *heed* or *notice*. Instead of saying *under the cognizance of this office*, be specific, as *this office does not audit travel vouchers*. Instead of saying *having cognizance of this fact*, say *aware of this fact*.

COMMENCE. *Begin* or *start* are stout little words that should not be forgotten.

COMMITMENT. How about *promise*?

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATION. Avoid these long words by being specific. Instead of *communicate*, use *write*, *wire*, or *telephone*. Instead of *communication*, use *letter*, *telegram*, *memorandum*.

COMPLIANCE, COMPLIES. The phrase *in compliance with your request* is too formal for a friendly letter. It is often not necessary, but, if needed, may be replaced with *as you requested*. *Meets the requirements* is a good substitute for *complies with requirements*.

CONCLUDE. It is better to *close a letter* than to *conclude* it.

CONTRIBUTE. What's wrong with *give*?

CONSIDER. Omit the superfluous *as* after this word. *We consider the case closed (not as closed).*

CONSIDERED OPINION. Forget this one.

CONSIDERABLE. Use this word only as an adjective.

CONSUMMATE. You really like big words if you use this one in the sense of *complete* or *bring about*.

CONTINUOUSLY, CONTINUALLY. The first word means *without interruption*; the second, *intermittently, at frequent intervals*.

DATE. Instead of *this date*, say *today*. Instead of *under date of*, say *on, of, or dated*.

DEMONSTRATES. Shows is a good plain word to substitute for this one.

DESIRE. *If you wish* or *if you want* is usually better than *if you desire*.

DETERMINE. Overworked. *Decide* or *find out* may be substituted.

DEVELOP. Don't use this word for *happen, occur, take place*.

DIFFERENT is superfluous in this sentence: *Six (different) plans were discussed at the meeting.*

DUE TO THE FACT THAT is a roundabout way of saying *because*.

DURING suggests continuously, throughout. *In (not during) the meeting he brought up the question of pay raises.*

EARLIEST PRACTICABLE DATE. What is a *practicable date*?

EFFECT, AFFECT. See **AFFECT**.

EFFECTUATE. A pompous way of saying *to bring about*.

EMPLOYED is overworked in the sense of *used*.

EMPLOYMENT. *Jobs* and *work* have equal dignity.

ENCLOSED—
—HEREWITH
—PLEASE FIND
—WITH THIS LETTER } *Enclosed is sufficient.*

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY is an unnecessary euphemism for *find it hard, or have trouble*. Instead of saying *call on our local office if you encounter difficulty in completing your application*, why not say *call on our local office if you need help etc.?* Or, if *difficulty* must be your word, why not replace *encounter* with *meet*?

ENDEAVOR TO ASCERTAIN, high-sounding phrase though it is, simply means *try to find out*.

EQUIVALENT is seldom better than *equal*.

EVENT is not to be used for *incident, affair, and happening*, unless the occurrence is particularly noteworthy.

EXERCISE CARE is a stuffy way of saying *please be careful*.

EXPIRATION. *End* is just as final.

EXPEDITE is a popular Government word. Can't we say *hasten* or *hurry*? Do you know that the Latin from which *expedite* derives means "to free one caught by the foot"?

EXPERIENCE HAS INDICATED THAT. Try *we (I) learned*.

FACILITATE is another popular Government word. It means *make easy*, but it *makes hard* reading for some people.

FARTHER, FURTHER. Farther indicates distance; further denotes quantity or degree. You go *farther* away; you hear nothing *further*.

FAVOR. Does anybody nowadays use *favor* in the sense of a letter? Don't. It's old fashioned.

FEW, LESS. *Few* is for numbers; *less* is for quantities or amounts. *Write fewer pages and say less.*

FIRST is both an adjective and an adverb. Don't say *firstly*.

FOLLOWING. *He retired after (not following) an outstanding career.*

FINALIZE, FINALIZATION. These are manufactured words. Why manufacture such words when you have *end, conclude, and complete?*

FOR—

- YOUR INFORMATION. Superfluous.
- THE MONTH OF JULY. *For July.*
- THE REASON THAT. *Since, because, as.*

FORWARD is often used when *send* is better.

FULLEST POSSIBLE EXTENT. A meaningless padding.

FURNISH is often used when *give* is better. *Please give (not furnish) us the information.*

FURTHER. See **FARTHER**.

IF—

- DOUBT IS ENTERTAINED. Say *if doubtful.*
- IT IS DEEMED SATISFACTORY. Say *if satisfactory.*

IMPLEMENT. Say *carry out.*

IN—

- COMPLIANCE WITH YOUR REQUEST. Say *as requested.*
- ADDITION TO. Say *besides.*
- A SATISFACTORY MANNER. Say *satisfactorily.*
- THE NEAR FUTURE. Say *soon.*
- THE EVENT THAT. Say *if.*
- THE AMOUNT OF. Say *for.*
- THE MEANTIME. Say *meantime or meanwhile.*
- ORDER TO. Say *to.*
- REGARD TO. Say *about.*
- VIEW OF THE FACT THAT. Say *as.*
- A POSITION TO. Say *we cannot rather than we are not in a position to.*

INADVERTENCY. *Errors and mistakes* are not glossed over by this euphemism.

INASMUCH AS. *As, since, and because* are a lot shorter.

INDICATE is overworked, but *show* is a stout little word.

INFORMED. *You are informed* should be a useless phrase in any letter.

INITIAL is overworked, but *first* is not used enough.

INITIATE is a Government favorite for which *begin* is synonymous. Sometimes the word can be omitted, as in the phrase *initiate a citation (cite).*

INCAPACITATED. Why not *unable to work?*

INSURE. *In order to insure* is a common phrase in Government letters. *Make sure* is simpler and more natural.

INTERPOSE NO OBJECTION. Be direct. Say *I do not object or I approve.*

JURISDICTION. See **COGNIZANCE**.

KINDLY should not be used for please. *Please reply, not kindly reply.*

LAST AND LATEST are not interchangeable. *Last* means final; *latest*, most recent. *The last page* of a book, but *the latest book on the market.*

LEAST is used when more than two persons or things have been mentioned. Use *less* when only two persons or things have been mentioned: *He is the less (not least) forceful of the two speakers.*

LENGTHY means unduly or tediously long. *Lengthy* may describe some of our letters, but *long* is usually the word.

LESS. See **FEW** and **LEAST**.

LIEU. *In place of* is more appropriate for letters.

LIKE. Never use *like* to introduce a subject and its verb. *He wrote as (not like) he spoke.*

LIQUIDATE. Say *pay off* if you use the word in that sense.

LOAN is not desirable as a verb. Use *lend*.

LOCALITY. Don't overlook the little word *place.*

LOCATE. You *find* (not *locate*) a file.

MAKES PROVISION FOR. Try using *does.*

MEETS WITH OUR APPROVAL is a roundabout way of saying *we approve.*

MODIFICATION. *Change* will usually take the place of this one.

NEAR is incorrectly used in this sentence: *There is not near enough.* Use *nearly.*

NECESSARY is used when *need* would do. For example, you may shorten *it is not necessary for you to you need not.*

NOMINAL means *in name*, and by implication *small.* Why not say *small?*

NONE as a subject is usually plural unless a singular subject is clearly indicated. *None of the jobs are open. None of the work is done.*

NOTWITHSTANDING THE FACT THAT is the longwinded way of saying *although* or *even though*.

OBJECTIVE can be *aim*.

OBLIGATE can be *bind*.

OBLIGATION can be *debt*.

ON is superfluous in stating days and dates.

He arrived Tuesday, not on Tuesday.

OPTIMUM is Latin for *best*. Let's stick to English.

OUT is superfluous in phrases like *start out* and *lose out*. *He started (not started out) as a messenger.*

OVER should be avoided when you mean *more than* in referring to a number.

There were more than (not over) five hundred people at the meeting.

OVER THE SIGNATURE OF is an unnatural way of saying *signed by*.

PAMPHLET need not be described as *little*.

The suffix *let* on words like *booklet*, *leaflet*, and *hamlet*, means *little* or *small*.

PAST. Say *last year*, not *past year*, if you mean the preceding year.

PART. *Our error* is better than *an error on our part*.

PARTICIPATE is a common word, but *take part* is a good plain way of saying the same thing.

PARTY. Does anyone use this for *person* any more? Don't.

PECUNIARILY INTERESTED. Like so many of our pompous phrases, this one originated to cover a broad meaning. Substitutes for phrases like these do not always satisfy our legal advisers. But you might try *financial interest* or *interest in profit*.

PER need not be used for our English article *a*. Avoid the Latin terms, *per annum*, *per diem*, and so on. Say *a year* and *a day*.

PHOTOSTATIC COPIES. *Photostats* is a word now generally accepted.

PLACE. See ANY PLACE.

PORTION. *Part of the time*, not *portion of the time*.

POSSESS. Why not *have*?

PRACTICALLY is overworked. Use *virtually*, *almost*, *nearly*.

PRECLUDE. Do you use this word whenever you can work it in? Vary your usage with *shut out* or *prevent*. Many letterwriters overwork the phrase *preclude the necessity*.

PREDECEASE is often used as a euphemism. Euphemisms are not as tone-invoking as you may think. Say *die before*.

PREDICATED ON THE ASSUMPTION. Forget this one.

PREVENTIVE is better than the irregular doublet *preventative*.

PREVIOUS TO, PRIOR TO. Why not *before*?

PRINCIPAL, PRINCIPLE. The noun *principal* means *head* or *chief*, as well as *capital sum*. The adjective *principal* means *highest* or *best in rank* or *importance*. *Principle* means *truth*, *belief*, *policy*, *conviction*, or *general theory*.

PROCESS OF PREPARATION doesn't make the action any more important than *being prepared* or *we are preparing*.

PROCURE. Some people say this is the common Government word for *get*.

PROVEN should not be used as the past participle of *prove*. Use *proved*. *Proven* may be used as an adjective.

PROMULGATE. A long word for *issue*.

PROVIDING should not be used for *if* or *provided*. *Providing low-cost houses is a problem but we will meet the problem provided the builders get supplies.*

PURSUANT TO. *Under* will usually take the place of this one.

QUITE means *really*, *truly*, *wholly*, *positively*. Avoid its use in phrases like *quite a few* and *quite some*.

RARELY EVER, SELDOM EVER. *Ever* is superfluous in phrases like these. Say *we seldom fail*, not *we seldom ever fail*.

RECENT DATE is meaningless. Either give the date of the letter or omit any reference to it.

REGARDING is overworked. Little words wear better, so try using *about* oftener.

REMUNERATION. Why not *pay*?

RENDER. Use *give* in the sense of *giving help*.

RESPECTING. If you mean *about*, why not say *about*?

RESIDE. The chances are you seldom use this word in talking. The talk word *live* is the natural one for a letter.

RETAIN. *Keep* is not a word to shun.

REVIEW OF OUR RECORDS INDICATES. If the information can come only from the record, omit this phrase.

STATE is more formal than *say*.

SECURE. Avoid this word when *get*, *take*, or *obtain* is better.

SELDOM EVER. *Ever* is superfluous.

SOME should not be used in the sense of *somewhat*, *a little*, or *rather*. *His letters are somewhat (not some) better.*

SORT. Never say *these sort* or *those sort*. Say *this sort* or *those sorts*.

SPOUSE. Unless you are quoting a law, why use this word in preference to *husband* or *wife*?

STILL REMAINS. *Still* adds nothing to the meaning of *remains*.

SUBMITTED. *Sent*.

SUBSEQUENT TO. *After*.

SUFFICIENT. *Enough.*

TERMINATED. *Ended* may be just as final.

THIS—

—IS TO INFORM YOU. Omit.

—IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND THANK YOU. *Thank you* is enough.

TRANSMIT. *Send* is better.

UNKNOWN should be avoided in the sense of *unidentified.*

UNTIL SUCH TIME AS. *Until* is enough.

UTILIZATION is an inflated word for *use.*

VERIFICATION may be *proof.*

VERY is redundant in the phrase *very complete.* *Complete* is absolute.

VISITATION. Why should anyone use this word in the place of *visit?*

WISH TO APOLOGIZE, WISH TO ADVISE.

Instead of the first phrase, simply say *we apologize.* Instead of the second phrase,

start off with what you have to say.

THE LETTERWRITER'S CHECKLIST

The questions are so worded that check marks in the "NO" column may indicate your correspondence trouble spots.

- | | YES | NO |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Are most of your letters less than a page long? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Is your average sentence less than 22 words? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Do you try to keep paragraphs short—less than 10 lines? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Do you avoid beginning a letter with <i>Reference is made</i> or <i>This office is in receipt of your letter</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Do you know some good techniques for beginning letters naturally and conversationally? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Can you think of 4 words that will take the place of <i>however</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. As a rule do you paraphrase laws and regulations instead of playing safe and quoting them? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Do you know what's wrong with phrases like these: <i>makes provision for, held a meeting, gave consideration to, meets with the Bureau's approval</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Are your letters free of pat phrases like <i>the records of this Bureau indicate</i> and <i>this office has no jurisdiction over</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Do you use personal pronouns freely, particularly the personal pronoun <i>you</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Are your letters written in the first person (<i>we (I) shall appreciate</i>) rather than the third person (<i>this Bureau will appreciate</i>)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Do you prefer active verbs (<i>the manager read the letter</i>) to passive ones (<i>the letter was read by the manager</i>)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. When you have a choice, do you choose little words (<i>pay, help, mistake</i>) rather than big ones (<i>remuneration, assistance, inadvertency</i>)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Whenever possible do you refer to people by name (<i>Mr. Jones, Miss Smith</i>) rather than categorically (<i>the claimant, the veteran, the applicant</i>)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Compare your letters with your talk. Do they sound as you do when you talk in a careful manner? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. Do you answer a question before explaining the answer? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. Do you encourage your stenographer to correct obvious errors in your letters? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. Have you an urge to use a red pencil on phrases like <i>attention is called to the fact, it is to be noted, and it will be apparent</i> ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Washington: 1955