

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

Written and Spoken

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PREFACE

How to communicate facts and ideas most directly, clearly, and succinctly in written and spoken English is the problem for which this book aims to present a relatively simple and direct solution. Since the assembling and organizing of material to be communicated almost always requires some writing, primary attention is given to written discourse. The written medium offers the student his best opportunity to consider his material, to fill gaps, add essential items, omit non-essentials — to test by trial and error the solution of his problem. Our thoughts, however, are most often transmitted by speech. If the finished product is to be spoken, some other elements must be considered in addition to those that are common to writing and to speaking. Those requirements also are given attention here. And finally, since communication is a matter of receiving as well as of sending, reading has a vital relation to the subject. The person who is trying to learn how he can best transmit his thoughts can learn much by observing how, and how effectively, material has been transmitted to him, in speech, and especially in written discourse. Some attention has therefore been given to reading, which enables the student to observe how the other fellow has failed or succeeded in reaching his goal. Obviously no special attention has been given to techniques of literary quality or esthetics. Although the purpose here is purely practical, the student should bear in mind that simplicity, directness, and clarity characterize the greatest works in our literary heritage.

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CONTENTS

I	READING FOR RESULTS	3
	The Reader's Interest — The Reader's Vocabulary — The Author's Purpose — Physical Factors in Reading — Intellectual Factors in Reading — Facts and Non-Facts — Topic Sentences — The Précis — Alertness	
II	THE LOGICAL BASIS OF COMMUNICATION	16
	<i>Descriptive Analysis</i> — Descriptive Analysis in Science — Descriptive Writing and Speaking — The Whole and the Parts — <i>Narrative Analysis</i> — The Whole in Narrative — The Facts in Narrative — <i>Explanatory Analysis</i> — Induction and Deduction — Explanatory Writing and Speaking — Speculation — Argument — the Three Processes of Thought Combined — <i>Contact of Minds</i> — The Beginning — Relation to the World — Relation to Audience Experience — Relation to the Occasion — Exercises	
III	THE LARGER UNITS OF COMMUNICATION	33
	<i>Limiting the Subject</i> — The Audience — <i>Gathering Information</i> — Preliminary Outline — Essential and Non-essential — <i>Outlining</i> — Specimen Outline — Sentence Outlines — <i>Order of Details</i> — Spatial Relations — Time Relations — Order of Importance — <i>The Final Writing</i> — Order of Writing — The Audience and the Beginning — Coherence — Conclusion — Exercises	
IV	ORAL COMMUNICATION	52
	<i>Speaking versus Writing</i> — Logical Structure — Proportion — Accuracy — Faulty Logic — Brevity and Directness — Structure — Transitions — Restatement — Motivation and Persuasion — Illustrations — Language of Speech — Specific and Concrete Terms — Visual Aids — Question Period — Phonograph and Sound Motion Picture — <i>Extempore Speaking and Discussion</i> — Extempore Speaking — Group Discussion — Leading a Discussion — Taking Part in a Discussion — <i>Problems of Voice</i> — Variety — Articulation —	

Spoken Punctuation — *Regional "Accent"* — Northeastern Region — Southern Region — Midwestern and Western Regions — *How to Project the Voice* — Support — Relaxing the Throat — Resonance — Exercises

V THE PARAGRAPH AS A LOGICAL INSTRUMENT 82

Main Functions of the Paragraph — Analysis of Paragraphs — Faulty Paragraphs — *Construction of the Paragraph* — Paragraphs of Particular Facts — Facts in Order of Space — Facts in Order of Time — Paragraphs of Generalization — Use of Words to Give Unity — Repetition of Key Words — Repetition of Idea — Relational Words and Phrases — Parallelism — *The Paragraph as Part of the Whole* — Length of Paragraphs — In Relation to Scale of Whole — In Relation to Outline — In Relation to Treatment of Topic — Kinds of Paragraphs — Sequence of Paragraphs — Exercises

VI THE DEMANDS OF GRAMMAR 105

The Parts of Speech — Nouns — Pronouns — Exercises — Adjectives — Verbs — Exercises — Adverbs — Prepositions — Conjunctions — Exercises — Interjections — *Verbals* — Participles — Gerunds — Infinitives — Exercises — *Phrases* — *Clauses* — Exercises

VII THE PURPOSE AND DESIGN OF THE SENTENCE 130

Completeness of Thought — Fragmentary Sentences — Sentence Unity — Exercises — *The Relation of Parts* — The Simple Sentence — Report — Swift Action — Emphatic Clarity — The Compound Sentence — The Complex Sentence — The Compound-Complex Sentence — Co-ordination and Subordination — Co-ordination — Parallelism — Subordination — Exercises — *Position of Parts* — Periodic Sentences — Loose versus Periodic — Balanced Sentences — Inversion — Climax — Exercises — Special Problems in the Connection of Parts — Exercises

VIII PUNCTUATION 157

The Period, the Question Mark, and the Exclamation Mark — *The Comma* — *The Semicolon* — *The Colon* — *The Dash* — *Parentheses* — *Quotation Marks* — *The Apostrophe* — *The Hyphen* — Exercises

IX THE CHOICE OF WORDS 168

Exactness — Words and Ideas — General and Specific Words — Specific Words and Logical Analysis — General Words and Inexactness — Abstract Words — Misuse of Abstract Words — Abstract Words and Communication — Long and Short Words — *Appro-*

priateness — Uses of Connotation — Words and Circumstances — Figurative Words — *The Communication of Meaning* — Words and Experiences — Technical Words — Definition of Words — *Number of Words* — Exercises

X SOURCES OF INFORMATION 187

Speed in Gathering Material — Accuracy in Gathering Material — *Observation* — Observation of Places — Observation of Persons — Point of View — Observation of Events in Parallel — Retaining What Is Observed — *Interviewing* — Organization of Material — *Using a Library* — Reference Works — Judgment in Library Research — System in Library Research — Exercises

XI THE WRITTEN REPORT 206

Definition of Report — Functions of Reports — Length of Reports — Qualities of Style — *The Memorandum Report* — Information Report — Conclusion Report — Recommendation Report — Progress Report — *The Letter Report* — *The Standard Report* — The Summary — Gathering Material — Arrangement of Material — Display

XII CONVENTIONS OF CORRESPONDENCE 220

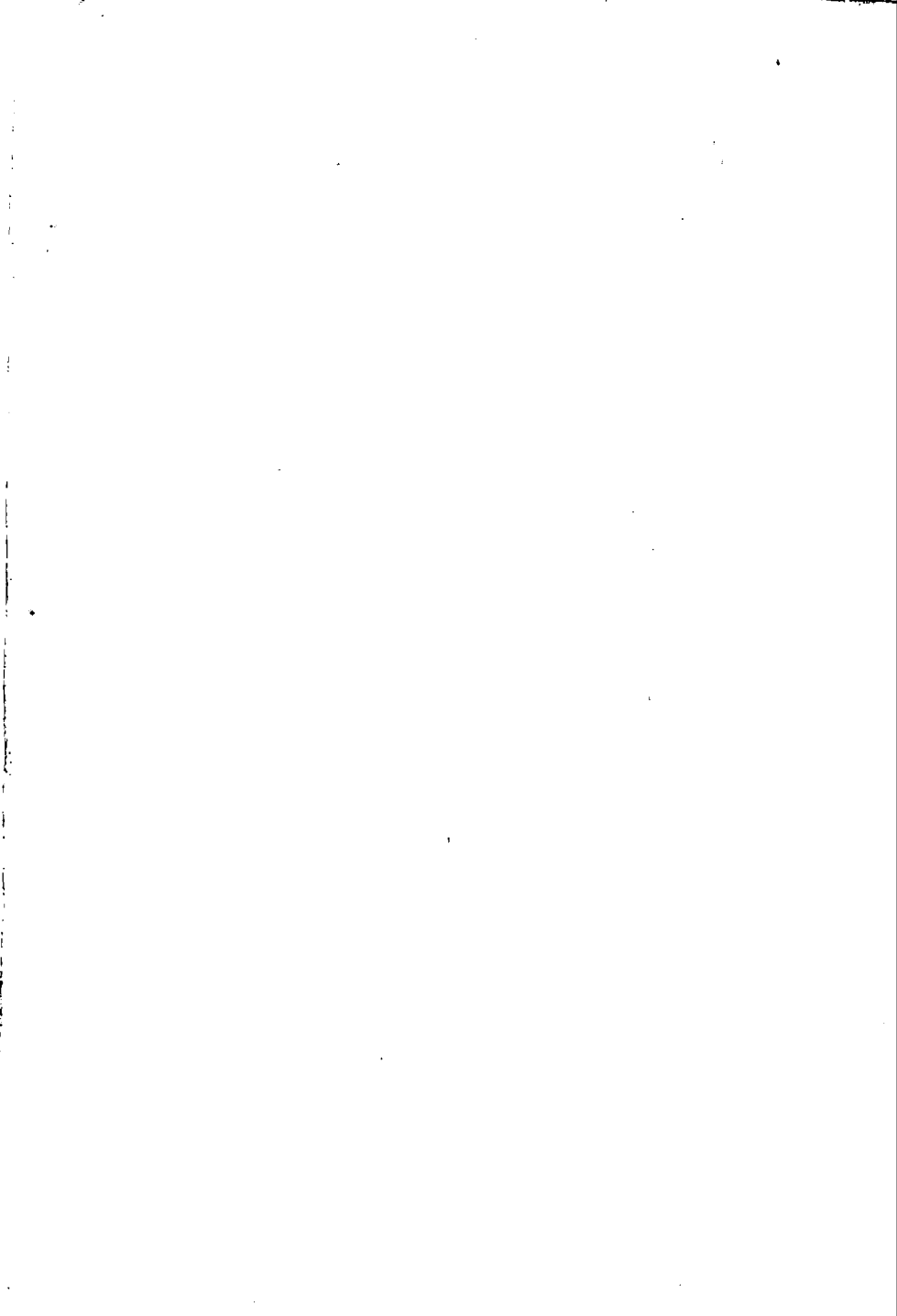
Mechanical Conventions — Physical Layout — Heading — Inside Address — Salutation — Text — Conclusion and Signature — Envelope — *Rhetorical Conventions* — Logic in Letters — Tone in Letters — Tone of Opening — Tone of Close — Routine Letters — Military and Naval Correspondence — Exercises

SUBJECTS FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING 239

INDEX 245

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN CORRECTING PAPERS 248

"It is essential that an officer should be understood, but still more essential that he should not be misunderstood."



CHAPTER I

READING FOR RESULTS

WITHOUT the other fellow, there is no communication. Whatever an individual undertakes to communicate by speech or by writing, however world-shaking his ideas may be in greatness, however powerful his facts may be in substance, his presentation of them accomplishes nothing so long as it remains a matter of his voice echoing in empty air or his prose rotting away on a crumbling sheet of paper in an unread book. What the other fellow does is indeed fully as important as what the originator does, for communication to succeed must be co-operation. In the theater, you have probably been at a performance when audience and actors were literally working together, the understanding and applause of the one calling for better and better work from the other, the two forces combining to produce what the reviewers the next day call "a truly memorable performance." In the classroom, you have probably experienced that sudden feeling that such-and-such a lecturer was really "getting his stuff across." It was coming across half because he knew what he was about and half because you were working as hard as he in the joint job.

The situation is exactly the same with written matter of anything more than the slightest and most trivial kind. The writer has something to transmit; unless the reader does his share of the work, the whole is not communicated. A book, a magazine article, an essay, is as much a co-operative affair as is the play or the lecture. Writing it is half the process; reading it is the other half. If either is poorly done, a pitiful waste of human energy is the result.

The ability to read effectively — that is, in such a way as to get the full value from the printed page with the least waste of time or effort — is therefore a decidedly important ability. To the stu-

dent especially, it should be a prime concern, for his business during student years is chiefly to perform the other fellow's part of the joint task of communication. If he does it well, if by effective reading he helps the unknown writers of books in their work of presenting material to him, they can help him in return. The double benefit is his.

In this way a student also develops a skill which will long outlast his college years and will stand him in good stead when his reading has become no longer a quest for specific information to fill specific requirements, but rather a stimulating process of finding out what other men have thought in order that he may measure his mind against theirs. The transition from one to the other kind of reading is never sharp or complete, of course; but in the main the college student's question as he opens a book is, "What do I need to get from this?" while in later years he is likely more often to ask, "What does he want to tell, and why does he want to tell it?" Whichever question actuates the reading, however, the problem and the method of reading effectively remain essentially the same.

The Reader's Interest

Reading effectively depends upon approach and technique, or upon strategy and tactics. One aspect of the approach to reading has already been suggested — that of the gradual shift from a primarily self-centered view of the task to a more philosophical one. This is a shift in the reasons underlying the reader's interest in what he is doing. That — the quality of interest — is fundamental to effectiveness. It operates in two ways.

In the first place, the reader has interests to begin with, subjects, people, ideas which arouse his mind and about which he wishes to learn more, possibly to meet college requirements, possibly for other reasons. Following out these interests in books gives direction and purpose to his reading. The playwright Channing Pollock in his autobiography *Harvest of My Years* illustrates the fact. His friend Basil King, he reports, "was deeply religious, and it was he who first persuaded me to read the Bible. I had been told that one *must* read the Bible as an act of piety, and therefore, of course, I had avoided it. Basil said the New Testament and parts of the

Old were the most thrilling drama ever written, so I devoured them within a few weeks and found him right.”¹ It was the playwright's initial interest in drama that made his reading of the Bible interesting.

In the second place, the reader may, and easily can, decide that he will be interested in what a writer is saying, even though the entire subject is new, strange, and of no immediate practical use to him. Anything under the sun can interest the man who decides to be interested, and though making this decision may at times lead to considerable expenditure of time and energy on matters which possess not the slightest vestige of applicability, making the reverse decision and deliberately being interested in nothing is dead sure to mean atrophy of the will, degeneration of the mind, and general slumping off into the estate of a human squash.

The Reader's Vocabulary

The relationship between words and the work of the writer or speaker needs no elaboration — no words, no book or speech. The relationship between words and the work of the reader or listener is no less critical — no words, no comprehension. The approach to reading is conditioned in many ways by the extent and quality of the reader's vocabulary. If he has a curbstone word-supply only, a book whose pages are packed with polysyllables scares him off. If he knows single meanings for many words, and single objective meanings only, the overtones of what he reads will escape him.

Communication is essentially a system of signaling between minds. Words printed on the page do not of themselves convey facts and ideas; look at a page of Icelandic or Amharic to prove the point. Words printed on the page convey facts and ideas only as they trigger a series of responses in your mind. If the words have been accurately selected and shrewdly combined, the responses in your mind will be comparatively close to the thought patterns in the writer's mind, but provided only that the words produce in your mind substantially the same concepts as in his. Here is the danger. If to him the word “wily” represents a concept far more subtle and

¹ Channing Pollock, *Harvest of My Years* (Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943), p. 191.

extensive than it does to you, co-operation between you falls far short of completeness. It is fairly sure that there will always be some lack at best. But the more such signals you command, the more patterns and combinations of them you can receive. Your approach to reading will be profoundly influenced for good or ill by your wealth or poverty in signals; controlling this influence for good, by methods later to be discussed, is one way in which you can powerfully co-operate in the business of communication.

The Author's Purpose

The approach to reading must reckon with the basic purpose of the author as it is evidenced in what he has written. Reading material, whatever its form, serves one or another of three functions. It is designed to transmit fact, to transmit belief or conviction, or to transmit emotion. Prose serving the first of these functions generally is less involved structurally than is prose which endeavors to convince, or prose or verse which seeks to evoke in the reader an emotion responding to that with which the author wrote.

Prose which is designed to transmit fact, or to inform, however, is very likely to rely heavily on specialized vocabulary, particularly if it is dealing with scientific or technological subjects. Prose designed to transmit belief, or to persuade or convince, is likely to be content with terms from the general vocabulary, but it will probably rely greatly on their suggestive, or "connotative," force as well as on their "dictionary meanings." As reliance on connotative force increases, prose of this second function approaches more and more closely to the language which transmits emotion, which language, of course, is poetry. Naturally, the dividing lines between the three classes of writing are not rigid; ordinarily, only informational prose dealing with scientific or technological matters is unmarked by elements from the other groups.

Here are a few brief illustrations which will show how the difference of function, or of the writer's purpose, is reflected in reading material. The first is an example of direct engineering language — informational prose:

Practical electrical conductors may be divided into two classes, according to the purpose they fulfill: Those used primarily to con-

duct electrical energy from one point to another with a minimum loss form one class; those used primarily to obstruct or resist the flow of current may be grouped into a second class. Electrical lines of all sorts, including those used both in power transmission and in communications, fall into the first class. Resistors of all varieties, as well as heating devices, make up the second class.

Power-transmission and distribution lines offer examples of the highest development of electrical conductors for the purpose of carrying energy from one point to another with small loss. Where power is to be transferred in large quantities over long distances, conductors of either copper or aluminum are used almost exclusively. These two metals possess high conductivity and at the same time are available in sufficient quantities at a reasonable cost. The principal factors which enter into a choice between them for a large power-transmission line are four, namely, electrical conductivity, density, tensile strength, and cost. The electrical conductivity of aluminum is only 60 per cent that of copper. Offsetting this disadvantage is the fact that aluminum weighs only one-third as much as copper per unit volume. The tensile strength of aluminum is less than half that of copper, but aluminum conductors can be reinforced easily by the use of a steel core, about which the aluminum is laid in strands. From the point of view of cost, the choice between aluminum and copper for a line of given conductivity is dictated largely by the relative prices of the two metals at the time of construction. For certain applications, however, especially in transmission lines and rural distribution lines, steel-reinforced aluminum conductors often show an advantage in cost over copper because their use permits installation of lighter-weight supporting towers or poles or of a smaller number of supports per mile, thereby reducing the total installed cost of the line. For applications where many branch connections are made, copper is preferred because it is more flexible.²

How a suggestion of emotional values can be included in prose of this first group is illustrated by the appositives ending the first sentence of the following paragraph, which is based on a journal entry that Captain Meriwether Lewis wrote on Sunday, May 26, 1805:

² Electrical Engineering Staff, M.I.T., *Electric Circuits* (The Technology Press, John Wiley & Sons, 1940), pp. 77-78.

. . . It was here that, after ascending the highest summit of the hills on the north side of the river, Captain Lewis first caught a distant view of the Rock mountains [The Rockies] — the object of all our hopes, and the reward of all our ambition. On both sides of the river, and at no great distance from it, the mountains followed its course. Above these, at a distance of 50 miles from us, an irregular range of mountains spread from west to northwest from his position. To the north of these, a few elevated points, the most remarkable of which bore N. 65° W., appeared above the horizon; and as the sun shone on the snows of their summits, he obtained a clear and satisfactory view of those mountains which close on the Missouri the passage to the Pacific.³

It is to be noted that the next example, even though addressed to a gathering of scientists, is composed of terms which though of a high intellectual level are all part of the general vocabulary. The function of the extract is to convey a belief. It is taken from the address of Professor P. W. Bridgman of Harvard, on his retirement from the presidency of the American Physical Society in January, 1943:

What is it that makes the "pure" physicist go when he is on the trail of some new idea in his laboratory? The answer is, of course, complex, but I believe that through all the multifariousness runs one simple guiding thread, the craving for understanding. To the extent that the guiding motif of an enterprise is the craving for understanding, to that extent the enterprise may be said to be purely scientific, as distinguished from technological, or utilitarian, or artistic, or political, or what not. The craving for understanding reaches its greatest poignancy only in a few cases, but all of us who are engaged in pure research have it to a certain extent, and it is the vital part of what makes us go. It is not a matter to be argued about, as to whether such a craving has economic or other justification; it is only to be accepted as a fundamental fact about human beings that some of them have developed to a high degree the passion for understanding and a delight in the corresponding activities, just as others have a strongly developed sense of beauty or of conduct. If society is ever going to become anything more

³ Elliott Coues, *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark* (Francis P. Harper, 1893. 4 vols.), I, 328.

than a vicious merry-go-round of circular activity, if ever there are ends in themselves or goods in themselves, then surely the gratification of the craving for understanding is one of them.

To those who have a passion for understanding, society will not be a satisfactory place unless it affords opportunity for the acquiring of understanding, so that to the extent to which the function of society is to make life satisfactory for its members, and it seems to me that this is pretty nearly the whole function of society, one of its responsibilities is the making and providing of adequate scientific opportunity. Society is the servant of science even more and in a more fundamental sense than is science the servant of society. Any control which society exerts over science and invention must be subject to this condition.⁴

From the serious tone of prose which seeks to convince through analytical presentation of belief to the impassioned tone of prose which seeks to persuade by swaying the emotions is a relatively short step. The following extract, which opened Thomas Paine's *The Crisis* in December, 1776, is of the latter sort:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. . . .

Effective reading is reading that gets directly to the nucleus of the material in hand, recognizing and subordinating the supplementary and the less important, emphasizing and retaining the essential. Doing these things is easier if the reader at the outset understands why the writer wrote as he did — not only what he had to say, but also for what purpose he said it, whether to inform, to convince, or to arouse to action. What is nuclear in his writing

⁴ *Science*, New Series, Vol. 97, No. 2511 (February 12, 1943), pp. 148-49.

and what is secondary are more readily discerned if the touchstone of purpose or function is first applied. Hence in the approach to reading, interest and vocabulary share importance with estimation of what response the writer is seeking.

Physical Factors in Reading

The technique of effective reading involves both physical and intellectual factors. Though much of what can be said about the physical factors is pretty obvious, it is worth another repetition, if only because the relationship between the physical and the intellectual is so close. Poor light is the greatest physical hazard; poor posture is a close second. The light source should be one that assures diffusion and cuts out the glare of reflection from the page. Glare is a sore tax on eyesight. The page should be kept at a reasonable distance from the eyes — say eighteen inches or thereabouts, and in such relation to the light source that even illumination falls on the whole printed area.

The reader's backbone should be straight, his head tilted slightly but not slumped down to the chin-on-chest range. The plane of the page and the plane of his face should be about parallel. Trying to work with the book flat on the desk between your elbows, your backbone curved like a bow, your head hung forward so that your face is almost parallel to the desk, and your hands clutching the back of your neck in a viselike grip is bad business. Your brain and your eyes can't get the blood they need; the page is likely to spray random glare into your face; your breathing is necessarily hampered — your results are likely to be more so.

The physical factors in effective reading extend beyond matters of light and posture; the physiological and the psychic are to be reckoned with as well. There is no good in trying to read delicate love poetry with a full belly, or intricate scientific exposition with taut and exhausted nerves. If you are so short on sleep that your hands shake, take a half hour's nap before you try to get at the nuclear stuff of a chapter on economics or geography. You may worry about stealing the time for the nap; with that half hour's refreshment, however, you will do more and better work in the time remaining than could have been done in the whole period by a fagged

brain. Similarly, if the world has seemed for the last two or three hours an unqualified mess, so that your instinctive answer to everything is a curt "So what?" you had better take two or three turns around the block before you try going to work on a book. Otherwise, your mind will be battling the author's all the way.

These physiological and psychological considerations connect directly with the intellectual factors involved in the technique of effective reading. As interest is of basic importance in the strategy of reading, so alertness is essential in the tactics. A sated, tired, or preoccupied mind cannot be alert.

One remaining physical disposition can be made to assist the alert mind: It is arranging the implements for reading as efficiently and sensibly as raw materials, tools, and supplies are arranged in a well-run factory or workshop. Paper, cards, or notebook for the pinning down of essential facts should be at hand when you start to work. One blunt pencil with a raw, chewed end is about as useful to you as one dull chisel with a loose handle would be to a pattern maker; see to it that you have better equipment. The reference books which you are likely to need during the reading — dictionary, thesaurus, log tables, and so on — should be ready at hand when you start to work, so that you need not disarrange everything in the middle of a paragraph as you jump up to hunt for a wanted supplementary fact, losing your place in the book and scattering the ideas in your mind. A dozen or so small slips of paper or cards to serve as "flags" for marking pages to which you may want to return should also be prepared. And if you are a smoker, have the matches where you can get at them without dropping your notes, and the ash tray where you can use it without falling out of your chair. The point of all this housekeeping is simply that your mind has a job to do, a job requiring calmness and concentration, and hence has a right to be safeguarded against the interruptions and exasperations which might be produced by uncontrolled demands and inconveniences of your carcass.

Intellectual Factors in Reading

The intellectual factors involved in the technique of effective reading are essentially those of analysis and system. To get at the