READER'S DIGEST

WRITE better, SPEAK better

How Words Can Work Wonders For You

Reader's Digest

WRITE BETTER SPEAK BETTER

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PART ONE

How to write better

Introduction

Your verbal ability is among the most important skills you possess. Throughout your life, in all kinds of situations from the classroom to the board room, people form their opinions of you on the basis of how you speak and how you write. Understanding how to use words effectively can bring you increased confidence and pave your way to success in school, in business, in your social life—in every area where communication is important.

WRITE BETTER, SPEAK BETTER is designed to help you achieve this goal. It brings together in one place the most practical advice available from experts in the field of communications. Its fifty-nine chapters have been carefully selected and organized by the editors of the Reader's Digest to give you a complete course in the writing and speaking skills that are essential in your everyday life, whether you are a housewife, a businessman, a student, or simply a person who wants to say what you mean and get results.

The book is divided into four parts. The first, "How to Write Better," covers in detail the many writing situations you encounter, from sending an invitation to preparing a business report or writing your congressman. Sample letters and lists of tips make the material clear and easy to understand. Part Two reviews the basic elements of word power: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Part Three, "How to Speak Better," gives helpful, concrete advice on speaking situations that include everyday conversation, what to say on the telephone, job interviews, running a meeting, how to use anecdotes in a speech, and organizing a formal talk complete with visual aids. The final section tells you how to detect and correct flaws in your voice or pronunciation. The special fifty-page feature, "A Dictionary of Usage," provides ready reference to common problems in writing and speaking.

Study the chapters, review the tips, take the progress tests, and you'll soon find that words really can work wonders for you.

1

Good writing—a skill you can learn

The ability to communicate clearly in writing is one of the most important skills you will ever master. It will help you to get your ideas across effectively and to get the results you want in your business and personal life. There is no mystery to good writing—it is a skill you can learn.

Like fine food, good writing is something we approach with relish and enjoy from the first taste to the last. And good writers, like good chefs, do not suddenly appear full-blown, as Athena sprang from the head of her father, Zeus. Quite the contrary, just as the chef serves an intensive apprenticeship mastering the skills of his trade, the writer sits at his table and devotes long hours to achieving a style, a precision, a clarity in his writing, whatever its purpose—schoolwork, matters of business, or purely social communication. You may be sure that the more painstaking the effort, the more effective the writing, and the more rewarding.

There are still some remote places in the world where you might find a public scribe to do your business or social writing for you, for a fee. There are a few executives who are blessed with that rare kind of secretary who can take care of all sorts of correspondence with no more than a quick memorandum to work from. But for most of us, if there is any writing to be done, we have to do it ourselves.

We have to write school papers (book reports, term papers, college applications), business papers (memos, reports, letters of inquiry, letters of adjustment), home papers (everything from notes to the milkman to invitations to a church supper). We are constantly called on to

put words to paper. It would be difficult to count the number of such words, messages, letters, and reports put into the mails or delivered by hand, but the daily figure must be enormous. What is more, everyone who writes expects, or at least hopes, that his writing will be read.

Yet we know very well, from our own experience, that much that is handwritten and more that is typed is only skimmed, and sometimes not read at all. Every day too much reading matter (newspapers, magazines, leaflets, as well as letters) comes into our hands. With all the duties and responsibilities we have in our business and personal lives, there simply isn't the time to go through all those pages which clutter our desks or cram our mail boxes. And our own correspondence, whatever its form and shape and size, must compete with the letters and correspondence of everyone else who is doing exactly what we are doing: writing.

Under these circumstances we must turn out a more attractive, more interesting, more tasteful product. We want to arouse and hold the interest of the reader of our correspondence or communication. We want whatever we write to be read, from first word to last, not just tossed into some "letters-to-be-read" file or into a wastepaper basket. This is the reason we bend our efforts toward learning and practicing the skills of interesting, effective writing.

Keep it brief

"That writer does the most, who gives the reader the *most* information, and takes from him the *least* time," wrote Charles C. Colton, churchman, gambler, and author, some two hundred years ago. This is an observation which everyone who writes should commit to heart, an observation to post above the desk of every businessman who dictates a memo, of every housewife who pens a letter, and of every student who taps out a term study on his typewriter.

The purpose of writing is to communicate: a thought, an idea, a sentiment, a fact. The more concrete and concise these elements in a communication, the more precise, the more rewarding they are to the reader. The manner in which you communicate information is enormously important. It must come to us in palatable form to command our attention, and to hold it.

"Brevity is the soul of wit," said Shakespeare's Polonius in *Hamlet*. This was a nice touch of irony since, as we all know, Polonius was a

rather long-winded gentleman. Nevertheless, his maxim warrants remembering, along with Mr. Colton's admonition that we demand the *least* time from our readers. But brevity, too, requires a skillful hand. We can do very well without the reams of unnecessary detail (especially of that "he said, she said" variety) which we so frequently encounter.

Make it clear and complete

On the other hand, nothing can be more irritating and sometimes frustrating than the omission of essential detail. Suppose, for example, the shirts you manufacture come in several styles, colors, and sizes, but the order you have received in the mail gives no specifications. Or you are driving to visit a friend in the country and you come to a fork in a country lane; you consult the map he has sent you and he has omitted both the fork and the road you are to take. Or someone writes down a telephone message from your out-of-town friends, telling you they're going to be in the city and will drop in to see you; but the message contains no date, no time, and nothing to indicate whether they are coming alone or with their children. And there are the instructions for setting up your hi-fi phonograph and tape recorder which take for granted that you know what a "patch cord" is.

Unquestionably there is virtue in brevity, but as these examples show, you must never assume that your reader is as expert or as knowledgeable as you are about whatever it is you are writing. Brevity is not an excuse for lack of clarity. And clarity, above all, is essential to what you have to say on paper.

Clarity, precision, conciseness—each is of utmost importance to effective writing. But what of style, the way in which you pen your correspondence, business or social? Certainly you want to avoid stiffness and rigidity in any kind of writing you do (even when you send off an angry letter to the manager of your local department store to complain that the bed you ordered arrived with just three legs and no headboard). At the same time, you wouldn't write a report on the market conditions in Hong Kong in the "chummy" manner of a letter to a cousin in Duluth or to that college roommate who has just become president of some giant, and competitive, organization.

The simplest and best approach toward developing your own particular style in writing is to write as you speak. This would seem to be just about as easy a task as you could set yourself—but in reality it isn't.

That old mystique which hovers over the written word seems to get into the way; even when we use a dictaphone to bridge the gap between what we wish to say and what we put to paper, the subliminal discomfort still lingers.

"It is not easy to write with a familiar style," wrote William Hazlitt, the sagacious English essayist, more than 150 years ago, "to write as anyone would speak in common conversation. . . ." But, given a modicum of time and a soupçon of effort, it can be done.

KEEP YOUR LANGUAGE LIVELY

As you write, concentrate on keeping your language active, spare and precise. Habitual use of the passive voice, unnecessary words and vague generalities makes your prose flabby, thus:

WEAK: The demand for the prisoners' release was not accepted by the chief executive.
BETTER: The president refused to free the prisoners.
WEAK: It was decided by the group that the matter would be considered at the next meeting.
BETTER: The school board decided to consider nominations next week.
WEAK: And illumination was called for by the supreme being.
BETTER: And God said, Let there be light . . .

The more you speak, the more freely you speak. The more you write, the more fluent your writing will become. Studying models and drills designed to develop your skills will help. And the keener your studies and more ardent your practice, the sooner will that antique, constricting dread of words lose its hold on you; and the sooner will that problem of getting off a memo to your secretary, that school application, that letter you owe your aunt in Toronto, be dissipated.

Effective, interesting writing is a skill you can master. In this first section of *Write Better, Speak Better* we shall analyze in detail the techniques involved in writing everything from business and personal letters to the productive college application, from mannerisms in writing that should be avoided to the art of intelligent editing. There will be numerous examples of model letters to guide you in your efforts, and a number of drills which should help you sharpen the essential skills. In later chapters, we will deal with the other kinds of writing, and with the bricks and mortar of the craft—grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and the rules governing good form and usage—which often make the difference between effectiveness and flatness in your writing.

2

Secrets of good letter writing

Most of the writing you do is probably for business or personal letters. Here are some surprisingly simple tips on how to give your letters the impact you want them to have—how to say what you want to say in the way you want to say it—plus a list of troublesome words and phrases.

If you're a typical American, you're in trouble. At least you're in trouble when it comes to writing a large percentage of your letters. For the chances are that a good share of them are going to people who know nothing—and care less—about you.

Consider how it was in our parents' and grandparents' time. Most of their letters were written to their families and to friends. Occasionally, the head of the household might sit down and dash off a stern letter to the local newspaper stating in no uncertain terms that the condition of the streets, or the nation, was disgraceful. But for the most part, personal correspondence consisted of letters to people whom our forebears knew reasonably well.

Think about your own correspondence. Undoubtedly, some of it is still personal. But the chances are that a great deal is written to strangers. Here are a few typical situations; you'll probably find several of them reflected in your own life.

The Smiths have a sixteen-year-old son with a fine scholastic record. They write to a college inquiring about scholarship possibilities. If they know the right things to say, they may receive a letter and a number of forms, one of which will request them to have friends send in character references. This vitally important letter must be just right.

Question: What should the Smiths say in their original letter in order to make a favorable impression on the school officials? How should they fill in the forms? Which of their friends should they ask to write references, if they expect to impress the school? And what should the references say?

A year ago, Mr. Smith bought a power mower from a local retailer. Two days after his warranty expired, the engine housing broke. The retailer says he can't do anything about it.

Question: Can Mr. Smith get a free repair by writing a letter to the manufacturer? He may be able to if he knows the right things to say.

The Smiths' daughter is graduating from college, and would like to work in Washington for the government.

Question: Should she write to her congressman or her senator or to some federal office? What should she say?

Mrs. Smith's brother recently died and left his small business to her. She'd like to find someone to manage it or buy it.

Question: If she puts a classified ad in the newspaper, what's the best thing to say?

Mr. Smith has just received a letter from the Internal Revenue Service, saying that he owes $153 in back taxes. Mr. Smith is sure they're wrong, but he doesn't want to waste a day arguing with an agent at the local IRS office.

Question: How can he straighten it out by mail?

In each of these cases, the Smiths are writing not to an individual, but to an institution. Today, much of our life is influenced by, and depends upon, impersonal institutions. What this section will do is suggest how to influence those institutions by mail—how to get them to answer your questions, or persuade them to do whatever it is you want done.

The ABC's of good letter writing

Writing successfully to virtually any institution, or any public figure, requires an understanding of one fact: The person you're writing to is harried. He doesn't have time to do his job as well as he'd like; his boss is on his back; his peers are wondering if he really knows his business; and his subordinates, he is sure, are either incompetent or angling for his desk.

As a result, anything you can say in your letter that will make his job easier will be of enormous help in getting a satisfactory answer.

What *can* you do to make things easier for him? There are three things, and they can be called the ABC's of good letter writing. ABC stands for Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity. Let's take a close look at each.

A IS FOR ACCURACY

Accuracy is very important because the person you're writing to does not, in all probability, know you, nor is he likely to be familiar with the circumstances which caused you to write. Therefore, be as specific as possible, giving all the pertinent information as accurately as you can in your letter to him.

For example, if you're complaining about a product you've bought that has become defective, include all the pertinent facts—where you bought it, the date you bought it, the model number of the product, if it has one. (For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 7.)

Remember, much of today's institutional business is run by the number. Computers shape the activities of a surprisingly large number of institutions, from setting up college classroom schedules to renewing your magazine subscription.

For instance, here's an excellent example of just how firmly we are all locked into this situation. A neighbor's wife received a renewal form for her driver's license. A clerk in the license bureau had apparently made an error, and the computer-produced form listed her middle name as her last name.

When she notified the bureau of the mistake and asked them to correct it, they sent her a computer-produced change-of-name form, along with a computer-produced form letter saying that since she had changed her name, she should now send them her correct name, along with proof that she *had* changed her name legally. She had not, of course, changed her name since her marriage some twenty years before. But, as far as the license bureau was concerned, she must have changed it, since the computer said so.

She finally managed to straighten out the matter by sending them an old library card with her correct name on it, as proof that she did exist. Her license still shows the incorrect name, but she is fairly certain that in three years, when she's due for another renewal, they may admit that she has a right to her own name.

Once we're in a nightmare like this, we can do little but slog on to the end. But, forewarned, we can take steps to avoid it.

Accuracy is a major rock of salvation here. Give the important facts

and the pertinent figures correctly, and you may be able to save considerable time and annoyance.

B IS FOR BREVITY

You can take it for granted that the person you're writing to hasn't time to wade through a long letter. If he receives a piece of correspondence that runs more than a page, or at most, two, he'll probably slip it at the bottom of his pile of incoming mail, with the thought that he'll look at it when he has more time.

Don't blame him. You'd probably do the same. So, pare your letter down to essentials, eliminating every sentence that will not help the letter's recipient to help you.

As a general rule, you can organize your letter into three parts:

1. Tell why you're writing.
2. Give the important facts.
3. Describe what you'd like the recipient to do.

1. Telling the recipient why you're writing immediately lets him know what's on your mind. It gives him, so to speak, a framework in which to read your letter, or a signpost telling him where he's to focus his attention.

For example, suppose you were writing to a television station to complain about the contents of a certain show. A good way to begin would be a simple declaration of that fact; for example, "I object strongly to the slurring remarks you made about civil service workers on the program 'Last Man' which was shown last night on Channel 4."

Or, suppose you're writing to urge a congressman to vote Yes on a certain measure. You might start: "Your support of HR 347, the immigration bill, will help strengthen the traditions on which this country was founded."

Contrast this with less direct methods. The recipient will wonder what it's all about if you write, in the case of the television station: "I feel there is too much joking about the civil service in your programs," or, in the case of the congressman, "We need to strengthen our constitutional heritage."

2. Giving the important facts to support your first sentence will show that you're businesslike and thoughtful. Limit the facts to the one or two or three which are most important. If you give a long string of reasons why, the letter becomes boring and irritating. *Remember: You*

don't want to irritate the reader, you want to get him on your side. One excellent, subtle way of doing it is to keep the letter clear and simple.

One useful practice is to put each of your reasons or arguments in a separate paragraph, preceded by a number. Thus, a letter to the editor of a newspaper might read:

> I believe we should install street lights at the corner of 16th Avenue and A Street.
>
> There are several reasons why this is desirable:
>
> First: It is the only block in the area without overhead illumination.
>
> Second: There were three nighttime accidents there in the past year.
>
> Third: The city has promised in the past that this would be done, but so far, there has been no action.

3. Finally, describing what you'd like the recipient to do gives him something to act upon. If you're complaining to a company, tell them what you want of them: "I believe you should refund my purchase price," or, "I want to exchange this for an undamaged model."

If you're writing to a government agency: "Please send me the correct forms," or "Can you tell me where I can find this information?"

■The guidelines are worth repeating:

Why are you writing?

What facts support your reasons for writing?

What should the reader do?

C IS FOR CLARITY

It is difficult to tell somebody, "Go out and be clear." It is like saying, "Be funny." But if you follow the suggestions given above for accuracy and brevity, you'll have gone a long way toward achieving clarity.

Here are a few additional suggestions which will make your letters—and any other writing you do—more easily understood.

Keep your paragraphs short. Frequent paragraphing breaks up the solid look of a letter, and even if it isn't easy to understand, the indentations make it *look* easier, and give the reader courage to go on. As a general rule, try to keep typewritten paragraphs under ten lines. Handwritten letters might well be paragraphed every five or six lines.

Keep your sentences short. Your harried reader simply does not have great powers of concentration, and even if he does, he'll probably be too busy to exercise them. If any sentence runs more than four lines, try to break it up into two shorter sentences.