**Writing Letters**

***Start with the important point***

Your first sentence should contain the main point of the letter. Many writers seem

to find it difficult to start. They write:

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter of 27th April, which we have received. Turning to

the matter you mention in your first paragraph, you will be pleased to know that

the Diesel Generators are ready…

The opening phrases of this letter are redundant; they have little function other

than to clear the writer’s throat. Readers must skip over them to get to the meat of

the letter, and this is wasteful for reader and writer alike. More importantly, it

blunts the impact of the message. Such an opening gives an apologetic and

hesitant tone. Start letters, instead, with the key point:

Dear Mr Smith,

The diesel generators are ready…

Many of the stilted phrases of the ugly ‘correspondence’ style are redundant

opening lines:

With reference to your enquiry please find attached…

I am writing to tell you that…

No one could write ‘I am not writing to tell you that…’or even ‘I am writing not

to tell you that…’. Equally silly is the opening:

We have received your letter…

The phrase is meaningless because its opposite is unlikely.

Much awkwardness in opening sentences is created by the feeling that it is

essential to refer at the outset to the date of the letter to which you are replying.

We have already suggested that the date is better in the reference or in the title

line; but if you must refer, in the first sentence, to the date of the letter to which

you are replying, put it in a more comfortable position, not highlighted at the

beginning. Do not write:

Thank you for your order of 21st April for diesel generators, which are now

ready.

But write:

The diesel generators, which you ordered on 21st April, are now ready.

The old habit of using Latin in the first sentences of letters is dying out. Writers

used to refer to ‘yours of 21st. ult.’ or ‘prox.’ or ‘inst’. Many readers are not

certain what the abbreviations mean, and in any case such Latin tags give an air

of stuffy pomposity to a letter. Write clearly by always stating the month itself.

Sometimes a letter is little more than a cover-note for something you are

sending. The traditional openings for this are stilted and formal. Do not write

‘Please find enclosed…’; it has an unnatural ring to it, and most of the variations

of this phrase are not much better. It is simpler and more natural to write: ‘Here

is the plan you wanted…’

***Organization***

Before ending a letter, make sure all the necessary points are covered. Give

information clearly, and in an order which makes it easy for the reader to follow

the points through. Do not be afraid to use sub-headings in a letter. They are very

helpful to the reader as a signal that he or she is moving to a different topic. If

the letter is more than a page long, it can have sub-headings, exactly as in a

report. Check that you have dealt with all the questions you must answer by

making brief notes in the margin of the enquirer’s letter, and going through them

while writing.

***Ending***

At the end of your letter, stop. This is obvious advice, perhaps, but many writers

add pious and empty courtesies. A customary flourish, by its very weary

familiarity, adds nothing; indeed, it detracts from the impression of sincerity.

Consider this ending:

Meanwhile we should be pleased to have your assurance of immediate

delivery of a replacement supply and look forward to being advised of

delivery on Monday or Tuesday of next week,

Yours faithfully,

The ending has a genuine point to make, but does so in such a verbose way that

it is unlikely to succeed. A more effective ending is:

Please will you tell us by Tuesday next week when you can deliver.

A second example of a verbose ending which struggles to say something simple,

at great length, is:

We should be pleased to have confirmation of your understanding of this

purchasing agreement between us, which we are sure will be to our mutual

advantage.

Such an ending leaves a bad taste: ‘We should be pleased to…’ sounds

pompous. ‘Confirmation of your understanding…’ means simply ‘confirmation’.

‘Agreement between us’ means simply ‘agreement’. ‘We are sure will be to our

mutual advantage…’ sounds like the bland re-assurances of the conman. A better

ending is:

Please confirm this agreement.

Many absurd and uncomfortable phrases are used to end letters. Such endings

should be cut out; the best way to finish a letter is with the last factual statement.

If an early reply is genuinely needed, then give both a date, and a reason.

Not:

The favour of a response in the near future would be appreciated.

but:

Please reply by the 25th because we make up our monthly orders then.

***The signature***

It is polite to type your name, or write it in block capitals below the signature.

The range and variety of English surnames is amazing. We all feel upset if our

name is mis-spelt; we all feel embarrassed if we are unsure about the spelling of

a name. To save your reader puzzling over a signature, try also to acquire a

legible and neat signature.

Finally, it is off-hand to end ‘Dictated and signed in his absence by…’ It

suggests the writer is too busy to deal with letters personally. We know it is

sometimes done for legal reasons, but the secretary is as much the organization’s

agent in law as the manager is. If your letter has to be signed by someone else, the

simple explanation ‘for’ is clearest and politest. When signing letters, it is also

polite to put your position or status after the signature. Everyone in the office

may know who you are, but the reader may not. It is always courteous to tell

your reader in what capacity the letter is written.

***Tactics for letters***

Not all letters merely report information. In many cases they have to explain

failure, repeat requests, refuse information or confess to not having done

something. If you have to fulfil one of these tasks, try to report first what you

*have* been able to do, then report what you have not been able to do. Reflect on

the impression this reply makes:

We have searched our files for the test reports on Batch C467. We think

this report must be held at the New York office, and if you write direct to

them you may be able to get a copy of it. We are sorry not to be able to

help you this time.

This letter reports failure to help, but does so in a strategic way. The impression

is that the writer has made an effort to find the information, and he or she has

thought of the way forward for the reader. Exactly the same information could

have been communicated more clumsily:

We do not seem to keep copies of the test reports, such as that on Batch

C467 which you requested, though we spent time searching our files. You

should write to the New York office.

The blame here appears to be put on the reader’s shoulders for asking the wrong

office. Even the fact that the writer spent time looking for the report sounds like

a reproach, whereas previously it sounded like an effort to help. Tactical thinking

is vital if you are to convey a good impresion. By using sympathy and

understanding for the reader, you can create a good impression and avoid

unfortunate misunderstandings.