
“What Do You Mean I Can’t Write?”

by John Fielden



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What do businessmen answer when they are asked, "What's the most troublesome problem you have to live with?" Frequently they reply, "People just can't write! What do they learn in college now? When I was a boy . . . !"

There is no need to belabor this point; readers know well how true it is. HBR subscribers, for example, recently rated the "ability to communicate" as the prime requisite of a promotable executive (see EXHIBIT 1).¹ And, of all the aspects of communication, the written form is the most troublesome, if only because of its formal nature. It is received cold, without the communicator's tone of voice or gesture to help. It is rigid; it cannot be adjusted to the recipients' reactions as it is being delivered. It stays "on the record," and cannot be undone. Further, the reason it is in fact committed to paper is usually that its subject is considered too crucial or significant to be entrusted to casual, short-lived verbal form.

Businessmen know that the ability to write well is a highly valued asset in a top executive. Consequently, they become ever more conscious of their writing ability as they consider what qualities they need in order to rise in their company.

They know that in big business today ideas are not exchanged exclusively by word of mouth (as they might be in smaller businesses). And they know that even if they get oral approval for something they wish to do, there will be the inevitable "give me a memo on it" concluding remark that will send them back to their office to oversee the writing of a carefully documented report.

They know, too, that as they rise in their company, they will have to be able to supervise the writing of subordinates—for so many of the memos, reports, and letters written by subordinates will go out over their signature, or be passed on to others in the company and thus reflect on the caliber of work done under their supervision.

Even the new data-processing machines will not make business any less dependent on words. For while the new machines are fine for handling tabular or computative work, someone must write up an eventual analysis of the findings in the common parlance of the everyday executive.

Time for Action

Complaints about the inability of managers to write are a very common and justifiable refrain. But the problem this article poses—and seeks to solve—is that it is of very little use to complain about something and stop right there. I think it is about time for

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¹See also, C. Wilson Randle, "How to Identify Promotable Executives," HBR May-June 1956, p. 122.

managers to begin to do something about it. And the first step is to *define what "it"—what good business writing—really is.*

Suppose you are a young managerial aspirant who has recently been told: "You simply can't write!" What would this mean to you? Naturally, you would be hurt, disappointed, perhaps even alarmed to have your *own* nagging doubts about your writing ability put uncomfortably on the line. "Of course," you say, "I know I'm no stylist. I don't even pretend to be a literarily inclined person. But how can I improve my writing on the job? Where do I begin? Exactly what *is* wrong with my writing?" But nobody tells you in specific, meaningful terms.

Does this mean that you can't spell or punctuate or that your grammar is disastrous? Does it mean that you can't think or organize your thoughts? Or does it mean that even though you are scrupulously correct in grammar and tightly organized in your thinking, a report or letter from you is always completely unreadable; that reading it, in effect, is like trying to butt one's head through a brick wall? Or does it mean that you are so tactless and boorish in the human relations aspect of communication that your messages actually build resentment and resistance? Do you talk "down" too much or do you talk "over your reader's head"? Just what do you do wrong?

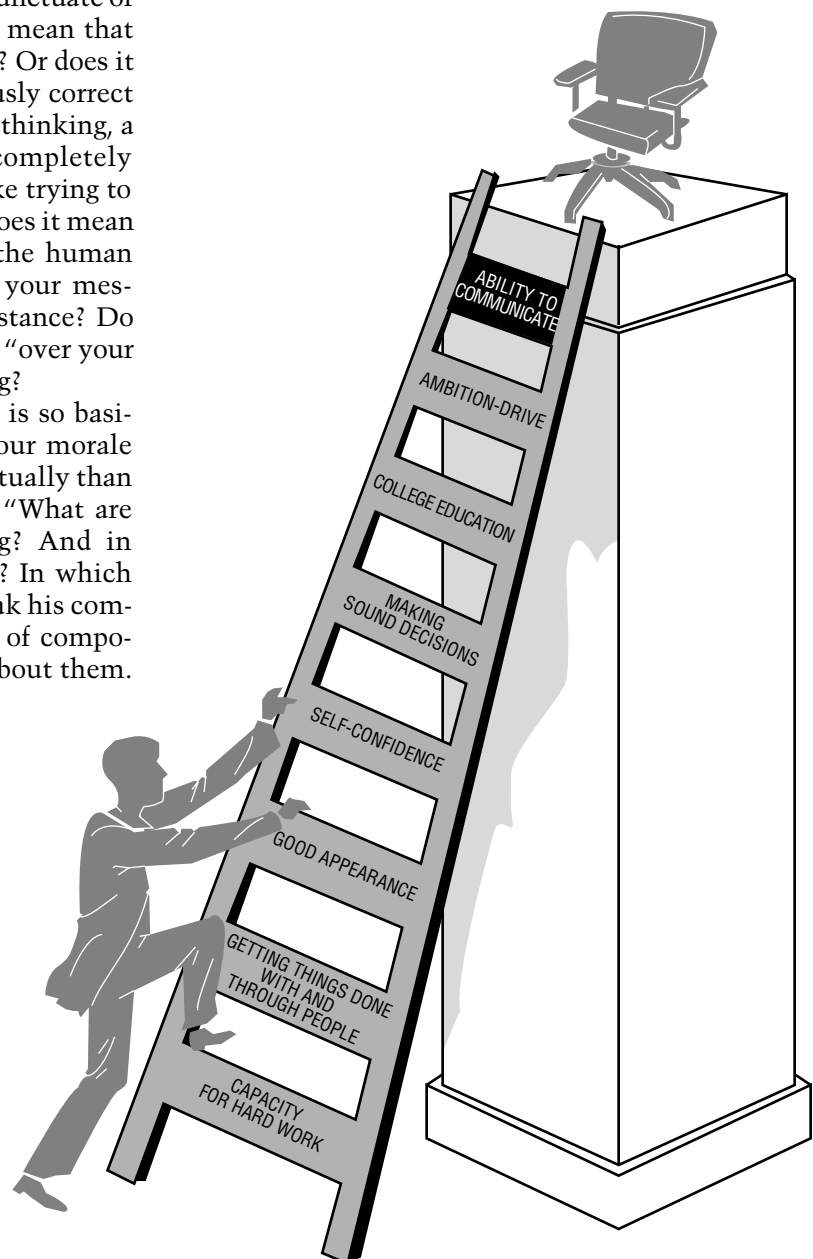
Merely being told that you can't write is so basically meaningless and so damaging to your morale that you may end up writing more ineffectually than ever before. What you need to know is: "What are the elements of good business writing? And in which of these elements am I proficient? In which do I fall down?" If only the boss could break his complaint down into a more meaningful set of components, you could begin to do something about them.

Now let's shift and assume that you are a high-ranking manager whose job it is to supervise a staff of assistants. What can you do about upgrading the writing efforts of your men? You think of the time lost by having to do reports and letters over and over before they go out, the feasibility reports which did not look so feasible after having been befogged by an ineffectual writer, the letters presented for your signature that would have infuriated the receiver had you let them be mailed. But where are you to start?

Here is where the interests of superior and subordinate meet. Unless both arrive at a common understanding, a shared vocabulary that enables them to communicate with one another about the writing jobs that need to be done,

nobody is going to get very far. No oversimplified, gimmicky slogans (such as, "Every letter is a sales letter"; "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative"; or "Write as you speak") are going to serve this purpose. No partial view is either—whether that of the English teacher, the logician, or the social scientist—since good business writing is not just grammar, or clear thinking, or winning friends and influencing people. It is some of each, the proportion depending on the purpose.

EXHIBIT I. Qualities that Characterize Promotable Executives



SOURCE: Taken from Exhibit III, Garda W. Bowman, "What Helps or Harms Promotability?" (Problems in Review), HBR January–February 1964, p. 14.

Total inventory

To know what effective business writing is, we need a total inventory of all its aspects, so that:

- Top managers can say to their training people, "Are you sure our training efforts in written communications are not tackling just part of the problem? Are we covering all aspects of business writing?"
- A superior can say to an assistant, "Here, look; this is where you are weak. See? It is one thing when you write letters that you sign, another when you write letters that I sign. The position and power of the person we are writing to make a lot of difference in *what* we say and *how* we say it."
- The young manager can use the inventory as a guide to self-improvement (perhaps even ask his superior to go over his writing with him, using the writing inventory as a means of assuring a common critical vocabulary).
- The superior may himself get a few hints about how he might improve his own performance.

Such an inventory appears in EXHIBIT II. Notice that it contains four basic categories—*readability*, *correctness*, *appropriateness*, and *thought*. Considerable effort has gone into making these categories (and the subtopics under them) as mutually exclusive as possible, although some overlap is inevitable. But even if they are not completely exclusive, they are still far less general than an angry, critical remark, such as, "You cannot write."

Furthermore, you should understand that these four categories are not listed in order of importance, since their importance varies according to the abilities and the duties of each individual. The same thing is true of the subtopics; I shall make no attempt to treat each of them equally, but will simply try to do some practical, commonsense highlighting. I will begin with readability, and discuss it most fully, because this is an area where half-truths abound and need to be scotched before introducing the other topics.

Readability

What is *readability*? Nothing more than a clear style of writing. It does not result absolutely (as some readability experts would have you believe) from mathematical counts of syllables, of sentence length, or of abstract words. These inflexible approaches to readability assume that all writing is being addressed to a general audience. Consequently, their greatest use is in forming judgments about

the readability of such things as mass magazine editorial copy, newspaper communications, and elementary textbooks.

To prove this point, all you need do is to pick up a beautifully edited magazine like the *New England Journal of Medicine* and try to read an article in it. You as a layman will probably have trouble. On the other hand, your physician will tell you that the article is a masterpiece of readable exposition. But, on second look, you will still find it completely unreadable. The reason, obviously, is that you do not have the background or the vocabulary necessary to understand it. The same thing would hold true if you were to take an article from a management science quarterly, say, one dealing with return on investment or statistical decision making, and give it to the physician. Now he is likely to judge this one to be completely incomprehensible, while you may find it the most valuable and clear discussion of the topic you have ever seen.

In situations like this, it does not make much difference whether the sentences are long or short; if the reader does not have the background to understand the material, he just doesn't. And writing such specialized articles according to the mathematical readability formulas is not going to make them clearer.

Nevertheless, it is true that unnecessarily long, rambling sentences are wearing to read. Hence you will find these stylistic shortcomings mentioned in EXHIBIT II. The trick a writer has to learn is to judge the complexity and the abstractness of the material he is dealing with, and to cut his sentences down in those areas where the going is especially difficult. It also helps to stick to a direct subject-verb-object construction in sentences wherever it is important to communicate precisely. Flights of unusually dashing style should be reserved for those sections which are quite general in nature and concrete in subject matter.

What about paragraphs? The importance of "paragraph construction" is often overlooked in business communication, but few things are more certain to make the heart sink than the sight of page after page of unbroken type. One old grammar book rule would be especially wise to hark back to, and that is the topic sentence. Not only does placing a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph make it easier for the reader to grasp the content of the communication quickly; it also serves to discipline the writer into including only one main idea in each paragraph. Naturally, when a discussion of one idea means the expenditure of hundreds (or thousands) of words, paragraphs should be divided according to subdivisions of the main idea. In fact, an almost arbitrary division of paragraphs into units of four or five sentences is usually welcomed by the reader.

EXHIBIT II. Written Performance Inventory

1. READABILITY	<p>COHERENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sentences seem awkward owing to illogical and ungrammatical yoking of unrelated ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to develop a logical progression of ideas through coherent, logically juxtaposed paragraphs 	<p>MOTIVATIONAL ASPECTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Orders of superior seem arbitrary <input type="checkbox"/> Superior's communications are manipulative and seemingly insincere
2. CORRECTNESS	3. APPROPRIATENESS	4. THOUGHT
<p>READER'S LEVEL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Too specialized in approach <input type="checkbox"/> Assumes too great a knowledge of subject <input type="checkbox"/> So underestimates the reader that it belabors the obvious <p>SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unnecessarily long in difficult material <input type="checkbox"/> Subject-verb-object word order too rarely used <input type="checkbox"/> Choppy, overly simple style (in simple material) <p>PARAGRAPH CONSTRUCTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of topic sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Too many ideas in single paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Too long <p>FAMILIARITY OF WORDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate jargon <input type="checkbox"/> Pretentious language <input type="checkbox"/> Unnecessarily abstract <p>READER DIRECTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of framing"(i.e., failure to tell the reader about purpose and direction of forthcoming discussion) <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate transitions between paragraphs <input type="checkbox"/> Absence of subconclusions to summarize reader's progress at end of divisions in the discussion <p>FOCUS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unclear as to subject of communication <input type="checkbox"/> Unclear as to purpose of message 	<p>A. UPWARD COMMUNICATIONS</p> <p>TACT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to recognize differences in position between writer and receiver <input type="checkbox"/> Impolitic tone—too brusk, argumentative, or insulting <p>SUPPORTING DETAIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate support for statements <input type="checkbox"/> Too much undigested detail for busy superior <p>OPINION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate research but too great an intrusion of opinions <input type="checkbox"/> Too few facts (and too little research) to entitle drawing of conclusions <input type="checkbox"/> Presence of unasked for but clearly implied recommendations <p>ATTITUDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Too obvious a desire to please superior <input type="checkbox"/> Too defensive in face of authority <input type="checkbox"/> Too fearful of superior to be able to do best work <p>B. DOWNWARD COMMUNICATIONS</p> <p>DIPLOMACY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Overbearing attitude toward subordinates <input type="checkbox"/> Insulting and/or personal references <input type="checkbox"/> Unmindfulness that messages are representative of management group or even of company <p>CLARIFICATION OF DESIRES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Confused, vague instructions <input type="checkbox"/> Superior is not sure of what is wanted <input type="checkbox"/> Withholding of information necessary to job at hand 	<p>PREPARATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate thought given to purpose of communication prior to its final completion <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate preparation or use of data known to be available <p>COMPETENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Subject beyond intellectual capabilities of writer <input type="checkbox"/> Subject beyond experience of writer <p>FIDELITY TO ASSIGNMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to stick to job assigned <input type="checkbox"/> Too much made of routine assignment <input type="checkbox"/> Too little made of assignment <p>ANALYSIS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Superficial examination of data leading to unconscious overlooking of important pieces of evidence <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to draw obvious conclusions from data presented <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation of conclusions unjustified by evidence <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to qualify tenuous assertions <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to identify and justify assumptions used <input type="checkbox"/> Bias, conscious or unconscious, which leads to distorted interpretation of data <p>PERSUASIVENESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Seems more convincing than facts warrant <input type="checkbox"/> Seems less convincing than facts warrant <input type="checkbox"/> Too obvious an attempt to sell ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Lacks action-orientation and managerial viewpoint <input type="checkbox"/> Too blunt an approach where subtlety and finesse called for

As for jargon, the only people who complain about it seriously are those who do not understand it. Moreover, it is fashionable for experts in a particular field to complain about their colleagues' use of jargon, but then to turn right around and use it themselves. The reason is that jargon is no more than shop talk. And when the person being addressed fully understands this private language, it is much more economical to use it than to go through laborious explanations of every idea that could be communicated in the shorthand of jargon. Naturally, when a writer knows that his message is going to be read by persons who are not familiar with the private language of his trade, he should be sure to translate as much of the jargon as he can into common terms.

The same thing holds true for simplicity of language. Simplicity is, I would think, always a "good." True, there is something lost from our language when interesting but unfamiliar words are no longer used. But isn't it true that the shrines in which these antiquities should be preserved lie in the domain of poetry or the novel, and not in business communications—which, after all, are not baroque cathedrals but functional edifices by which a job can be done?

The simplest way to say it, then, is invariably the best in business writing. But this fact the young executive does not always understand. Often he is eager to parade his vocabulary before his superiors, for fear his boss (who has never let him know that he admires simplicity, and may indeed adopt a pretentious and ponderous style himself) may think less of him.

Leading the reader

But perhaps the most important aspect of readability is the one listed under the subtopic "reader direction." The failure of writers to seize their reader by the nose and lead him carefully through the intricacies of his communication is like an epidemic. The job that the writer must do is to develop the "skeleton" of the document that he is preparing. And, at the very beginning of his communication, he should identify the skeletal structure of his paper; he should, in effect, frame the discussion which is to follow.

You will see many of these frames at the beginning of articles published in HBR, where the editors take great pains to tell the reader quickly what the article is about and what specific areas will come under discussion during its progress. In every business document this initial frame, this statement of purpose and direction, should appear. Furthermore, in lengthy reports there should be many such frames; indeed, most major sections of business reports should begin with a new frame.

There should also be clear transitions between paragraphs. The goal should be that of having each element in a written message bear a close relationship to those elements which have preceded and those which follow it. Frequently a section should end with a brief summary, plus a sentence or two telling the reader the new direction of the article. These rather mechanical signposts, while frequently the bane of literary stylists, are always of valuable assistance to readers.

The final aspect of readability is the category that I call "focus." This term refers to the fact that many communications seem diffuse and out of focus, much like a picture on a television screen when the antennas are not properly directed. Sometimes in a report it seems as if one report has been superimposed on another, and that there are no clear and particular points the writer is trying to make. Thus the burden is put on the reader to ferret out the truly important points from the chaos.

If a writer wants to improve the readability of his writing, he must make sure that he has thought things through sufficiently, so that he can focus his readers' attention on the salient points.

Correctness

The one thing that flies to a writer's mind when he is told he cannot write is *correctness*. He immediately starts looking for grammar and punctuation mistakes in things that he has written.

But mistakes like these are hardly the most important aspects of business writing. The majority of executives are reasonably well educated and can, with a minimum of effort, make themselves adequately proficient in the "mechanics" of writing. Furthermore, as a man rises in his company, his typing (at least) will be done by a secretary, who can (and should) take the blame if a report is poorly punctuated and incorrect in grammar, not to mention being presented in an improper "format."

Then what is the most important point? Frequently, the insecure writer allows small mistakes in grammar and punctuation to become greatly magnified, and regards them as reflections on his education and, indeed, his social acceptability. A careless use of "he don't" may seem to be as large a disgrace in his mind as if he attended the company banquet in his shorts. And in some cases this is true. But he should also realize (as EXHIBIT II shows) that the ability to write *correctly* is not synonymous with the ability to write *well*. Hence, everyone should make sure that he does not become satisfied with the rather trivial act of mastering punctuation and grammar.

It is true, of course, that, in some instances, the inability to write correctly will cause a lack of clarity. We can all think of examples where a misplaced comma has caused serious confusion—although such instances, except in contracts and other legal documents, are fortunately rather rare.

A far more important aspect of correctness is “coherence.” Coherence means the proper positioning of elements within a piece of writing so that it can be read clearly and sensibly. Take one example:

□ *Incoherent*: “I think it will rain. However, no clouds are showing yet. Therefore, I will take my umbrella.”

□ *Coherent*: “Although no clouds are showing, I think it will rain. Therefore, I will take my umbrella.”

Once a person has mastered the art of placing related words and sentences as close as possible to each other, he will be amazed at how smooth his formerly awkward writing becomes. But that is just the beginning. He will still have to make sure that he has placed paragraphs which are related in thought next to one another, so that the ideas presented do not have to leapfrog over any intervening digressions.

Appropriateness

I have divided the category *appropriateness* into two sections reflecting the two main types of internal business communications—those going upward in the organization and those going downward. This distinction is one that cannot be found in textbooks on writing, although the ideas included here are commonplace in the human relations area.

There is an obvious difference between the type of communication that a boss writes to his subordinate and the type that the subordinate can get away with when he writes to his boss (or even the type that he drafts for his boss’s signature). I suspect that many managers who have had their writing criticized had this unpleasant experience simply because of their failure to recognize the fact that messages are affected by the relative positions of the writer and the recipient in the organizational hierarchy.

Upward communications

Let us roughly follow the order of the subtopics included under upward communications in EXHIBIT II. “Tact” is important. If a subordinate fails to recognize his role and writes in an argumentative or

insulting tone, he is almost certain to reap trouble for himself (or for his boss if the document goes up under the boss’s actual or implied signature). One of the perennially difficult problems facing any subordinate is how to tell a superior he is wrong. If the subordinate were the boss, most likely he *could* call a spade a spade; but since he is not, he has problems. And, in today’s business world, bosses themselves spend much time figuring out how to handle problem communications with discretion. Often tender topics are best handled orally rather than in writing.

Two other subtopics—“supporting detail” and “opinion”—also require a distinction according to the writer’s role. Since the communication is going upward, the writer will probably find it advisable to support his statements with considerable detail. On the other hand, he may run afoul of superiors who will be impatient if he gives too much detail and not enough generalization. Here is a classic instance where a word from above as to the amount of detail required in a particular assignment would be of inestimable value to the subordinate.

The same holds true for “opinion.” In some cases, the subordinate may be criticized for introducing too many of his personal opinions—in fact, often for giving any recommendation at all. If the superior wishes the subordinate to make recommendations and to offer his own opinions, the burden is on the superior to tell him. If the superior fails to do so, the writer can at least try to make it clear where facts cease and opinions begin; then the superior can draw his own conclusions.

The writer’s “attitude” is another important factor in upward communications. When a subordinate writes to his boss, it is almost impossible for him to communicate with the blandness that he might use if he were writing a letter to a friend. There may be many little things that he is doing throughout his writing that indicate either too great a desire to impress the boss or an insecurity which imparts a feeling of fearfulness, defensiveness, or truculence in the face of authority.

Downward communications

While the subordinate who writes upward in the organization must use “tact,” the boss who writes down to his subordinates must use “diplomacy.” If he is overbearing or insulting (even without meaning to be), he will find his effectiveness as a manager severely limited. Furthermore, it is the foolish manager who forgets that, when he communicates downward, he speaks as a representative of management or even of the entire company. Careless messages have often played an important part in strikes and other corporate human relations problems.

It is also important for the superior to make sure that he has clarified in his own mind just what it is he wishes to accomplish. If he does not, he may give confused or vague instructions. (In this event, it is unfair for him to blame a subordinate for presenting a poorly focused document in return.) Another requirement is that the superior must make sure that he has supplied any information which the subordinate needs but could not be expected to know, and that he has sufficiently explained any points which may be misleading.

Motivation is important, too. When a superior gives orders, he will find that over the long run he will not be able to rely on mere power to force compliance with his requests. It seems typically American for a subordinate to resent and resist what he considers to be arbitrary decisions made for unknown reasons. If at all possible, the superior not only should explain the reasons why he gives an order but should point out (if he can) why his decision can be interpreted as being in the best interests of those whom it affects.

I am not, however, suggesting farfetched explanations of future benefits. In the long run, those can have a boomerang effect. Straight talk, carefully and tactfully couched, is the only sensible policy. If, for example, a subordinate's request for a new assignment has been denied because he needs further experience in his present assignment, he should be told the facts. Then, if it is also true that getting more experience may prepare him for a better position in the future, there is no reason why this information should not be included to "buffer" the impact of the refusal of a new assignment.

Thought

Here—a most important area—the superior has a tremendous vested interest in the reporting done by his subordinates. There is no substitute for the thought content of a communication. What good is accomplished if a message is excellent in all the other respects we have discussed—if it is readable, correct, and appropriate—yet the content is faulty? It can even do harm if the other aspects succeed in disguising the fact that it is superficial, stupid, or biased. The superior receiving it may send it up through the organization with his signature, or, equally serious, he may make an important (and disastrous) decision based on it.

Here is the real *guts* of business writing—intelligent content, something most purveyors of business writing gimmicks conveniently forget. It is also something that most training programs short-

change. The discipline of translating thoughts into words and organizing these thoughts logically has no equal as intellectual training. For there is one slogan that is true: "Disorganized, illogical writing reflects a disorganized, illogical (and untrained) mind."

That is why the first topic in this section is "preparation." Much disorganized writing results from insufficient preparation, from a failure to think through and isolate the purpose and the aim of the writing job. Most writers tend to think as they write; in fact, most of us do not even know what it is we think until we have actually written it down. The inescapability of making a well-thought-out outline before dictating seems obvious.

A primary aspect of *thought*, consequently, is the intellectual "competence" of the writer. If a report is bad merely because the subject is far beyond the experience of the writer, it is not his fault. Thus his superior should be able to reject the analysis and at the same time accept the blame for having given his assistant a job that he simply could not do. But what about the many cases where the limiting factor is basically the intellectual capacity of the writer? It is foolish to tell a man that he cannot *write* if in effect he simply does not have the intellectual ability to do the job that has been assigned to him.

Another aspect of thought is "fidelity to the assignment." Obviously the finest performance in the world on a topic other than the one assigned is fruitless, but such violent distortions of the assignment fortunately are rare. Not so rare, unfortunately, are reports which subtly miss the point, or wander away from it. Any consistent tendency on the part of the writer to drag in his pet remedies or favorite villains should be pointed out quickly, as should persistent efforts to grind personal axes.

Another lapse of "fidelity" is far more forgivable. This occurs when an eager subordinate tends to make too much of a routine assignment and consistently turns memos into 50-page reports. On the other hand, some subordinates may consistently make too little of an assignment and tend to do superficial and poorly researched pieces of work.

Perhaps the most important aspect of thought is the component "analysis." Here is where the highly intelligent are separated from those less gifted, and those who will dig from those who content themselves with superficial work. Often subordinates who have not had the benefit of experience under a strict taskmaster (either in school or on the job) are at a loss to understand why their reports are considered less than highly effective. Such writers, for example, may fail to draw obvious conclusions from

the data that they have presented. On the other hand, they may offer conclusions which are seemingly unjustified by the evidence contained in their reports.

Another difficulty is that many young managers (and old ones, too) are unsophisticated in their appreciation of just what constitutes evidence. For example, if they base an entire report on the fact that sales are going to go up the next year simply because one assistant sales manager thinks so, they should expect to have their conclusions thrown out of court. They may also find themselves in difficulty if they fail to identify and justify assumptions which have been forced on them by the absence of factual data. Assumptions, of course, are absolutely necessary in this world of imperfect knowledge—especially when we deal with future developments—but it is the writer's responsibility to point out that certain assumptions have been made and that the validity of his analysis depends on whether or not these assumptions prove to be justified.

Another serious error in "analysis" is that of bias. Few superiors will respect a communication which is consciously or unconsciously biased. A writer who is incapable of making an objective analysis of all sides of a question, or of all alternatives to action, will certainly find his path to the top to be a dead end. On the other hand, especially in many younger writers, bias enters unconsciously, and it is only by a patient identification of the bias that the superior will be able to help the subordinate develop a truly objective analytical ability.

Persuasiveness

This discussion of bias in reporting raises the question of "persuasiveness." "Every letter is a sales letter of some sort," goes the refrain. And it is true that persuasiveness in writing can range from the "con man" type of presentation to that which results from a happy blending of the four elements of business writing I have described. While it would be naive to suggest that it is not often necessary for executives to write things in manipulative ways to achieve their ends *in the short run*, it would be foolish to imply that this type of writing will be very effective with the same people (if they are reasonably intelligent) *over the long run*. Understandably, therefore, the "con man" approach will not be particularly effective in the large business organization.

On the other hand, persuasiveness is a necessary aspect of organizational writing. Yet it is difficult to describe the qualities which serve to make a com-

munication persuasive. It could be a certain ring of conviction about the way recommendations are advanced; it could be enthusiasm, or an understanding of the reader's desires, and a playing up to them. One can persuade by hitting with the blunt edge of the axe or by cutting finely with the sharp edge to prepare the way. Persuasion could result from a fine sense of discretion, of hinting but not stating overtly things which are impolitic to mention; or it could result from an action-orientation that conveys top management's desire for results rather than a more philosophical approach to a subject. In fact, it could be many things.

In an organization, the best test to apply for the propriety of persuasiveness is to ask yourself whether you would care to take action on the basis of what your own communication presents. In the long run, it is dangerous to assume that everyone else is stupid and malleable; so, if you would be offended or damaged in the event that you were persuaded to take the action suggested, you should restate the communication. This test eliminates needless worry about slightly dishonest but well-meaning letters of congratulation, or routine progress reports written merely for a filing record, and the like. But it does bring into sharp focus those messages that cross the line from persuasiveness to bias; these are the ones that will injure others and so eventually injure you.

Conclusion

No one can honestly estimate the billions of dollars that are spent in U.S. industry on written communications, but the amount must be staggering. By contrast, the amount of thinking and effort that goes into improving the effectiveness of business writing is tiny—a mouse invading a continent. A written performance inventory (like EXHIBIT II) in itself is not the answer. But a checklist of writing elements should enable executives to speak about writing in a common tongue and hence be a vehicle by which individual and group improvement in writing can take place.

By executives' own vote, no aspect of a manager's performance is of greater importance to his success than communication, particularly written communication. By the facts, however, no part of business practice receives less formal and intelligent attention. What this article asserts is that when an individual asks, "What do you mean I can't write?"—and has every desire to improve—his company owes him a sensible and concrete answer.

THE purpose of communication is persuasion." I heard this aphorism in one of those management improvement sessions (at a resort hotel) that the contemporary corporation uses so extensively, to "improve communications" among other reasons. It has haunted me ever since. For what it says is that there is no point in mere transfer of cognitive knowledge of information, no point in journalistic or scientific reporting. Communication becomes a strategy of power, a model of "winning friends and influencing people." Its enemy is not misunderstanding or ignorance but improper attitudes and values.

If this point is grasped, the managerial enthusiasm for "good communications" becomes more understandable if not more lovable. The goal is shared values, but perhaps not shared information. Indeed, completely shared information, including information on what the communicators aim to accomplish, might well defeat the "appeals to reason" that are really appeals to sentiments.

Wilbert E. Moore, *The Conduct of the Corporation*, New York, Random House, 1962, pp. 72-73.