3. REPORTS

Vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for mysteries of science; and hard or misapplied words with little or no meaning have, by prescription, such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them, that they are but the covers of ignorance and bindrance of true knowledge.

John Locke

For the purposes of the interchange of information, the basic symbolic act is the report of what we have seen, heard, or felt: “There is a ditch on each side of the road.” “You can get those at Smith’s hardware store for $2.75.” “There aren’t any fish on that side of the lake, but there are on this side.” Then there are reports of reports: “The longest waterfall in the world is Victoria Falls in Rhodesia.” “The Battle of Hastings took place in 1066.” “The papers say that there was a big smash-up on Highway 41 near Evansville.” Reports adhere to the following rules: first, they are capable of verification; secondly, they exclude, so far as possible, judgments, inferences, and the use of “loaded” words.

Verifiability

Reports are verifiable. We may not always be able to verify them ourselves, since we cannot track down the evidence for every piece of history we know, nor can we all go to Evansville to see the remains of the smash-up before they are cleared away. But if we are roughly agreed on the names of things, on what constitutes a “foot,” “yard,” “bushel,” and so on, and on how to measure time, there is relatively little danger of our misunderstanding each other. Even in a world such as we have today, in which everybody seems to be fighting everybody else, we still to a surprising degree trust each other’s reports. We ask directions of total strangers when we are traveling. We follow directions on road signs without being suspicious of the people who put the signs up. We read books of information about science, mathematics, automotive engineering, travel, geography, the history of costume, and other such factual matters, and we usually assume that the author is doing his best to tell us as truly as he can what he knows. And we are safe in so assuming most of the time. With the emphasis that is being given today to the discussion of biased newspapers, propagandists, and the general untrustworthiness of many of the communications we receive, we are likely to forget that we still have an enormous amount of reliable in-
formation available and that deliberate misinformation, except in warfare, still is more the exception than the rule. The desire for self-preservation that compelled men to evolve means for the exchange of information also compels them to regard the giving of false information as profoundly reprehensible.

At its highest development, the language of reports is known as science. By “highest development” we mean greatest general usefulness. Presbyterian and Catholic, workingman and capitalist, German and Englishman, agree on the meanings of such symbols as $2 \times 2 = 4$, $100^\circ$ C., $HNO_3$, 8:35 A.M., 1940 A.D., 5000 r.p.m., 1000 kilowatts, pulex irritans, and so on. But how, it may be asked, can there be agreement even about this much among people who are at each other’s throats about practically everything else? The answer is that circumstances compel them to agree, whether they wish to or not. If, for example, there were a dozen different religious sects in the United States, each insisting on its own way of naming the time of the day and the days of the year, the mere necessity of having a dozen different calendars, a dozen different kinds of watches, and a dozen sets of schedules for business hours, trains, and radio programs, to say nothing of the effort that would be required for translating terms from one nomenclature to another, would make life as we know it impossible.

The language of reports, then, including the more accurate reports of science, is “map” language, and because

it gives us reasonably accurate representations of the “territory” it enables us to get work done. Such language may often be what is commonly termed “dull” or “uninteresting” reading; one does not usually read logarithmic tables or telephone directories for entertainment. But we could not get along without it. There are numberless occasions in the talking and writing we do in everyday life that require that we state things in such a way that everybody will agree with our formulation.

Some Writing Exercises:

The Exclusion of Judgments

The reader will find that practice in writing reports is a quick means of increasing his linguistic awareness. It is an excellent exercise, one which will constantly provide him with his own examples of the principles of language and interpretation under discussion. The reports should be about first-hand experience—scenes the reader has witnessed himself, meetings and social events he has taken part in, people he knows well. They should be of such a nature that they can be verified and agreed upon.

This is not a simple task. A report must exclude all expressions of the writer’s approval or disapproval of the occurrences, persons, or objects he is describing. For example, a report cannot say, “It was a wonderful car,” but must say something like this: “It has been driven 50,000 miles and has never required any repairs.” Again, state-
ments like “Jack lied to us” must be suppressed in favor of
the more verifiable statement, “Jack told us he didn’t have
the keys to his car with him. However, when he pulled
a handkerchief out of his pocket a few minutes later, the
keys fell out.” Also, a report may not say, “The senator
was stubborn, defiant, and unco-operative,” or “The sena-
tor courageously stood by his principles”; it must say in-
stead, “The senator’s vote was the only one against the
bill.” Most people regard statements like the following
as statements of fact: “He is a thief.” “He is a bad boy.”
These again must be excluded in favor of statements of
the more verifiable kind: “He was convicted of theft and
served two years at Waupun.” “His mother, his father,
and most of the neighbors say he is a bad boy.” After
all, to say of a man that he is a “thief” is to say in ef-
effect, “He has stolen and will steal again”—which is more
a prediction than a report. Even to say, “He has stolen,”
is to pass a judgment on an act about which there may
be difference of opinion among different observers. But
to say that he was “convicted of theft” is to make a state-
ment capable of being agreed upon through verification
in court and prison records.

Scientific verifiability rests upon the external observa-
tion of facts, not upon the heaping up of judgments. If
one person says, “Peter is a deadbeat,” and another says,
“I think so too,” the statement has not been verified. In
court cases, considerable trouble is sometimes caused by

witnesses who cannot distinguish their judgments from
the facts upon which those judgments are based. Cross-
examinations under these circumstances go something like
this:

Witness. That dirty double-crosser Jacobs ratted on me!
Defense Attorney. Your honor, I object.
Judge. Objection sustained. [Witness’s remark is stricken
from the record.] Now, try to tell the court exactly what hap-
pened.
Witness. He double-crossed me, the dirty, lying rat!
Defense Attorney. Your honor, I object!
Judge. Objection sustained. [Witness’s remark is again
stricken from the record.] Will the witness try to stick to
the facts.
Witness. But I’m telling you the facts, your honor. He did
double-cross me.

This can continue indefinitely unless the cross-examiner
exercises some ingenuity in order to get at the facts be-
hind the judgment. To the witness it is a “fact” that he
was “double-crossed.” Often hours of patient questioning
are required before the factual bases of the judgment are
revealed.

The Exclusion of Inferences

Another requirement of reports is that they must make
no guesses as to what is going on in other people’s minds.
When we say, “He was angry,” we are not reporting, we
are making an inference from such observable facts as
the following: "He pounded his fist on the table; he swore; he threw the telephone directory at his stenographer." In this particular example, the inference appears to be fairly safe; nevertheless, it is important to remember, especially for the purposes of training oneself, that it is an inference. Such expressions as "He thought a lot of himself," "He was scared of girls," "She always wants nothing but the best," should be avoided in favor of the more verifiable "He showed evidences of annoyance when people did not treat him politely," "He stammered when he asked girls to dance with him," "She frequently declared that she wanted nothing but the best."

The Exclusion of "Loaded" Words

In short, the process of reporting is the process of keeping one's personal feelings out. In order to do this, one must be constantly on guard against "loaded" words that reveal or arouse feelings. Instead of "sneaked in," one should say "entered quietly"; instead of "politicians," "congressmen" or "aldermen"; instead of "officeholder," "public official"; instead of "tramp," "homeless unemployed"; instead of "Chinaman," "Chinese"; instead of "dictatorial set-up," "centralized authority"; instead of "crackpots," "holders of uncommon views." A newspaper reporter, for example, is not permitted to write, "A bunch of fools who are suckers enough to fall for Senator Smith's ideas met last evening in that rickety firetrap that disfigures the south edge of town." Instead he says, "Between seventy-five and a hundred people were present last evening to hear an address by Senator Smith at the Evergreen Gardens near the South Side city limits."

Second Stage of the Writing Exercise: Slanting

In the course of writing reports of personal experiences, it will be found that in spite of all endeavors to keep judgments out, some will creep in. An account of a man, for example, may go like this: "He had apparently not shaved for several days, and his face and hands were covered with grime. His shoes were torn, and his coat, which was several sizes too small for him, was spotted with dried clay." Now, in spite of the fact that no judgment has been stated, a very obvious one is implied. Let us contrast this with another description of the same man. "Although his face was bearded and neglected, his eyes were clear, and he looked straight ahead as he walked rapidly down the road. He looked very tall; perhaps the fact that his coat was too small for him emphasized that impression. He was carrying a book under his left arm, and a small terrier ran at his heels." In this example, the impression about the same man is considerably changed, simply by the inclusion of new details and the subordina-
tion of unfavorable ones. *Even if explicit judgments are kept out of one's writing, implied judgments will get in.*

How, then, can we ever give an impartial report? The answer is, of course, that we cannot attain complete impartiality while we use the language of everyday life. Even with the very impersonal language of science, the task is sometimes difficult. Nevertheless, we can, by being aware of the favorable or unfavorable feelings that certain words and facts can arouse, attain enough impartiality for practical purposes. Such awareness enables us to balance the implied favorable and unfavorable judgments against each other. To learn to do this, it is a good idea to write two essays at a time on the same subject, both strict reports, to be read side by side: the first to contain facts and details likely to prejudice the reader in favor of the subject, the second to contain those likely to prejudice the reader against it. For example:

**FOR**

- He had white teeth.
- His eyes were blue, his hair blond and abundant.
- He had on a clean blue shirt.
- He often helped his wife with the dishes.
- His pastor spoke very highly of him.

**AGAINST**

- His teeth were uneven.
- He rarely looked people straight in the eye.
- His shirt was frayed at the cuffs.
- He rarely got through drying dishes without breaking a few.
- His grocer said he was always slow about paying his bills.

This process of selecting details favorable or unfavorable to the subject being described may be termed slanting. Slanting gives no explicit judgments, but it differs from reporting in that it deliberately makes certain judgments inescapable. The writer striving for impartiality will, therefore, take care to slant both for and against his subject, trying as conscientiously as he can to keep the balance even. The next stage of the exercise, then, should be to rewrite the parallel essays into a single coherent essay in which details on both sides are included:

His teeth were white, but uneven; his eyes were blue, his hair blond and abundant. He did not often look people straight in the eye. His shirt was slightly frayed at the cuffs, but it was clean. He frequently helped his wife with the dishes, but he broke many of them. Opinion about him in the community was divided. His grocer said he was slow about paying his bills, but his pastor spoke very highly of him.

This example is, of course, oversimplified and admittedly not very graceful. But practice in writing such essays will first of all help to prevent one from slipping unconsciously from observable facts to judgments; that is, from "He was a member of the Ku Klux Klan" to "the dirty scoundrel!" Next, it will reveal how little we really want to be impartial anyway, especially about our best friends, our parents, our alma mater, our own children,
our country, the company we work for, the product we sell, our competitor's product, or anything else in which our interests are deeply involved. Finally, we will discover that, even if we have no wish to be impartial, we write more clearly, more forcefully, and more convincingly by this process of sticking as close as possible to observable facts. There will be less "hot air" and more substance.

How Judgments Stop Thought

A judgment ("He is a fine boy," "It was a beautiful service," "Baseball is a healthful sport," "She is an awful bore") is a conclusion, summing up a large number of previously observed facts. The reader is probably familiar with the fact that students, when called upon to write "themes," almost always have difficulty in writing papers of the required length, because their ideas give out after a paragraph or two. The reason for this is that those early paragraphs contain so many such judgments that there is little left to be said. When the conclusions are carefully excluded, however, and observed facts are given instead, there is never any trouble about the length of papers; in fact, they tend to become too long, since inexperienced writers, when told to give facts, often give far more than are necessary, because they lack discrimination between the important and the trivial. This, how-

ever, is better than the literary constipation with which most students are afflicted as soon as they get a writing assignment.

Still another consequence of judgments early in the course of a written exercise—and this applies also to hasty judgments in everyday thought—is the temporary blindness they induce. When, for example, an essay starts with the words, "He was a real Wall Street executive," or "She was a typical cute little co-ed," if we continue writing at all, we must make all our later statements consistent with those judgments. The result is that all the individual characteristics of this particular "executive" or this particular "co-ed" are lost sight of entirely; and the rest of the essay is likely to deal not with observed facts, but with the writer's private notion (based on previously read stories, movies, pictures, etc.) of what "Wall Street executives" or "typical co-eds" look like. The premature judgment, that is, often prevents us from seeing what is directly in front of us. Even if the writer feels sure at the beginning of a written exercise that the man he is describing is a "loafer" or that the scene he is describing is a "beautiful residential suburb," he will conscientiously keep such notions out of his head, lest his vision be obstructed.

A few weeks of practice in writing reports, slanted reports, and reports slanted both ways will improve powers of observation, as well as ability to recognize soundness of observation in the writings of others. A sharpened
sense for the distinction between facts and judgments, facts and inferences, will reduce susceptibility to the flurries of frenzied public opinion which certain people find it to their interest to arouse. Alarming judgments and inferences can be made to appear inevitable by means of skillfully slanted reports. A reader who is aware of the technique of slanting, however, cannot be stampeded by such methods. He knows too well that there may be other relevant facts which have been left out. Who worries now about the “Twenty-one Days Left to Save the American Way of Life” of the 1936 presidential campaign? Who worries now about the “snooping into private lives” and the “establishment of an American Gestapo” that were supposed to result from the 1940 census? Yet people worry about such things at the time.

Applications

1. Here are a number of statements which the reader may attempt to classify as judgments, inferences, or reports. Since the distinctions are not always clear-cut, a one-word answer will not ordinarily be adequate. If the reader finds himself in disagreement with others as to the classification of some of the statements, he is advised to remember the Social Worker and the Advertising Man and not to argue. Note that we are concerned here with the nature of the statements, not their truth or falsity;

for example, the statement, “Water freezes at 10° Cen-
degre,” is, although inaccurate, a report.

a. She goes to church only in order to show off her clothes.

b. A penny saved is a penny earned.

c. Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
   Is hung with bloom along the bough.

A. E. Houseman

d. In the old days, newspapers used to tell the truth.

e. The German-American Bund is a Nazi propaganda agency.

f. Belgium has been called the Niobe of nations.

g. “Italy’s would-be invaders can’t blitzkrieg though country which is crisscrossed by a whole series of mountain ranges and whose narrow passes and extremely few serpentine roads are guarded by large and determined Greek forces.”

Chicago Daily News

h. Senator Smith has for a long time secretly nursed presidential ambitions.

i. Piping down the valleys wild,
   Piping songs of pleasant glee,
   On a cloud I saw a child,
   And he laughing said to me:
   “Piper a song about a Lamb!”
   So I piped with merry cheer.
   “Piper, pipe that song again;”
   So I piped: he wept to hear.

William Blake

j. “But the liberals needn’t be feared if you understand them. The thing to do is to keep constantly posted on what they are up to and treat them as something that got on your shoe. They are mostly noise, and an honest man has the advantage, because truth and tolerance simply are not in them.”

Westbrook Pegler
k. "And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth: And the days of Adam after he had begotten Seth were eight hundred years: and he begat sons and daughters: And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died."—Genesis 5:3-5

2. In addition to trying such exercises in report writing and the exclusion of judgments and inferences as are suggested in this chapter, it is suggested that the reader try writing (a) reports heavily slanted against persons or events he likes, and (b) reports heavily slanted in favor of persons or events he thoroughly dislikes. For example, the ardent Democrat might show a Republican rally in a favorable light and a Democratic rally in an unfavorable light; the ardent Republican might reverse this procedure. This is a necessary preliminary to "slanting both ways at once," which is obviously an impossible task for anyone who can see things only in one way. Incidentally, the "Reporter at Large" department and the "Profiles" department of The New Yorker often offer good examples of the report technique: explicit judgments are few, and a real effort is made to give at least the appearance of "slanting both ways at once."

4. Contexts

Dictionary definitions frequently offer verbal substitutes for an unknown term which only conceal a lack of real understanding. Thus a person might look up a foreign word and be quite satisfied with the meaning "bullfitch" without the slightest ability to identify or describe this bird. Understanding does not come through dealings with words alone, but rather with the things for which they stand. Dictionary definitions permit us to hide from ourselves and others the extent of our ignorance.

H. R. Huse

How Dictionaries Are Made

It is an almost universal belief that every word has a "correct meaning," that we learn these meanings principally from teachers and grammarians (except that most of the time we don't bother to, so that we ordinarily speak "sloppy English"), and that dictionaries and grammars are the "supreme authority" in matters of meaning and usage. Few people ask by what authority the writers of dictionaries and grammars say what they say. The docility with which most people bow down to the dictionary is amazing, and the person who says, "Well, the dictionary is wrong!" is looked upon with smiles of pity.