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Reflections on Communication in Agricultural Economics

Harold F. Breimyer

Agricultural economists are not wont to wearing sack-cloth and ashes. Rarely do they admit shortcomings publicly. Nor should they. To their credit, though, they make one exception. They admit freely that as individuals and as a profession they struggle with sins of omission and commission in communicating their ideas.

The concern is warranted. The subject matter of economics does not lend itself to easy, clear communication. Economics is, after all, an exercise in abstraction. The human intellect has a materialistic bias. It grasps and conveys information about the material world more readily than about the conceptual.

So it is that most agricultural economists, in my observation, labor hard as they try to convert their ideas to understandable prose. Despite their efforts, success ratios differ. Anyone who reads the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* or, for that matter, *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* will attest to variability in quality of writing.

The importance of effective writing is not disputed. Most of the recognized giants in agricultural economics have been talented writers. From my early career years I remember John D. Black. He had an advantage, having been first an instructor in English. John Kenneth Galbraith made the ascent from cow college animal science student to agricultural economist and to distinguished economics professor at Harvard University as much on the basis of his distinctive and appealing writing style as on the brilliance of his ideas. Frederick Waugh, a distinguished scholar, was a superb writer. Theodore Schultz is of the same genre.

To what degree, and by what means, can effective writing in economics be taught?

In the *Journal* for Spring 1987, Judith Latham reviewed a book written by Donald N. McCloskey that addressed the subject (*The Writing of Economics*). Reading Latham's excellent review gave rise to these reflections.

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The starting point for any self-instruction on writing might be called strategic. Who is in charge? Latham quotes McCloskey's eminently correct answer. The reader is "sovereign." How often does an author defend himself in terms of the factual accuracy and grammatical correctness of his writing? How often is his defense irrelevant? If potential readers do not understand what the author has written, the score for him is the same as for a football team that fails to put the ball in the end zone.

During my tenure in the US Department of Agriculture, episodes of training sessions on writing came as regularly as United Way campaigns. Some instructions were excellent. Others were marred by reliance on statistical tests, length of sentence, frequency of polysyllables, and so on. Statisticians and mathematicians may be taking over most of the world, but they never can intrude effectively on the art of communication. Clarity of ideas, exactness in word choice, and conformity to rules of language are the essence of communication. They are outside the range of numbers.

Theodore Roosevelt is said to have written a page-long sentence that was clear. Six short sentences of jumbled thoughts can be jabberwocky.

Confine oneself to short, simple words? Of course not! If a long word gives the precise meaning the author wants to convey, use it. For my part, on the average I teach my readers two new words, usually long ones, per paper. Maybe someone reading this article will look up jabberwocky.

Chief mentors of my early days were the divine Caroline Sherman of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and T. Swann Harding of USDA's Office of Information. Sherman stressed, next after orderliness of ideas, a variety of style. Make some sentences short, others longer, she said. Invert subject and predicate occasionally. She would invariably look at opening words of successive paragraphs. If they were of stereotyped style, out came her blue pencil.

One counsel of Harding has always stayed in my mind. For creative writing, he advised, "Don't force it." If

today the author's mind is blank, go fishing and hope for better tomorrow Creativity comes in spasms Currently I write a weekly newspaper column One ready to print copy is kept in reserve, lest on the deadline day my mind be blank

Latham quotes McCloskey regarding writing rough drafts early It's a sage precept Bushrod Allin of BAE went a step further When no more than halfway through a manuscript, write the summary Such was his instruction The practice is remarkably effective in helping give what my English teachers begged for, namely, unity, coherence, and (proper) emphasis

Most of us who put words on paper have favorite *bêtes noires* Among mine is the practice of opening a sentence with "There is (or are)" There are six reasons for No, six reasons go far to explain

Another aversion of mine is excessive use of superlatives, particularly "very" The English language is replete with adjectives and adverbs of magnitude or intensity They should be used

Finally, two more admonitions and a promise Of the former, the first is to be willing to strike out, discard, and start over For doing this, word processors are a marvelous aid They are a marked improvement over scissors and stapler Secondly, rely on Roget His *Thesaurus* is invaluable I am on my third copy The first two fell apart

And the promise It's the satisfaction that comes from having produced, after false starts and some travail, a composition that is a pleasure to read It's not vanity to like what one has done and to find gratification in one's own literary handiwork

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