# "YOURS BUREAUCRATICALLY": WRITING MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Elizabeth M. Shore

"The Minister has renewed his instructions that we avoid bureaucratic jargon in all correspondence for his signature," states a 1981 memorandum in my office files. Two years later, a memorandum outlining a different Minister's preferred style in correspondence conveys a similar message: "He hates bureaucratic jargon .... The Minister asked me to be vigilant in correcting those letters with an overbearing, bureaucratic style." A further two years have now passed, bringing with them yet another Minister, and one of these days I shall no doubt receive a memorandum that begins, "The Minister wishes all correspondence prepared for her signature to be free from bureaucratic jargon." Ministers change, but their objections to bureaucratic writing remain remarkably constant.

To readers who are unfamiliar with government correspondence, these objections may suggest a number of questions. First, why should a Minister be concerned about matters of style? As the person responsible for making policy decisions involving millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs, why did a former Minister of the department in which I work take the time to prepare a personal memo admonishing his staff to keep all correspondence free from "patronizing pomposity, cat and dog sentences, the passive voice, and the cheerful offer of help after we have just singularly failed to provide it"? It is because correspondence can be a most effective way for a Minister to make contact with a wide range of the electorate, especially private citizens who write letters to members of Cabinet because they have no other easy means of direct access to those who are governing the country. A thorough and well-written personal response to such letters will reassure the recipient that his or her concerns are being dealt with by a responsive and responsible politician who deserves to remain in power.

In the second place, why do Ministers not write their own letters? One glance at a Minister's daily schedule will provide the answer. Meetings with representatives of industry and pressure groups, Cabinet committees, attendance in the House of Commons, public ceremonies, and a multitude of other functions leave Ministers little time for dealing with correspondence. Moreover, the sheer volume of correspondence addressed to most Ministers--an average of 160 letters per day to the Minister of my department, for example--is far beyond the capacity of any one person to handle. For these reasons, Ministers rarely compose the replies that they sign. (Indeed, it is an open secret that Ministers do not necessarily even <u>sign</u> the replies that they "sign"--a special machine is often used to execute a Minister's signature on letters that deal with uncontroversial topics or are based on text already used in previous replies.) The task of writing most ministerial letters that concern departmental (as distinct from purely political or constituency) matters devolves onto the bureaucracy; and our main

objective in this activity, from the Minister's point of view, is to avoid writing like bureaucrats.

This raises a third question: is bureaucratic writing necessarily bad writing, as implied in the previously quoted exhortations to avoid "bureaucratic jargon" and "an overbearing, bureaucratic style"? I do not think so. Contrary to what James Boren would have his readers believe, most government writers do not deliberately fuzzify, wordify, abstruct or irrelevate the information they present.[1] Bureaucratic writing may be good or bad, like any other kind of writing. Good bureaucratic writing is grammatically correct, clear, logical, concise, accurate, and has a tone appropriate to the sender, recipient and subject matter. These criteria are, of course, familiar to all teachers of technical, business, academic, and even military writing.[2]

As a means of improving the quality of the correspondence that the bureaucracy prepares for Ministers to sign, many federal government departments have established ministerial correspondence units or secretariats such as that described in a previous issue of Technostyle.[3] These units characteristically comprise three types of employees and activities: administrative or clerical staff who co-ordinate and record the movement of all incoming letters and outgoing replies as they move through the department; word processor operators who type the replies; and writers who draft the replies, based on facts provided by specialists elsewhere in the department who are familiar with the issues raised in the incoming letters. It is the recruitment and testing of this third group, the writers, that I now wish to discuss.

A good writer, as Flannery O'Connor may have said, is hard to find. The job sounds easy enough--after all, writing personal letters is something that most of us do routinely--and an advertised vacancy for a writer usually attracts a large number of candidates. Writing good letters, however, is not something that most people do routinely, and candidates for a writer's position are therefore carefully screened and tested in order to evaluate their abilities.

In the initial screening, each application is reviewed to ensure that the candidate meets certain requirements that the manager of the unit considers basic to the performance of the job. These requirements specify the level or type of education, language ability in English and/or French, experience, and any other particular skills that the job needs. For example, in order to be eligible for an English writer's position in the secretariat where I work, candidates must normally possess the basic educational requirement of a B.A. in English or in another field related to the position; they may be required to possess an intermediate level of French (if their duties will involve translating information from French, or discussing matters with francophone staff); and they must have some previous experience in writing ministerial or business correspondence. (With regard to the education requirement, I might note in passing that while a B.A. in

Communications would theoretically be acceptable as "related to the position," in practice I have found that candidates holding this degree can rarely write well. Presumably more of their academic studies were devoted to electronic data transmission, film techniques and body language than to the written word.)

Candidates who meet these basic requirements are given a written test, which is the central part of the evaluation process. The test that I currently administer consists of a proof-reading exercise and the writing of two ministerial replies. The proof-reading exercise, a three-page letter containing some eighty typographical errors, is straightforward but nonetheless important. Although errors of spelling or punctuation are almost invariably spotted and corrected during the multi-level approval process through which all ministerial correspondence passes,[4] one or two do occasionally evade scrutiny and one sees, too late, that for want of a hyphen the Minister has signed a letter referring to "one hundred odd senior executives." More significantly, an incorrect date or inaccurate financial total in a letter dealing with legal matters could involve the Minister in serious complications. A further consideration is the delay entailed in retyping replies to correct typographical errors. Even in this era of word processors, it still takes extra time to amend and reprint a reply, and most Ministers are understandably anxious that their replies should be ready as promptly as possible.

For the main part of the test, candidates are given two letters addressed to the Minister, together with a sheet of facts in point form on which to base their replies. The facts are correct and comprehensive, which is more than can be said of much of the information that secretariat writers actually have to work with; but given the time limitations of the test, it is not feasible to expect candidates to cross-check and supplement facts by making phone calls and consulting reference texts as a regular writer will do. The information supplied to the candidates does, however, require considerable rewriting before it is fit to be included in a ministerial reply. Points are presented in an illogical order, redundant details are included, and there are grammatical and spelling errors. Candidates must analyze, reorganize and reexpress the information carefully in order to write a good reply.

The completed replies are evaluated in terms of three main aspects: basics (grammar, spelling, punctuation); content (inclusion of all the relevant points from the information provided, together with a complete and accurate address, salutation, acknowledgment, complimentary closing and signature block); and style. (A sample evaluation sheet is reproduced on page 50.) The pass mark is 70%, and two people evaluate each reply independently. Scoring for the basics and content is straightforward, and most candidates obtain passing marks on these aspects unless their grammar is weak--the loss of 5% for each grammatical error, to a maximum of 20%, virtually ensures the failure

of the candidate's entire reply. Scoring for style is less clear-cut, but the criteria specified on the evaluation sheet help to control the evaluators' subjectivity. Candidates' scores vary widely on this aspect. Many find difficulty in achieving a logical order of ideas in their writing; some write in a diffuse and repetitive way; and a surprising number change the given factual points despite their having been told that the points are correct.

Those who pass the written test are subjected to an interview in which, as in most Public Service interviews, they are asked questions designed to assess their knowledge, abilities, and personal suitability in relation to specific functions of the job in question. In the case of a writer's job, the questions might assess whether a candidate has a good knowledge of style manuals and dictionaries, and is aware of current issues affecting the department (and which are thus likely to figure in correspondence addressed to the Minister); the ability to work under the pressure of tight deadlines and to organize work efficiently by assigning priorities and keeping a record of the status of individual items; and personal qualities such as tact (for querying information supplied by departmental specialists) and flexibility (for accommodating sudden new assignments or priorities in response to urgent demands that ricochet down from the Minister's office, particularly on Friday afternoons). The response to each question is recorded and rated; the passing mark is 60%.

A candidate who scores well on the interview as well as the written test should thus possess all the basic virtues of a good writer of ministerial correspondence. Upon joining the secretariat or correspondence unit, though, he or she still has more to learn. There are, to begin with, certain conventions that apply to this type of correspondence in particular and are unlikely to be encountered in other types of letters. For example, a Minister does not thank a member of the Opposition for bringing a problem or incident to his or her attention; rather, the reply should be phrased in a manner that will imply that the Minister was already fully aware of the situation. After a change of government, writers must take care to avoid implying that a new Minister simply adopts the positions and policies held by his or her predecessor (who, if reelected as a Member of Parliament, is now likely to be the new Minister's chief political critic). Even if the new Minister's position on certain issues does indeed resemble the previous Minister's, this fact should not be explicitly noted. And writers must generally differentiate between the Minister's position on (or involvement in) a particular question, and that of the department. Thus the information conveyed in a letter to be signed by the Minister is often prefaced by a distancing device such as "I have been informed that ..." or "Departmental officials have investigated this incident and have reported that ..."

Conventions such as these apply to correspondence prepared for any Minister. Supplementing these, however, each Minister requires an individual tone in correspondence, reflecting the personal image that he or she wishes to project. This tone can significantly modify the overall effect of a letter. One Minister for whom I have worked opted for a businesslike tone, stating in a memorandum to his staff: "Let us avoid the excessive use of 'thank you.' We work for the citizens who write to us. We should not thank them for taking an interest in the affairs of government--that is the obligation of a citizen." A ministerial reply that reflects this attitude might begin "This is in reference to your letter of May 4," confine itself to an objective statement of the relevant facts, and be signed "The Honourable ----, Minister of ----." Another Minister considered that the obligation lay with the government rather than with the citizens, reminding his staff that "It is the ordinary taxpayer who pays our salaries. We owe him a good, fair and reasonable explanation of our programs. We are not doing him a favour by answering his letter." A reply prepared for such a Minister would be warmer in tone, beginning "Thank you for your letter of May 4"; facts would be reported with some indications of personal feeling--"I am pleased to tell you that ..." or "Unfortunately ..."; and it would end with a comment such as "I hope this information is useful to you" or "I appreciate your writing to me about this matter." The signature block in this case would probably be just the Minister's name, devoid of honorific and title.

In addition to these refinements of tone, good writers in a secretariat or correspondence unit will rapidly acquire other important skills, such as the ability to dislodge smouldering paper from an overheated photocopier and to distinguish between official sources of information and actual sources of information. Their success on the job will basically depend, however, on their capacity to write well.

So if, one day, you are moved to write a personal letter to a federal Minister, and in due course you receive a reply that is clear, logical, concise, courteous, and addresses your concerns accurately, you can be fairly sure that the departmental bureaucracy includes a group of carefully selected writers who are trying to prove to their Minister that bureaucratic writing is not necessarily jargon-ridden and overbearing.

## NOTES

1. James H. Boren, Fuzzify! Borenwords and Strategies for Bureaucratic Success (Toronto: Wiley & Sons, 1982). The terms cited, and many other expressive neologisms, are defined on pages 158-196.

2. At CATTW's annual conference last May, one speaker who discussed the development of a manual for teaching writing to military cadets stated that her students found the models of good writing chosen from government material were unhelpful. However, the qualities that these students considered characteristic of good military writing--clarity, logic, brevity, accuracy, relevance, and force--are very similar to those advocated in any standard manual on writing.

3. Serafina Sebastyan, "Executive Correspondence--A Better Way", Technostyle, vol. 3, no. 3 (Winter 1984), 7-8.

4. The approval process, in theory and in practice, has been described with painful realism by Alain Godbout in "Une note d'accompagnement au ministre," Canadian Public Administration, vol. 27, no. 3 (Fall 1984), 437-41. As Godbout indicates, an eight-stage process can all too often expand into a thirty-five stage process.

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Elizabeth Shore obtained a Ph.D. in English from Birmingham University, England in 1976. Since then she has taught English part-time at the University of Ottawa and held various positions as a writer and editor in the federal government. She now manages the Parks Canada Secretariat in Environment Canada.

## EVALUATION SHEET: MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

| | Maximum Score | Candidate's Score |
|---|---|---|
| **1. BASICS** | | |
| Grammar (deduct 5 points per error) | 20 | |
| Spelling (deduct 1 point per error) | 5 | |
| Punctuation (deduct 1 point per error) | 5 | |
| Sub-total | 30 | |
| **2. CONTENT** | | |
| Name and address of correspondent (should be complete and accurate) | 3 | |
| Salutation | 1 | |
| Acknowledgment (should specify date and subject of the incoming letter) | 4 | |
| Points that should be included in the response: ---------- ---------- ---------- ---------- | 20 | |
| Complimentary closing and signature block | 2 | |
| Sub-total | 30 | |
| **3. STYLE** | | |
| Clarity (absence of jargon, ambiguity, and contradictions) | 8 | |
| Logical order of ideas | 8 | |
| Conciseness (absence of redundancy and circumlocution) | 8 | |
| Accuracy (correct references, titles, etc.; absence of unnecessary additions or changes to the facts provided for the reply) | 8 | |
| Tone (should be courteous, not excessively formal or informal, and appropriate to the specific recipient) | 8 | |
| Sub-total | 40 | |

CANDIDATE'S TOTAL SCORE (OUT OF 100):