Letters

A Plea for Clarity

Both Peoples and Ford (Letters, 29 July), in reacting to David McNeill's article (13 May, p. 875) "Speaking of space," seem to suggest that a combination of editorial sternness and occasional vilification are the main weapons for combating the sloppy writing of many engineers and scientists. Unfortunately, learning to write readable prose is work. Perhaps subconsciously recognizing this, an engineer will usually reply, "I am doing alright. Don't bother me. That sort of thing isn't my field, anyway. I don't pretend to have any literary gifts." (In dialogue, engineers can be quite pithy.)

I once hoped that another approach might work. If an engineer could be made to recognize the personal stake that he has in communicating his results as clearly and as widely as possible, perhaps he could be pursuaded to take an interest in the problem and to give some thought to what can be done about it. In collaboration with an English teacher, I wrote a book based on this approach, but as nearly as I can judge, it is meeting the fate of all such books: those who need it ignore it. It appears that exhortation, sternness, and appeal to self-interest all fail or at best succeed only now and then. The true cure should be undertaken in college and perhaps in high school by shifting the emphasis, by changing the appeal made to the students. It seems to me that English departments draw too little attention to the distinction between beauty and clarity, and that English courses could emphasize simple expository writing far more than they do. This would not be appropriate for all students, but for many, it would set a goal that they could see some hope of attaining.

For such students, appreciation of fine writing should be kept as distinct from composition as history is now kept distinct from biology or Spanish. The course in composition should consist solely of expository assignments on prosaic things that the students already know about—from installing spark plugs to cutting out a dress pattern or washing a car—and these efforts should be judged entirely on their clarity, on how well they say what the writer meant to say, not on their entertainment value as light reading. I am aware that such assignments are occasionally given now. Sometimes they are even graded on clarity alone. But what I am suggesting is a writing course that consists solely of such assignments, year after year, especially for technically minded students. In all of my own education, I recall no English teacher who emphasized that beauty is a step beyond clarity, and that clear writing is usually possible even for those who cannot write beautifully. As a start in such a course, the students might rewrite some of their science texts.

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Which Comes First: Money or Brains?

I can sympathize with some of Greenberg's commentary "Money for science: The community is beginning to hurt" (10 June, p. 1485). Unfortunately, the statement does not differentiate adequately between subsidizing research on a wholesale scale and granting subsidies as rewards for demonstrated skills or as encouragement to those who are likely to yield outstanding returns.

There seems to be a widespread feeling among numbers of young scientists that without abundant funds for equipment, travel, or other purposes, worthwhile research is unlikely. I am not unmindful of the value of money nor of its necessity for given purposes. What disturbs me is the apparently growing attitude that solid research in any project depends first on money and secondly on brains.

Men seem to be forgetting that ideas and hard work have been of paramount importance in the history of our scientific ventures. All the subsidies from Uncle Sam, from large foundations, or from vast corporations, cannot guarantee discoveries or solutions to problems, helpful as these funds may be. Possibly such dependence upon grants can contribute to the loss of the spirit of initiative and leadership that we expect from young applicants. A reduction in appropriations may hurt, but an excess can hurt, also. Grants can become a crutch without which, one day, the recipient may find himself totally disabled.

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Reprints: The Situation Abroad

It is customary here down under to acknowledge the receipt of reprints by mailing a card with the message: "Dear . . ., I am most grateful for the reprint which you recently sent me. Yours sincerely." On numerous occasions in recent years, upon sending those cards to authors in the U.S.A. and Canada, I have received by return mail a second copy of the reprint, even though the "thank-you" card did not specify the work concerned. On one occasion the card was returned to me with a note, "Sorry reprint supply exhausted" stamped across it. Well. . . .

So as not to deprive some other interested reader of a reprint, I have stopped sending the acknowledgment cards to the U.S.A. and Canada. This letter is to be an explanation and apology to those authors who may have considered me impolite.

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May I apologize to those scientists who have sent me reprint request cards but who have never received reprints of the paper. Our maximum order is for 200 reprints and secretarial assistance is not unlimited. Reprint requests number several hundred before the reprints arrive from the printers, and selection becomes a daunting task based on a number of arbitrary parameters: date sent, known workers in the field, legible signature, probable photocopy facilities, and color of stamps. Consign-