An analysis of Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son on writing effective business letters reveals that the principles we now stress in business writing have stood the test of time. Although most of Chesterfield's advice (couched in a style that makes old, cliche-ridden principles seem fresh again) is still followed, his admonition that writers should read to improve writing style has been set aside. This article examines the parallels between Chesterfield's advice and current business writing philosophy and finally argues that we should place greater emphasis on reading in business writing courses.

LORD CHESTERFIELD ON THE CRAFT OF BUSINESS WRITING: THE RELATIONSHIP OF READING AND WRITING

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FREQUENTLY A MESSAGE FROM THE PAST has a freshness and impact that cannot be paralleled by a modern passage expressing the same ideas. This statement is particularly appropriate when applied to Lord Chesterfield's comments on the writing of business letters. His "quaint," eighteenth-century style tends to freshen our interest in concepts grown cliche-ridden and therefore stale through everyday use. His sensitivity to the concerns of business writing that we now take as basic principles not only shows us that we are working in a tradition much older than we might have thought, but also tends to give those principles a new aura of validity. Furthermore, though writing in the eighteenth century, Chesterfield suggests an approach to improve one's ability as a prose stylist that can and should be put to effective use in today's business writing courses. The purposes of this paper are: 1) to review Chesterfield's advice on writing business letters so that we might renew our sense of rightness in what we teach in business writing courses, and 2) to reemphasize, as Chesterfield did, the relationship between reading and prose style—a relationship that is stressed in most writing courses but is particularly needed now in the business writing classroom.

As you may recall, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, was a distinguished eighteenth-century statesman, diplomat, and
patron of arts and letters. Chesterfield was fortunate in that he lived early enough in the century to be a political ally of Bolingbroke, Pope, Swift, and others who joined their attacks on Robert Walpole's government. He thus knew and was stimulated by some of the best political essayists and satirists ever to write in English. And yet he lived late enough in the century to know most of Samuel Johnson's work and even to have a personal encounter with this man who, more than any other, shaped literary and moral opinion in the second half of the century. In fact, Chesterfield's famous encounter with Johnson shows his genuine admiration of artful writing: he could not resist praising the fine and powerful style of Johnson even in a piece of writing so personally unflattering to him as Johnson's scathing letter rejecting Chesterfield's belated offer of patronage.¹

Chesterfield, however, was not just an admirer of the great writers around him. He was an accomplished stylist in his own right who relied heavily on his ability to use the written word to insure his diplomatic and business success. The technological limitations of his age (which he probably thought of simply as realities and not as limitations) required him to conduct most of his business through letters and therefore led him to see, perhaps more emphatically than we, the importance of clear, persuasive writing.

ORIGINS OF CHESTERFIELD'S WRITINGS

Chesterfield's most famous writings are his letters to his illegitimate son, Philip Dormer Stanhope. It is in these letters that Chesterfield put into writing the principles which had governed the way he thought, acted, and wrote throughout his career. Since he had no legitimate children, Chesterfield lavished all his paternal attention, love, and, most of all, his paternal aspirations on his son, who Chesterfield decided was to become a diplomat, statesman, and generally successful man of the world. Chesterfield spent a great deal of money and, more importantly, devoted a great deal of his own time and energy in his attempt to make Philip in this image. His letters to his son, which were to be an important part of the boy's education, are therefore filled with sage suggestions on how Philip should conduct himself in social, political, and business situations so as to win the respect and admiration of those with whom he dealt.
The educational program itself was a failure. Philip was simply not cut out, physically or temperamentally, to be the refined, controlled, calculating politician and socialite Chesterfield wanted him to be. Nevertheless, the letters, published in 1774, the year after Chesterfield's death, were immediately famous throughout England. In some circles, however, they became immediately "infamous." Everyone recognized the "utility" in the letters; many though could not accept the moral code they found stated and implied in the collection and therefore vigorously attacked it as being a degenerating influence on English youth. Samuel Johnson, the most outspoken and respected moralist of his time, denounced the letters for teaching, as he put it, "the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master."

Justification for Johnson's comment can be easily found in the letters, for Chesterfield advises his son to employ many questionable tactics in order to achieve his social and diplomatic goals. For example, he encouraged Philip to flatter his friends and acquaintances; to probe them constantly for weaknesses to be exploited; and, for his own protection, never to reveal his own thoughts and feelings so that he might be exploited by others. Chesterfield also advised Philip to always distrust ideals, and to be ever willing to compromise what ought to be for the necessities of the moment. And, what probably rankled the moral Dr. Johnson more than anything else, Chesterfield encouraged his son to practice fashionable adultery for personal pleasure and political leverage.

Chesterfield's apologists, including Bonamy Dobree, have defended him by saying that the deception and questionable conduct he advocates are of relatively minor importance compared to the emphasis on virtue found elsewhere in the letters. Even the moral Dr. Johnson, obviously no admirer of the Lord, was willing to grant Chesterfield's letters some value: "Take out the immorality," he said, "and it should be put in the hands of every young gentleman." Samuel Shellabarger, a mid-twentieth-century commentator on Chesterfield, counters Johnson's observation by saying that the emphasis on "secular virtue and expedient compromise" so permeates the letters and Chesterfield's basic philosophy that if we take out the immorality we have little left of interest or value. Though this moral debate is interesting, it is not our main concern here. Perhaps it is best to say simply that if we do take out the immorality, some very interesting and valuable advice on writing does remain.
Philip's writing ability or inability comes up in letters written fairly early during his obligatory Grand Tour of Europe. Lord Chesterfield had at that time decided that Philip should concentrate his efforts on those qualities he had not yet mastered which were essential to the success of a diplomat. Chesterfield had no trouble coming up with what he called a list of Philip's "debts." The "debit" list included Enunciation, Manners, and English. To Chesterfield they were all serious shortcomings; but, according to him, Philip need not despair—he simply should work harder to correct them. In this letter he tells his son:

Thus I have, with the truth and freedom of the tenderest affection, told you all your defects, at least all I know or have heard of. Thank God they are all very curable, they must be cured, and I am sure you will cure them. (July 9, 1750)*

All teachers of English composition, I suppose, agree deep down with Chesterfield when he says writing problems are "curable." However, I am not sure that after several years of teaching most of us would make a statement as emphatic and unqualified as Chesterfield's. Even he learned that "cures" were not so sure as he first believed. He never did "cure" his son's social manners to his satisfaction. He seemed to have had similar trouble "curing" Philip's writing problems because approximately a year and a half later (Dec. 19, 1751) Chesterfield found need to write a letter almost entirely devoted to the craft of writing business letters.

ADVICE ON BUSINESS LETTERS

Chesterfield's comments on business writing in this letter are not profound; they are commonplace observations based on his years of personal experience and his own common sense. What I and my students have found interesting about them is that Lord Chesterfield, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, over 225 years ago, offers the same practical advice found in every good textbook on business and professional writing produced in this century.

In this letter (Dec. 19, 1751) Chesterfield concentrates on two basic characteristics of good business letters: clarity and audience awareness. On clarity he places his strongest and earliest emphasis. His letter begins:
My Dear Friend:

You are now entered upon a scene of business, where I hope you will one day make a figure. Use does a great deal, but care and attention must be joined to it. The first thing necessary in writing letters of business is extreme clearness and perspicuity; every paragraph should be so clear and unambiguous, that the dullest fellow in the world may not be able to mistake it, nor obliged to read it twice in order to understand it.

(Apparently the dullards of the eighteenth century were superior to those of this century in reading ability.)

Interspersed among his frequent general comments on the importance of clarity and simplicity in business writing that follow this attention-getting opening are warnings about particular stylistic matters that might impair the intelligibility of any letter. He first warns Philip not to overwrite. Avoid he says, "tropes, figures, antitheses, epigrams," "florishes," and "declamation." According to Chesterfield all of these devices are "misplaced" or even "impertinent" in business letters. To make the same point, modern textbook writers tell us to avoid "wordiness," "cliches," "sententiousness," and "gobbledygook."

Later in the letter he warns Philip about long sentences. "Let your periods be harmonious," he advises, "without seeming to be laboured; and let them not be too long, for that always occasions a degree of obscurity." This, I might point out, was said before the days of the Gunning Fog Index and other "scientific" ways of measuring the relationship between sentence length and reading difficulty.

Most of the specific comments Chesterfield devoted to matters of clarity concern problems which careless use of pronouns can generate. Since he was an Englishman who spoke several continental languages fluently, Chesterfield was particularly sensitive to this relative weakness in English.

Our pronouns and relatives often create obscurity or ambiguity; be therefore exceedingly attentive to them, and take care to mark out with precision their particular relations.

He then goes on to make his point more emphatic by giving Philip sample sentences which illustrate the improper and then proper use of personal and relative pronouns hoping that in this way Philip will not miss the point.

Although Chesterfield emphasizes improper use of pronouns, long sentences, and verbosity as major impediments to the easy comprehension of any writing, he also realized that the clarity or obscurity of any passage depends on many stylistic and
organizational factors. He ends the first paragraph of the letter with a sentence that restates his emphasis on clarity but also calls his son’s attention to the need for coherence in larger writing units.

Let your first attention be to clearness, and read every paragraph after you have written it, in the critical view of discovering whether it is possible that any one man can mistake the true sense of [that paragraph]; and correct it accordingly.

THE WRITER AND HIS AUDIENCE

As one might expect, Chesterfield was particularly aware of the need to fit the style, diction, and content of any written communication to its purpose and intended audience. This fact is, I believe, implicit in the comments on clarity and simplicity already mentioned. But it can also be seen in his acute consciousness of the impression even little things make upon the reader. He advised his son, for example, not to neglect any detail which might influence his audience including orthography, handwriting, and even the manner of “folding up, sealing, and directing . . . packets.” (Apparently Philip had an atrocious handwriting style. In another letter (July 9, 1750) Chesterfield told him: “Your handwriting is a very bad one, and would make a scurvy figure in an office-book of letters, or even in a lady’s pocket book.”)

Chesterfield’s emphasis on cultivating the reader’s regard is most evident, however, in his paragraphs on politeness and grace. The “usual terms of politeness” are absolute requirements, he says. In addition, “certain graces” (i.e. compliments and subtle embellishments of style) may improve business letters but, he warns, must be used carefully and sparingly lest they interfere with the purpose of the correspondence. Thus Chesterfield was not only sensitive to the need for what we call “reader orientation” but he was also aware that one’s credibility could be seriously eroded if compliments or other attempts to win the reader’s regard are clumsily or carelessly handled.

Chesterfield’s comments on clarity and audience awareness correspond with what have been major goals of business writing courses for years. And teachers can, through lectures, exercise, and written assignments be fairly successful in getting students to write letters and reports that are clear and oriented to the reader’s needs. However, Chesterfield emphasizes one other very
important aspect of good writing that is not easily taught, if it can be taught at all. Over and over again throughout this letter Chesterfield mentions the need for the businessman and any writer to use a graceful and appealing style. "... Clearness," he said, "implies a correctness, without excluding an elegance of style." He counsels his son to let his sentences "be harmonious, without seeming to be laboured." And, after advising Philip to avoid "florishes" and "declamation," Chesterfield qualifies that advice by saying: "But (I repeat it again) there is an elegant simplicity and dignity of style absolutely necessary for good letters of business; attend to that carefully."

I think we can all see the validity of Chesterfield's comments. How often do we see letters, reports, and other papers which, despite being clear and reader-oriented, are basically unappealing and even distractingly dull because of a flat, uninspired prose style? The question that naturally follows is: What can we do to raise a dull style into something more "harmonious," as Chesterfield put it? Various exercises designed to teach students the stylistic variety necessary for appealing prose are a start, but often they generate little more than a mechanical response. A sense of style is finally just that—a sense which cannot be effectively developed or radically improved in one course through a few mechanical exercises and guidelines. What then can we do?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AND WRITING

Here I think Chesterfield suggests an approach that is still workable and appealing. In the letter I have discussed and more directly in his letter of November 24, 1749, he tells Philip to read in order to improve his style. Chesterfield goes on to suggest several writers who he believes are good English prose stylists. In Chesterfield's mind, style is not something that can be mastered in an afternoon—it is something that must be absorbed over a long period of time through wide and careful reading. Chesterfield's suggestion is very much in keeping with eighteenth-century educational practices. In that period, grammar school and university students polished their Latin prose style by reading and then imitating the best Roman authors. This practice naturally and easily transferred to the study of English prose as seen in the advice of Chesterfield and, to mention another
famous example, the practice of Benjamin Franklin, who imitated the prose style he found in Addison and Steele's Spectators.

The important relationship between one's reading tastes and one's writing ability is not just an outmoded eighteenth-century idea. The simple proliferation of freshman "readers" should be proof enough that educators are convinced of the positive effects of critical reading on writing ability. Furthermore, technical writers and teachers of technical writing have long recognized the value derived from reading both modern and older pieces of technical writing. Very few business and professional writing courses, however, require students to read outside of the course text and perhaps a few articles on communications. Even in these readings students are not usually monitored or encouraged to read critically. I believe that broad, critically monitored outside reading should be required as a supplement to traditional exercises and writing assignments in business writing courses.

This conviction was strongly reinforced for me recently through a comment made by Claude Ramsey, Chairman and President of Akzona Incorporated (a Fortune 500 company) in response to a survey Dr. Stephen Gresham and I conducted. After mentioning that "a flair for writing" is an invaluable asset for young business and technical graduates particularly in their first few years of employment, this executive went on to make the following observation:

Those I've met who express themselves well in writing (and often orally as well) are usually omnivorous and fast readers with broad literary tastes. Those who do only the "required" business or technical reading are often almost illiterate when forced to present a proposal in writing. (Mr. Ramsey's observation, I hasten to add, was entirely spontaneous and unsolicited. We had asked for sample reports which his company, for very good reasons, could not supply.) Thus eighteenth-century educators, contemporary educators, as well as a successful modern business executive speaking from the "real world" outside academia all suggest that we should encourage students in business writing courses to read and to read widely.

If reading is required in a business writing course, however, it must be required in a context that will stimulate students to continue to read and develop their sensitivity to style. I require that my business writing students do outside reading and then
write up for each item short reports in which they first summarize the work and then evaluate its organization and style. I try to keep their interest in the assignment high by allowing them to read almost anything they wish as long as it is a serious article or book in their field of study. But I also try to encourage those "broad literary tastes" mentioned by Mr. Ramsey by requiring that they read from a list of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors who wrote about politics, economics, or business. My list includes Chesterfield, as you might expect, but also Jonathan Swift (The Drapier's Letters), Samuel Johnson (the letter declining Chesterfield's offer of patronage), Adam Smith (from The Wealth of Nations), Thomas Paine (The American Crisis; Common Sense), Thomas Carlyle (Past and Present), John Ruskin (Unto this Last), and Benjamin Franklin (An Account of the Invention of the Pennsylvania Fireplace). Others, older or more recent, might work as well or better in your situation. These older writers not only give the students a broader reading experience but also serve to enhance the students' sensitivity to style since they can easily perceive different stylistic patterns in them and compare them, consciously or unconsciously, to those used by modern authors.

In my experience so far, students have responded positively and encouraged me to continue the requirement. I don't expect, however, that the little reading I can require will make much of a difference immediately in their ability to write. But I am hopeful that this assignment does begin to develop in them a taste for reading and an ear for style in everything they read. Both of these qualities are, I think, essential for a good writer. And encouraging those traits is an important step toward developing what Chesterfield called a "harmonious" style.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

2. Ibid., p. 188.
6. All quotations from Chesterfield’s Letters are from Dobree’s edition.
7. Since it contains a sneer at academic style, a quotation from the November 24, 1749, letter seems appropriate: “You have with you three or four of the best English authors, Dryden, Atterbury, and Swift: read them with the utmost care, and with a particular view to their language; and they may possibly correct that curious infelicity of diction which you acquired at Westminster.”

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