

are words. Sir Ernest Gowers in *Plain Words* (1948) refers to the unknown member of the Staff of the General Post Office in Britain who composed the notice that used to be displayed in British post offices: "Postmasters are neither bound to give change nor authorized to demand it". Apart from warning "customers of what must have been a singularly intractable dilemma" Sir Ernest writes, "Every word is exactly right: no other word would do as well: each is pulling its weight; none could be dispensed with", and he goes on to quote a commentator on Milton's prose: "Fewer would not have served the turn, and more would have been superfluous". "Postmasters are neither bound to give change nor authorized to demand it". To you whose tools are words, this small gem must bring great pleasure.

To get on with the therapy:

- (a) If you do not have them, you should buy for bed-side reading the Second Edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, and Follett's *Modern American Usage*, edited and completed by Jacques Barzun. Somerset Maugham writes of Fowler thus:

"I have read many books on English prose, but have found it hard to profit by them; for the most part they are vague, unduly theoretical, and often scolding. But you cannot say this of Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. It is a valuable work. I do not think anyone writes so well that he cannot learn much from it. It is lively reading. Fowler liked simplicity, straightforwardness and common sense. He had no patience with pretentiousness. He had a sound feeling that idiom was the backbone of a language and he was all for the racy phrase. He was no slavish admirer of logic and was willing enough to give usage right of way through the exact demesnes of grammar."

- (b) You should prepare almost all your work first in draft, as enjoined on page 1 of the *Manual of Procedures*. It is not true that often you are too hard-pressed; a draft saves time, both for you and for your secretary.
- (c) I come now to the last of the three proposals which I am venturing to make, but I warn you that it is long-winded. What kind of prose do we want? This may seem an odd sort of question, but you will perhaps agree that the style should be appropriate to the subject matter, and should be related to the medium of communication, and to the purpose of the document. Without bothering you with what led me to this conclusion, I believe that the prose of the department, in the rare despatches and in the innumerable numbered letters which we send and receive, should be in general similar to that of the judgements handed down by the highest Appellate Courts in Britain, the United States and Canada.