

# editor's page

## Improve Your Writing: Some Helpful Hints

Last November, I met with two "swap shop" groups during the annual National Association of Extension 4-H Agents meeting. We shared ideas on how to improve the chances of getting a manuscript published.

The following week, while in Columbus, Ohio, I was pleased to visit briefly with Professor Emeritus Edgar Dale. You may recall my comments in the last issue about his influence on my career.

We talked about John Dewey "stealing his stuff" and him "stealing" mine. He reminded me that "all work and no plagiarism makes dull reading." A few days later, I received reprints of seven of his News Letters on communication he suggested "might be worth plagiarizing."

The connection between the two experiences—the NAE4-HA meeting and the visit with Edgar Dale—prompts me to share some ideas that might help you improve your writing, whether for the *Journal of Extension* or otherwise.

1. *Define your audience and purpose.* Who are you writing for? Why are you writing? What do you want the reader to *do* or *feel*?
2. *Use a snappy introduction.* Get the reader's attention and convince him/her to read on.
3. *Tell a logical story.* Have each point be a firm foundation for succeeding ones.
4. *Make key points visible.* Use marginal headings. The format of the *Journal* is a good example.
5. *Write "net."* Get rid of superfluous stuff. "Better to fully uncover one point than to cover ten"—Dale.
6. *Make it personal.* The "you" approach is good. This may be why many of us always read the letters to the editor in magazines and newspapers.
7. *Invite reader involvement and participation.* Note the effectiveness of printed interviews. I wonder why the *Journal* has used so few?
8. *Use pointed examples.* Examples make abstract ideas more concrete.
9. *Simplify vocabulary.* Avoid polysyllabic profundity. But most people like to learn new, hard words. Do you enjoy the serendipity of learning a new word as much as I enjoy the word "serendipity"?
10. *Watch sentence structure.* Two factors are most important—length and complexity, but complexity may be the more serious culprit.

11. *Use a variety of visual material.* One member of our evaluation panel consistently (and justifiably) criticizes the *Journal* for using too few pictures, graphs, drawings, and charts.
12. *Repeat and summarize thoughtfully.* Answer the reader's question: So what? Look back at your purpose. Have you achieved it?

Let me express my appreciation to the members of NAE4-HA for the idea for this page and to Edgar Dale for much of the substance to build on that idea.

Ray