

Second Thoughts on Style

by CHARLES F. LEONARD

WHAT is the most effective style and format for the presentation of proposals for social or economic reform? This question arose during the course of my research in the library of the Henry George School. My research has dealt mainly with the practical and legal aspects of land value taxation and has covered literature by a variety of writers, skilled and unskilled. As a result I have been impressed with the importance of style and subject matter and have set down a few speculative guidelines for presenting technical material understandably.

1. *Be specific.* Offer proposals for action on clearly defined problems, based on systematic reasoning from established facts and principles. Responsible political or social action must be based on facts and reason.

2. *Limit the objective.* To contribute significantly to the solution of any one of the world's problems is a worthy achievement. No writer should attempt more and no reader would expect more in a single work. It is the writer's prerogative and responsibility to define the limits of his objective and remain within them.

All social concerns are too complex to be solved totally in any one effort. However, nothing is gained by treating several subjects at once or venturing too far afield. A careless, shotgun attack is discursive and unconvincing.

3. *Name your authorities and sources.* Everyone draws on a common field of knowledge in reaching conclusions. But a writer should always, both for the reason of integrity in allowing his readers to confirm his facts and premises, and as a simple courtesy, give credit fully and accurately.

5. *Use conventional forms.* Standard rules for grammar and arrangement of material are adopted to facilitate clear and efficient communication. Shock methods have no place in serious discussion. It is possible to be forceful and persuasive using the conventional forms, for if an author's integrity is unimpeachable it will be recognized. Follow a "professional golden rule." Approach others in their specialty with the same respect you desire for your own. A non-professional desiring to publish naturally seeks a critical review of his work.

In writing letters to editors or politicians, these, too, should be built on defensible propositions, not on attempts to moralize. Sloppy manuscripts are pushed aside and seldom get beyond a secretary or clerk.

As an example of a widely read book on a very prosaic subject, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is an excellent model. This was a study and criticism of the harmful uses of chemical insecticides and weed killers, by an author who was not a specialist in that field. It was, however, an informed and responsible report which became a best seller among current works of non-fiction, and even led to a Congressional probe. Perhaps we cannot match the graceful style of the late Miss Carson, but we should be warned to give second thoughts to our written and verbal pleas for a better world, in the context we understand best and believe in most.

Charles F. Leonard, whose home is in Los Angeles, is currently studying medicine in New York, and conducting a special study for the Henry George School. He is serving as secretary of the Committee on Land Taxation (COLT), while preparing a "manual" on the practical application of land value taxation.