

Agricultural Communications . . .

Dr. E. B. Knight, Editor

Need for Greater Capacity in the Communications Area

E. B. Knight, Professor
Agricultural Economics
Tennessee Tech

Many businesses, numerous organizations, yes, and even a high percentage of marriages fail or at least function ineffectively due to inadequate methods of communication. This was the opinion of an outstanding authority who appeared before the 1964 meeting of the American Institute of Cooperation which was held on the campus of Michigan State University last August.

The DICTIONARY, that beloved friend of a person attempting to develop a subject, defines Communication in these terms: (1) an imparting; (2) the act of making oneself understood; (3) a means of passing or sending information from one place to another; (4) news, intercourse. The same source gives this meaning to the word Communicable: (1) capable of being known, imparted or conveyed.

As educators the readers of the **NACTA Journal** are constantly endeavoring to impart knowledge, information, skills and/or abilities. Before they can do a good job of teaching they must be able to make themselves understood by their students and the others they come in contact with whether it be in the class room, the laboratory, the shop or in the world outside the ivory towers. The teacher's is the responsibility of passing on ideas and information. To this goal teachers need a comprehensive grasp of the principles underlying the several means of communication plus, of course, proficiency in the usage of such procedures.

The spoken word, whether it is in the form of a lecture, class room discussion or report, is the employed form of communication in our colleges and universities. Looking backward, the writer wonders if the many millions of words uttered in his classes ever hit the target. Did the students exposed to this out-pouring have sufficient background to bridge the gap from the known to the unknown? Were they convinced of the merit and personal usability of the subject matter presented? Could they assimilate it and make it a part of their professional equipment? Did they grasp the relationship involved? In other words, had the teacher used at least reasonably well the in-

struments of communication so that a satisfactory degree of rapport prevailed?

Similarly, the writer, in retrospect, ponders the outcomes of the news stories he has prepared, the reports he has presented, the talks he has given and the probable results of other means of communication he has utilized in more than two score years of professional life. Perhaps, this personal standard is comparatively low when scanned in terms of the accomplishments of other teachers. But, for all of us, there should be a constant desire for improvement.

We are all engaged in communicating both professionally and socially. We are salesmen in the narrow and broad sense of the word, whether it be in the class room or in the big, outside world. To a large degree the future of the American Economy, especially the agricultural sector, depends upon us. Therefore, the more skill we possess in the communications area the greater degree of service we will render our contemporaries, our students and the several groups we touch.

A wide variety of devices and procedures are available to those of us who wish to increase the effectiveness of our communications. Today, educators are making extensive usage of mass media like TV, radio, newspapers and popular periodicals. Conferences, conventions, club and association meetings all offer opportunities to present our case via word of mouth in the form of reports, speeches, and panel discussion. Audio-visual aids in this era of electronic devices are frequently invaluable as we attempt to communicate. Likewise helpful are the products of duplicating machines. The authoring of articles for professional journals, the preparation of pamphlets, bulletins and the like, too, are important items in the effort to inform others. These, and many more constitute the wealth of instruments which are at hand to assist us in the field of communications.

This brief article is intended as a prelude to several contributions written by specialists in the different major types of communication areas. It is expected these discussions will appear in subsequent issues of the **NACTA JOURNAL**.

Setting Standards of Excellence

Jean L. Aiken
University of Nebraska

One of the characteristics which set President Kennedy apart from other men was his demand for excellence. He always wanted the best, whether it was advice on matters of policy or music for a White House gala. When he asked Robert Frost to read a poem for his Inauguration Day

they discussed whether or not the poem should say "will" or "shall" in the closing lines. Such attention to detail was typical of President Kennedy.

Personnel directors and recruiters who hire students graduating in the agricultural disciplin-

es tell us we send them men well prepared technically but not very well prepared in communication skills. We have been lax in requiring attention to details, and have not demanded the best of our students in their communication of ideas, both written and spoken. Certainly a great share of the responsibility for effective communication rests upon the Department of English and the instructors in technical writing (where such courses are required for agricultural students). However, at a recent Agri-Business Conference held at the University of Nebraska, leaders in both industry and agricultural education agreed the problem of speaking and writing effectively should not be dumped into the lap of the Department of English and then forgotten. This makes sense. If students are to become aware of the importance of careful writing and speaking, they must be made aware that these skills are as necessary in an agronomy or plant pathology class as in English or journalism classes.

There are standards which might be set as minimum requirements for all tests and papers which agricultural students write and still allow flexibility of individual assignments. Assuming the students have had freshman English, technical writing and a semester or two of speech, these requirements are:

1. Questions should be answered in complete sentences. This seems too fundamental to need comment, but the sad fact is, many students do not recognize sentence fragments. Assuredly, we think in fragments, speak casually in fragments; but if we are to transmit an idea it can best be done by the use of clear, concise, and complete sentences.

2. Correct use of reasonable amounts of punctuation should be required. Punctuation marks should be essential aids to clarity of meaning. Any good dictionary may be used for reference.

3. Careless spelling must not be condoned. Students expect their English teacher to mark misspelled words but it means much more when other instructors comment upon spelling. Many students do not spell well at all, others are merely careless. Neither group will do anything to improve spelling habits as long as they can "get by." They must realize careless errors in mechanics may indicate to the reader or listener a tendency toward carelessness in thinking, logic, or presentation of facts. When they realize this they will work to correct spelling errors, and use their dictionaries.

4. The use of accepted grammatical forms must be insisted upon. The errors students make in grammar are relatively few, such as: form of verbs, changing tense of verbs, agreement of pronoun and antecedent, use of the relative pronouns, etc. If they are persuaded such errors detract from meaning they will proofread to eliminate them.

5. Wide reading in their field and related fields should be encouraged. This will not only broaden the students' interests but is one way they can improve skills in the use of their language, if they read critically.

Three ways to bring attention to the mechanics mentioned are:

- a. Instructors may take off 5 or 10% for a paper with many errors in spelling, grammar or punctuation. Or, if an abstract or paper (other than a test) is revised, a bonus added to the grade gives incentive to revise. The first paper must be returned and show careful revision before such a bonus is given, however. Obviously, instructors do not have time to mark every error but they can indicate errors exist on a paper and show disapproval.

- b. More essay-type examinations give students practise in writing under pressure. They have to present facts clearly in an orderly manner to have a correct answer. Again this takes more time to correct. Perhaps one or two essay questions might be used rather than all objective questions. The practice given the students in organizing ideas is worth the extra effort.

- c. Stimulating participation in class discussion gives a student a chance to express himself orally. If discussion is skillfully handled he will learn to defend his ideas when his peers question them.

Most of our agricultural students come to us with a background of judging experience. This is invaluable to them, but we must insist upon standards of excellence so they will transfer that training to their thinking, writing and speaking in the classroom.

What Do...

(Continued from page 89)

as pre-admission criteria indicate a greater ability to learn?

2. Are the admission criteria selecting students effectively? Are the criteria admitting limited potential mature students and keeping out of college the larger potential later maturing students?
3. Has your college or university conducted any research into behavior patterns that portend depressed student quality college course work.
4. What is known about the effect upon student behavior of dormitory accommodations, scholastic standing committee actions, fraternity affiliation and co-curricular or extra-curricular activities?
5. Is separation from college a part of the maturing experience essential to the growth of some of the capable but poor performing students?
6. What other admissions criteria, in addition to or instead of test scores and high school rank, might be used to separate those students ready for college from those who are not?

1. *New York Times*, August 2, 1964, p. E7

2. U. S. Office of Education, *Agriculture College Enrollment Reports*

3. *The College of Agriculture, Rutgers-The State University, New Brunswick, New Jersey*

4. *College Entrance Examination Board Scholastic Aptitude Test*

5. *Rutgers College Announcement, 1964-65, p. 264*

6. *Rutgers College Announcement, 1956-57*

7. *Rutgers College Announcement 1964-65 p. 200*

8. From a sample of the 1956 freshman class

9. Remark of a member of the University Scholarship Committee to the agricultural faculty, February 27, 1958.

10 These changes were preceded by committee discussions and faculty approved administrative action.