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## Words

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## Words

BY BRUCE W. WHITE

How should an account be headed? The question, I suppose, has been a vexed one ever since scribes first began to try to save time by cutting little patterns on wet tiles or waxen tablets. But, today, there seems to survive a frantic desire to save time—and when a minute saved today means hours wasted later, the underlying economy of the saved minute is not very obvious.

To get closer to the subject, why do accountants label accounts with names that are either meaningless or misleading? There may have been some excuse in the bad old days, when there was a definite intention to frustrate the unauthorized searcher after information; but in this enlightened age, accountants realize that to get more than ragged scraps of information, the searcher requires uninterrupted time. The modern accounting system, seen in its entirety, is a model of logical sequences, and its value is appraised quite largely on its very clarity. Why, then, with such a skeleton to build upon, should the beauty of straight lines be marred by unsightly excrescences?

Brevity is the soul of wit—but overmuch brevity in account-titles obscures their meaning and seems to approach the acme of witlessness.

Clarity seems to me to be the butt we should aim at, and, if clarity means the use of two words for one or of an added word in an account-title, by all means let us have the extra word.

Accounting is not an exact science, because of the variety of its application (but the recording of facts can be made an exact matter) and without exact recording of facts on which to base and to which to apply our accounting theories, accounting becomes a mere waste of time.

Let the account-title be exactly descriptive. Why should anyone, accountant or layman, be expected to know that “consumers’ accounts receivable” is an “income” account and should have been described as “income billed to consumers?” Examples of this nature could be endlessly multiplied, but to no good end. There may have been theories underlying such examples that appeared perfectly sound to their authors. Their

only final outcome is confusion, which, I believe, was never intended to result from "system."

In any event, this effect of terminological inaccuracy affects accountants themselves rather than the general public. It is, however, sufficiently serious to be worth comment.

The other point at which accountants are beset by their own brevities is the inadequacy of the majority of "journal narrations." Many accountants, otherwise of stout calibre, never seem able to narrate a transaction so that another can follow it. If it is involved and affects several accounts confusion is worse confounded. Older accountants, who remember the agonies of disentangling "invested capital for the pre-war period" when the federal income tax first began to be a serious factor of accounting work, are less apt to offend here than men of lesser memories. For my own part, give me redundancy in narration—give me words—give me anything at all, save that sweet brevity that may be interpreted half a dozen ways ten years afterwards—or can not be interpreted at all. Reconstructing forgotten transactions from six words and two colons may be dignified by the term "constructive accounting," but many of the "constructors" of the "pre-war period" would dearly have loved to have the scalps of their tormentors.

So far, this laxity in words and their use and value has not hit the profession in its public relations except in the wasted time that must either annoy the client or swell up the bugaboo of "uncharged time"; but we now come to the worst effect—many men of affairs claim that accountants' reports do not tell them anything. They are either vague collections of words and phrases, ornamented by so-called "statements" that they can not understand, or they are so wrapped up and disguised in technicalities that they are not humanly understandable. Allow for a certain amount of pardonable exaggeration due to annoyance and there is still left enough weight in the complaint to justify the idea of quackery that haunts our labors in the public mind. I grant that certain forms in common use—notably the balance-sheet and statement of income and expense, profit-and-loss statement, or whatever you like to call it, have reached their present crystallization through experience; but that they are not altogether acceptable is clear. To the accountant they have definite values and meanings—not so to the layman. If this were not so why should one of the great New York banking houses have taken to publishing periodical statements of its condition with concise ex-

planations for the layman. If accountants' reports were the models of crystalline logic they set out to be—and should be—such criticisms could not be leveled against them.

I think the accountant of today loves words. The roll of sonorous syllables hypnotizes him to his own undoing. There are doubtless some among us with a nice appreciation of word-values, but when a client finds in his report such phrases as “the quantification of the predicate” can you wonder that he throws up his hands and classifies accountants as a body of Windy Willies?

To set our house in order is not easy; it must be done from the inside and, seeing the type of youngsters who are now turning to accountancy as their life work it should not prove any herculean task.