

Some old ways still the best

If I owned a personal computer which I do not (even though word processors are viewed by many writers, poets, and journalists as indispensable to their trade), the first software I'd acquire would be an unabridged dictionary to which I could refer by pushing a key. Not since I was in grade school have I been without a dictionary on my desk.

The second software I'd purchase would provide the contents of a small but indispensable book containing the spellings of 30,000 words. Again, since grade school, I've been a good speller; but even the best-trained memory sometimes slips, and the arrangement of letters in a word refuses to fall into proper sequence. My speller is well-worn and dog-eared. (Only by reference to the speller am I certain that in writing dog-eared I should not double the r.)

To complete my basic tools-of-trade, I would add Roget's Thesaurus without which I'd be severely handicapped. Often the almost-right word comes to mind in mid-sentence, but although an inner voice persuades me a better exists, it will not pop to the surface. I find it, usually, in the thesaurus.

In time, were I to persist in my efforts to write with a word processor, I could find dozens of other reference books worth adding to my tools. Lining the room where I work are book-cases filled with volumes, volumes filled with information to which I refer for establishing dates, names and historical facts. Stories, legends, myths, and literary classics of ages past stand cheek-by-jowl against novels, art, music, drama,

travel and cook books. Several shelves are devoted to histories, collections and anthologies.

Should all the information contained in my books be available at the touch of a button, I could dispose of my library and gain house-room equal to a small addition. There'd be no chore of dusting books, nor any need to keep them organized so I can find easily any information.

Dispose of my books? I'd sooner dispose of wall-hung pictures that remind me of people I love, places dear to me, and scenes that bring pleasant memories. I'd sooner replace furniture that has brought comfort to generations. While "things" do, over time, wear out, they often last longer than people.

Books, like other cherished possessions that call to mind those who lived and loved and laughed (and suffered before they died long before I was born), are ties between the past and the present. They extend into the future when my own eyes no longer see, ears hear, nor fingers move in staccato rhythm over typewriter keys. Things, including books, will pass to younger generations just as many have come to me.

Books, each carrying its own unique message, are like life-long friendships; I could no more consign them to a discard pile than I could turn my back upon dear friends.

I wonder as I contemplate a computer: would it be used to full capacity? Would using one change my writing style? Would I feel better or less well-equipped to communicate with whoever reads the thoughts I commit to paper?

A machine which may be programmed to produce or erase words instantly might diminish opportunities to consider, arrange, reconsider, and rearrange with editing pen, deprive me of testing sound, meter, and phrasing that is now a habitual part of writing.

Writing is simple; rewriting is complex. As pages of prose roll from my typewriter in first draft, they look like the finished product. Some writers may edit as they go along, but not I. In draft, I complete an entire article, column or chapter, putting into print all detail, all ideas as they surface.

When a subject is written as fully as possible, I rework what is done. Eliminating superfluous words, moving entire paragraphs, changing mood of messages by choosing better phrases to express thought or feeling, simplifying, correcting, adding emphasis or challenge: all these are part of rewriting.

Can writers accomplish this exercise with word processors? Some can, perhaps. Someday I may train myself to do it. Hours of time, reams of paper, could be saved. Should I invest in a computer? Some days I'm tempted. At other times I sit at my typewriter fully satisfied that this machine, although microchip and software have made it obsolete, still serves me best.

And yet, I drive an automobile rather than a horse, my house is wired for electricity rather than lit by kerosene lamps, and modern plumbing rather than a pitcher pump delivers water to my kitchen sink.

Remembering the comic cartoon entitled "Born Thirty Years Too Soon," that ran when I was a child, I grin at myself as I cling to familiar old-fashioned ways.