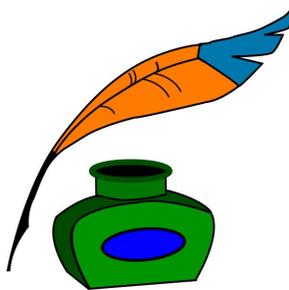# Writing for Results

SUMMARY

Some people write to put their thoughts on paper. Others write to discover what their thoughts are. Most of us do both to varying degrees, depending on what we're writing about.

When you write, some of your ideas will become clearer and some of them will become murkier. Don't be discouraged by the times when ideas become murkier. It's just a sign that you're in the midst of learning something new or resolving a problem that needs to be addressed. That brings us to the questions of how we think and what we think about when we write.

Effective writing requires effective thinking. And effective thinking requires that you direct your thoughts at the right target at the right time. This handbook gives you tools that will help you to do just that. I have focused on executive documents. However, many of the techniques you find here will help you to communicate clearly, concisely and effectively through any medium.

For the most part, the tools you will find here are just that: tools, not rules.

THE STEP-BY-STEP MODEL

Writing for Results uses a step-by-step model that identifies the different types of decisions you make when you communicate. The model will help you to focus on the right element of that process at the right time. For each element, you will find techniques and options that will help you to make efficient and effective decisions for your message.

Writing for Results is divided into the four major stages of the step-by-step model:
• giving yourself a frame of reference;
• researching and selecting the content of your message;
• choosing the medium or media for your message; and
• preparing the message itself, if you've chosen a written medium.

1. Frame of Reference. The first stage is to give yourself a frame of reference that will guide everything that follows. You can also use frames of reference to plan complex communication strategies in model form.

The elements of a frame of reference are:
• the objective of your message;
• the audience of your message;
• the authority required for your message;
• the barriers and competition that your message may have to overcome; and
• the time lines needed to develop and convey your message.

You may find that changing one of these elements requires you to change other elements as well.

2. Content. The next stage is to develop the content of your message, without worrying too much about how it is to be conveyed or what it will look like in final form. Developing the content is largely a matter of deciding which concrete details and arguments to add to what abstract concepts in order to bring your audience around to your way of thinking. In other words, the content must be directly relevant to your frame of reference.

By "content" I mean anything that forms the substance or meaning of a message — in contrast with style, which affects ease of reading but should not change the substance. However, content can be affected by as little as changing a single comma, which is a matter of grammar (or, more accurately, English usage).

3. Medium. After you have developed the content of your message, you will be in a position to decide what is the best medium to convey it. First, decide whether to convey it orally or in writing, or both. Then, review the oral and written media available to choose what is best-suited to your needs.

4. Preparing the Message. If you have chosen a written medium, the last stage is to develop the message itself.

In doing so, the first task is to organize the content and write a first draft. Sometimes, you will be able to develop an organization structure first and then write the first draft. Other times, you will find that you need to write the first draft before you can develop the organization structure.

In organizing the content, you will need to:
- take account of your audience's comprehension span;
- develop a grouping scheme; and
- sequence material within your grouping scheme.

Developing an effective organization structure can be a complex challenge at times. You might be tempted to skip this step. However, if you cannot see the pattern in what you have written, you cannot expect your readers to.

The next step is to format your text. Here, your goal is to make your organization structure easily visible to readers, and to make the text physically easy to read. For letters and for memos to your minister, the format is rigidly defined. With other briefing material, however, you have much more latitude.

As you proceed toward the final draft of your message, you will focus less on content and structure, and increasingly on style and grammar:

- Style is a matter of increasing ease of reading without changing the content of your message. Aim for active verbs, short words, short sentences and ample sub-paragraphs.

- Grammar is largely a matter of making sure that you use accepted practices of English usage to ensure that you say what you mean to say. English usage also comprises matters such as spelling, capital letters and using words according to their definitions in the dictionary.

Once you've got a near-final draft of your message, you will find that it is useful to get comments from a colleague. It also pays off to leave the near-final draft aside for a while to give it a chance to cool off before you review it again.

After you have sent the draft forward for approval, more senior levels may ask you to make changes. When that happens, make sure that you work with the e-file that is on your organization's executive documents tracking system — not the one that you have tucked away in your own computer. As well, take a moment to show where you have made changes, using a pen or a highlighter. This saves time for everyone.

STRUCTURE OF THE MODEL

Some of you may take issue with how I have defined the stages of the step-by-step model. Others might wonder about the sequence of the stages. If that's you, I won't argue with you too long and hard. The model is a tool, not a rule. If you disagree with its structure, focus instead on the elements within each of the four stages. Jump to any section and you will find techniques and options that will help you to make your message more effective.

LATIN

You will see in some sections that I have used Latin to fill in the content of sample messages where the text itself is not relevant to the point I am making. I drew the text wholesale off the Web from classical Latin texts — texts that I certainly don't pretend to understand.

FEEDBACK

In drafting this handbook, I have aimed to provide guidance that is sufficiently precise to be useful, sufficiently broad to apply to a wide range of documents, and sufficiently flexible to enable it to be applied in a wide range of organizations.

I would welcome any comments you'd like to offer on how well I have met those objectives, as well as any other concerns or suggestions that you might have. Writing for Results has benefitted greatly from user feedback for over 25 years, and I am deeply indebted to all who have taken the trouble to offer their wisdom. Please do not hesitate to send your feedback through the Comments Page.

EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

Feedback through the Comments Page is generally one-way communication. If you would like to get the views of others on executive documents issues of any sort, the place to do it is the Members' Forum. It is a unique opportunity for you to obtain perspectives from members in diverse organizations worldwide.