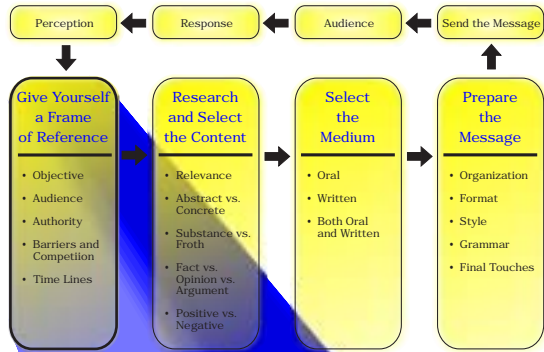
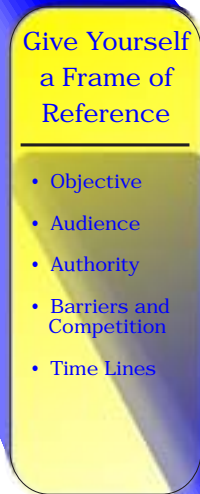


### Writing for Results

A Step-by-Step Model for Successful Briefings



# Chapter I-1. Objective



*The mind that has no fixed goal loses itself; for, as they say, to be everywhere is to be nowhere.*

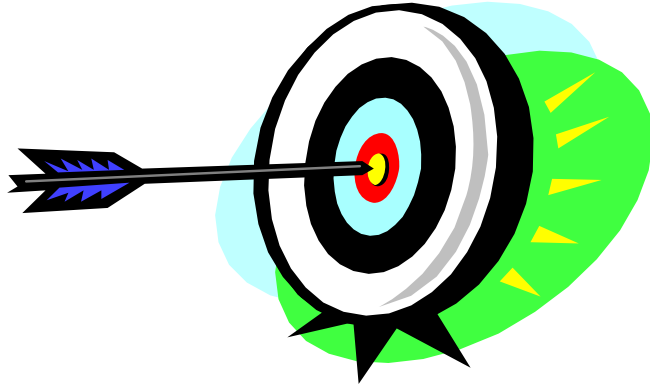
Michel de Montaigne

Objective

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If you do not have an objective for your message, there is no point in taking your time and your audience's time over it. However, setting a useful objective can be more of a challenge than you might think. You may also have to consider your objective in the context of a larger process. An example of this is found in [Figure 0.3](#), How to Use the Step-by-Step Model.



## WHAT IS THE TRIGGER?

In setting an objective, your first task is to examine what triggered your decision to prepare a message. In many cases, the trigger will be an incoming message of some sort – a phone call, a letter, a request from your boss, etc.

Scrutinize the trigger carefully. Make sure that you fully understand it before you decide how to respond to it. To do that, it can also be helpful to ask yourself what triggered the trigger, although in many cases the best you might be able to do is make an educated guess. Understanding why you have been asked to do something can be vital in ensuring that you react appropriately.

To take a simple example, let's say your boss has asked you to prepare a briefing for your company's president. In the context of the discussion, you interpreted that to mean that you are to prepare a slide deck for presentation to the president. But it might be that your boss assumed that you would understand that she wanted you to prepare a briefing note. Better to double-check early on than to spend hours on the slide deck, only to find that it wasn't at all what was wanted.

Alternatively, you might think that a slide deck would be a good idea, even though your boss didn't ask for it. That's fine, as long as you know that it wasn't what your boss asked for and that you probably face an uphill battle in: (a) getting your boss to approve the idea; and (b) getting an opportunity to present the deck to the president.

## OBJECTIVE VS. PROCESS

In forming an objective, avoid stating it in terms of the process of communicating. That process is the means to an end. It is not an end in itself.

Here's an example of an objective that has been stated in terms of the process of communicating:

Objective: To provide my supervisor with information on buying a new computer for my office.

That's a bit like an archer saying "My objective is to move the arrow in the direction of the target." It is more likely that the archer would say, "My objective is to hit the bullseye."

Revising the objective above, you could state it more usefully as something that you want to accomplish:

Objective: To convince my supervisor to approve the purchase of a new computer for my office.

Stating it this way will have a significant impact on the way you prepare and deliver your message.

## AN ANALOGY WITH ADVERTISING

The analogy of an ad campaign for an auto dealership may help in understanding how to define objectives. The measure of the ad campaign's success is not how many ads are placed in the newspaper. Rather, the measure of success is in how many potential buyers decide to visit the dealership.

Beyond that, persuading prospects to visit the dealership is just one small step in a much larger marketing process. It starts with market studies and product design, and it ends with a customer signing on the dotted line and receiving the car. In the same fashion, the objectives of any given message represent just one small step in a much larger process.

In any marketing initiative, the goal is to promote sales and earn a profit. Specific marketing activities, however, have much more limited objectives. For example, the auto dealership's advertising objective is not to sell cars. That's the ultimate goal, but no one expects a customer to see the ad, pick up the phone and say: "Sell

me the Taurus SEL Wagon I saw advertised in today's newspaper."

Instead, the objective of the ad is to persuade the customer to visit the dealership. That's to say, the objective is to persuade the customer to take the next step toward buying a car. Similarly, once the customer visits the dealership, the sales rep's first objective is not to sell the car. A good sales rep will take many preliminary steps before reaching that stage — finding out what the customer wants and can afford, identifying models best suited to those requirements, persuading the customer to take a test drive, etc.

A key challenge in defining the objective of your message will often be to define which small step in a larger process you are taking right now — the equivalent of “the next step toward buying a car”.

## YOUR OBLIGATIONS IN SETTING OBJECTIVES

As an employee of an organization, your obligation is to serve that organization's best interests, not your personal best interests. In the first example above, the objective was to convince the supervisor to buy a new computer. In practice, however, that is too narrow and self-serving an objective. It is also an objective that reduces your chances of success.

Let's look at an example where your supervisor has asked you to advise her on what database software your group should use. Say you are familiar with MS Access, and acquiring it would be your personal preference. You might be tempted to state your objective as follows:

Objective: To convince my supervisor to approve the purchase MS Access as the database software used by our office.

That would certainly be a viable objective to work with. But you would also be doing a disservice to your supervisor and your group by stating it in such terms.

In the case of the database software, many considerations other than your personal preference should be taken into account — cost, capabilities, ease of use etc.

Your message might still recommend the purchase of MS Access, but it is vital that you arrive at that conclusion through an objective consideration of all relevant factors. A more appropriate objective might be something along these lines:

Objective: To provide my supervisor with advice that will enable her to make a sound decision in acquiring the database software that is best-suited

to our group's needs.

Similar principles apply when you are writing to brief senior executives. They expect to be able to make sound decisions on the basis of the briefings they receive. And to do that, they must receive accurate and balanced information, a thorough analysis of the issues, and objective advice. They also expect that advice to conform with their broader goals and priorities.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

In setting an objective, you may need to be strategic. You certainly don't want to set an objective that is less than what you could achieve. But you also want to avoid setting an objective that is more than you can reasonably expect to achieve. Sometimes you will have to set aside a long-term objective that is not immediately feasible and settle instead for a more modest objective that will lay the groundwork for pursuing the long-term objective later on.

Let's look an example. Say your long-term objective is to convince your president to adopt new standards that will require increased fuel efficiency in the cars the company manufactures. You know that this will help reduce the greenhouse-gas emissions that are causing climate change. However, you also know that your president does not believe that greenhouse gas emissions are causing the climate to change.

That leaves you with quite a challenge if you want to convince the president to support the new standards. There is no point in pursuing that objective before you have convinced the president that greenhouse gas emissions are causing climate change. That, then, might be the immediate objective in your communications strategy.

Even that limited objective, however, might prove to be too ambitious for you. It might be that what you really need to do is convince the president's advisors that greenhouse gases are causing climate change. You would then rely on the president's advisors to persuade him or her. Note how that decision changes not only the objective but also the audience of your message.

Being strategic means taking a cold, hard look at reality. It often requires wisdom in selecting feasible short-term objectives that will further your long-term objective.

## HOW WILL YOU MEASURE YOUR SUCCESS?

Before you send your message, it is good practice to put a note on your calendar — a few days, a week, a month etc. from now — to check on whether your message has been received and whether it has achieved its objective. This implies that you have set criteria by which to assess whether it has succeeded.

When setting your objective, ask yourself how you will know whether your message has succeeded. If you cannot answer that question, this may be a sign that you need to put more thought into defining a useful objective.

## MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES

Be wary of building multiple objectives into a single message, even if they address the same general subject. Sometimes it is necessary or desirable to do so. Often, however, it is not, and the result can be confusion and delays in acting on your message.

It can be much more effective to send two short messages with two different objectives than to send a single long message that covers both objectives.

## SPECIALIZED DOCUMENTS

Many executive documents may have procedures and format standards of their own that you will need to be aware of as early as possible. They include:

- memos to a senior executive;
- letters for a senior executive to sign;
- briefing books for a senior executive; and
- speeches, media lines or media releases for a senior executive.

If you think you may end up preparing any of those documents, contact your executive documents coordinator early on to find out if there are any procedures or formats that you should be aware of.