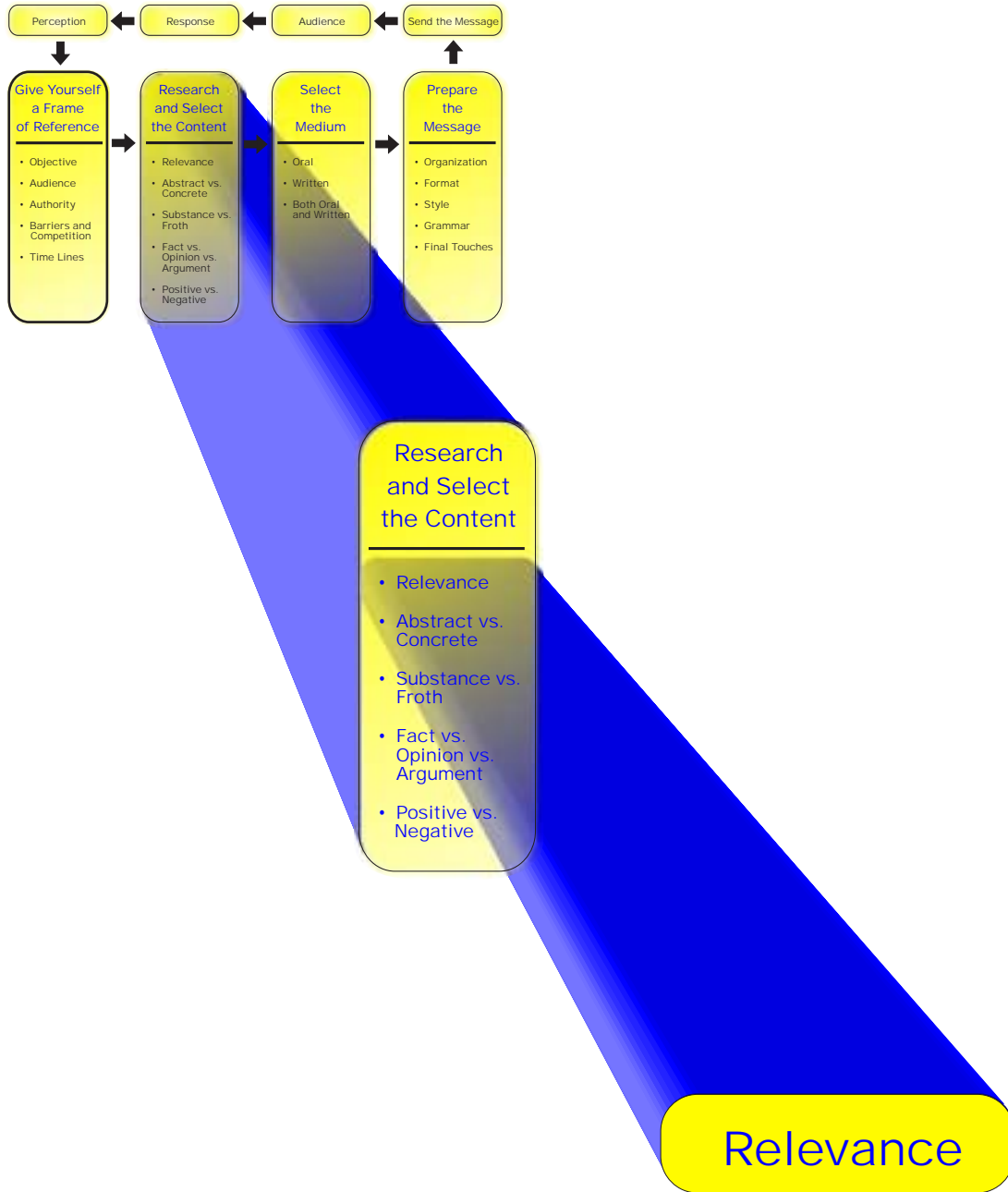


Writing for Results

A Step-by-Step Model for Executive Documents



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RELEVANCE

Introduction

It can seem overwhelming at times when you must decide what should form the content of your message. In making those decisions, your first thought should be: “Is this relevant to my frame of reference?” If you are writing to a minister, a deputy minister or a senior corporate executive, you may well have to prove the relevance of your message before it even gets inside your audience’s office.



This section examines key factors to consider in ensuring the relevance of the content of your messages.

Objective

You will need to be constantly vigilant in eliminating material that is relevant to your subject but not your objective. However, that still leaves many volumes of material that could conceivably deserve a place in your message. To narrow things down further, you will have to give careful thought to the audience for the message, the authority required to send the message, barriers and competition your message may encounter, and the time frames you are working with.

Audience

Relevance to your audience should be at the top of your mind at all times. It can be quite a challenge to put yourself in an audience’s shoes and to select content accordingly. Much of the content that you care about very deeply may be far too detailed for the audience.

What Is Important?

In assessing whether material is relevant to your audience, a consistent theme will be the question: “Is this important?” That can be a challenging question to come to grips with, and there may be a temptation to dodge it by simply putting

everything in and leaving it to your minister to decide what is important and what is not. To do that, however, is to abdicate an important part of your responsibility.

It is part of your job to make difficult decisions in selecting what to include and what to leave out. If you don't make those decisions, you are effectively delegating the responsibility upward to people who can ill afford the time it takes to plow through unnecessarily long briefing notes. They will not thank you for the extra information.

Length

As a rule, shorter messages get better results than long messages when you are writing executive documents. This goes hand-in-hand with your responsibility of deciding what is important and what is not.

If you have spent the past four months analyzing the costs and benefits of various options, it can be tempting to let others know just how much work this has been and how much you know about your subject. You might be tempted to write a 38-page cost-benefit analysis, just in case your minister wants to review how you came to your conclusions.

Be wary of giving in to such temptations. The chances are that you will not further your cause by including the 38-page analysis. It is more likely that you will damage your cause – by making your message more intimidating and hiding messages that really matter. Be rigorously objective in deciding whether it might be sufficient to replace the 38-page analysis with the simple statement: “Over the course of 10 years, Option A will cost 23 percent more than Option B while achieving essentially the same level of effectiveness.”

Strategic Perspective

If you are writing to a minister, a deputy minister or a senior corporate executive, try to put yourself in your audience's shoes and understand the strategic perspective he or she has on the subject matter. It is a safe bet that their perspective will take account of many more factors and much broader factors than those that involve your job directly.

Give some thought to what those factors are when you assemble content for your messages. The more accurately you anticipate those factors, the less is the

likelihood that your message will be dismissed for reasons that never occurred to you.

Balance and Objectivity

In writing executive documents, your superiors have a right to expect balance and objectivity in the material you prepare. That's what you are paid for. It's called professionalism. If you are writing for your minister, it is vital that he or she be able to have confidence in the material provided. Conversely, if you gain a reputation for pursuing your personal agenda in what you prepare, you could soon find yourself marginalized and routinely ignored.

Those principles, however, are easier to state than they are to follow. They also bring us into the realm of professional ethics. If you are asked to write an argument for an option that you do not believe in, you owe it to yourself and your boss to say that you do not think that is a sound course of action. Having heard you out, however, your boss might then say: "OK, I know how you feel. But I still want you to do it my way."

In the vast majority of cases, your professional obligation then becomes to apply your knowledge and skill to do things the way your boss wants to the best of your ability. In a tiny minority of cases, it may be that doing things your boss's way will mean unethical or illegal behaviour on your part.

It is beyond the scope of Writing for Results to tell you how to deal with cases of unethical or illegal behaviour, so I won't try to do so. Instead, I will restrict myself to the cases where you and your boss simply have differing views on how things should be done. The bottom line is that your obligation is to act to the best of your ability in the best interests of the organization. If your boss listens to your views and disagrees, your boss's views should generally prevail.

Knowledge

Your audience's knowledge of the subject matter and ability to understand it are important factors in the length of your message. If your audience is already familiar with the subject, you can save yourself a lot of length. Even so, you need to be careful not to take too much for granted. It's a fine balance.

Get to know as much as you can about your audience. Factors you may need to consider include:

- place of residence;
- level and type of education;
- career experience;
- cultural background;
- mother tongue;
- familiarity with the subject matter and technical concepts.

All of these factors can give you important insight into what you need to explain to your audience and what you do not.

Preferences

Different audiences have widely differing preferences for the type of briefing material they receive. Some want more detail, some want less. Some are very particular about the format you use, some don't care a lot as long as it is comprehensible. Consult your boss or your executive documents coordinator to learn what you can about the preferences of whomever it is you are writing for.

Needs, Priorities and Goals

It is part of your job to take account of your audience's strategic needs, priorities and goals to be best of your abilities. Your audience may care deeply about a number of matters, and the more you can learn about those matters the better equipped you will be to achieve results.

Let's take a simple example. Say you know that your minister has announced that your division will be closed in the next fiscal year. It would make no sense, then, to draft a memo to the minister that seeks approval of a two-year project for your division.

Here's another example. Say your minister has gone on record as saying that climate change is a natural phenomenon that has nothing to do with greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In that case, it would make no sense to draft a memo to your memo that recommends approval of a new program for reducing GHG emissions. If GHGs concern you, your first step is going to be to draft a memo that will convince your minister that GHG emissions are causing climate change. Not until you have won that argument can you start to think about getting approval

for a program to reduce GHGs.

It is impossible to give you a list of the types of goals and priorities that you should consider in drafting a message. But you should pay heed to any resources that you can get your hands on that might give you insight. They might include policy speeches, budgets, a speech from the throne (or perhaps a state of the union speech in the U.S.A.), and campaign platforms.

Beyond that, you can be reasonably certain that your minister will be interested in matters that involve potential for significantly increasing or decreasing:

- progress in achieving objectives (program outputs and outcomes);
- employment in a given area;
- program spending or financial viability;
- positive or negative media coverage, particularly if it involves addressing a large or influential audience; and
- staff complements.

Horizontal Impact

Programs, departments, governments, countries and corporate sectors are becoming ever more closely linked with one another. It is incumbent upon you to take account of those links and the impact on other stakeholders in the material you prepare.

Complexity

Beware if you sense that your message is becoming complex. If it seems complex to you, you can be sure that it will be even more complex to your audience. Even if your message seems straightforward to you, it can be helpful to run a draft by a colleague to see if he or she can digest it with ease. A complex message often means that the writer has not taken enough time to think things through. Simplify it wherever you can. If you cannot simplify the message, it may be a sign that you have selected too ambitious an objective.

Authority

As noted earlier, authority is the flip side of your audience.

Let's say that the matter at hand involves international trade, but your minister's

portfolio is agriculture. That may mean a very different process than would be the case if your minister's portfolio were international trade. In this case, your minister may lack the authority needed to deal with the matter at hand. That will mean that you must draft a memo to the minister that will persuade him or her to write to the minister responsible for trade to persuade that minister to take the action needed.

Barriers and Competition

The content of your message will often need to overcome barriers and competition such as:

- time pressures on your audience or intermediary audiences;
- contrary views or competing priorities of your audience or intermediary audiences;
- messages from other sources that convey contrary views;
- financial pressures;
- human resource pressures; and
- political pressures.

Time Frames

Last, but by no means least, you must consider time frames when you are planning the content for your message. Remember what time frames entail:

- a deadline for delivery of the message to your audience;
- a budget for the amount of your time you can devote to the message; and
- a schedule to allocate your time and that of others to meet the deadline.

Those factors by themselves will serve as useful guidelines on what sort of content can go into your message. If your message must be delivered tomorrow, you don't have time for conducting a lot of detailed research. The best briefing in the world is of no value if it is delivered a week after it is needed. If your message must be delivered six months from now, on the other hand, a broad range of options is available in developing the content. Similarly, more options will be feasible if this is your sole task for the next two days than would be the case if you have 23 other tasks to take care of in the same period. And the same goes for others involved in the process, ranging from the clerks who must process the message to, say, the minister, who must sign the message.