

## WRITING REPORTS

### PREPARATORY PHASE: organisation of information

#### 1) Specifying the aim of the report

- At the end of the introductory section the full background of the report and/or the reason why it has been written should be perfectly clear.

#### 2) Identifying readership

- It is very rare that the reader of any report has no previous knowledge of the subject, and the writer must bear this in mind when selecting information. Similarly, the reader will have certain expectations as regards the content and form of the report, and it is the writer's task to anticipate and, whenever possible, meet these expectations.

#### 3) Selecting and structuring information

- Essential information must be relevantly organised in a logical sequence.  
- The reader's attention should be easily focused on the most important points.  
- The conclusion should show a direct link with the introduction and should contain nothing new or surprising for the reader.

#### 4) Formulating the subject heading

- The report should have a brief and accurate subject heading. It should be an accurate statement of the topic of the report, expressed as economically as possible. This is why noun- rather than verb- phrases are used. Content words in subject headings may be given in capital letters.

#### 5) Deciding upon the techniques of presentation

- A good report should be made visually attractive for the reader by using appropriate subdivisions and subheadings.

A short report should have the following three distinct sections:

#### 1 Introduction (the opening paragraph(s))

##### **Function**

It should establish why the report has been written.

##### **Contents**

The introduction should contain:

- a) a reference to previous communication and/or
- b) a description of the background situation and/or
- c) an explicit statement of the aim of the report.

#### 2 Development/The Main Body (the middle paragraph(s))

##### **Function**

It should make the message of the report perfectly clear.

##### **Contents**

The development should include a series of the main ideas, supported by facts, examples, advantages/disadvantages, etc. The organisation of these ideas, etc., will depend upon the **aim** of the report.

#### 3 Conclusion (the final paragraph(s))

##### **Function**

It should present the logical outcome of the information given in the main body.

##### **Contents**

The conclusion should contain:

- a) **opinion** reports – the writer's opinion and interpretation of the facts (without 1st person reference)

- b) **action** reports – a clear statement of:
- the **action** taken or to be taken
  - the **deadline** for this action
  - the **actor**, i.e. the person responsible for taking this action.

## **PRESENTING NUMERICAL INFORMATION**

When deciding whether to include some form of a diagram in the report, ask yourself:

- What is my **aim** in including a diagram? The type of pictorial representation which you choose often depends upon whether you wish to present information in an accurate or a visually attractive way.
- Who is my **reader** and what are his/her requirements?
- Can it be read easily? Would the reader have any problems in interpreting it?

Even when dealing with a mass of information on a complex topic, try to keep it as simple as possible.

- Do not try to convey too much information in one diagram. Two (or more) simple diagrams are better than one very complicated diagram.
- If there is more than one diagram, number them.
- Use a clear key where necessary. Label the parts of a diagram if this will help your reader to understand it.
- Give your diagrams accurate titles.
- Add brief, clear footnotes where necessary.
- Make sure that the type of diagram which you have chosen is the most appropriate one.
- Make sure that all the graphs, tables, diagrams, etc. are properly integrated into the text.
- Keep the chart, etc. and its written commentary as close together as possible. The impact of the illustration will be lost, if the reader has to keep on going backwards or forwards by several pages in order to read about it.

To summarise:

- Use illustrations with care: if they are too numerous or complex, the reader will become confused and distracted.
- Use illustrations to support and explain, but NOT to replace the written word.

## **WRITING PHASE: language**

Writing gives structure and form to our ideas. In the business world this is done for a purpose: to persuade, recommend, offer advice, give an order, etc. A business text must be therefore easily and quickly read and its message must be understood exactly as intended. If you learn to recognise and avoid the more common errors of information control, grammar and style, you will achieve this aim.

You will write more confidently and more correctly, if you check everything you write. Pay particular attention to the following:

- **Appropriate subject heading** Take care to prepare your reader by

introducing the subject appropriately in the headline.

- **Carefully organised information** If the reader needs to be persuaded or convinced, your information will need careful planning and organising. Introducing the central message to your readers can cause many problems to you as a writer. Since readers generally tend to concentrate on the introduction and conclusion of a business text, it is very important to learn how to introduce and conclude your central message effectively.
- **Correct grammar and spelling** Train yourself to check for major grammatical errors, words which are commonly misspelt and sentences which are incomplete.
- **Suitable style and tone** The style and tone must match the message and its reader. Good writers in the business world know how to choose their words. The communication must achieve its goal or time and energy are wasted. If you wish to be a good writer, good grammar and spelling are necessary but not sufficient. Your words must be chosen with care and tested for their suitability for each particular writing task. Good writers can write **upwards** and **downwards** without offending their readers.

In **downward** communication the writer is in a position of authority, and his/her communication aims to cover such functions as issuing orders, stating decisions, etc. The language in this case will reflect the writer's certainty that his/her directives will be followed. The writer will use decisive modals and will seldom employ expressions which would conflict with the stricter tone.

The functions which we often find in **upward** and **horizontal** communication are to put forward ideas and express possible courses of action. However, the writer cannot be certain that his/her suggestions and recommendations will be acted upon, and his/her tone will therefore be more tentative and show more deference towards the reader(s).

The notion of **tone** is very important to the business writer. Since readers can be insulted not by the message but by the manner of expression, an otherwise perfect piece of writing could possibly cause a breakdown in communication. It is therefore important for you to analyse your relationship with your reader(s) and then to choose the appropriate language and tone for your message.

Developing an effective writing style is difficult, especially for the non-native English speaker. **In business you cannot write the way you speak: the written business style avoids giving unnecessary information, complicated arguments, personal references, jargon and other features of informal conversation. Abbreviations and contractions are avoided and the full forms are used instead. As a general rule, the more formal a report is, the less personal reference it will contain.** Effective writers in business do not usually refer to themselves. Instead, they emphasize their position and authority. They have been hired because they have certain professional abilities, and it is their professional opinions, recommendations, arguments and mandates that are important to their readers.

**When producing a business document always try to apply the formal style techniques:**

- **avoid redundancy**
  - **never use colloquial words when more formal words can be employed**
  - **remember that the passive voice helps to focus on the message**
  - **avoid the use of personal pronouns (expressions of formality – like the „empty “ it can help to solve the problem)**
  - **never use contracted forms in formal writing (e.g. “don ‘ t”, “it ‘ ll”)**
- **Logically connected ideas** Finally, your ideas must be suitably connected, so that the reader can identify related ideas while reading through and gradually understanding the message. The choice of connectives must ensure that the sentence length is controlled and that appropriate focus is given to each piece of information.

(Based on ‘Write for Business’ by M. Doherty, L. Knapp, S. Swift; Longman)