POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN WRITING A FORMAL REPORT

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"I must write with pains so that my reader may read with ease".

Robert Louis Stevenson

No matter whether your job is in accounting, engineering, production, sales, service or teaching -as an employee you can expect report writing to be an important part of your work.

The extent of your participation will vary. You may be asked to handle the clerical details only or to asist with the preparation of content or to prepare the entire report yourself. Sometimes, you may be required only to read the reports coming into your department and evaluate them.

Regardless of how you may be involved with business reports, it will be helpful for you to know what is a report and how it is constructed.

A business report is an *organized, factual,* and *objective* information brought by a person (the sender) who has experienced or accumulated it to a person or persons (the receiver) who need it, want it or are entitled to it. It can be informal (letter or memo form), or formal.

A written business report is a tool of management. Its goal or objective is to assist managers in reaching the best possible decisions. That is why it is very important that the report be well written and easy to understand. It is assigned by and prepared for a higher authority. Therefore, it is prepared according to that person's directions, needs, and preferences, but must be based upon the truth.

Since the report is written for a higher authority, we must keep that person in mind and try to know him as best as possible. Prepare a "user-oriented" report. The engineer designer takes into account future commuters on the highway, so must the report writer hold in consideration the reader or receiver of his report. By using a you-attitude or empathy- taking into consideration your reader- this can be achieved. Also, using a you-attitude helps the writer to be objective. Consequently, the writer will avoid being biased in reaching conclusions.

A *formal* report is a large project. It involves a great deal of time, effort, and organization. Some reports involve considerable research and investigation. They may require several weeks or months to compile. In these types of report, the writer offers some conclusions and recommendations based on the findings.

Althought writing a formal report can be a difficult and complicated task, it can be made simpler if you keep in mind the following suggestions:

* Know reader

  1. What can I safely assume about this person?
  2. What is this person's approach to life?
  3. What is the reader's position in relation to mine?
  4. Did the reader request the report?
  5. How can this person benefit from the information included in the report?

* The purpose - Why am I writing the report?

* Select the information to be included carefully; the effective writer considers:

  1. Verification - being sure all sources are valid and crosschecking them.
  2. Necessary background information - being sure the reader knows enough about the situation to understand the report.
  3. What information to include or omit - being concise but including essential information.
  4. Review - checking for possible misunderstandings and errors after the report is written.
  5. Follow up - making clear what action will be taken in the future.

* All business reports must follow a basic organization.

  1. Purpose - Why the report was prepared.
  2. Procedure - How was the data for the report gathered.
  3. Body - What was found.
  4. Conclusions - What the information presented means.
  5. Recommendations - What action should be taken as a result of the findings.
  6. Other parts are:
     a. Title page
     b. Table of contents
     c. Appendix
     d. Bibliography

* Primary research (investigations by means of interviews, or questionnaires) is essential in order to reach factual and verifiable conclusions.

* Secondary research (investigations by using books, magazines, and newspapers) are also very helpful in reaching conclusions.

* Charts, graphs, tabulations, and diagrams help the receiver in comprehending the report.

* Psychological needs, motivations, and experiences influence the interpretation that the receiver may give to certain words. So be specific; use concrete words. Words should be chosen that will convey the writer's meaning as clearly, exactly, and concisely as possible.

1. Use simple, everyday vocabulary. Prefer the familiar word.

   1. Avoid saying "cognizant" when you can say "aware".
     "Due to the fact" - "because"

2. Avoid unnecesary words.

   1. Why say "prior to" when "before" means the same thing.

   2. Avoid roundabouts and redundancies.

   Example: "Pursuant to your letter requesting our annual report. Same is herewith enclosed".
   Better: Here is the annual report you asked for.

Try to use just the number of words necessary to communicate the ideas.

3. Short, simple sentences are preferred, but a report made up only of short, simple sentences even with personal pronouns is dreadfully monotonous. Variety in sentence length, and change of pace helps sustain reader interest.

* Even though some technical writers will argue that you should write your verbs in the passive voice, this is not always true. By using the active voice you create interest in your writing. Active verbs are more lively than passive verbs and call for simple sentences. However, there are instances when the passive voice is preferred.

1. When the doer of the action is not known to the reader.

2. When the writer wishes to place the emphasis on the action

   Example: The *reports* were handed in yesterday.

3. When the writer wishes to keep the name of the doer anonymous.

* Technical terms should be avoided - but if it is necessary to use them, they should be defined at the bottom of the page or in the appendix.

* The most important aspect of effective communication is establishing a positive relationship with your receiver. Therefore, your report should reflect and enhance the positive aspects of that relationship.

* Appearance or presentation is also very important. The report should look neat.

In summary, the success or failure of a formal report depends largely on the thoroughness and systematic care with which the preparatory processes have been performed. The ideas to be communicated must be mastered; the objective or purpose of the report must be definitely determined; and a plan must be made for getting the material over to a particular reader in such a way as to produce a certain effect.

The truth is that writing a good, successful formal report is not an easy task. Professor Raleigh Nelson of the English Department in the College Engineering Department, University of Michigan, has said the following about report writing:

> "No inexperienced writer, unless he is a genius, can hope to produce a flawless report manuscript at the first writing, no matter how well he has done his preparatory work. The habit of carefully organizing one's ideas and concentrating on his main objective, if persisted in, should ultimately make it possible to dictate a report to a stenographer in almost perfect form. But it takes years to develop such facility of production. For a long time one must be satisfied to make first a rough draft which can be remodeled and revised and refurbished till it is free of its most glaring faults".[1]

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