



WRITE SMART

... and Get Decisions

The Complete Guide To Business Writing

Preface and Chapter 1

by

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Preface



IT CAN BE A BUSINESS MEMO, A TRIP REPORT, a letter, or an e-mail. It can be a technical report, minutes of a meeting, a proposal, an IOC (inter-office communication), or a fax. Whatever its subject, format, or length, the correspondence that gets action is distinguished by its primary feature: it provides the basis for a decision.

I call such a document a DOC for “Decision-Oriented Correspondence.” DOCs present the proposal, point of view, and information that enable decision-makers to act. In every case DOCs must call for decisions or report decisions. They are the documents that make things happen. They are the most important form of correspondence in industry.

In my experience, how a company writes reflects how a company makes decisions. Companies whose correspondence calls for action in specific terms are the most likely to make good decisions.

For example, in the 1980s Lotus Development achieved phenomenal growth that made many of its employees millionaires while still in their 20s. The correspondence there reflected a determination to “tell it like it is” and to act on that information.

By contrast, the people at Gulf Oil were eternally unwilling to take a stand or call for action. It was impossible to get them to write a direct and conclusive statement. I saw proposals that were presented in the most mealy-mouthed and tentative fashion go through numerous levels of management. Each level would put a cover memo on top of the proposal noting, “We have reviewed this proposal and pass it on for your review.” At no level did anyone dare call for approval or rejection of the proposal.

The result of this atmosphere of corporate timidity was disastrous. Today there is nothing left of the Gulf Oil that once grossed \$24 billion a year.

Most correspondence fails to provide the basis for a decision. It merely presents facts in an ineffectual, disjointed, weasel-worded, and flabby account that never tells the reader what to do or believe.

And the person who receives such a document can’t figure out what the point of it is.

Why did he get this memo? What did he learn from it? And what is he supposed to do after he’s read it?

Not just time is lost, but opportunities!

Since 1978 I have taught the structure of DOCs to more than 15,000 business men and women at many of the most successful and fastest-growing companies worldwide. The skills they have learned enable them to write clear, concise, and convincing DOCs.

In this book, I make these skills available to everyone.

Other books on business writing are compendia of minutiae, focusing on grammar and syntax. But grammar and syntax are not the problem. Most business people can write a satisfactory sentence – but they can't put their sentences in an effective order that supports a decision.

And it is sentence order that makes an effective DOC.

Other books invariably urge the writer to outline, but they never specify what information must appear in an outline, such as the proposition around which the entire correspondence is constructed.

In this book you will learn a step-by-step procedure for preparing an outline for a DOC. You will master a fill-in-the-blanks form – the Worksheet for Organizing Ideas – that tells you exactly what to put in your DOCs and where.

I have never seen a book on business writing that says what to put in the first sentence of a piece of correspondence, what in the second, and what critical statement must appear in the first sentence of the second paragraph. This book does.

To illustrate the approach in this book, here is a memo I received recently. If it makes little sense to you, don't take it personally. The writer was equally confused, as indicated by the icon in the upper right corner that you will see whenever "before" and "after" versions of correspondence are presented in this book.



Subject: Comments on Proposal for Computer Purchase

As you requested, a review of the proposal for purchase of ten Dell notebook computers for the sales staff has been performed and there are reservations about the benefits of the purchase.

The sales force is using eight Compaq notebooks that are three years old and have limited memory – only 1 gigabyte of RAM. As a result, salespeople are prevented

from using more sophisticated software that they claim would make their record-keeping simpler. However, a closer examination of the proposal suggests the amount of effort needed to master the new software would offset the increase in efficiency claimed in the proposal. In fact, PC Support believes it could be several months before sales personnel would be comfortable with the new software.

The proposed notebooks would not be compatible with our present hardware, which would create problems in synchronizing data between the home office and sales personnel. In addition, the cost of \$1,649 per notebook would be 5 times the expense of increasing the RAM in our present equipment from 1 gigabyte to 4 gigabytes. There would also be the cost of new software at \$375 a copy.

In conclusion, the only apparent benefit from this proposal would be the DVD drive on the proposed Dell machines, which is not available on our present notebooks. However, this feature would be of limited benefit, especially since PC Support informs me that there is currently no plan to move the catalogue from CD-ROM to DVD technology. Therefore, it would appear more logical to increase the memory in our present hardware and upgrade our existing software, which would achieve some of the efficiencies the sales force is seeking.

If you decide not to purchase the Dell notebooks, I will get quotes on the cost of upgrading the existing hardware and software.

At first it seems the most important information is buried at the end of the fourth paragraph: “it would appear more logical to increase the memory in our present hardware and upgrade our existing software. . . .”

However, the memo responds to the reader’s request for a review of the proposal. The reader wants to know the writer’s point of view on the proposed purchase of the notebook computers. The writer’s view may be inferred here, but that’s not good enough in a DOC. The writer must call for an explicit decision: “I recommend rejecting this proposal. . . .”

Let’s start over by outlining this memo on the Worksheet for Organizing Ideas. Then I’ll show you the resulting DOC.

WORKSHEET FOR ORGANIZING IDEAS — Short Form

SUBJECT: Purchase of 10 Dell Notebook Computers - Not Recommended

OPENING STATEMENT

1 I. Significance to the Reader

A. What Prompts DOC Now: I have reviewed the proposal for purchase of 10 Dell Notebooks for use by sales force

B. Importance of Subject: Reservations about advantages of this purchase

2 II. Position: I recommend we reject the proposal

4 A. Essential Background: Sales using 3-year old Compaq with 1 gig of RAM – prevents using new software

___ B. Definition of Terms: _____

___ II. Methodology (if necessary)

___ A. Sources of Data: _____

___ B. Assumptions & Limitations: _____

IV. Issues and Conclusions (pro and con)

6 PRO

A. DVD drive

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

E. _____

5 CON

A. Hardware/software cost

B. Incompatibility

C. Complexity of software

D. _____

E. _____

V. Recommendations

3 A. Action Program: Increase memory in present equipment and upgrade software to achieve some efficiencies

7 B. Future Work: Will get quotes on hardware and software upgrade if reader agrees

Here is the DOC composed from the outline on this Worksheet:

Subject: Purchase of Dell Notebooks – Not Recommended



As you requested, I have reviewed the proposal for the purchase of ten Dell notebook computers for the sales staff (*What Prompts DOC Now*). I have some reservations about the advantages of the purchase (*Importance of Subject*).

Based on my review, I recommend we reject this proposal (*Position*). Instead, I suggest we increase the memory in the sales force's present hardware and upgrade its software (*Action Program*).

By way of background, sales is using 8 Compaq notebooks which they have had for three years. The computers have 1 gigabyte of RAM, which sales personnel say prevents them from taking advantage of new, more sophisticated software. They claim such software would make their record-keeping simpler (*Essential Background*).

There are three drawbacks to buying the Dell notebooks.

- Cost – The purchase price of \$1,649 per notebook is 5 times the expense of increasing the RAM in our present equipment from 1 gigabyte to 4 gigabytes. In addition, there is the cost of new software at \$375 a copy.
- Compatibility – The proposed notebooks would not be compatible with our present hardware, which would create problems in synchronizing data between the home office and sales personnel.
- Complexity of Software – The effort required to learn the new software would offset the increase in efficiency claimed in the proposal. In fact, PC Support believes it could be several months before sales personnel would be comfortable with the new software (*Conclusions*).

The only apparent benefit from this proposal would be the DVD drive on the Dell machines, which is not available on our present notebooks. However, this feature would be of limited benefit, especially since PC Support informs me that there is currently no plan to convert the catalogue from CD-ROM to DVD technology. (*Conclusion*).

If you decide not to purchase the Dell notebooks, I will get quotes on the cost of upgrading the existing hardware and software (*Future Work*).

The revised version shown above contains no new information. Instead, using the Worksheet as a guide, I have arranged all the points in the original memo in the order that is most easily understood by the readers. And this order is appropriate for all the DOCs you must write.

Write Smart is a cookbook, complete with all the critical ingredients. It teaches you how to use these Worksheets so you can produce a DOC by filling in blanks. And it supplies you with a schedule for producing a short DOC in three simple steps in 20 minutes or less.

Using the Worksheet, you will organize your DOCs in 5 minutes. Applying techniques for getting your outline into full sentences and paragraphs, you will compose your rough draft in 10 minutes. Finally, with four rules for paragraph structure and five principles for sentence structure, you will have all the guidelines necessary to edit your rough draft in 5 minutes.

To help you master the principles in this book, I have prepared a supplement, *Business Writing – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. It provides numerous examples of DOCs, from e-mails to minutes of meetings, from scientific articles to cover letters for resumes. You will see this supplement referred to in this book as *The Write Smart Supplement*.

* * * *

As I dropped my son off at college for his freshman year, I encouraged him to “work hard.”

He shook his head. “It’s not ‘work hard,’ Dad. It’s ‘*work smart*.’”

This advice applies to business and technical writing as well.

There are three rules for writing. . .

Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Chapter 1

Muddled Memos: Reasons and Remedies



SHORTLY AFTER MY 18TH BIRTHDAY, I FIRST encountered the official bafflegab of American bureaucracy. I had registered with my local draft board, letting them know that I was now of age to defend my country – a prospect I hoped was unlikely since I was a full-time student. Nonetheless, my draft card represented a milestone to me, and I was so interested in what privileges this new status gave me that I read every word on the wallet-size card.

On the back, in small print, I found this gem:

A personal appearance before the appeal board may be requested if you are eligible to request an appeal to the appeal board. You may appeal to the appeal board without requesting a personal appearance before the appeal board, but if you wish to appear before the appeal board, you must specifically ask for the appearance in addition to requesting an appeal.

I read this paragraph several times but never figured out what the Selective Service meant. In time I ended up serving in the U.S. Army.

Some years later my younger brother received his draft card and I was curious to see if the same passage still appeared on the back. Sure enough, there it was, verbatim! There must have been thousands of complaints about this gibberish. Why hadn't the Selective Service changed it?

My brother informed me that obviously the wording was intentional. It was an intelligence test – if you were smart enough to figure out how to appeal, you were too smart for the Army and they didn't want you. And that is why, he added, his older brother had spent three years in uniform.

I have been battling bureaucratic bafflegab ever since.

After my tour of duty, I entered law school on the G.I. Bill. A year and a half later, I realized I was not cut out to be a lawyer. I quit while I could still write a simple declarative sentence.

In fairness, I should concede that law school does teach clear thinking, but somewhere between the brain and the hand, all that clear thought becomes garbled with legalese when most lawyers start writing – the *notwithstandings*, the *hereinafters*, the *pursuant tos*, the *party of the first parts*, et alii.

As Robert H. Mundheim, former general counsel of the U.S. Treasury Department, has noted, an ordinary person giving an orange to someone else merely says, “I give you this orange.”

But a lawyer giving this same orange says it this way:

Know all men by these presents that I hereby give, grant, bargain, sell, release, convey, transfer, and quitclaim all my right, title, interest, benefit, and use whatever, in, of, and concerning this chattel, otherwise known as an orange, or citrus orantium, together with all the appurtenances thereto of skin, pulp, pip, rind, seeds, and juice, to have and to hold the said orange together with its skin, pulp, pip, rind, seeds, and juice for his own use and behoof, to himself and his heirs in fee simple forever, free from all liens, encumbrances, easements, limitations, restraints, or conditions whatsoever, any and all prior deeds, transfers or other documents whatsoever, now or anywhere made to the contrary notwithstanding, with full power to bite, cut, suck, or otherwise eat the said orange or give away the same with or without its skin, pulp, pip, rind, seeds, or juice.

I left law school on a Wednesday afternoon in October and joined a small daily newspaper. It was there that I came to appreciate the elegance of simple, succinct, and well-organized writing.

My first assignment was to compose an obituary and I wrote it the way I’d learned to write in school – by presenting information in chronological order. Giving a full account of the deceased’s life history, I built to the final line, “Yesterday, after a long illness, Arthur W. Poindexter died in his sleep.”

My editor’s comment: “Along with Poindexter, you buried the lead.”

I soon learned to put the “lead” in news stories where it belonged. The rule became firmly fixed in my mind: put the most important information at the beginning and the least important at the end. Then, if I turned in an article that ran 20 inches and the editor had room for only 15, he could confidently snip off the last 5 inches without fear of deleting something crucial, like “After two days of deliberation the jury found the defendant guilty.”

I realize that in the business world you do not have an editor who cuts off the last five inches of your memo or letter. But you do have readers with a diminishing attention span – their eyes may glaze over before they come to the critical information at the end. For that reason, you follow the same rules that reporters do.

The traditional journalist's format answers the five classic questions: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. It's the format that enables a reporter covering a fast-breaking news event to run to a telephone, call the city desk, and dictate a story that can run on Page 1 with a minimum of editing. A reporter who has mastered this structure can produce an article in a matter of minutes.

You can do the same with a comparable format for your business writing. But first you must avoid some classic pitfalls in composing your correspondence.

In the past 18 years I have critiqued more than 50,000 memos, letters, and reports. I have found that confused, muddled writing can be attributed to six causes. Each is deeply ingrained but easily corrected.

The Mystery Story Approach

The first cause of gibberish in business writing is presenting information in the order in which we did our thinking.

I recently received an e-mail that began, "The following is an account of the four topics on the agenda for our meeting on Wednesday, July 18." The e-mail listed these topics and then addressed each in detail. Finally, on the bottom of the third page, the e-mail closed with, "Terry, I want you to be prepared to lead the discussion on each of these subjects at the meeting."

Unfortunately, Terry never got to the end of the Mystery Story. He lost interest long before he finished reading the e-mail, and he never learned that he was the meeting. The meeting did not go well for Terry.

Save Terry the embarrassment – get the important information up front.

The "I'll Figure It Out As I Go Along" Approach

The second cause of muddled e-mails, letters, and reports is the tendency to start writing before we know what we want to say. We decide that we'll figure that out as we go along. And so we sit down at our terminal and begin banging away. After a page or so, we pause, look at what we have written, and decide we are not "there" yet, although we are still not exactly sure where "there" is.

On we go. Finally, after a page or two, we realize our account is running much longer than the subject merits and that we had better wrap it up. So we lean back in our chair and ask ourselves, “What exactly am I going to say in this piece of writing?”

After some thought, we come up with the key idea that we should have started this whole process with, but now we place it in the last paragraph in a sentence that invariably begins, “Based on the above, I recommend. . . .”

And again we have the classic Mystery Story. In this instance neither the writer nor the reader knows how the e-mail or letter is going to end until the last paragraph.

Eliminate this mystery-story approach in your correspondence. First, fill out the Worksheet, determining what you want the reader to do or believe as a result of reading the DOC. Then place that key information at the beginning.

The “What Reader?” Approach

The third cause of muddled correspondence is our preoccupation with our own perspective – we fail to consider our readers’ needs.

An example of this failing is the memo written by an in-house training consultant to a department manager proposing a personnel development program. Instead of telling the manager how the department will benefit from the program, the consultant goes into a detailed account of the training he will deliver – not what *you* are going to get but what *I* am going to do.

If you want to determine to what extent you have considered the reader’s point of view, count how often you use *I* or *we* in the DOC versus the number of times *you* appears. If there are more instances of *I* and *we* than *you*, you had better rework the DOC to stress the reader’s perspective.

I often see this gulf between the writer and reader when Research & Development is reporting its findings to management. The researchers – whether they are geologists for an oil company, molecular biologists for a pharmaceutical concern, or chemists for a chemical corporation – write endlessly about how thoroughly and cleverly they’ve done their research, providing a detailed account of all their methods and experiments and mental gymnastics. But all management wants to know is if the geologist has found oil, if the biologist has developed a drug that cures a disease, or if the chemist has discovered a new and marketable compound.

In Chapter 2, *Management to Earth: Do You Read Me?*, I will stress the importance of recognizing your readers’ concerns and characteristics. You must take these into account if you are to be persuasive. In that chapter I introduce you to the

Reader Profile Form. Filling out this form will help you identify what you know about your readers and how that information will affect what you say in your DOC.

The “Baffle’em with Bullshit” Approach

The fourth cause of business bafflegab is trying to dazzle our readers with fancy words they will have to look up in the dictionary and elaborate sentences they will have to diagram to understand.

Many of us believe that big fancy words are a sign of intelligence and a first class education. So we package our messages in twenty-dollar words and bureaucratic phrases that we think sound authoritative. “Attached please find the aforementioned” – apparently this means something’s stapled to the DOC and the reader should “find it, please.”

Some of the fanciest vocabularies issue from the mouths of flight attendants and pilots. Recently, while I was flying from Chicago to Boston, the pilot announced on the public address system, “We are presently anticipating experiencing considerable turbulence. Please observe the fasten seatbelt sign and . . .”

Halfway through that mouthful we were in the middle of the roughest air I’ve “experienced” in a long time. It would have been simpler to say, “Buckle up; it’s gonna get rough!” No doubt, the airlines intend for such elaborate phrasing to lull the passengers into a false sense of security at 35,000 feet without a parachute.

As an expert on business writing once remarked, “Big words name little things. All big things have little names, such as life and death, peace and war, or dawn, day, night, hope, love, home. Learn to use little words in a big way; they say what you mean. But when you don’t know what you mean, use big words – that often fools little people.”

Complex sentences go hand in hand with fancy words. I recently had a Ph.D. chemist in my program who wrote sentences of 50 and 60 words that left readers gasping. My favorite began, “In short,” and then went on for another 71 words.

In Chapter 11, *Quick and Clean: The Final Edit in 5 Minutes*, I will provide you with guidelines for making sentences clearer by using ten-cent words and by limiting your sentence length. With practice, you will find yourself writing *use* instead of its popular twenty-dollar synonym, *utilize*.

The “Weasel Words” Approach

The fifth cause of muddled writing is hedging what we have to say with “weasel words.” This is the work of cautious writers who are reluctant to take a stand. Their

memos are endlessly hedged with *it appears, it seems, maybe, possibly*, and the like. Lost in this quagmire of qualifiers is a point of view.

Classic weasel words include *basically* and *virtually*. Sentences begin “Basically, we anticipate completing the project by April 1.” *Basically* in this instance means there is no way you will finish by that date. Or, “The development work is virtually complete,” which means you’ve done ten percent of the work at most.

In this book I call for a change in tone. I advocate advocacy. Take a stand in your DOCs. Tell your reader what to do and what to believe in unequivocal terms.

The “Perfect Draft” Approach

The sixth cause of unreadable writing is combining the steps for composing correspondence into a single process.

To write effectively, you have to separate writing into three distinct steps: thinking, writing, and editing. In this way you can focus on each step separately.

Yet we usually combine these three steps because we believe it will take too much time to first outline, then draft, and then edit.

We jot down an opening sentence. It’s a disaster, so we trash it. A second attempt is a bit better but still needs a lot of work. We are hoping that if we can just put together a decent beginning sentence, it will propel us through to the end. On we go, polishing and tightening what little we have written, and after ten minutes or so, we finally come up with what we hope is an adequate opening sentence.

Then we write the second sentence and, after a great deal of reworking, we finally produce something we think is satisfactory. But when we reread the opening sentence to see if it flows into the second, we realize that it doesn’t work anymore. So we rewrite it, only to discover that the second sentence now needs revising. By this time, 20 minutes have passed and we still don’t have a satisfactory opening.

To avoid this labored process of writing, commit to using the three-step approach presented in the chapters that follow.

Here it is in a nutshell:

1. *Thinking Phase* – fill out the Worksheet using key words and phrases to establish what you are going to say and the order in which you are going to say it. For a one-page DOC, filling out the Worksheet (Short Form) will take only 5 minutes once you know what you want your readers to do or believe. In Chapter 6, *Quick and Clear*, you will learn the simple process of outlining.

2. *Writing Phase – compose a draft of your correspondence by expanding the key words and phrases on your Worksheet into full sentences and paragraphs.* Drafting a routine DOC of a page or less can take as little as 10 minutes with the completed Worksheet as your guide. In Chapter 10, *Quick and Dirty*, I will give you guidelines on converting your outline into a rough draft.
3. *Editing Phase – polish your draft by applying nine principles for editing.* In this last stage of composing your DOC, you will be able to edit your rough draft in 5 minutes. In Chapter 11, *Quick and Clean*, I will present the nine principles for editing, which are all you need to put your DOC into its final form.

Much of the reworking and revising and editing we do while drafting is simply procrastination – we don't want to think about what we are going to write next, so we decide we'll go back and fiddle with what we have already written. The result is a fragmented, meandering, waffling memo that takes forever to write.

Spare yourself! Follow the guidelines in the coming chapters and writing will become efficient, almost easy. Your correspondence will no longer be muddled – it will be clear, concise, and convincing.