HOW TO WRITE MORE POWERFUL BUSINESS REPORTS

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There is one key difference between reports and most other forms of business writing, and we get a hint of that in the word, "report." Whereas with many other forms of written communications you can be a little creative and put your own slant on your words, in a report you must not. Not in theory, anyway.

In a report, you're supposed to report – not embellish, embroider, influence, etc. Just the facts and nothing but the facts. This does not, however, mean that reports need to be dull and boring. It does, however, mean that you can't make the content more interesting than it really is. Impossible? No, it just takes some good organization and clear writing.

Before we go any further, I point out there are numerous books and training courses on the market that teach you the formalities and practicalities of report writing. Some are more long-winded than others. Most of them are good.

Here in this article I can't do what other writers do in a book, so if you need to write reports a lot, I recommend that you buy one or two of the most popular books and study them. What I'm doing here then, is to highlight the points I think are most important to help you make your reports more readable, and the information in them come across more vividly.

If you work in a larger organization, there will probably be set formats for reports, at least for the internal variety. Whether you like them or not you're normally obliged to stick to them. However the way you roll out and write your content is still up to you.

So what are the key points to focus on?

1. Write for your reader
Don't allow yourself to fall into "businesses" jargon and phrasing no matter how much you or other people may feel it's more appropriate. It isn't. Use language and tone of voice that your key readers will feel comfortable with. If you don't know what they feel comfortable with, find out. It's well worth taking the trouble, because it will make the report much more enjoyable for them to read – a good reflection on you. If your report is to be read by a wide variety of different audiences, focus your language on the most important groups. Ensure that less topic-literate readers are catered for by using discreet explanations of technical terms or perhaps a short glossary of terms as an appendix within the report.

2. Organize your information sensibly
Start by writing yourself out a list of headings which start at the beginning and finish with the conclusions of your information. If you must include a lot of background information before you get into the "meat" of the information, section it off clearly with headings that say that it's background ("Research Project Objectives," "Research Methods Used To Collate Information," "Personnel Involved In Questionnaire," etc.) so those who know it all already can skip straight to the important stuff. Make sure your headings "tell the story" so someone glancing through those alone will get the basic messages. (You'll find that busy executives will thank you for doing this, especially when they have 16 other, similar reports to read in a crowded commuter train on the way into a meeting to discuss all of them.) Then fill in the details under each heading as concisely as you can.

3. Use an "executive summary" to tell it in a nutshell
Depending on the nature of your report you may be expected to include an executive summary, or at least an introduction that captures the key points of your information. The objective of this is to give the reader the key issues as quickly as possible. Write this after you've done the body of the report, not before. Use your list of headings as a guide. Keep strictly to the facts – this is still part of the report, not your interpretation of it. Strip each sentence down to bare bones with minimal

adjectives and adverbs. Use short words and sentences. Don't just get to the point - start with it and stick to it.

4. If your interpretation is called for, keep it separate

If part of your remit is to comment on the report and/or its conclusions, keep this separate from the main body of information. (Blocked off in a box or under a clearly separated heading will do.) Naturally as you're professional you will be as objective as possible. But if you do feel strongly one way or another, ensure that your argument is put as reasonably as possible without going on for pages and pages. Remember, brief is beautiful, although it's harder to write briefly (and include all the important points) than it is to produce words in abundance.

5. Don't get carried away with illustrations

Graphs and charts are great to illustrate important issues and like the man said, "a picture is worth a thousand words." However ensure that those you use are of a level of complexity that will be understood by the least topic- literate of your readers. There's nothing more irritating than a graph that takes you 20 minutes to decipher. It's not so much a case that readers are too stupid to understand a complex graph, as it is that they don't want to spend too much time working it out. The easier/quicker you make it for readers to understand and assimilate your information, the more successful your report. Try, also, to keep graphs and charts physically adjacent to the text that talks about the same thing. There's nothing more irritating for the reader if they have to keep flipping from front to back of a document. (When in doubt, think of someone reading your report on that crowded commuter train.)

6. Cut the clutter

Still on that topic, try to avoid including too many diverse elements in your report, no matter how long and involved it is. If you do need to include appendices and various bits of background material, research statistics, etc., make sure they're neatly labeled and contained at the back of your document. As I suggested earlier, don't ask readers to skip back and forth, directing them with asterisks and other reference directing symbols. If you're writing a medical report or paper then you're obliged to include these when quoting references from other papers, but please keep even these to a minimum. They're very distracting and can break your reader's concentration.

7. Take some trouble to make it look nice

I know you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but people do. Like it or not. According to UK Image consultant Tessa S, when you walk into a meeting, 55% of your first impression of someone is reflected exclusively in the way you're dressed. Documents fall into the same hole. So how your document looks goes a long way to creating the right impression of your work, and of you. Obviously if a report is due to go outside your organization and particularly to clients or customers, you will be careful to ensure it's polished and clearly branded with your corporate identity and all that. However, how an internal report looks is important, too, although your Head of Finance might have apoplexy if you bind it in expensive glossy card. Be sensible with the internal variety - neat, understated, groomed looks don't have to cost much but they "say" a lot about the value of your report (and you.)

8. A minute on minutes

I think minute-taking is a horrible job, having done so for 6 years while on a charity fundraising committee. And being useless at handwriting (thanks to decades of computers and typewriters) never mind shorthand (was thrown out of secretarial school after 3 weeks) I struggled for months to scribble everything down to précis later, until I realized that my brain was a far more efficient filter of information. At the end of each agenda item, I asked myself the classic reporter questions of "who, what, where, when, why, how and how much." All I had to do was jot down a few words and when I got home to my trusty PC, I could expand those into realistic summaries of what went on. As much of the dialogue in meetings is either unnecessary, repetitive, or both, simply use your brain as a filter. That's what it's trained to do for you in your day-to-day life, so it works for meetings too. One word of warning though; don't wait too long before your work up your minutes. Another trick the brain does is to forget after a few hours or a day or so at most.