

Proposal writing: Some general principles

Introduction

One of the most underestimated tasks which an engineer or administrator must carry out is the writing of proposals, task reports and memoranda. Writing ability is rarely mentioned as a requirement in job advertisements or interviews, and few people have received specific training at college or university in writing effective documents. Yet any working scientist or engineer will tell you that a lot of his/her time is spent writing, or trying to write a wide variety of documents.

In this paper we indicate some of the principles that should be observed for effective proposal writing.

Writing as the manager's means of communication.

In a supervisory or managerial position almost all of one's work involves face to face or written communication. American research indicates that the higher in an organisation one rises, the more time one spends on communication activities. Table 1 shows the percentage of time different categories of managers usually spend on communications ("verbal media" in this research).

Table 1 - Typical percentages of time spent on communication

Portion of total work time spent on communication %			
Hierarchy	Verbal media	Informal writing	Formal writing
Chief Executive	65	10	2
Division Manager	60	15	2
Department Manager	45	20	5
Section Head	40	20	5
Project Head	30	20	10
Engineer of Scientist	25	15	10
Junior Engineer	20	10	10
Technician	15	10	2

It is striking that only a relatively small part of one's work time is spent on formal writing. In practice, informal writing (letters, memoranda, telexes, and so on) plays an increasingly important part as one enters middle management. Top management manages on the whole by talking or endorsing the writing of others, rather than writing him- or herself. In any case writing is a key part of any manager's job, especially in the development field where numerous parties have to be informed of progress and convinced of the need for action.

Managers in development projects face an additional problem. They are chosen to lead a team on basis of one's technical expertise. Management abilities play a secondary role. Few of them have had any kind of formal training in report writing or other forms of communication. Yet one must produce a large amount of written material regularly.

Besides weekly, monthly and/or quarterly reports to client and financing agency, the manager is often responsible for technical and administrative reports at regular intervals, correspondence, internal memoranda, budget and finance reports, telexes, letters to a variety of people on personnel, administrative and technical matters, proposal writing and many, many other kinds of written texts. And we have not even mentioned the large technical, financial and social study reports, which precede any large project investment.

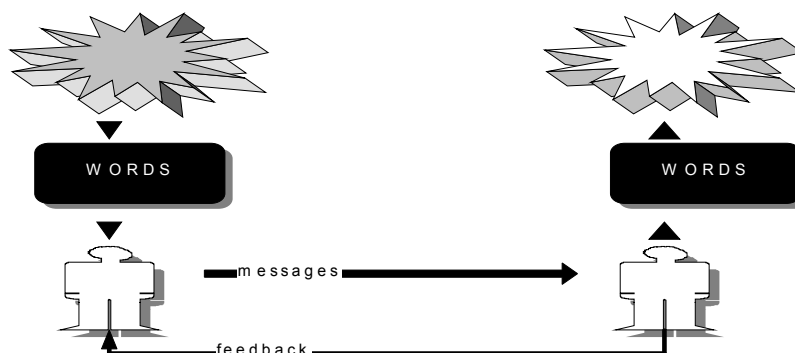
The importance of major reports, such as the final report of a feasibility study, is summed up already in an old United Nations document¹: "As reports form the basis for authorising further action including the construction of projects, they must be predicated on a sound foundation. A basic principle of reporting is that reports are of no greater value or reliability than the underlying investigation and, conversely, that the findings of the investigation are of little worth unless presented in a clear, readable and understandable manner."

A model of the communication process

One difficulty in talking about the communication process is that it is so familiar to us. We talk to others (and ourselves) and write notes, letters and large documents, every day of our lives. We need an objective way of looking at the process.

A mathematician and a telecommunications engineer developed a simplified model of the information process in the 1930s. The Shannon-Weaver model has been adopted by writing specialists to offer an objective way of looking at how we communicate with each other. Although the model is by no means perfect (it ignores, for instance, the psychological factors, which are involved), it does give us a way of talking about the subject.

Figure 1: Shannon – Weaver Communication Model



Two parties are involved, a transmitter and a receiver. I am the transmitter, sitting at my word processor and typing this text, you are the receiver, reading the notes. The transmitter attempts to send a message to the receiver through a channel. My message, at this point, is that communication is something we can talk about objectively and make decisions about (it doesn't just "happen"). The channel we are using is an English-language text.

¹ United Nations (1964): Manual of Standards and Criteria for Planning Water Resource Projects,.

How much of the great ideas which I have in my mind actually get across to you, my readers? There is no known way of measuring the effectiveness of communication, because nobody can look into my head and into your head and compare the results. But if we say that the efficiency is near perfect, and that there is no more than 10% loss in the information content at each stage of the process, then even in this "best-case" situation the accumulated loss is considerable.

There are at least four points in the process at which loss can take place. First of all, my thoughts must be translated into words (10% loss), then my words have to be put onto the page (10% loss), you must read the words I have typed (10% loss), and finally translate them back into thoughts (10% loss).

In the best possible case, you will then actually grasp 65% of the original ideas that I had in mind when I began. And we are assuming a high efficiency here. Tiredness, the effective of working under strain, the foreign language, the quality of the reproduction, aeroplanes flying over head, all these and many more factors conspire to reduce that effective figure to 50, 40, 30 per cent and lower.

What is more, in spoken communication non-verbal cues, intonation and feedback play an important role in helping our audience to understand us. In written communication, these aids are not available. This lack of instant feedback makes the task of the writer more difficult, and reduces the efficiency of his communication. It is not unusual for written reports to have very low communication efficiency, and writers must make use of every opportunity, which they have to improve this. For this reason we stress the importance of clear communication. We think it takes effort and attention on the part of the writer. We do not think it is easy at all.

Reader versus Writer orientation

Basically there a different reasons why we write. We write the way we see others write. At school we learn to use writing for ourselves. Note taking, logbooks and working drafts out on paper are all writer-oriented techniques. At school, college and university we also learn a second kind of writing: writing for show. We write to let others see that we know a lot about a subject. Much academic writing is writing "for show". The reader often knows as much about the subject, if not more, as the writer does.

A very different approach to writing is: writing to communicate. In other words, writing to pass information over to someone who does not know much, or indeed anything, about the subject we are discussing. Much writing in development work is of this third type.

The first two types of writing are essentially writer-oriented; the third type is reader-oriented. One thing which distinguishes the good writer from the mediocre, is that he or she writes with the needs of the reader in mind, that he or she takes account of the knowledge, training and needs of the reader. It is important therefore, to identify the readers of our proposal beforehand.

Who are our readers?

Whatever the case, you will find it helpful, before you sit down and begin writing, to spend some time producing a chart indicating your readers for yourself. Ask yourself: for who am I writing, and what does he or she know or want to know about this project, this topic? Who actually will be the reader of this proposal: the NGO Board, the EU appraisal committee, the local NGO executives or the target group representatives?

In most cases you will distinguish three kinds of readers:

1. generalists with little knowledge or background in the subject of the report;
2. analytical readers, who will read the report in order to make decisions and come to conclusions on the basis of argumentation;
3. and specialists, with the same knowledge of the subject as you have yourself, sharing the same terminology and ways of looking at the subject matter.

Most proposals and reports have one or more of each of these categories of readers, and you will have to design the document taking their needs into consideration. You will also have to take account of the way in which each of these kinds of readers will make use of the text.

Identify the readers of the proposal

- Go over the distribution of the proposal;
- Write down the names and the positions of all readers;
- Identify the readers who will decide whether the proposal is accepted: the key readers:
 - which category: generalists, analytical readers, technicians;
 - check your objective and identify the reader or the readers on whom you have to focus in order to obtain what you want;
- Define the characteristics of every key reader (brainstorming):
 - His/her identity: education, culture, language;
 - His/her previous knowledge of the project, the country, the region;
 - which values does (s)he believe in: in short, what makes him tick.

Define the aim of the proposal

- Choose one or more key readers;
- Hold a brainstorming session to find out which questions the key readers will ask about this proposal.

How to meet the key-reader's needs

- Follow the format strictly (including the budget format)
- Use the financier's terminology (be careful with jargon)
- Keep the appraisal criteria in mind
- Keep it - *short*: in words; sentences and paragraphs
 - *simple*: straight forward; to the point
 - *strong*: concrete; avoid passive sentences

Write the key sentences of each paragraph

- Go over the table of contents and decide which subjects will be dealt with in a paragraph;
- Write a sentence for each paragraph which expresses entirely and concisely the idea or the message conveyed in the paragraph;
- These successive sentences contain the broad outlines of the reasoning in the proposal;
- Check if all arguments necessary to achieve your aim and to answer the questions of the most important readers have been included;
- You are now able to produce the summary.

Write the paragraphs

- Where possible, develop each key sentence by adding major or minor details: illustrate, clarify the main ideas;
- Make sure that the order is logical;
- Draw all your arguments from the previous analyses;
- Do not add any new ideas.

How do readers read our texts?

There are at least five ways of reading a text. Everyone uses all of these techniques, depending upon what the document is being used for.

Skimming is what you do to when you flip through a text at speed to get a rough idea of the content.

Scanning is one level deeper; you search for a specific topic at speed, you are looking for something in particular. Skimming and scanning both require that the writer has made good use of headings and layout in the text.

The third technique is search reading, scanning through a text followed by selective reading of relevant passages. Search reading can only be done quickly if the writer has balanced his text evenly over the headings and subheadings of the document, and organised the paragraphs of the text, the tables and figures, in a recognisably logical fashion.

The fourth reading technique is receptive reading, reading to understand a text. This is where the quality of the logic of the argument tells. The persuasive (psychological) power of the text is also important here.

Finally there is critical reading, reading which aims at picking holes in an argument, at evaluating it, at weighing it. To sustain this kind of reading, a writer must not only take account of logic, he must also be totally clear, provide sources for his statements, explain inconsistencies convincingly, and so on.

The needs of a reader when he is skimming and scanning are different from his needs when he is engaged in, for instance, receptive reading. Aids to skimming and scanning such as frequent headings and the use of underlining and other typographical measures to aid access may conflict with straight-forward receptive reading. The needs of the reader when engaged in receptive reading (clear, simple text) may conflict with his needs when engaged in critical reading (well-documented sources, exhaustive notes). The writer must ensure that all the styles of reading are catered for, and that the techniques, which he uses, are carefully balanced to produce a fully usable text.

The given-new convention

Of the many sources of confusion and irritation in written documents, the most common occurs because the writer fails to observe a simple but unwritten rule: he may not introduce new and unknown information before he has paved the way with something known and familiar. This is the "given-new" convention, an agreement between writer and reader that underlies all communication.

Many proposals, reports, memoranda, letters, telexes begin without setting a proper context. It is as if the writer were afraid to spend too much time introducing his or her topic, and instead just begins in the middle of the subject matter. At the same time, it may be the part of the proposal that will not be read by all those that are a bit familiar with the context of the issue. It is a must to introduce the topic to those that are new to it.

A piece of text written in this way is like a detective story. The reader has to puzzle the message out piece by piece. For the writer this may be the easiest way to tell his story, but it violates the unspoken and unwritten given-new convention. It therefore irritates the reader and may turn him/her from a receptive reading style to a critical reading style. The detective approach has no place in technical and scientific writing.