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The Best Memo You'll Ever Write

by Holly Weeks

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The Best Memo You'll Ever Write

Every memo—or report or e-mail—is important in today's business environment. If you keep in mind that readers are content driven, time pressed, and decision focused, you can write right—every time.

by Holly Weeks

THERE IS A LOT OF ADVICE out there about what defines good business writing, much of it conflicting. Business readers like writing that is clear, but writers are often encouraged to make their information "sound good." Readers want their information served up simply and directly, but writers are pushed to make their copy "stand out." Readers want to get to the bottom line fast, but writers are criticized if they leave out background detail that someone might look for.

Conflicting advice is hard to follow, and clarity can be the first standard to fall. Not because the writer's thinking is fuzzy—a frequent disparagement—or because the writer is intellectually dishonest and trying to hide the truth behind smudgy language, but because the writer is trying to juggle contradictory ideas about style, presentation, and level of detail.

The truth is that there is a better way to approach business writing, and that is to start from these three realities: business readers are content driven, time pressed, and in search of solutions.

What does that mean to writers? First, they should get out of the impressive-language business. To content-driven readers, language simply carries information, ideas, and the relationships among them. Good language is rather like a good butler—it works smoothly in the service of the reader without calling attention to itself. Second, organization is critical. Whatever particular analysis you make or actions you advocate, how compelling readers will find your report or memo depends largely on how logically you order and present information and ideas.

The starting point

From your introduction the content-driven reader judges whether the rest of your memo is worth his time. Yet the beginning is where many writers ease in and build slowly.

This is a mistake. Your opening must answer the reader's question "Why am I reading this?" To do so, it needs to establish the relevance and the utility of the document as a whole. Here is where the classic business writing text *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving,* by Barbara Minto (Minto International, 1996) is particularly helpful. An effective introduction, Minto says, briskly tells a story built around four elements:

1. **The situation:** A quick, factual sketch of the current business situation that serves to anchor the reader.

READER-FRIENDLY STYLE

Writing clear, content-driven sentences can be tough on people who want their writing to "flow." Think of it: the reason lullabies flow is that you are trying to get a child to fall asleep. Flowing sentences tend to be long, dense, and rhythmic. Choppy sentences are not better—too many of them can be distracting. Readers want the middle ground—brisk, hardworking sentences that carry good content. Brevity is not a virtue in business writing, conciseness is.

Reader-oriented business writing is also tough on people who think complex phrasing makes them look smarter. When a content-driven reader gets bogged down in your phrasing, you don't look elegant or smart. You look pompous and self-absorbed.

Surprisingly, jargon—the specialized language of a particular field—is not inimical to good business writing, if it's suitable to your primary audience. Using jargon, like using acronyms, is a tight and efficient way to communicate among experts. But there are three situations in which you shouldn't use jargon: when it's meaningless, when you don't understand it, or when your readers aren't familiar with it. If you have multiple audiences and you want to use professional terminology because your primary audience uses it, define your term the first time you use it. For a long report, consider adding a glossary.

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2. **The complication:** A problem that unsettles the situation in the story you're telling. It's why you're writing the memo or report.
3. **The question:** This might be "What should we do?" "How can we do it?" or "What's wrong with what we tried?" The question does not necessarily have to be spelled out; it may be implied.
4. **The answer:** Your response to the question and your solution to the complication.

The order in which the elements appear can vary. Here are two examples:

Situation–Complication–Solution
(the question "What should we do?" is implicit)

Mediation's popularity has increased over the last quarter-century as people have sought alternative methods of dispute resolution that do not entail litigation's high cost and adversarial approach. But concern is growing that because mediators possess varying levels of training, the quality of mediation is unpredictable. I suggest that we use our organization's stature to spearhead a movement to professionalize the standards of practice for mediation so that mediators can get consistent, high-quality preparation in every state, and individuals or communities submitting to mediation will have confidence in their mediators' qualifications.

Question–Situation–Complication–Solution

What can we do to professionalize mediation so that the momentum gained over the last half-century is not lost? Individuals and communities turned to mediation in the first place to avoid the expense and conflict of litigation. But the increase in the number of mediators with varying levels of training makes the quality of mediation unpredictable, which causes dissatisfaction. I suggest that we use our organization's stature to spearhead a movement to establish standards of practice for mediation so that mediators can get high-quality training wherever they live, and individuals or communities submitting to mediation can have confidence in their mediators' qualifications.

Notice that shifting the order of the elements still satisfies the reader's expectation for the introduction. But it changes the tone, with the second example sounding more assertive.

Constructing the pyramid

Now it's time to make the case for the solution you advocate. Minto has two recommendations. First, stay away from sentences initially and diagram your arguments and data as small, digestible chunks of information. Second, working from the top down, cluster and hang those chunks in a pyramid shape, with the information below developing and supporting the points above (see "Organizing Ideas in a Pyramid"). An argument can travel horizontally across the chunks on its own level, but always in support of the chunk from which it hangs on the level above. Your thinking may have progressed from bottom up in the pyramid, but your writing is going to progress from top down.

ORGANIZING IDEAS IN A PYRAMID

From *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving* by Barbara Minto. © 1996 by Barbara Minto.

Say you have just joined a midsize processed-food company. As the new vice president of business development, you are charged with identifying new markets and leading the creation of products for them.

Sales growth in the company's main product line, frozen dinners, has been stagnant for three years running. But you have identified a promising new target market: working parents between the ages of 35 and 55 who have sophisticated tastes and avoid preservatives and artificial ingredients. You want to convince your company's executive committee to create an upmarket line of organic frozen dinners with a Continental flair.

Here is how you would arrange the chunks in one section of your pyramid:

Once you've arranged the chunks of your argument in this way, the actual writing is easy.

Some final tips

- **Put the weight at the front of each section.** Readers like the journalistic approach—even if the story will break the hearts of millions, journalists give it away in the headline. But writers want to lead the reader, hand-in-hand, through their points and arguments to their conclusion. Except in murder mysteries, readers hate that.
- **Use reader-oriented judgment to decide the right level of detail.** Many overwriters pride themselves on their thoroughness, while underwriters congratulate themselves for being admirably brief. Both do a disservice to their readers and hence to themselves. Overwriters risk losing readers in a flood of detail, while underwriters may come across as superficial thinkers. From the reader's point of view, thorough means "exhaustive" and brief means "short"; the goal should be to be concise, which means "as tight as possible, but complete."
- **Revise by principle; there is no template.** Business writers beg for template sentences, but a template will distort a reader-oriented, content-driven memo or report every time. The principles of good organization—fast, focused openings, the weight at the front of each section, a well-judged level of detail, and Minto's pyramid structure of logic—will serve you better than twisting your content to fit a generic template. Revising by principle will also help you more than the old standby advice: "Set it aside for 48 hours and come back to it." That's an effective way to give you a fresh eye for your writing, but when was the last time you had 48 hours to spare? ❊

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