

# Golden rules of writing well



**By Gillian Christie**

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**A**fter discussing document structure in my last two columns, this time I'm developing the theme with a specific focus on report writing.

The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1999) defines a report as: "An account given of a particular matter, especially in the form of an official document, after thorough investigation or consideration."

So a report is usually written after some reasonably thorough preparation or research into a topic or issue. There are many types of reports and many are given different names such as submission, issues paper, business case and the like. But essentially they are all reports and there are general techniques that will relate to them all. Obviously some reports, such as an audit report, will have certain requirements that also need to be taken into account.

Reports can vary widely in length and complexity. There are five stages in preparing and writing a report, but for shorter, simpler reports not all stages will be needed, or two stages may merge.

## Think/plan

You can't write a report in a "stream of consciousness" way. Before putting fingers to keyboard, take a few moments to think about your reader(s) and the purpose of your document. Are you aiming to convince a board of directors that a particular course of action is the best? Do you want to dissuade a client from doing something that might get them into trouble with Inland Revenue? Or are you simply presenting the final costings for a project?

Make sure you are clear on what your

reader wants from you. You don't want to spend a lot of time preparing a lengthy report when all that was needed was a list of ideas for discussion. Also think about what your reader already knows about the topic, as this will have a bearing on the level of detail you need to include.

Planning your report may take just a few minutes' thought but it is important to get you on the right track.

## Don't fall into the trap of giving your reader every bit of information you've gathered

### Research

This is where you gather the information you need for your report. You may not use all of it – some may end up being background information to help you as you write. Source material could be legislation, court cases, client records, and details gathered from websites, interviews or phone calls. Discussions with colleagues can also contribute to your store of information.

### Structure/sort

When you have completed your research you need to organise the material you've gathered. Type up a list of the main points arising from your research. You can organise them in a variety of ways. Here are some ways you can sort the information into groups of related points.

- Use the cut and paste function – this gives you a ready-made framework for your report, but some people don't like this method because the screen

size means you can't see all the points at once.

- Have a coding system and assign each point a code, such as A for analysis, B for background, C for costings – depending on the sections of your report (next month's article). A related method is to draw columns headed with the report sections and tick the relevant column for each point.
- Actually cut up the list and physically sort the points into piles. This might sound strange, but it is really effective for people who find that doing something physical helps their brain sort things out.

Rather than starting with a typed list, you could use a mind map – this works particularly well for a team report. For a group discussion, make sure you use a whiteboard that prints!

As you sort your points you might find that some can be left out. Don't fall into the trap of giving your reader every bit of information you've gathered – assess each point critically to see if it suits the purpose of your report. If your report is cluttered with too much detail your reader will find it hard to extract the important points.

It's really important to structure your report in a logical way. I like to think of it as leading the reader in such a way that when they get to the end they should understand exactly how you reached your conclusion or recommendation. They should never get to the end and be surprised!

Next time I'll cover the main sections of a report and the information that might go in each part. ■