Headlines will make reports great again!

Your readers will delight as you deliver key messages in a way that suits them and makes you look good.

Anyone got too much time on their hands? Thought not. We're all way too busy, so make your reports shine (and your readers happy) by putting the most important information at the beginning of a document, section or paragraph.

1.	**Remember the Five Ws**	Asking who? What? When? Where? Why? And who? Can help you find your key messages.
2.	**Headings and sub-headings are more than labels**	They can be an informative guide for the reader, helping them to navigate and find the information they need.
3.	**Summarise and create a hierarchy throughout**	Identify what is most important and give it prominence with details later.

Remember to put answers before explanations

You must read through all this to get to the point. The explanation gets in the way of the message.

In a recent survey over 50% of respondents ranked speed of response as the most important factor influencing whether they felt satisfied with our repairs service. Almost a quarter of respondents ranked it as the second most important factor. **Taken together these figures reveal how important good response rates are for building and maintaining customer satisfaction levels.**

This version puts the what before the why; ie the thing you want people to know before the explanation. The technical term for this is a 'topic sentence'.

Response rates have a significant impact on customer satisfaction levels. In a recent survey over 50% of respondents ranked speed of response as the most important factor influencing whether they felt satisfied with our repairs service. Almost a quarter of respondents ranked it as the second most important factor.

Doing this will put your busy readers in control

This approach will enable your readers to scan, take in the main points and investigate the details if they want to. Also think about:

1. Using 'words in tables' rather than bullet points.
2. Boxing out information that will only be of interest to some of your readers.

What is the best structure for my report?

Your mission is to help your readers get your messages quickly and easily.

Bringing the most important information to the beginning of any section (see overleaf) is vital but having a clear structure will also help.

3. Presenting a report
Mostly it's common sense
3.1 Headings
Help stop the reader from getting lost
3.2 Indentation
Here are examples of a paragraph
(a) subparagraph

Common elements of reports

Summary	This should highlight: • Purpose and context for report (why the reader is reading this) • Key messages • Any actions needed DO NOT just describe what is in the report.
Introduction/ background	Sets the scene: • Why is the report being written? • What kinds of information does it contain? • How is the problem being approached? • For whom is the report being written?
Main discussion/ body of report	The real content, such as what was done/discovered. Can include: SWOT analysis, comparisons, chronological accounts, evidence, findings, graphs, tables etc
Conclusions	These should arise naturally from the evidence and information presented in the previous section.
Recommendations	Any actions you want your reader to take. Should follow on logically from conclusions.
Appendixes	A place for information that would overload your main report, such as: • Glossary of technical terms • Tables of statistics (if you have large amounts of data) • Questionnaires/case studies etc

This is a quick guide to some basic principles.

More detailed guidance is widely available, but the most important thing is to take control of your message and how you deliver it.

Get into the habit of noticing what you like or don't like about reports or proposals that you read. Build up your awareness about what works and adopt what you like.

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Caroline Oubridge 2015
caroline@communicatingbrilliantly.co.uk

Horses for courses –organise content to support your message

Problem – cause – solution	Good for problem solving and proposals.
S-O-A-P: situation, objective, appraisal, proposal	Also good for proposals: 1. describe the current situation. 2. Clearly state what the goal is. 3. Explore the qualities or needs of the situation. 4. Propose a solution.
Compare and contrast	Feasibility studies need to line up alternatives and highlight the difference between them, eg Plan A costs and time taken v Plan B costs and time taken.
Chronological	Good for describing real-life events such as an accident or anti-social behaviour report.
Categories and characteristics	Organise by function, geography, cost level etc