Writing better reports

Caroline Bradley

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hqn TRAINING

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1 Message from Caroline

Hello

Here are the slides and information from the Writing Better Reports training. Thank you for your participation, I really enjoyed examining these ideas with you all. I hope that you can enjoy putting some of the ideas from the course to good use.

I've included a rewrite of a briefing note as an example of using plain English, hierarchy, headings and words in tables. Also:

Enclosed handouts:

1. There's one about using headlines
2. The checklist - feel free to adapt.
3. Some ideas on supporting teams to write well (aimed at managers and specifically about responses to complaints but it holds true for all writing).

Other useful info
There are links to helpful online info below on plain language, punctuation and presenting data.

I wish you all the best of luck with making the changes that will help to make your writing clearer and more effective. Get into the habit of noticing what you like or don't like about reports or policies that you read. Build up your awareness about what works and adopt and adapt what you like.

Best wishes
Caroline

Remember:

1. Find your message	What your reader needs to know and what you need to achieve. Your task is to create understanding. Think and plan first.
2. Find your structure	Bring key messages to the top, support them with well organised sections. Make your headings informative, use graphs, charts and tables when they help.
3. Find your voice	Use active, everyday language. Be precise, clear and direct.

Plain language resources to help you

A guide to writing in plain English (from the Plain English Campaign)

The A to Z of alternative words	A PDF from the Plain English Campaign http://plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf
Advice on how to write well for your reader - including specialists from GOV.UK	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk
A US government guide to plain language	V useful place to find practical guidance - aimed at government employees) https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/
A guide to whether your words will be understood	You can look up a word in the lexicon to see how often it's used and who's likely to know it. https://www.clearest.co.uk/plain-english-lexicon
Useful books	1. Oxford Guide to Plain English, by Martin Cutts 2. Complete Plain Words by Sir Ernest Gowers (the first edition of this appeared in 1954, Ernest had been a civil servant since 1903. This is an interesting read that highlights how long this has been an issue.

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Help with punctuation

A guide to punctuation	Helpful reminders of rules we've all forgotten! http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/
BBC Skillswise	Videos and downloadable worksheets on English for adults – helpful if you want to refresh your knowledge https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/skillswise/english/zjg4scw
Useful books	1. Eats, Shoots and Leaves, by Lynne Truss 2. The Penguin Guide to Punctuation, by Penguin Reference Books 3. Everyday English for Grown-Ups, by Michelle Finlay

Words in Tables – present information in a condensed and punchy way
Info at Jon Moon's website www.jmoon.co.uk (including this article with examples). He is the author of the book "Clarity and Impact" details at his website.

Other helpful books

1. Visual Thinking, empowering organisations through visual collaboration by Willemien Brand https://www.bispublishers.com/visual-thinking.html
2. Business Writing for Dummies by Natalie Canavor
3. Switch - How to change things when change is hard by Chip and Dan Heath - read the first chapter for free at their webs
4. How to Have a Good Day by Caroline Webb - lots of useful ideas about using what we know about how the brain works to have a better day at work (and elsewhere) www.howtohaveagoodday.com/ uses the work of Daniel Kahneman (Nobel Prize winner) who wrote the book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" about the two system brain.

Presenting data - graphs, charts and tables
Animations about presenting data better (less is more) are at:
graphs - https://www.darkhorseanalytics.com/blog/data-looks-better-naked

tables - https://www.darkhorseanalytics.com/blog/clear-off-the-table
pies - https://www.darkhorseanalytics.com/blog/salvaging-the-pie
maps - https://www.darkhorseanalytics.com/blog/data-looks-better-naked-maps-edition

Storytelling with data by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic (PDF available online, possibly illegally).
Their guide to charts is at https://www.storytellingwithdata.com/chart-guide

Financial reporting

Louder than Words - principles and actions for making corporate reports less complex and more relevant.

A 2009 report by the Financial Reporting
Council https://www.iasplus.com/en/binary/uk/0906louderthanwords.pdf

2 Briefing note rewrite - Big Townshire Community Safety Partnership

Big Townshire Community Safety Partnership (CSP) – Briefing Note for Informal Cabinet

The purpose of this paper is to:
- ensure members are aware of the scope of the remit of the CSP; and
- demonstrate the inextricable link between the core work of the Council and the work of the CSP.

The Community Safety Partnership (formerly Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP)) was established following the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (The Act) to reduce crime, disorder and substance misuse. It is a statutory partnership of which the Council is one of the named 'responsible authorities'. In brief, the statutory requirements are:

- set up a strategic group to direct the work of the partnership
- regularly engage and consult with the community about their priorities and progress achieving them
- set up protocols and systems for sharing information
- analyse a wide range of data, including recorded crime levels and patterns, in order to identify priorities in an annual strategic assessment
- set out a partnership plan and monitor progress
- produce a strategy to reduce reoffending
- commission domestic violence homicide reviews

The Police and Crime Commissioner must have regard to the CSP priorities within their police and crime plan. A few topic-based countywide delivery partnerships exist to support the work of the local CSPs in meeting their statutory duties. These were set up with the agreement of local CSPs and cover issues that can be tackled more appropriately on a larger scale.

In addition to the statutory partnership, responsible authorities are also required, under s.17 of The Act, to consider the implication on crime and disorder of all their day to day activities.

The table below shows the Council's current work on the CSP and in tackling crime and disorder more generally:

TABLE REDACTED

CSPs generally exist at a district-level, however, partnerships can apply to the Secretary of State to merge with other CSPs locally. The district council is usually the accountable body for district-level CSPs. BTDC has been the accountable body for the Big Townshire CSP since it was formed.

At the February 2019 meeting of the then Big Townshire Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) it was agreed that the Board - its purpose and functions - needed to be

reviewed and refreshed, including membership, frequency of meetings, funding (including funding for Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR)) and the role and purpose of the meetings that feed into the CDRP, namely the Tasking and Co-ordination Group (TCG) and the Problem Solving Group (PSG).

Briefing Note for Informal Cabinet

Big Townshire Community Safety Partnership (CSP)

Purpose:
1. To explain the remit of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP)
2. To demonstrate how the core work of the council and the CSP are closely linked.

1. The remit of the CSP is to reduce crime, disorder and substance misuse in a strategic and informed way.

The partnership is made up of representatives from police, probation, the council, NHS, fire and rescue authorities and the county council.

The CSP is responsible for:
1. understanding local priorities
2. developing a plan to reduce crime
3. overseeing performance against crime reduction targets.

2. The CSP is a statutory partnership - established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The council is one of the named 'responsible authorities' but also, the accountable body.

District councils are usually the accountable body for district-level CSPs. CSPs generally exist at a district-level, however, partnerships can apply to the Secretary of State to merge with other CSPs locally. BTDC has been the accountable body for the Big Townshire CSP since it was formed.

3. The CSP is required to:

a) Develop strategy	• **Create a group to work together to achieve a shared strategy for the benefit of local communities.** • **Produce a yearly plan and monitor progress.** • **Produce a strategy to reduce reoffending.**
b) Understand priorities and progress	• Regularly engage and consult with the community about their priorities and report progress • Make an annual strategic assessment of crime levels and other data to identify patterns, priorities and progress

c) Share information	Set up protocols and systems for sharing information such as: *...concrete examples help people to grasp general ideas*
d) Commission domestic violence homicide reviews	*Independent reviews into deaths of adults caused by violence, abuse or neglect by a relation, partner, or member of the same household.*

3 Supporting your team to write clear and effective responses to complaints

Supporting your team to write clear and effective responses to complaints.

When people complain they want to be heard, understood and dealt with fairly.
You want your team's responses to:

- Be straightforward and clear
- Improve customers' relationship with you
- Enable the speedy resolution of complaints

Writing is a very personal thing and managing other people's writing can be a challenge. Here are some ideas on how to do it supportively:

1. Make sure everybody knows what good looks like

- Agree what a good complaint response looks like. Make sure everyone understands the need for plain English, a clear purpose, structure and consistent style.
- Circulate good examples and helpful phrases. Discuss them at team meetings.

2. Be clear about the standards you will use to judge quality

- It's important to be consistent and clear when you suggest a change to someone else's writing. It's easy for staff to feel demoralised and that "whatever I write she changes it".
- Good enough is good enough – only intervene to make important improvements, don't dwell on details that don't matter. If letters are good enough to go, get them sent. Don't aim for perfection or try to make every letter as if you had written it.

3. Encourage people to plan before they write

- Planning content helps to improve style and structure too.
- Develop a team planning template and encourage people to use it.
- For new writers or particularly difficult responses ask people to discuss and agree their approach with you at the planning stage, before the first draft.

- Show the plan and a first and final draft of some of your letters to help your team understand the process.

4. Create a supportive atmosphere

- Writing well takes effort. Provide resources like dictionaries or style guides. Circulate snippets and press articles about effective writing.
- Encourage staff to approach writing as a skill they can improve.
- Develop a buddy system of safe constructive criticism and feedback.
- Show your own drafts and final versions, ask for feedback – be prepared to take criticisms!
- Ask your team what help they need. Find out what is supportive and what is annoying.

5. Seek feedback

- Survey customers to find out what they thought of the content, structure and tone of the replies they received.
- Ask an external writing-skills consultancy to audit your team's work.

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Rockingham House, St Maurice's Road, York, YO31 7JA
Tel: +44 (0)1904 557150 Email: hqn@hqnetwork.co.uk Visit: hqnetwork.co.uk

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