Food Security Information for Action

Reporting Food Security Information

Writing Effective Reports

Learner Notes

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Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- understand the principles for writing introductions, conclusions and executive summaries;
- recognize techniques to organize and explain your information;
- understand techniques for writing clear and concise sentences; and
- understand how to effectively edit your documents.

Introduction

The information contained in a report must be embedded in a structure and language that engages your readers – easily, convincingly, and perhaps even pleasurably.

This lesson provides guidance and tools that will help you to determine the most appropriate ways to organize your information and the most suitable language with which to present it. It will also explain how to review your work to assure that is effective and error-free.

Writing the introduction, conclusion and summary

One of the ABCs of writing reports is the need for an effective **introduction** and **conclusion**.
It is also obvious that the introduction opens up the document and the conclusion closes it, with the substance taking up the pages in between. What is not so clear is how to actually compose them – what information should they contain, and how much?

The same is true of **executive summaries**, with the additional question: Do I need one at all?

This section will examine these components of a document. Very often, they are the easiest components to prepare.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

MAIN BODY

CONCLUSION

A. Writing the introduction.

The word "introduction" is often interchanged with "background", "orientation" or "context".

The introduction is like a "business card". It is your first – and best – chance to engage your audience. In fact, readers usually form their first impressions of a report on the basis of their response to the first paragraphs they see. The main question to ask yourself as you are drafting the introduction is: what are most important events that have led to the writing of this report?

The introduction is also going to provide the readers with a preview of how you write. If readers find your language cumbersome or your level of detail excessive, or too technical in the introduction, they may put the document down.

A good introduction leads the reader from general knowledge into particulars, and by doing so unites the reader's purpose with that of the writer.

It should do at least three specific things for the reader:

1. Create a context shared by the reader and the writer

Creating a context for your report means meeting your reader at a level of knowledge and interest in the subject you both share. This need to establish some common ground at the paper's opening expresses a basic principle of communication: for two people to communicate, their lives must touch somewhere, somehow.

2. Clearly establish the purpose of the report

The purpose of the report should be stated explicitly, and toward the end of the introduction. The purpose should pull together the reader and the writer into a common task. The statement of purpose may only comprise one line and its wording must be considered carefully.

3. Describe the organization of the report

People who do lots of reading usually read quickly.

They will first glance at the table of contents to see the order of ideas, and leaf through the pages quickly, noting the sequence of headings and presence of figures or illustrations. Only then will an experienced and busy reader actually start reading.

By including in your introduction a forecast of the organization of the report, you will help your readers understand the information more quickly, as well as give them a sense of your writing style.

B. Writing the Conclusion

Most readers remember best what they read last. The **conclusion** gives you one last chance to move your reader in the direction you choose.

There are a number of techniques for providing effective conclusions:

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1) **Recommend actions**

This is one of the most common techniques. However, it is frequently combined with one or more of the other techniques listed here.

2) **Repeat the major points**

The longer and more complicated your report is, the more important it is to conclude by summarizing its major points.

3) **Summarize the entire document**

Sometimes a report does not break down into major points very conveniently. In this case, you should write a summary to be used as a conclusion.

4) **Re-emphasize the importance of the topic**

Re-emphasizing the importance of the topic will help to pull the reader out of the "details" of the report and regain a sense of overall perspective.

5) **Create a sense of ending.**

Readers expect the things they read to have some kind of ending or closure.

You can add the sense of ending by:
- Finishing with an appropriate quotation
- Echoing a key phrase from the introduction
- Adding an emotional appeal

C. Writing the Executive Summary

An executive summary is a brief description of a report's most relevant contents.

Executive summaries are extremely useful for decision makers, who want to get to the "gist" of the document as quickly as possible. More and more, they are considered essential components of reports.

Although the executive summary is placed at the beginning the report, it should be the very last piece you write: if your report is well written and organized, you will review what you've written, extract the most essential ideas and include them into the summary.

The executive summary should include what you want the reader to remember.

An executive summary is under no obligation to cover all the parts of the report, or to cover elements in the same proportion as the report.

However, it must answer the questions that decisions makers will look for on the report. In order to make sure that you anticipate these questions, keep this list in mind:

- What is the problem?
- What does it need to be solved?
- How should it be solved?
- What are the benefits of solving it in this way?

The list above will help you decide what points to include and, perhaps more importantly, what points to leave out of the summary. This is going to be a determining factor, since the length of an executive summary should be **no more than 1.5 pages for every ten pages** of text – and even shorter if possible.

Organizations and explanations techniques

How to organize and explain your information? This will require you to look carefully at the various pieces of information you need to present, and to understand their relevance and their relationships to each other.

There are three common schemes (or sequences) that can help you to organize your information:

Sequence	What it is	When to use it
Inductive	The **inductive sequence** begins with specific details and uses them to build up to a general conclusion or recommendation. When you use this pattern you are taking your readers step by step through a carefully designed sequence of facts or ideas, or a reasoning process, so that you can bring them to a conclusion that you have already reached.	This pattern is useful when you want to delay stating your conclusion until you are certain that your readers understand your evidence and reasoning. Or perhaps you suspect that your readers may be uncomfortable with, or even hostile toward, your recommendations. The same readers may willingly accept your evidence and reasoning so long as they do not, at the same time, have to commit themselves to a particular conclusion. However, once they have accepted the evidence, you can hope that they will find the conclusion inescapable.
Deductive	The **deductive pattern** is the opposite of the inductive pattern. When you use the deductive pattern, you begin with your most	The deductive pattern is especially useful when you want to announce conclusions or recommendations quickly and toward the beginning of your report, which is often the case when your readers are

	general or inclusive concepts and then proceed to sub-concepts, examples and specific details. This pattern is similar to the inverted triangle of journalists, who begin the news stories with an overview and then provide details.	already aware of the recommendations but need to have them formalized. Using this pattern calls immediate attention to your most important point or concept and then follows that central concept with support, illustrations or proof.
Space/Time	The **space/time pattern** arranges information according to the sequence in which you or your readers might encounter it in the real world.	For example, you might use time sequence to report on a series of events or developments. Or you might use space sequence when discussing the geographical impact of a food emergency.

Table I: Sequences

Within the organizing schemes, there are essentially six techniques for explaining your information:

Technique	What it is	Example
Example	An **example** makes a general idea concrete by giving one or more specific instances.	A number of Millennium Development Goals address hunger. Goal One contains the phrase "...to reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger..."
Analogy	An **analogy** is a type of example, which compares one thing to another.	"Developing local vulnerability assessment systems is similar to informing policy decisions. Both need to be undertaken incrementally."
Definition	A **definition** uniquely identifies something, by providing a synonymous word or phrase, by going on to describe the features that distinguish it from similar objects or concepts, or by elaborating further by providing the history and examples.	"The 2001/3 food crisis in southern Africa prompted the development of National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs). An NVAC is a committee comprised of government ministries or departments, the United Nations agencies and NGOs." [The definition goes on to describe the purpose and function of the Committee]
Categorization	**Categorization** is taking information and dividing it into distinct parts.	"The SPHERE initiative was launched in 1997 by a group of NGOS and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, which framed a

	Each piece of information must fit into one of the categories.	Humanitarian Charter and identified Minimum Standards to be attained in disaster assistance in each of five key sectors: water supply and sanitation; nutrition; food aid; shelter; and health services." [The explanation continues with a description of the standards in each of the five categories.]
Comparison and contrast	**Comparison and contrast** illustrates the similarities and differences, respectively.	"Average rainfall decreased 20 percent in the dry lands, whereas in upland areas, the decrease registered at only 12 percent. Nevertheless, harvest in the dry lands increased by 5 percent, while the upland areas saw a 2 percent decrease."
Cause and effect	**Cause and effect** explains why something happened. This is a particularly risky technique since it is often difficult to determine which is the cause and which is the effect, and to determine whether the cause is sufficient to result in the effect, necessary to result in the effect, or simply associated with the result.	"More secure access to land would empower food-insecure communities to lift themselves out of poverty." [In this example, the following questions or doubts could arise: Is secure access to land sufficient to reduce poverty? Which is cause and which is effect – is poverty a result of insecure access to land, or is insecure land a result of poverty?]

Writing clear and concise sentences

The kind of writing you will be doing needs to be unambiguous, and to move along quickly and in an orderly way.

Incorporating clarity, economy and straightforwardness into your writing, especially at the sentence level, can help you establish a high level of what is called **readability**.

Even if there is not an ideal sentence construction, readability must be the overriding principle. To "measure" readability, ask yourself the following questions:

- Will my reader be able to understand what I have just stated by reading the sentence quickly?
- Will my reader be able to understand what I have just stated without having to go back and re-read parts of it?
- Will my reader run out of breath in the middle of the sentence?
- Have I used a big word when a little word will suffice?
- Is there more than one idea in my sentence?
- Are there any words (particularly adjectives and adverbs) that I can remove?

Of course, the list of questions could be much longer, but these basic questions should help keep you on track. Here is an example of some common pitfalls:

Colloquialism	Alternative
In the year 2000	In 2000
During the period May-June	From May to June
In the areas of	In
In the event that	If
Until such time as	Until
Regarding	On, about
For the purpose of	To
Prior to	Before
Utilization	Use
In order to	To

Table 11: Common pitfalls

A word of caution: many writers fear that shortening or simplifying their sentences will somehow compromise the professionalism of their document. This could not be further from the truth. Simplifying sentences merely makes them more readable. And your readers will be extremely grateful!

Moreover, often writers begin to write a sentence at the same time that the thought is evolving in their mind.

For example:

> The area of communication that the focal points are interested in learning more about is along the line of technical reports used in agriculture and government.

The sentence mirrors the original thought, but thoughts usually are not economical. The sentence needs to be reviewed and tightened up:

> The focal points would like to learn more about technical reports used in agriculture and government.

Don't you think the sentence is now more readable[1]?

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[1] Please look at the Annex "Writing readable sentences" to learn about important techniques for improved readability.

Editing your documents

Once you have completed a draft of your report, you will need to **review** it carefully.

There are at least a dozen elements that you should be paying close attention to, when you review your document:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Format
- Unnecessary information
- Logical sequence of sentences
- Repetition of information
- Dense, heavy sentences
- Sequencing of paragraphs/ideas
- Clarity of the message
- Missing information
- Politically sensitive issues
- Paragraph coherence
- Unnecessary word repetition
- Grammatical mistakes

An optimal editing process has three stages:

1. **Conceptual/structural stage**
2. **Linguistic stage**
3. **Proofreading/format stage**

Let's consider each stage in more detail...

1. The conceptual/structural stage

In this first stage you are simply scanning the document, in much the same way a reader might do to get a sense of what the document is about.

You should only be focusing on the following elements:

- Clarity of message
- Sequencing of paragraphs/ideas
- Missing information
- Unnecessary information
- Repetition of information

During this stage you should not correct sentences or spelling mistakes. Try to keep a more global perspective. At the end of this stage, you will need to make your corrections – primarily rearranging paragraphs or sections, and eliminating and adding blocks of information.

2. The linguistic stage

The **linguistic editing** is the time-consuming stage, since you are carefully reading the document, word by word, and asking yourself, "Do I like the way that I have expressed this idea?" You will be focusing on the following elements:

- Dense, heavy sentences
- Clarity of the message
- Politically sensitive issues
- Unnecessary word fodder and repetition
- Logical sequence of sentences

Why fret over commas and spelling mistakes when you may end up changing the sentence entirely? At the end of this stage, make all corrections so that you have a perfectly clean copy (whether on screen or hard copy).

2. The proofreading/format stage

Proofreading is simply checking for mistakes. You will be focusing on the following elements:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Grammar

If you are following a house style, you will want to make sure that there are no violations of that style. Checking the format (paragraph indents, consistency in heading typefaces, justified paragraphs, etc.) should be saved for last. It is difficult to concentrate on spelling mistakes and formatting issues at the same time.

If you systematically edit your document, using the three stages described above, you should feel confident that your document is as effective as you are able to make it.

Some editing tips:

- Allow some time to pass between the time you've completed the draft of the document and the time you begin the editing process. If you are under a very tight deadline, even five or ten minutes will help. The more time and "distance" you allow, the better your editing will be.
- For each editorial stage, start with a clean copy.
- If you are accustomed to editing directly on the screen, feel free to do so. If you are not, you may want to begin to make the transition by editing short document (one page) directly on the screen.
- Use your computer's spelling- and grammar-check programmes to support your proofreading.
- If you are editing a long document (ten ore more pages) directly on the screen, it is always best to have a clean, hard copy of the document by your side. This is especially important for the first editorial stage when you need to quickly and easily see the sequence and flow of paragraphs and sections and the overall structure of the document.

Summary

- A good introduction to your report should create a context shared with your reader, clearly establish the purpose of the report and forecast the organization of the report.

- Techniques for providing effective conclusions are: recommending actions, repeating the major points, summarizing the entire document, re-emphasizing the importance of the topic.

- An executive summary is a brief description of a report's most relevant contents. It must answer the questions that decisions makers will ask about the report.

- You will use inductive, deductive and/or space/time schemes to organize your information and various techniques for explaining your information.

- Incorporating clarity into your writing, especially at the sentence level, can help you establish a high level of readability.

- An optimal editing process has three stages: conceptual/structural stage, linguistic stage and proofreading/format stage.

Further readings

- Barker, A. and Manji, F 2000. Writing for Change - An Interactive Guide to Effective Writing, Writing for Science, and Writing for Advocacy. IDRC / Fahamu. http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-9428-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

- Chopak, C. 2000. Early Warning Primer: An Overview of Monitoring and Reporting, Charles Chopak. USAID FEWS Project. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/

- Hovland, I. 2005. Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations. Overseas Development Institute (ODI). http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/Documents/Comms_tools_web.pdf

- Suggested websites include:
  Overseas Development Institute, Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/

  USAID Famine Early Warning System Network http://www.fews.net