Some Guidelines to Successful Writing in Professional Settings

Top managers in both the public and private sectors have consistently asserted that the key to success with projects and advancement in organizations is the ability to communicate. While most communication takes place orally and non-verbally, the ability to write clearly, logically, and persuasively is considered by many to be a reflection of one's ability to think cogently and to put one's thought into action. Often, writing provides the permanent record by which the soundness of our decisions is judged.

Equally important, writing is one of the most powerful tools we have to coordinate activities with co-workers and other colleagues, create interactions among stakeholders in decision-making processes, and mobilize constituencies to aid in implementing policy. Since individuals vary in their degree of writing experience, the goal of any writing program should be to help students identify the communication skills and techniques they already possess, and to enhance them to whatever level appropriate to their current or future positions of responsibility.

Writing in the Communication Process

While individual communications (letters, memos, reports, theses, etc.) can be considered and analyzed as discrete and relatively static products, they are all parts of a dynamic and continuous communication process. Any single communication has antecedents to which it is a response, concurrent communications that may either complement or compete with it, and subsequent communications that are either explicitly or implicitly caused by it. Thus, communication is a constantly changing flux characterized best by a series of transactions among communicators and recipients who are themselves both actual and potential communicators—participants in the same process.

Successful writing plays a significant role in the communication process by eliciting a response from its readers, or audience, that is appropriate to the writer's purpose. The nature of this response depends upon the writer's knowledge of his audience—what their preconceptions of the situation are, what they need to know, what elements of persuasion would work best (and worst) with them, and so forth. This analysis is possible (and necessary) because the communication process has provided a <u>context</u> for the writing. Thus, the achievement of the writer's purpose is conditioned by an understanding of this context and of the agents who are players in it.

The writer's goal is to define, within this context, a purpose whose results are apparent in terms of action or acknowledged understanding. These results elicit further communication in the form of <u>feedback</u>, whereby the writer judges whether or not the writing has successfully achieved its purpose. This invites change, reconsideration, revision, and further response as a continuation of the communication process. Hence, no piece of writing is ever completely finished, even when it has been delivered.

Writing As a Successful Product

Each writing task is a snapshot of your ideas at a point in time. Consequently, it is important to frame, focus, and sharpen the resolution of your words so they clearly reflect your meaning. The goal of the writing process is to produce a successful product—that is, one that achieves a clearly defined purpose by informing, persuading, or motivating your audience to respond appropriately.

In thinking about how to achieve your purpose it is necessary to analyze your audience in terms of their preconceptions and their degree of knowledge about, and involvement with, your topic. To achieve your purpose you must plan, shape, and develop your communication so that it

- anticipates your readers' knowledge, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the matter at hand;

- addresses those expectations with appropriate information and reasoning;

- persuasively overcomes any objections your readers may have; and

- projects your ideas in a tone that is likely to gain acceptance.

The first step in analyzing your readers is to note your relationship with them. Are you writing to a superior, a peer, or a subordinate? Will your communication be passed on to others at higher levels of responsibility? If so, what is their relationship with you and with the primary audience? Are you writing confidentially to an individual, more publicly to a group of people, or to the society as a whole? What would be the consequences (if any) if your communication were seen by external audiences such as the press or the community at large?

This analysis will help you to establish what you want and need to say and how you should say it. Your estimation of the audience's prior knowledge of your topic will dictate the scope of your communication in its degree of detail and development. Your understanding of the audience's preconceptions will help you to anticipate their reactions and overcome any possible resistance and objections through appropriate arguments and other persuasive means. Having done this, you should develop a clear idea of the best tone to take for achieving your purpose in light of your readers' points of view.

Your writing will inevitably engender feedback, whether it be oral or written communication in direct response, action (or lack of it) on the part of your readers, communications directed to others, or combinations of these. This will indicate whether or not you have been successful in achieving your purpose. It can help you to know if you have been correct in your audience analysis. It gives you the opportunity of correcting your solution to the original problem so that

it doesn't become a problem in itself. Perhaps the most important aspect of feedback is that it creates a "loop" for improving future communications.

Writing As a Decision-Making Process

The two preceding perspectives—writing as part of a process and as a product—come together when you consider writing as the manifestation of a decision-making process. As such it is similar to the results of any of the other means by which we arrive at effective decisions:

1. First, we define and analyze the situation, assess the requirements and scope of our task, and gather all the relevant information available.

2. We then gather all the resources at our disposal and marshal them towards addressing the problem.

3. We decide which of our resources can best be used to provide a solution to the problem.

4. We implement our action plan in the most efficient manner possible, using whatever means are appropriate.

5. Finally, we evaluate the results and institute any changes necessary for achieving and maintaining our purpose.

Within the communication process there are three levels of decision-making. First are those decisions that relate most directly to your solution to the problem—what are you going to do, or what do you propose that others do? You then must decide what means are best for communicating this decision—how are you going to go about doing it? You are then in the position to make the meta-decisions that govern how successfully you implement your purpose—how are you going to inform, persuade, and motivate others to help you do it? Even when writing merely confirms decisions that have been made, the accuracy, clarity, specificity, and coherence of the recording document are instrumental in determining the shape and feasibility of such decisions.

Stages in the Writing Process

Good writing develops by stages, each as important as the other. Each stage requires a particular sort of attention and builds upon the stages preceding. The degree to which the stages of writing are seen as distinct steps depends upon one's writing experience. Thus, someone for whom writing is a daily, accustomed activity tends to blend the stages together more fluidly than does someone who is called upon to write less often. In addition, all writers tend to go back and forth between the stages as the process of writing helps them to modify and refine their thought. For instance, problems with transitions between ideas revealed in the drafting stage can lead to a reconsideration of the outline, which aids progress in redrafting and revising. Indeed, instead of

talking about a singular writing process, it would be much more accurate to refer to multiple writing processes, both for each individual writer and among all writers. But for purposes of description the stages visited by writers in the process of their activity can be identified as follows:

1. <u>Preparation and analysis:</u> Gathering all relevant information, examining it from appropriate points of view, performing an audience analysis, and recording notes, observations, and other thoughts.

2. <u>Invention</u>: Generating ideas derived from analysis and arranging them in logically related groups.

3. <u>Outlining</u>: Developing a major idea or thesis, organizing subordinate ideas in their appropriately logical order, and systematizing supporting evidence.

4. <u>Drafting</u>: Fleshing out the ideas in prose, developing them with relevant data, examples, and other specific and concrete support.

5. <u>Revising</u>: Rewriting in successive drafts that reflect improvements in organization, development, structure, coherence, and tone.

6. <u>Editing</u>: Refining the prose by cutting out all unnecessary words, clarifying the structure of individual sentences, and revising one's expression to be a precise reflection of one's thought.

7. <u>Polishing</u>: Preparing the final draft with an eye for correctness and consistency in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

8. <u>Proofreading</u>: Ensuring that the final copy is typographically perfect, making any necessary corrections.

One's degree of experience in writing often determines the deliberation with which one goes about it. Inexperienced writers sometimes tend to write out a draft of their thoughts as they occur to them, clean it up a bit, and consider that to be their best effort. More experienced writers learn from the feedback they receive that such an approach does not do justice to their ideas, and that a more deliberate approach is more fruitful. They see the need to work on their ideas developmentally so that they undergo increasing degrees of sharpening, strengthening, and refinement.

While there is no magic formula by which good writing is produced, approaching one's writing with care and deliberation bears increasingly successful results. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to discuss each of the writing stages in somewhat more detail, so as to appreciate what each of them has to offer.

Preparation and analysis

Success in writing in graduate courses often has its foundation not only in detailed preparation of the case material or other reading, but also in a thorough analysis of the communication situation in the case. Ideally such analysis should precede the first draft by several days to allow a thorough consideration of the significant communication issues. To be sure, the pace of assignments in some courses can often preclude such deliberation, and as you probably have already discovered, "real life" is often equally hectic, if not more so. To address such concerns specifically, Sanford Kaye's *Writing Under Pressure* (listed in the bibliography at the end of this note) provides some excellent strategies for making the time one has to write count most. Whatever time one has to write, the most significant communication issues generally include the following:

1. Who is the primary audience to be reached by any communication? What secondary audiences might see or have interest in it?

2. What is the nature of these audiences? What preconceptions does each have? What degree of knowledge does each have about the situation? What are their attitudes?

3. What means do I have at my disposal to reach my audience(s)? Is it most appropriate to use a memo, letter, bulletin, news article, report, or some other channel? (At times this choice may be determined by the nature of the assignment, but consideration of the full range of means helps to put that choice in perspective.)

4. Does the situation presume an established communication policy? Should it be consistently followed in this situation, or is there a need to break new ground?

5. What are the psychological and motivational implications of the situation? What effect will my communication have upon the audience(s)? What negative reactions should I anticipate?

6. What information do I need to convey my message? Do I need to analyze data, and, if so, in what form and degree of detail will it best help my case?

7. What arguments or other forms of persuasion will prove most successful with my audience(s)? What sorts of arguments should be avoided?

8. What tone is likely to enact my purpose best? What attitude towards my audience should I convey in order to accomplish my goals?

Invention

Once you have answered these questions you will begin to sense what you have to say, though you may not yet know how you will say it. The best approach to this is first to write down

your purpose—what main idea you want to convey or what you want to accomplish. Then write down, in whatever order they occur to you, any assertions, observations, arguments, or other thoughts that either support your main idea or lead to achieving your purpose.

When you have finished recording your thoughts you will notice that many of them fall in logically related groups. It can be helpful to rearrange them accordingly to see if there emerges a natural order among them that seems best for their presentation. The emergence of this apparent order comes more easily as you gain experience in writing, but at this stage it is best to trust your instincts—you will have opportunity to adjust this order as you proceed.

Outlining

It now helps to expand your ideas in an outline form. Whether this be formal or informal matters little, so long as it helps you to get a sense of your overall organization (the order in which you present your ideas) and structure (the proportional relationships among your ideas, their subordination to your main idea and to one another). In so doing you should amplify upon your ideas by noting after each the evidence that supports it.

If there seems to be a disproportionate amount of evidence for some ideas and relatively little for others, this is a good point at which to ask yourself if the ideas with more support need dividing or if those poorer in support might need more, or both. Perhaps the larger idea is composed of several smaller ideas that should be subordinated to it. Be willing to revise your outline as many times as necessary to give each of your ideas its appropriate degree of support and its proper scope. This gives you a clear sense of where you are going with your thought based upon where you have been.

Drafting

Use your outline to generate an initial draft. Write out everything you have to say as fully and as quickly as possible, without stopping to edit or revise. This is the raw material that will serve as the basis for subsequent drafts, what Peter F. Drucker refers to as the "zero draft." If possible, set this draft aside for a day and look at it with fresh eyes later. In re-reading it ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does it say all that I mean to say?

2. Is my position supportable?

3. Is my evidence appropriate and sufficient?

4. Are my ideas and evidence consistent with one another?

5. Is there a logical flow from idea to idea?

Annotate and adjust your draft in response to your answers. Add evidence where appropriate, cut out redundancies, reposition evidence if necessary, and add transitions between ideas. Write out another draft. Don't be discouraged from starting over—in fact, this is preferable to sticking doggedly to an outline that you have seen doesn't work.

Revising

Test this draft for organization, structure, development, coherence, and tone. Try it out on a colleague or two, asking them to tell you where you need to provide clearer guidelines to the development of your thought. Work on transitions between ideas. Use paragraphing as guideposts for your reader, indicating the stages in development of your thought. Be sure each paragraph is unified in its content, coherent in its development, and clear in its topic idea. Write as many drafts as necessary for you to be satisfied that you have presented your ideas with clarity and logic. Ask yourself if the attitude you convey towards your reader accords with your purpose.

Editing

Pare your draft of unnecessary verbiage—using five words where two will do wastes your reader's time and serves as a barrier to communication. Put yourself in your reader's shoes and ask if this is something you would want to read. Strike out what must go. In producing a revised draft be sure to provide any transitions made necessary by your pruning efforts. Adjust your style, making your prose simple, clear, vigorous, and direct.

Polishing

Check your latest draft for correctness and consistency in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Consult a standard handbook and dictionary in cases where there is doubt. Remember that spelling checkers are only partially reliable, since they will let pass any well-formed word, regardless of whether it is appropriate to the context.

Proofreading

When you have produced your final draft, proofread it for typographical errors and correct them. Once you have determined that your work represents your best effort, you are ready to contribute it to the communication process.

Other Guides to Good Professional Writing

Bates, Jefferson D. *Writing with Precision: How to Write So That You Cannot Possibly Be Misunderstood.* New York: Penguin, 2000.

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