

How you plan written communication.

When you talk to someone, you get immediate feedback that tells you whether they understand. With a written message there is no immediate feedback and there is the danger that people will misunderstand your meaning. You can reduce this danger by good preparation.

Define the Purpose

Unless you are clear about the purpose of your document it is very unlikely that you will achieve it. To help clarify the purpose, try completing this sentence:

“As a result of reading this document, the reader will” – What?

Whatever the purpose, write it down and keep it in mind throughout the planning and writing stages. If you cannot specify the purpose, then perhaps there is no need for a document at all.

Define the Receiver

- Who is going to read the document?
- What do they need to know?
- What technical terms will they understand?
- How much do they already know about the subject?
- How much time do they have for reading?
- What is their attitude to the subject?

Get the Right Level of Detail

Even when you have clearly identified your readership, it is not easy to strike the right balance between giving all the information readers are likely to want, and producing a readable document with a logical flow. Avoid cluttering up the text with a lot of detail. Present the information clearly and concisely.

The Investigation

Sometimes you can base your document entirely on your own knowledge. There is often an investigation stage when you gather together the facts you need.

The easiest way to plan the investigation is to start planning the document. If you know what the main headings will be in your document, you can plan your investigation in order to get the facts you need to put under these headings. Unless you do this, you can spend a lot of time gathering facts but still miss out some that you really need.

If you have your main headings already, this will also help you sort out your facts. Make notes under the relevant headings as you gather the information. This saves a lot of work later when you write the document.

Organising your Material

If the reader is to grasp complex material easily, they need to be able to take in the information step by step. It needs to be divided up in some way so that each section deals with self-contained part of the whole. This is the task of classification.

The guidelines for any system of Classification are that:

- It must cover all the points
- It must be chosen with the readers in mind
- Headings should be helpful and specific
- Each fact should fit logically into only one section

Take each main heading you decided on in your Outline Structure. Then decide on sub-headings to help you organise your information. Decide if the material is relevant. If so, go back and modify your classification.

Distinguish between facts and opinions, it may be that there are some gaps in your information and you still need to gather a few more facts. At this stage you should also be editing your material, cutting out any information that is not relevant to your main argument. Once you have completed this work you are ready to start writing your document.

The type and complexity of the document will dictate your level of preparation. In a simple email the preparation can be achieved by following the stages in your head or on a piece of paper. A more detailed report or letter will need more complex written preparation, however if you are going to be effective the preparation should never be neglected.