
Write to the Point

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Readers need quick messages

- On average, business readers receive 30 to 40 messages per day. This includes emails, memos, letters, and reports.
- Readers skim messages, looking for information or answers.
- Readers need concise openings so they know why the message is important to them!

Why messages fail

- Many messages fail to give readers a concise opening. Instead, these messages...
 - Give detailed background information that isn't important to the reader.
 - Beat around the bush and bury the main message.
 - Narrate a long story before getting to the point.

What readers want

- Readers want
 - To know in the first paragraph what the message is about and how it relates to the reader's concerns. **This is the main message.**
 - Easy to skim messages that use short paragraphs, listings, and sometimes headings.
 - Clearly organized messages that explain ideas in logical order.

What is a main message?

- The main message tells the reader
 - What the message is about (purpose)
 - Why the message is of interest to the reader
 - What the reader is expected to do—take action, be informed, etc.

Here are some nonstarters

- I am writing in response to your letter dated December 27.
- The purpose of this letter is to announce a new policy.
- We received your request to make changes to the floor plans. We are aware of your need to make these changes as soon as possible.

Compare these two openings

- This is in reference to your letter concerning the new floor plans.
- Based on your suggestions, we have revised the floor plans to accommodate DSL connections. You'll find the new floor plans, budget, and construction schedule below.

The main message

- Concisely summarizes your key idea in the opening paragraph.
 - "Based on your suggestions, we have revised the floor plans to accommodate DSL connections."
- Previews the contents to come.
 - "You'll find the new floor plans, budget, and construction schedule below."

What's wrong with this opening?

I have been asked by our Department Head, Josie Johnson, to announce a change in our policy in how we process requisitions for items over \$500. As you know, we currently process these items through our Just In Time computer-process. However, purchases over \$500 now need to be approved, which is not the case in the Just In Time process.

What's wrong?

- The opening fails to state what the new "policy" is?
- Explains the "old" process, which isn't necessary since it no longer is relevant.
- Doesn't clearly define who "approves" or how approvals are made.

Compare these openings

I have been asked by our Department Head, Josie Johnson, to announce a change in our policy in how we process requisitions for items over \$500. As you know, we currently process these items through our Just In Time computer-process. However, purchases over \$500 now need to be approved, which is not the case in the Just In Time process.

Effective July 1, 2007, purchases over \$500 for office supplies, computer equipment and software must have written approval from the Department Head and Account Manager.

Notice how this message concisely states the main message:

This proposal **recommends** that our company adopt the Mobile Communications Network (MCN). MCN **offers functions** that enable our drivers to communicate instantly with the home office. If adopted, MCN **will decrease delivery delays** and **increase our delivery area**. What follows is a description of the system and a cost analysis and integration schedule that will help you analyze MCN's benefits.

How the message is organized

- This main message opens with a recommendation, **answering “what.”**
- The second sentence explains **“why”** this system is being recommended.
- The third sentence explains **“how”** the system will benefit the company.
- The fourth sentence **previews** the contents (topics) covered in the memo.

Test your writing

- Review your emails and memos.
- Analyze only the first paragraph.
- Have you told the reader...
 - What the message is about?
 - Why the reader should be interested in the topic?
 - What the reader is expected to do with the information?
 - What information the reader will find in the following paragraphs?

How to write main messages

- Analyze the audience:
 - Who are you writing to?
 - What do they already know about the topic?
 - Why should they be interested in your message?
 - What do you want them to do with the information?

Analyze your purpose

- Why are you writing this email, memo, letter, or report?
 - Share information?
 - Propose a solution, new procedure, etc.?
 - Suggest a solution to a problem?
 - Respond to a complaint or problem?
- What outcome do you want?
 - Change reader's mind? Change the ways things are done? Get a task completed on time? Etc.

Determine what information to include

- Answer the 5Ws/How (who, what, where, when, why, and how)
 - What is this about?
 - Why is it important?
 - Who is involved?
 - Where will it happen?
 - When will it happen?
 - How will it be carried out?

Organize your points

- Start with what: What is this about?
- Next answer why: Why is it important?
- Next, explain how: How will it occur?

Write a rough draft

- Try this:
 - Once you have answered the audience, purpose, and 5Ws/How questions, take 10 minutes to write your message.
 - Don't edit.
 - Don't worry about grammar, punctuation, or grammar.
 - Keep writing, without stopping to get your ideas down on paper.

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Review your draft

- Underline points that should be included in your **main message**. Hint: look at your last paragraph, you'll usually find it there.
- List these points. Remember, you're only focusing on the main message—the opening paragraph.
- Write your opening paragraph.
- Take a break. Then rewrite it.
- Have you effectively summarized the main message? If not, rewrite again.

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Tips for writing main messages

- Main messages are not easy to write; that's why so many messages don't get to the point.
- Main messages take "thought." If you're rambling, then you haven't thought through the issue. Go back and do more planning. Analyze! Analyze!
- Get ideas down before editing. Why spend time editing half-baked ideas anyway.

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Final thoughts

- Writing to the point takes planning and lots of thought. It takes time!
- Planning what you want to say before writing helps you focus on the key ideas. It takes time!
- By spending time on your opening main message, you'll improve your communication by 50%
- Try it...if only for a week and see the results.

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