BETTER BUSINESS WRITING

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PREFACE

This guide describes a technique for business writing which I call the Question & Answer technique. The technique works for all written business communications: letters, memos and, most of all, reports.

Experience shows that users of the technique find it extremely successful. The small amount of effort needed to study and familiarise yourself with the Question & Answer technique will be amply rewarded by the results of its successful use.

Simon Carne

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Carne started to think carefully about his own business writing some 20 years ago when he was writing expert evidence for use in a court of law. He quickly realised that the techniques he used to ensure that his reports were both clear and persuasive could also be used in conventional business writing. So did others who read his material. He was soon in demand as a writing skills trainer. His clients, past and present, include firms of accountants, economists, risk managers and others.

He has written extensively for news and technical media, including articles in the Times, Financial Times and many legal, accounting and finance magazines. In lighter moments, he has also written for the football magazine, Four-Four-Two, and satirical pieces for the journal of the Actuarial Profession.

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1 THE KEY TO GOOD BUSINESS WRITING

THE NEED FOR THIS GUIDE

1.1 Written communication is an essential part of business life. It also provides an opportunity for exhibiting quality, excellence and innovation in the writer's work, whether writing to customers, clients, colleagues or any other business contacts. But, all too often, business communications fail to capture their readers' attention or to communicate the intended message.

1.2 The central theme of this guide is to place the maximum possible emphasis on writing to inform the reader rather than recounting facts, or even worse, writing to protect the author at the expense of the message. For people who worry that business life contains many dangers that need to be guarded against, this guide contains advice on how to protect your position without losing any of the added value that good communication provides.

THE MAIN LESSONS

1.3 There are four main lessons in this guide:

a) The key to good business communication is to begin with the essential message – don't leave it to the end of the document. The document should set out clearly the main message followed by the statements that immediately support that message and then the facts that support those statements and so on. There is a technique for this purpose which I call the Question & Answer technique (see Section 2 for a full description of the technique).

b) Confronting a blank sheet of paper can be the most daunting part of writing any document. The Question & Answer technique provides an ideal way to get over this hurdle without wasting time (Section 3).

c) Good business writing uses plain language, displays numerical information simply and is well sign-posted (Section 4).

d) The effectiveness of a long document is enhanced by the right packaging (Section 5).

BENEFITS

1.4 The Question & Answer technique benefits writers as well as readers. Readers gain a quicker understanding of the message being presented and a better appreciation of the quality of the information provided. Writers find it easier to demonstrate the full impact of their message.

2 WRITING FOR YOUR READER

THE QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE

2.1 The ideal way to communicate, especially in business, is as follows:

a) present the main message first;

b) then set out the arguments that immediately support the main message; and

c) then set out the facts that support the arguments … and so on.

2.2 There is a straightforward technique for writing in this style. It is called the Question & Answer technique for reasons that will quickly become apparent.

AN EXAMPLE

2.3 Consider the following story:

Something terrible has happened! You know Andy. He's from Manchester. He's been staying with my flatmates. They all went out for a pizza last night and then they were going to the cinema. My flatmates went by bike and Andy went by Tube. Andy never arrived at the cinema. He hasn't been seen since.

2.4 Just think what that story must have been doing to the listener's blood pressure after they learned that "something terrible" had happened. As they worried about all the possible disasters that could have occurred, they were forced to hear about Andy, pizzas, clubs, bikes and trains before finally finding out the real nature of the disaster.

2.5 How much easier it would have been for the listener if they had been told the story in the order which was most natural for them. To see how to do that, consider the conversation again, but this time interspersed with the listener's thoughts (shown below in square brackets). Notice how the sequence of the conversation changes as the speaker answers the listener's questions:

Something terrible has happened.

[What has happened that is so terrible?]

Andy's gone missing.

[Who is Andy, and in what sense is he "missing"?]

Andy is the friend from Manchester who has been staying with my flatmates. He was supposed to meet them at a cinema last night but he didn't turn up.

[When was he last seen alive?]

The last time my flatmates saw him was at the pizza place before they set off.

[How did they lose him?]

My flatmates went by bike and Andy went by Tube.

2.6 If the speaker had only realised that the second version is more natural for the listener, they could have told the story in that order:

Something terrible has happened! Andy's gone missing. Andy is the friend from Manchester who's been staying with my flatmates. He was supposed to meet them at a cinema last night but he didn't turn up. The last time my flatmates saw him was at the pizza place before they set off. My flatmates went by bike and Andy went by Tube.

2.7 The revised version answers all the listener's questions just as soon as they can think of them, so there is no need for the listener even to ask. Above all, the most important question is answered first: "Just how terrible is the event?"

2.8 Obviously, we cannot expect such a rigorous conversation structure in everyday life. The person recounting the events was tense and anxious. They were describing what happened in the same order that they learned it themselves. But, in business communications, writers are expected to be calm and rational not tense and anxious. They are expected to present the information in a helpful way.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM v PRESENTING THE SOLUTION

2.9 The key to presenting information helpfully is to distinguish the way you solve a problem from the way to present the solution. To solve a problem you start at the beginning and work through the analysis (logically, one hopes) until you reach the conclusion. Conventional business writing makes the reader work through the same process. It's as if the writer wanted to communicate to the reader: "I've worked very hard to get this answer and I want you to know it."

2.10 The Question & Answer technique works on the principle that it's easier for the reader to be told first what the real point is, followed by an explanation. With the Question & Answer technique, it's the reader's logic that counts.

ADVANTAGES OF USING THE QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE

2.11 There are a number of advantages gained from using the Question & Answer technique. The most important are:

a) The Question & Answer technique repeatedly invites the reader to ask a question – and then answers it for him – inviting another question, and so on. This process continues until there are no more questions to answer.

b) The reader does not have to remember facts from earlier sections of the document, because facts, reasons and conclusions are grouped together.

c) The document does not include extraneous information. With the Question & Answer technique, only relevant information is included, and then only at the point of relevance. This is in marked contrast to the commonly encountered style of writing which includes lots of background material for the simple reason that it is true.

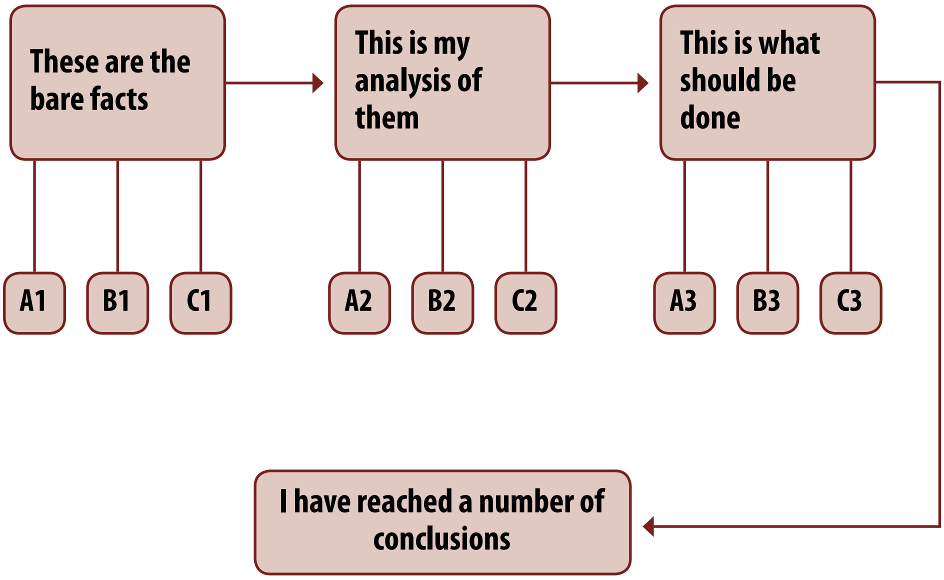
CONVENTIONAL APPROACH v QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE

2.12 The diagram below shows the difference between a business document written in a conventional style and one which follows the Question & Answer technique.

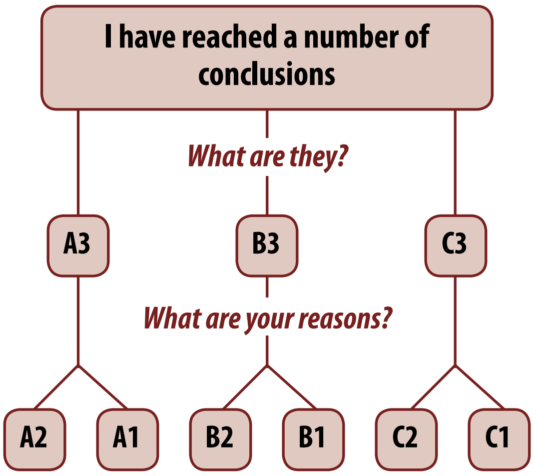
2.13 The conventional style takes the reader through the problem-solving process before arriving at a set of recommendations. Section 1 diagnoses the problems. Section 2 asks the reader to remember the problems from the previous section and explains their causes. Section 3 uses the facts and thoughts from Sections 1 and 2 to reach some conclusions about what should be done.

2.14 The Question & Answer technique is fundamentally different. First the writer tells the reader that he has reached some conclusions and, as fast as the reader can think "What are they?", the writer tells the reader. The writer then answers the next logical question: "What are your reasons?" and follows that with the supporting evidence.

CONVENTIONAL



QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE



BEING POSITIVE IN ORDER TO DIRECT THE READER'S MIND

2.15 A well practised writer learns how he can "prompt" the reader to ask the question that the writer wants to deal with next. This is frequently done by making positive statements which encourage the reader to want more information.

2.16 For example, in a report recommending changes, the writer may make the positive statement: "I have identified a number of improvements that can be made." This statement encourages the question: "What are the improvements?", which is an invitation to the writer to expand on their proposals.

2.17 In stark contrast, the writer could have addressed the same points with the words: "I have identified a number of weaknesses which need to be rectified." This alternative wording encourages a quite different response from the reader: "What is wrong with the present set-up?" The reader is now on the defensive. He may well deny that there is a problem and will have to be convinced that there is one before he will be receptive to the potentially innovative suggestions that follow.

2.18 Another example, taking the negative version first, is as follows:

Negative

"I have concluded that the company is failing to manage its supply chain effectively. As a result, significant delays in production are occurring. I recommend the company to institute a range of new management processes …."

Positive

"I recommend the company to make some improvements in its supply chain management. This will eliminate the current production delays and resulting revenue losses. The main improvements I propose are …."

2.19 In the positive approach, the criticism is implied by the solution, rather than stated explicitly. The message is the same, but the difference in tone may make the reader less defensive about the present failings and more receptive to the ideas in the report. There may be times when the negative approach is needed to stir a complacent reader, but generally its judgmental style will not win the hearts and minds of the people the writer aims to persuade. In the positive version, detailed criticisms will come out later in the document, but the key message is one of improvement rather than criticism.

A FURTHER EXAMPLE

2.20 There is a further example of the Question & Answer technique in Appendix A of this guide.

3 CONFRONTING A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER

USING THE QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE TO GET STARTED

3.1 Confronting a blank sheet of paper can be the most daunting part of writing. The Question & Answer technique provides an ideal way to get past this hurdle.

3.2 If you think of the document as the answer to a question, it becomes clear that the writer needs to define the question before they can answer it. A simple, but undoubtedly powerful, technique for doing this is to identify what I call the Starting Point and Development. The Starting Point is an uncontroversial fact that defines the frame of reference for the report and concentrates the reader's attention on the relevant subject. The writer can then describe the occurrence or Development that leads to the question which the document is seeking to address using the Question & Answer technique. Some simple examples:

	Starting Point	Development	Question
1	This is how our company operates now.	Something has gone wrong.	What should we do?
2	We agreed a plan of action at the last meeting.	It has not been possible to implement the plan because …	What should we do instead?
3	Communication is an essential part of business life.	But too often business reports fail to capture the readers' attention.	How can that be rectified?

3.3 The principle of identifying and answering a single question or, at most, a pair of connected questions is an important technique for unifying and clarifying the purpose of the document you are about to write.

SPECIFYING THE WRITER'S ANSWER TO THE KEY QUESTION

3.4 Having identified the key question, the writer can follow the Question & Answer technique to develop a structure for the document which will present the answer to the question together with the information or advice that explains and supports that answer (rather than an array of facts that the writer happened upon during their preparatory work).

3.5 The structure arrived at using the Question & Answer technique enables the writer to convince the reader that they have correctly analysed the issues they were asked about. The Question & Answer technique does this by establishing logical relationships that can be used to build up an argument, a case for change or whatever is required. For example: do this because x is going wrong; do that in order to achieve y; do this by means of actions a, b and c. This is the process of thinking illustrated by the diagram beneath paragraph 2.14.

4 CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORDS

THE AIM

4.1 Good business writing uses plain and simple language, is well sign-posted for the reader, displays numerical information effectively and uses abbreviations in the most helpful way for the reader.

PLAIN AND SIMPLE LANGUAGE

4.2 A good business communication is written in simple language. A professional tone undoubtedly helps to convey the proper impression, but an excessively formal style that is so often adopted by business people rarely (if ever) impresses the reader. In fact, formality usually only serves to make the document harder to understand. Diagrams may help but they are not a substitute for good text. The popularity of oral presentations to accompany a written communication is nothing more than an acknowledgement that the writer has not communicated their message effectively and needs a spoken presentation to get the message across.

4.3 The key to plain English is to avoid the use of jargon and unnecessarily long or unusual words. Plain language is, almost always, easier to understand than complicated words or jargon. Unusual words may have a pleasant "sound" to them or look impressive, but they are no use if the reader cannot understand them.

4.4 "Listen" to what you write. If it sounds odd to your ear, it will look odd to the reader's eye. The written word should not try to match the informality of speech, but it should be capable of being spoken without sounding odd.

4.5 Business communications should always be courteous and professional; and they should address points of significance, not trivia. Avoid the use of emotive language, in order to convey the qualities of objectivity and integrity. Be positive in what you say.

SIGN-POSTING

4.6 "Sign-posting" is the use of words and physical presentation to help the reader follow the document and/or find a particular point they want to revisit. Good sign-posting greatly enhances a document and makes it easier to read. When writers use the Question & Answer technique, they develop a diagram of the type shown below paragraph 2.14. Sign-posting effectively lets the reader have the benefit of the same diagram.

4.7 There are two basic principles of sign-posting:

a) *cross-referencing*: headings and numbering can be used to reflect the structure of the document (see paragraphs 4.8-4.9 below);

b) *layout on the page*: the text and the space between the text ("white space") can reinforce that structure (see paragraph 4.10).

Cross-referencing

4.8 The purpose of cross-referencing pages, sections and paragraphs is, quite simply, to act as a label so that:

a) the writer can point the reader to another part of the document, eg "see paragraph 1.2"; and

b) readers can direct one another to a particular passage ("Bill, please check the point made in paragraph 3.4").

4.9 In order to make the most of these opportunities to help the reader, the writer should include cross-references as often as it is convenient to do so. The reader may not be familiar with the Question & Answer technique, so it is particularly helpful to signal in the summary paragraphs that more information is forthcoming in the succeeding paragraphs. Notice how often this guide uses the signal "see paragraph X."

Layout

4.10 There are many ways to lay out a written document. Many businesses have a particular house style which must be followed, but where writers have discretion to set out the document as they think fit, they should use the layout to enhance the structure. For example, the use of headings can highlight the different "levels" in the argument (corresponding to the levels of argument in the logic diagram).

THE EFFECTIVE USE OF NUMBERS

4.11 Business documents frequently make use of numbers, because numbers are a key component of businesses life. It is essential to communicate numbers effectively so as to make it easy for the reader to understand and interpret them. Numbers can also enliven the message by making a change from continuous prose.

4.12 The phrase "the figures speak for themselves" is rarely true. Almost always, it is necessary to use words to explain the relevance and significance of numbers. It is much more effective if the explanation is given before the reader gets to the numbers, not afterwards. That way, the reader knows in advance what they are looking for in the numbers, rather than having to work it out for themselves.

ABBREVIATIONS

4.13 Abbreviations save time if they are used properly, but not if they are used gratuitously or in the wrong way. Abbreviations should be chosen with the reader's convenience in mind, not the writer's. A simple rule is: whenever possible, use abbreviations that will be most easily recognisable to the reader each time they comes across the abbreviation.

4.14 For example, ICAEW is instantly recognisable to all British accountants as the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, but when writing for non-accountants, it won't be understood. It is far preferable to refer to "the Institute" (or "the English Institute" if it is necessary to distinguish it from the equivalent body in Scotland).

4.15 Abbreviations are only helpful if they are recognisable. Readers are thoroughly confused and mildly irritated if they are introduced to a number of new abbreviations which they cannot retain in their heads. For example, it would have made this guide far harder to follow if I had referred throughout to the QAT, expecting the reader to remember that it stands for "Question & Answer technique". When writing with a computer, it isn't necessary to use abbreviations to assist or speed up the typing.

5 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

THE FORMAT OF A DOCUMENT

5.1 The clarity of the message can be enhanced by the right "packaging". For reports and other substantial documents, a well-tested format is in four parts as follows:

a) a covering letter;

b) an introduction and summary;

c) the main sections of the document; and

d) appendices (if needed).

THE COVERING LETTER

5.2 Covering letters can serve an important purpose in the report package. They are a medium for communicating information which is vital to the protection of the writer's position. Covering letters do not interrupt the flow of the report or detract from its positive tone because the reader has not yet reached what they regard as "page one" of the report. Covering letters like this can provide a very simple solution to dealing with any issue that is awkward to fit in to the logical argument of the report. But take care not to incorporate any of the assignment's findings or conclusions in such a letter, because they will then be read out of context.

5.3 Do not confuse formal *covering* letters with the informal *transmittal* letter that says "Dear John, I enclose four copies of our report as promised. Yours sincerely". The two types of letter co-exist and cover the same report, but they should never be confused or combined. A copy of the covering letter should be attached to every copy of the report, because it is part of the report. The transmittal letter serves only as a courtesy accompanying the report and is not part of it.

5.4 Four examples of information which may be included in a covering letter are:

a) the formal terms of reference for the report and details of any changes that were made after the original instructions were given to the writer;

b) an explanation of any failure to complete the terms of reference, eg "I have not been able to obtain any reliable information regarding [a particular subject] because of [a stated reason]. I discussed this complication with [name] at a meeting on [date] and it was agreed that my report should not, therefore, deal with that aspect";

c) any limitations as to the use which may be made of the report, eg that the report was written for the purposes of [a particular set of circumstances] and should not be relied on for any other purposes; and

d) any other caveats or statements needed to protect the writer's position.

5.5 The terms of reference will normally define the key issues that the writer proposes to answer, but the formal wording may not be ideal for inclusion in the body of the report. This is because, all too often, the terms of reference are not phrased in a way that focuses the reader's mind on the key issues. In order to avoid disrupting the flow of the report with an unwieldy statement of the terms of reference, the terms of reference can be removed from the body of the report, either to a formal covering letter or to an appendix, depending on whether you want them to be read first or not. The covering letter (or appendix) should also be used to explain any changes or additions to the agreed terms of reference.

5.6 The Preface to this guide is akin to a covering letter. It explains the purpose of the guide, defines its scope and contains some encouragement to use the advice.

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

5.7 The introduction and summary contain the key messages of the entire document. They provide a brief overview for the busy reader, to enable them to decide within 60 seconds or so whether to read the rest, and if so, which parts to look for. The introduction and summary must (together) be able to represent the entire document, by explaining succinctly its purpose and message. Nevertheless, they are an integral part of the document, not something pasted on to the front as an afterthought. The rest of the report cannot stand alone without them.

5.8 Typically the introduction and summary will be together in one section. It is important, however, not to confuse their different functions: the introduction states the purpose of the report; the summary summarises its message.

The introduction

5.9 The function of the introduction is to state the purpose of the report, ie to ask the question to which the report provides the answer. The Starting Point and Development which were explained in Section 3 as a technique for kicking off the logic diagram is also very convenient for developing the introduction. The approach appeals to many readers because it:

a) begins the report with an uncontroversial fact that defines the frame of reference for the report and thereby concentrates the reader's attention on the relevant subject (the "Starting Point")

b) describes the occurrence or "Development" that leads to …

c) the "Question" which the report is seeking to address.

The summary

5.10 The Answer to the Question is, of course, what makes up the remainder of report. The summary must begin immediately by answering the question or questions posed in the introduction. It does this by presenting what was in the top box of the logic diagram, as illustrated in the diagram beneath paragraph 2.14.

5.11 The key messages are then amplified by a summary description of the key action areas linked to the major contributory causes of the problem. The key action areas are the boxes in the second tier of the logic diagram.

5.12 Of course, the object of a report is not always to stimulate action. It may be to present options and stimulate a decision. Alternatively the emphasis may be on presenting a judgement or on presenting information so that the reader can make their own judgement. Whatever the purpose of a report, the process of building and presenting a logical structure will invariably help to clarify the issues and to direct the reader's mind towards formulating a reaction to those issues.

5.13 It is also a good idea to complete the summary with a list of the benefits of adopting the report in terms of the pay-off to the reader (see, for example, paragraph 1.4 which describes the benefits to be gained from adopting the ideas in this guide).

THE MAIN SECTIONS

5.14 Essentially, the summary provides the link between the key messages and the content of the succeeding sections. The opening of each section should present the key issues in summary, using wording very similar to the words in the corresponding paragraph of the summary. If the logic diagram has been properly constructed, it will be apparent to the writer how to develop each of the succeeding sections.

5.15 Each section must cover one of the main issues brought out in the course of the analysis. It is up to the writer to decide how to present the details, but a good general rule is: when describing a problem, present the matching solution immediately afterwards. Do not leave the reader to worry about an unresolved issue for a moment longer than necessary.

5.16 It is important to decide how much detail is needed to convince the reader of the writer's case. Some of the supporting detail can go into appendices (see paragraph 5.19 below). But bear in mind that readers will find it inconvenient to turn forward several pages immediately in order to find an appendix. So you need to compromise:

a) put information in an appendix if it would seriously break up the flow of the argument if the information were left in the section; but

b) keep information in the section if you really want people to read or study it.

5.17 People accustomed to conventional report writing may be used to closing their reports with some summarising material. The Question & Answer structure does not naturally provide for this. The end of the report deals with the least important material and so there is no sense of finality or opportunity for a resonant closing paragraph.

5.18 To get around this, I often find that, particularly where actions are diverse or spread across several parts of the reader's organisation, it is helpful to produce a summary action plan, implementation plan or simply a section titled "Next Steps". In this way, I can close the main body of the report on a note that is unifying and forward-looking.

THE USE OF APPENDICES

5.19 Appendices are useful for segregating any material which would impede the flow of the report's argument and is not itself an essential component of that argument. Suitable subjects for appendices include:

a) Information about the report itself:

- the original terms of reference
- an explanation of a methodology employed for the analysis

- a list of people interviewed during the course of the research
- a questionnaire used during the fact-finding

b) detailed information gained during the assignment:

- a full analysis of interviews
- a summary of the statutory or legal context in which the company operates
- copies of budgets, forecasts or plans that are key to an understanding of the background to the report
- copies of input the writer obtained from others, eg a marketing study, commissioned during the course of the work.

Appendix A: AN EXAMPLE

PUTTING THE QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE INTO PRACTICE

A.1 How does the Question & Answer technique work in practice? This appendix sets out a hypothetical example of a report in both the conventional and Question & Answer technique formats. The example is short and deliberately artificial. The purpose of the example is to illustrate the lessons of Section 2.

EXAMPLE: APPRAISAL OF RONALD STARR

A.2 The example is about a young man called Ronald Starr (known to his colleagues as "Rising Starr"). He works for the leading UK manufacturing giant, British Conglomerate PLC, where for the past five years he has been in charge of a subsidiary Williams Widgets Ltd, a small widget manufacturer. British Conglomerate bought Williams Widgets at the end of 2005, when it was in a pretty poor state of affairs having been badly mismanaged after the founder's death.

A.3 Starr was put in charge of the Williams Widgets for five years. His mission was to turn the company around. Those five years are now up and one of the directors of British Conglomerate has written a report to the board of British Conglomerate describing Starr's performance.

A.4 The following paragraphs set out the report in two formats: conventional and Question & Answer.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL OF RONALD STARR
[Conventional version]

Background

1 Williams Widgets Ltd ("Williams") is a manufacturer of widgets based in Oxbridge. Williams was founded in 1951 by Robert Williams and run very successfully until the late 1980s when Robert Williams died and ownership of the company passed into the hands of his son, Bobby Williams.

2 Williams was acquired by British Conglomerate PLC from Bobby Williams in late December 2005 and put under the control of Ronald Starr, a graduate of British Conglomerate's management training scheme. Starr's five year mission was to turn Williams into a successful venture following its poor performances under the previous ownership. I have been asked to appraise the performance of Starr over the five year period 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2010.

3 At the time of the acquisition, Williams had a customer base of 40 companies, mostly in Oxbridgeshire and one or two neighbouring counties. The company's turnover was £15 million pa. The profit in the year to 31 December 2005 was £55,000.

Current position

4 At 31 December 2010, the number of customers supplied by Williams was 100. Of these customers, 75 are spread throughout the UK and 25 are in other EC countries.

5 In the year ending 31 December 2010 the turnover was £47.5m and the profit was £5.45m.

Analysis of performance

6 Over the five years of Starr's stewardship of the company, Williams has increased its customer base by 150%.

7 Over the same period the turnover has more than trebled and the profitability has increased from less than 0.5% of turnover (ie barely breaking even) to 11.5% of turnover which is an acceptable level.

Conclusions

8 Three key indicators, profit, turnover and customer numbers, all show significant improvement over the five years. Based on that comparison, Starr has done an excellent job and should now be considered for a senior position in one of the major companies in the group.

REVIEW OF THE CONVENTIONAL REPORT

A.5 The conventional report exhibits many of the aspects commonly found in written business communications. Not only does the reader have to wait until the very end to find out what he wants to know, but the writer fails to capture the readers' attention in the preceding text.

"Background" section

A.6 The background section is boring, because either the readers (ie the board members of British Conglomerate) know it already, or else they will not be able to see the significance of it. In this example, the background is mercifully short but, in a real report, it might have continued for pages.

A.7 Notice also that the background is a mixture of the relevant (eg "Williams had a customer base of 40 in 2005") and the irrelevant (eg "Williams was founded in 1951"). So often in a conventional business communication the writer fills the "Background" section with facts without later filtering out those which turn out to be extraneous and irrelevant.

"Current position" section

A.8 The second section (which sets out the facts for 2010) is, in many ways, the worst section. Very few readers, if any, actually concentrate on that section at all. The reader who cannot remember the corresponding information for 2005 tends to look back to the previous section for a recap (when teaching the course on which this guide is based, I put each section on a separate page and watch to see how many people turn back a page). Those readers who can recall the 2005 figures tend to make mental comparisons between 2005 and 2010 ("If the turnover was £15m in 2005 and is £47.5m in 2010, that is an increase of more than three times…"). But that is what appears in the next section. In other words the reader is either thinking back to the previous section or thinking ahead to the next one. Their mind is everywhere except on the section that their eyes are reading!

Conclusion section

A.9 At last!

QUESTION & ANSWER STRUCTURE

A.10 If the report had followed the Question & Answer technique, the structure would be quite different:

Starting Point: Starr has been in charge of Williams Widgets since 1 January 2006.

Development: His five year tour of duty has come to an end and his performance needs to be reviewed prior to deciding where to post him next.

Question: What is the result of that review?

Answer: He has done an excellent job and should be considered for a senior position in the group.

A.11 The full report looks like this.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL OF RONALD STARR
[Question & Answer version]

Introduction and summary

1 Ronald Starr was appointed Managing Director of Williams Widgets ("Williams") in January 2006, immediately following British Conglomerate's acquisition of the company. Starr, who is a graduate of British Conglomerate's management training scheme, was given a five year mission to turn Williams into a successful venture following its poor performances under the previous ownership. I have been asked to investigate and report on Starr's performance.

2 The results of my study show that Starr has done an excellent job and should now be considered for a senior position in one of the major companies in the British Conglomerate group. My opinion is based on three key indicators: profit, turnover and customer numbers, all of which have shown significant improvement over the five years as follows:

a) *Profits* are now at an acceptable level compared with the break-even position at the start of the period. In 2010, the profit was £5.45m, equal to 11.5% of turnover

(£47.5m). In 2005, the profit was £55,000, equal to less than 0.5% of turnover (£15m).

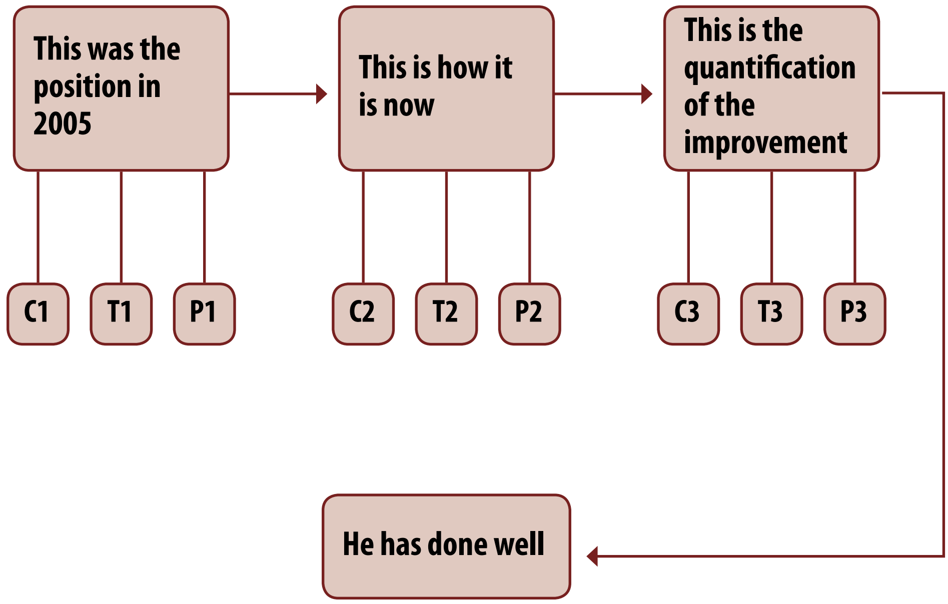
b) *Turnover* has more than trebled over the period to £47.5m from £15m.

c) *The customer base* has increased by 150% over the period and expanded from the local region to a pan-European base. In 2010, the number of customers was 100, up from 40 in 2005. The geographical base has expanded throughout the UK (75 customers) and into Europe (25 customers), having been confined to Oxbridgeshire and the neighbouring counties in 2005.

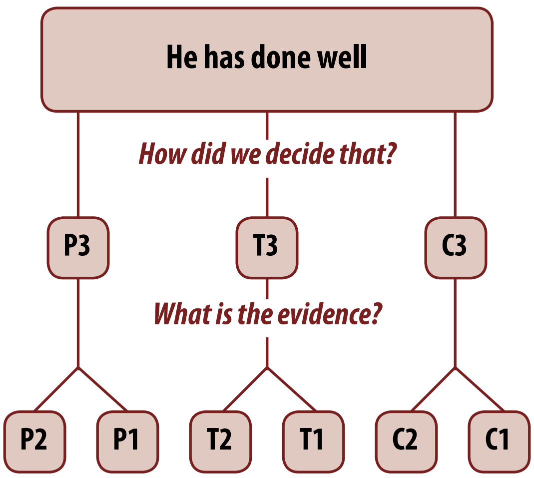
COMPARISON OF THE STRUCTURES OF THE TWO REPORTS

A.12 It is interesting to compare the structures of the conventional and Question & Answer versions of the report using a similar diagram to the one that first appeared in Section 2.

CONVENTIONAL



QUESTION & ANSWER TECHNIQUE



A.13 The conventional report sets up three factors, customer base (C), turnover (T) and profit (P), which recur in each section of the report until a conclusion is reached ("Starr has done an excellent job"). In contrast, the Question & Answer version begins with that conclusion which the writer says can be justified by reference to the three criteria: profits, turnover and customer base, each of which has shown a significant improvement over the five year period. Then there is a "section" devoted to each of the three criteria (in this case the report is so short that each section is no more than a sub-paragraph). Each section (sub-paragraphs (a), (b) and (c)) begins with a statement which shows the improvement factor (eg "The customer base has been increased by 150%") and supports it with the necessary data ("In 2010, the number of customers was 100, up from 40 in 2005").

A.14 Notice also that, in the Question & Answer version, profit, rather than the customer base, is dealt with first of the three criteria. In a commercial organisation, profit is a more important measure of success than turnover or customer numbers. There is no reason why profit could not have come first in the conventional report too, but most writers who use the conventional style tend to build up to the important results rather than starting with the most important information and putting the least important material last.

A.15 Finally, notice how much shorter the Question & Answer version is (it is about 20% shorter). By re-ordering the information into a sequence which is most natural for the reader, there is almost invariably less text to write.

OMISSIONS FROM THE EXAMPLE (TO KEEP IT SIMPLE)

A.16 There are a number of omissions and simplifications in the Starr example in the interests of brevity. The two most obvious omissions are that:

- Neither report explains how the writer arrived at the key indicators. (I picked them in order to keep the report simple and to avoid going into unnecessarily complex financial ratios.) In a real life report of this nature, one would need to justify the key indicators unless they were standard criteria used for the appraisal of all employees in similar positions, in which case the report could easily indicate this (eg in paragraph 2 of the Question & Answer version: "The results of my study, which was based on our standard criteria, show that…").
- Neither report justifies the assessment that the growth rates are good. In real life one might, for example, compare Williams Widgets' profit and turnover of other companies in the British Conglomerate group (or in the widget industry) in order to show that the current percentage is satisfactory.

A.17 In order to address these issues in the report, each of the three sub-paragraphs dealing with profits, turnover and customer base could be expanded into a section of its own, comprising a few paragraphs. The structure of an expanded profits section might look like this (see diagram below):

Profits

Profits are now at an acceptable level compared with the break-even position at the start of the period and this indicates a good performance by Starr.

In 2010, the profit was £5.45m, equal to 11.5% of turnover (£47.5m). In 2005, the profit was

£55,000, equal to less than 0.5% of turnover (£15m).

Profit expressed as a percentage of turnover is a relevant indicator of Starr's performance because … [give reasons]. The figure of 11.5% is a good result when compared with other companies in the British Conglomerate group … [give data].