



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Business Writing

by Dan Shinnick

Background

In the actuarial profession we need to work on building our skills as business people. An area where we can improve is business writing. Actuaries generally are very bright people who have not been taught how to write in a business setting. This article lays out the format and style that is effective in communicating with management.

Conclusion

Effective business writing can be accomplished by following a simple format and keeping your audience in mind. There are six steps to effective business writing:

1. Know your audience,
2. Tell them what time it is,
3. Tell them what this means,
4. Tell them what's next,
5. Make it pretty,
6. Put detail at the end.

Know your audience

As you write the document focus on what's important to your audience (not what's important to you). Think about the questions they are likely to ask, and answer them in the document. Remember that you are trying to help them understand. Speak in their language and address their concerns.

Tell them what time it is

Do not tell them how you built the watch. Many actuaries struggle with this, because they know so much and they've worked so hard—and want to tell people about it. Start with your conclusions or recommendations. You are not writing a novel, you're not trying to build up to a climax and a surprise ending. So, start with the end. Draw conclusions and make recommendations (don't leave it up to them). Address their key points. Keep it short; you should be able to make your point in less than two pages.

What does this mean

Explain your conclusions and recommendations. Address the implications of what you are concluding or recommending. Supply supporting arguments

and facts (but not in detail). For some recommendations you may want to include a section on "solutions thoughtfully rejected."

Tell them what's next

Finish your document with a section on next steps. Do you want them to do something? Then ask for it! Let them know what you're going to do next. Be specific as to action steps and deadlines.

Make it pretty

Use a legible, professional font. Arial or Times New Roman are acceptable fonts. Also, make sure the font is big enough; I suggest using a 12-point font. Draw attention to the sections, use bolding and underlining. Balance your use of white space; don't make a page too crowded or too open. If you need to make an analytical point, use graphics instead of a table of numbers, but don't overuse graphics. Too many graphs is just as bad as too many numbers. Use a simple format, similar to this one.

Put detail at the end

It is very important that you have done the detail work to support your conclusions and recommendations. It is not important that you always show it. However, some audiences will want to see the supporting detail. Put this detail in appendices, and make sure that you show how they support the conclusions and recommendations you have made.

Next steps

Reflect on this method of business writing.

- Is it something that could help you be more effective?
- Change it to fit your style and organization, if you need to. □



Chairperson

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