Writing for Results

A Step-by-Step Model for Successful Briefings

| Perception | ← | Response | ← | Audience | ← | Send the Message |

Give Yourself a Frame of Reference
- Objective
- Audience
- Authority
- Barriers and Competition
- Time Lines

Research and Select the Content
- Relevance
- Abstract vs. Concrete
- Substance vs. Froth
- Fact vs. Opinion vs. Argument
- Positive vs. Negative

Select the Medium
- Oral
- Written
- Both Oral and Written

Prepare the Message
- Organization
- Format
- Style
- Grammar
- Final Touches

Chapter II-2

Abstract vs. Concrete

Research and Select the Content

- **Relevance**
- **Abstract vs. Concrete**
- **Substance vs. Froth**
- **Fact vs. Opinion vs. Argument**
- **Positive vs. Negative**

Abstract vs. Concrete

The more abstract the truth you wish to teach, the more you need to seduce the senses to it.

Friedrich Nietzsche

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT   CONCRETE

VS.

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

The nature of language is abstract. It uses symbols — words — to represent reality.   It is important to remember that those words are not reality itself. In that fact lies both the great benefit and the great danger of language.

As with abstract art, for some audiences you'll have to give detailed explanations to get them to understand those word symbols the same way you do. Other audiences might see things your way already and know what you know, and you can spare them the trouble of plowing through lengthy explanations.

THE BENEFITS

Using word symbols opens up countless avenues of communication that would otherwise be closed. Take, for example, the word "canoe". Those black squiggles on paper are not actually a canoe. You can't paddle them or carry them. And they have hardly any weight, so you can't even use them as a doorstop.

"canoe"

But what a useful bunch of black squiggles! Without them, you would have to carry a canoe with you to make people understand what was on your mind every time you wanted to refer to a canoe. And that's just canoes. What about

mountains, houses, sunsets and highways? There's a limit to the number of things we can carry around with us. However, there's no limit to the number of words we can have at our disposal. And we can deliver them around the world a lot faster than FedEx can deliver canoes.

THE DANGERS

Along with the benefits, there also come dangers. Because those black squiggles are not actually the canoe itself, they are imprecise. They can also be misleading, deliberately or inadvertently.

The word "canoe" doesn't give me any details about the canoe itself. How long is it? How old is it? Does it have holes in it? Who owns it? Who made it? What is it made of? When was it made? You might know these things about your canoe. But you can't expect me to know what you know about it unless you tell me. I don't know any of those details from the word "canoe" alone.

As well, if you are writing to someone who doesn't understand English, those black squiggles don't conjure up the faintest image of a canoe. Even for those who do speak English, the squiggles we use may be meaningless in some cases. Take "chevrotain", for example. Unless you're a wildlife biologist, it is unlikely that you would know that "chevrotain" means "any small deer-like animal of the family Tragulidae, native to Africa and Southeast Asia, having small tusks." If you need to use "chevrotain", be prepared to explain what it means the first time you use it. Better still, provide a photo as well.

The same concept applies to many of the words we use on the job. For example, quite a few people in the energy industry are thoroughly familiar with the term "hydrogen fuel cell". Others, however, might find the term as meaningful as "Παλιά Ανάκτορα".* If your audience is unfamiliar with a term such as "hydrogen fuel cell", you'll have to explain it to them before you can expect to accomplish anything by using the term.

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* Greek for "The Old Palace", the home of Greece's parliament.

YOUR JOB

Only you can decide when it's safe to use relatively abstract terms and when your audience will need concrete details in order to understand things the way you do. The success or failure of your message depends heavily on those decisions.

As a writer, it is your job to add sufficient concrete details about the words you use to serve your purpose and your audience's needs — and also to be careful not to add too many details that aren't really needed. Sounds simple in theory. In practice, it can be a formidable challenge.

The text in Figure II.2.1 on the next page provides a simple example. It's quite a mouthful. And it uses a lot of precious space. Fortunately, if you are addressing a minister in the Canadian government, you could get away with this instead:

> The Cabinet Committee for the Economic Union will consider the proposal on Thursday, May 3, 2001.

Indeed, for many people the relatively abstract term "Cabinet Committee for the Economic Union" is more useful than would be all the details without the abstract term. If, on the other hand, you decide that your reader needs to know who sits on the committee, you could deal with it this way:

> The Cabinet Committee for the Economic Union will consider the proposal on Thursday, May 3, 2001. Attachment 1 lists the members of the committee.

Here's another example:

> Widget 13-A is a bad buy.

If I'm responsible for evaluating widgets and my boss has confidence in my abilities, it may be sufficient for me to simply advise her that "Widget 13-A is a bad buy." On that information alone, she decides not to purchase one. Others, however, might not have the same confidence in my judgement. They will need more persuading. For them, I might have to document Widget 13-A's safety record, maintenance history, productivity, cost etc., and then compare it with other brands of widgets. In other words, I need to add concrete details — details that I know my readers care about — in order to persuade them not to buy Widget 13-A.

A LARGE COMMITTEE

The following will consider the proposal on Thursday, May 3, 2001:
- the Honourable Ralph Goodale, Minister of Natural Resources;
- the Honourable Arthur Eggleton, Minister of National Defence;
- the Honourable John Manley, Minister of Foreign Affairs;
- the Honourable David Collenette, Minister of Transport;
- the Honourable David Anderson, Minister of the Environment;
- the Honourable Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage;
- the Honourable Brian Tobin, Minister of Industry;
- the Honourable Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice;
- the Honourable Alfonso Gagliano, Minister of Public Works and Government Services;
- the Honourable Martin Cauchon, Secretary of State (Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec);
- the Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resources Development;
- the Honourable Pierre Pettigrew, Minister for International Trade;
- the Honourable Don Boudria, Leader of the Government in the House;
- the Honourable Lyle Vanclief, Minister of Agriculture;
- the Honourable Herb Dhaliwal, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans;
- the Honourable Ron Duhamel, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Secretary of State (Western Economic Diversity) (la Francophonie);
- the Honourable Claudette Bradshaw, Minister of Labour;
- the Honourable Robert Thibault, Minister of State (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency);
- the Honourable Herb Gray, Deputy Prime Minister;
- the Honourable Paul Martin, Minister of Finance; and
- the Honourable Lucienne Robillard, President of the Treasury Board.

Figure II.2.1

In some cases, you will find that citing an abstract concept and a single concrete example will serve your purpose perfectly. Chapter II-3, Substance vs. Froth, gives you an excellent illustration of this.

GENERAL OR SPECIFIC?

You often have the options of using either specific terms (relatively concrete) or general terms (relatively abstract) without greatly affecting length, but certainly affecting impact on readers. You could say, for example, "There are 550 animals on this farm." Or you could say, "There are 550 cattle on this farm." As a rule, the specific has greater impact on readers than the general. However, that rule can be broken for any number of legitimate or nefarious reasons.

Note that you often have a number of degrees of abstraction to choose from. Here are examples, starting with the relatively abstract and proceeding to the relatively concrete:

- means of transportation (could be an airplane, a motor vehicle, a train, a boat, a bicycle or a space ship)
- boat (could be a submarine, a frigate, a freighter or a leisure craft)
- leisure craft (could be a speedboat, sailboat, a yacht, a canoe or a rowboat)
- canoe (could be made of aluminum, fibreglass or canvas and cedarstrip)
- canvas-and-cedarstrip canoe (could be any one of the many thousands of such canoes that have ever existed on earth)
- my canvas-and-cedarstrip canoe (could have any number of positive and negative characteristics)
- my 16-foot red canvas-and-cedarstrip canoe, which is in good-as-new condition; here, I'll show you some photos of it (leaves relatively little to the imagination)

Remember, however, that the nature of language is always abstract. You can use relatively concrete words to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding, but all words by their nature are abstract. The word "cow" does not become concrete until you are down at the farm, looking at a specific cow in the barnyard.

Interestingly enough, though, a sheet of words can tell you a great deal of useful information about that cow in the barnyard that most people could not perceive simply by looking at the cow in the barnyard. Words could tell you in seconds how old the cow is, who owns it, what it weighs, what it's worth on the market, whether it is purebred, what its state of health is, and any number of other useful things that might require several experts and extensive testing to determine otherwise. Such is the power of language. As a writer, your task is to decide when "cow" is sufficient, when you need to add details, and if so, what details to add.

FACT OR OPINION?

You often have the options of using either facts or opinions — again without greatly affecting length, but affecting impact on readers. You could say, for example, "It is hot outside." That is an opinion. It tells me how you feel about what it's like outside. However, you and I might have very different ideas about what "hot" means.

Using a fact, you could say instead, "It is 98 °F outside." That certainly gives me a clear idea of what it's like outside. However, it only tells me a fact. It doesn't tell me how you feel about the fact. If you wanted to do both, all you would need to do is say something like this: "It is hot outside, 98 °F."

COMPARISONS

Comparisons can be an excellent tool in giving abstract concepts a concrete meaning for a given audience. Here is an excellent example from the Letters to the Editor section of the June 23, 2005 edition of *The Globe and Mail*:

> . . . new "tier 2" automotive technologies have reduced smog-causing emissions from new vehicles by 99 per cent.
>
> What does that mean? Today, painting a room with one gallon of water-based paint generates more smog emissions than driving a 2005-model SUV from Toronto to Vancouver and back again. And burning a cord of firewood in your fireplace this winter will generate more smog emissions than driving 37 new-model SUVs around the circumference of the Earth. . . .
>
> Mark A. Nantais
> President
> Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers' Association
> Toronto

INTENSIFIERS

Intensifiers are words such as "very" (or "not very"), "extremely" and "somewhat".

Intensifiers are abstract and imprecise words that tell your audience how you feel about your subject. Your audience might know you well enough to understand what you mean when you use intensifiers. If so, they may be useful words.

Often, however, intensifiers mean little while leaving the writer with false confidence that he or she has said something persuasive. For example, how much more dangerous is "very risky" than "risky"? "Very" might mean something to you. But it doesn't tell most readers enough to decide whether they share your opinion.

You have two options: Delete the "very". Or explain it with concrete details.

Here's an example:

   Widget 22-B is extremely expensive.

Instead, you could say:

   Widget 22-B is expensive.

or:

   Widget 22-B costs $10,328.

or:

   Widget 22-B is too expensive for our budget.

or:

   Widget 22-B costs 17 percent more than Widget 17-M.

or:

  Widget 22-B costs 17 percent more than Widget 17-M. However, the added cost is more than offset by its longer life span and lower maintenance costs.

OTHER DIMENSIONS

Let's look at an example that illustrates other dimensions of the use of abstract and concrete words. We'll start with the following text:

> To complete the job by July 21, 2006, we will need the following tools by June 22, 2006:
> – electric sander;
> – caulking gun;
> – lathe;
> – pliers;
> – screw drivers;
> – putty knife;
> – soldering iron;
> – crosscut saw;
> – rip saw;
> – hacksaw;
> – plane;
> – brace and bit;
> – power drill;
> – wood drill bits;
> – metal drill bits;
> – band saw;
> – carpenter's hammer;
> – ball peen hammer;
> – monkey wrench;
> – Allen wrench;
> – socket wrench;
> – oxyacetylene welder;
> – spot welder;
> – riveting hammer; and
> – metalworking pliers.

That's quite a list. It presents two problems. The first is that it takes a lot of precious space. In a memo that is limited two pages, it would not be viable. Second, it exceeds our comprehension span. Most people can wrap their minds around lists of no more than seven or eight items. If the list goes beyond that limit, their eyes will glaze over. They will not be able to readily absorb the information.

Length

Fortunately, we can use abstractions to get around the problem of length. For example, we could replace the whole list with the following sentence:

> To complete the job by December 13, 2005, we will need to have all necessary tools by October 18, 2005.

That, however, doesn't tell the reader much about just what tools will be required. Here is one option that would address that problem:

> To complete the job by December 13, 2005, we will need to have all necessary tools by October 18, 2005. Attachment 1 lists them.

This is identical to the example used above for the Cabinet Committee for the Economic Union.

Comprehension Span

In providing information, it is important to bear in mind the reader's comprehension span. Again, most people have trouble wrapping their minds around lists of more than seven or eight items.

It might be that you decide that you need to provide more concrete detail in the memo in order to give the reader a feel for what tools are needed. To do that, you could use an intermediate level of abstraction. It would break items in the list into a manageable number of categories. You might say something like this:

> To complete the job by December 13, 2000, we will need to have all necessary tools by October 18, 2000. This will comprise 25 metalworking tools, woodworking tools and general-purpose tools. Attachment 1 lists them.

This intermediate level of abstraction addresses the problem of exceeding the reader's comprehension span. It breaks the list of 25 into three categories that are easy to grasp: metalworking tools, woodworking tools and general-purpose tools.

Figure II.2.2 on the next page shows what the whole list might look like if it was

METALWORKING TOOLS	caulking gun
hacksaw	putty knife
soldering iron	crosscut saw
metal drill bits	rip saw
ball peen hammer	wood drill bits
monkey wrench	band saw
oxyacetylene welder	brace and bit
spot welder	carpenter's hammer
riveting hammer	
metalworking pliers	**GENERAL-PURPOSE TOOLS**
	needlenose pliers
WOODWORKING TOOLS	screw drivers
electric sander	power drill
plane	Allen wrench
lathe	socket wrench

Figure II.2.2

provided in an attachment at a detailed level of abstraction. Note, however, that two of the categories in this example still exceed the comprehension-span limit of seven or eight items in a list. The next two examples resolve that problem.

Reprofiling

The three categories used above are not carved in stone. Depending on your needs, you could reprofile the 25 items in a number of ways. Figure II.2.3 on the next page provides an example that also uses a second, or intermediate, level of abstraction to help keep the list manageable.

Figure II.2.4 provides another option for reprofiling the same information, but without an intermediate level of abstraction.

Different ways of profiling information can have dramatically different impacts on your audience, and the options for profiling are limited only by your imagination. An important part of your writing task is to decide which option will be best-suited to your objective and audience.

HAND TOOLS

Metalworking
hacksaw
metal drill bits
ball peen hammer
monkey wrench
oxyacetylene welder
spot welder
riveting hammer
metalworking pliers

Woodworking
plane

caulking gun
putty knife
crosscut saw
rip saw
wood drill bits
brace and bit
carpenter's hammer

General Purpose
needlenose pliers
screw drivers
Allen wrench
socket wrench

ELECTRICAL TOOLS

Metalworking
soldering iron

Woodworking
electric sander
lathe
band saw

General Purpose
power drill

Figure II.2.3

SAWS
hacksaw
crosscut saw
band saw
rip saw

HAMMERS
ball peen hammer
riveting hammer
carpenter's hammer

DRILLS
metal drill bits
wood drill bits
brace and bit
power drill

WELDING AND SOLDERING
soldering iron

oxyacetylene welder
spot welder

FINISHING EQUIPMENT
electric sander
caulking gun
putty knife
plane
lathe

WRENCHES AND PLIERS
metalworking pliers
needlenose pliers
Allen wrench
socket wrench

OTHER
screw drivers

Figure II.24

Note that both of these examples meet the comprehension-span limit of seven or eight items in a list.