2. The format of the report

When the objectives of the report are firmly established, the material must be collected; indeed, some of it will probably be already available. Decisions about organising the information can begin now, even if they are only provisional. Report writers often worry that nothing can be done until everything is assembled, and are then appalled at the amount of organisation needed, usually with a strict time limit.

As material arrives, it should be put into one of three categories:

1. obviously important information which must go into the report because it is completely relevant to the objectives;
2. borderline information which might be useful to some readers, or which might amplify or substantiate other more important material;
3. information which is interesting (or not) to the writer, but which is not relevant to the objectives of the report.

At this stage, it is obviously dangerous to jettison category 3, but it should be set aside to be checked through later. Material in categories 1 and 2 must be kept available, but thought of as probable 'main text' (category 1) and appendix material (category 2). There must be flexibility between these two sections, and details may move about for some time before finding an eventual resting place. Nevertheless, information which is 'main text' is now being identified and can be examined to see what logical order might be appropriate.

2.1 Beginning and end

It seems obvious that every report has a beginning and an end, but the choice of these limits should be a conscious decision rather than mere accident. The beginning of a report is not usually the beginning of the work: there will have been meetings, letters, conversations, laboratory work, and possibly some previous reports. This report is built on foundations which may have been laid weeks or months, even years, earlier. The choice of starting point will be decided largely by the objectives, and so ultimately, once more, by the reader. Questions will have to be answered, such as:

- What does the reader already know about this work?
- How much background (to this project or whatever) will the reader need in order to understand the argument of the report?
- Has the reader been closely involved with this, or similar, work before?

Obviously, if the answer to the third question is 'yes', then less background detail will be needed, and the scene can be set briefly and easily. If the answer to the first question is 'not much', then more background will be needed and the 'appendix material' file will probably grow. If the answer is, as often happens, 'some readers will know a great deal and others very little', then drastic reorganisation may be needed to put more information into appendices, and to give more detail in the text. However, it is always worth remembering that reports are often passed on from one reader to another, and so should not be written so specifically for a particular reader that others cannot use the information.

2.2 Appendices

It may seem strange to talk about the use of appendices so near the beginning of this Guide, but they can be one of the writer's most useful tools, and some of their value has already been suggested. Essentially, an appendix or appendices should be used to remove from the main text all information which is not needed by the majority of the users of the report.

Law 2: Keep the report as short as possible

Human nature being what it is, and report users being as busy as they are, the shortest report usually wins in attracting attention and also in being read as opposed to being glanced at and forgotten. If the main text is uncluttered by detailed statistics, maps, explanations of technical terms, or experimental data, it will be kept as short, and therefore as readable, as the material allows.

An appendix, then, is a good place for background information which most readers will take for granted but which a few need to be told. It is excellent for supporting statistics, and diagrammatic material which is not needed as the report is read. (See Section 4 for a further discussion of this point.) Lists of symbols, technical terms and abbreviations which are familiar to some but not all readers may be included in the appendices. It is, however, common practice nowadays to place them near the beginning of the report as part of the preliminaries.

As in many aspects of report presentation, tone (getting it right for the reader) is all-important. Readers may feel patronised if too much is explained and bewildered if too much is taken for granted. Putting helpful back-up material into an appendix can satisfy all parties.

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