

## Writing in business/academic situations

*Bernt Arne Ødegaard*

Writing for business/academics is very different from writing fiction. The purpose of any document you produce is to *inform* the reader about an issue. The twin goals of producing a document is to give as much information as possible and as little as necessary. While this sounds like a contradiction, it is still true. Let me give you some thoughts that will help you understand this apparent contradiction.

### 1 You are writing for different readers

Some of your potential readers just want a quick answer to a question. They want to find the information as easy a possible.

Other readers want to understand fully what you write, in order to build upon it in their work, or possibly to replicate your results.

Catering for such diverse needs have resulted in a number of features of most business / academic writing:

- An executive summary / abstract that summarizes the issue and the results.
- An introduction that gives us the question to be answered, and summarizes what is coming, as well as a quick overview of the results
- Tables/figures with lots of details in small fonts. These details should be enough to understand the table/figure without reading the text.
- Conclusion reiterating/reinterpreting the results that you have already stated in the abstract and the introduction.
- Appendices with full details.

An **Appendix** contains *self-contained* discussions of *supplementary* results. Appendix presentation of results is for looking up details for the specially interested, it should not contain results *necessary* to understand the discussion in the text.

#### Structure

Depend on the question to be answered.

There is *no* fit-all way of structuring a discussion of a given problem. Sometimes it makes sense to spend time setting up a problem before you discuss results, other times you can jump straight into the results, and work the problem definition into the results discussion.

Different people may end up with different structures, which may all be equally useful.

**But**, if you get it wrong, you are likely to derail the reader. Return to the structure question after you have written a text. Does it make sense when you try to read it?

## Writing

The main challenges

- Maintain a flow in the presentation.

Do not jump from one thing to the next.

Logical consistency. Do not refer to things coming later in the document.

- Keep it short.

Discuss only those results/numbers relevant for the points you want to make.

In the main discussion you should only include summary tables with the results, and as few of them as possible. *Only* the results necessary for your discussion should be in the main text. Details and alternative calculations should be put in appendices. Think also whether it is possible to construct a summary table where you refer to several tables in the appendix for full details.

## Iteration/Rewriting

Do not be afraid of rewriting and changing

### *Polishing*

After you have produced a finished version spend some time polishing. Ask yourself questions like: Is this material *really* necessary for answering the question posed? Is this the *best* way of ordering the sections? Can I *rewrite* this part to make it .. shorter? .. clearer? ..less confusing? .. more relevant? This kind of polishing needs time, it is often best to put the text away for a week and then get back to it to look at it with a fresh mind.

## 2 Checkpoints

- Executive summary/abstract, max one page, summarizing the whole paper, *including* the results
- What is the question? – Start by telling the reader the question to be answered, with enough context to understand what is being asked
- Keep it to the point: Only material relevant for answering the question to be included.
- Keep it short. It is better to give only highpoints of results/data/calculations in the text, and then give details in appendices.
- Explain figures/tables. Any table or figure should include (in very small font) enough information to understand what is being presented without the need for wading through the whole text.
- Conclude: Reiterate what were the major results/findings

- Have I included page numbers, section numbers, table numbers, figure numbers?
- Does the resulting document have a consistent look? (Consistent fonts, point size, justification, etc).