

HANDBOOK FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION	1
A Shelf for Your Ideas - Preface to the Third Edition	4
What you need to know before you start	1
The Essentials	2
Principles	2
Structures	7
Introductions	18
Specific Applications	29
Essay	31
Memo	46
CV	53
Business Letter	63
Press Release	69
Policy or Project Proposal	77
Report	88
Minutes	91
E-Mail	98
Social Media for Professional Purposes	102
Lessons Learned	105
Editing Documents	107
Crisis Communications	112
Conclusion	117
Sources & Acknowledgments	118

4321 - What you need to know before you start

What this book is for; how it can help you; how you should use it.

To live and actively participate in a society requires you to communicate all the time. This is why most people want to be better at communicating. Being better at communicating allows you to succeed and to help others succeed. You have a better chance of transmitting your ideas.

But it is difficult to learn professional communication. Universities rarely teach it in good courses. Without systematic teaching, there isn't an established framework for professional communication, or an ongoing discussion on how such a framework could look. And it is not a skill that can easily be learned from a book.

So how can this book make a difference? I believe that this book can give you the tools to succeed: four principles, three structures, two formulas and one procedure. If you master them, you will do very well. You will first learn the four principles that always apply and then see how to put them into practice. Three structures help you make your ideas accessible. Two simple formulas will support you, and you can adapt them to your requirements. The book will also show you a procedure that you can always use to draft documents.

To make the most of this book I advise that you thoroughly engage with its first part. It is short, for your benefit. You should fully understand the four principles, three structures, two formulas and one procedure. Once you have the 4321 framework internalized, you have the basics for practically all professional documents. We will discuss specific formats in the second part of the book.

The primary purpose is to get you to think in the right direction. You will need to think because you will need to make choices. For that reason, the book is designed around transferable advice that you can adapt. Use this book as a tool that opens possibilities, not as a text that imposes constraints.

The handbook draws on the experience of running organizations, of working with think tanks across multiple countries, of campaigning with international impact, and of teaching and coaching. Moreover, it draws on the experience of making mistakes that I can help you avoid. I have used techniques that have been successful across many countries and various organizations, including the private and public sector and the military. The biggest inspiration has been Barbara Minto, who has put together some of the best ideas on how to write clearly. Throughout, however, I have tried to keep in mind what you, an interested reader, will find useful.

The 4321 Essentials

How to get started.

To communicate well, you need to follow four principles. These principles apply to all professional communication, and they also underlie the structure which we use to organize ideas. Your success will depend on your understanding of these essentials, and on your ability to apply them in various contexts. The following pages explain the four principles, three visualization techniques that help you build a structure around three, two formulas and a procedure which you will find useful whenever you write.

FOUR PRINCIPLES

The principles that always apply whatever text you are writing.

- **Define your purpose in writing**

Professional communication is about achieving results. You write so that something will or can happen. Whenever you write, clarify what result you are trying to bring about. Even if you just want to inform someone, you give them this information so that they can ask themselves whether they need to change or adapt their own plans in response to what you tell them. If you are sure that they do not need to act, most likely they do not need to know.

Hence define the purpose before you do anything else. One good way of defining the purpose is to create a visual image of the specific action you want your reader to take. When writing a memo, you want people at least to take note – which means that they should ask themselves and their subordinates the question “Do we agree with the proposed action? If we don’t, what is our better suggestion on what to do?” When writing a CV, you usually want to obtain an invitation to the interview.

“Who does what how when where why?”

Consequently, you should picture the situation where the person looking at your CV compares it with the criteria for the position, decides that you are suitable, sets it aside and tells her assistant to invite you for an interview.

Having defined your image, write down the specific actions you want to happen as a result of your document. Be specific. The action formula for writing down the objective is: “Who does what how when where why?” This formula is used wherever people need to take decisions and implement them. As all action goals can be formulated in this way, you benefit from always using it.

Having the image and the written formula alone does not ensure that you will succeed. But if you do not create the image, you may fail to define your purpose and you will be even less likely to succeed. At the same time the image helps you to check whether your aspiration is realistic. Can you visualize it happening? Have you seen something similar happen recently? If so, your goal probably is realistic. You will, of course, occasionally try something new that previously never happened – but

these are exceptions. Usually you will want to pursue less ambitious goals, as doing so allows you to succeed more often.

- **Write for the reader**

Having established your visualized aim, pursue it by writing specifically for the reader. Who is the reader? Why is the reader reading your document? What are the reader's interests, expectations, beliefs and possibilities? I suggest characterizing the reader with three to five adjectives. Characterize before you begin to plan your document. Decide whether you need to do some research about your reader (or groups of readers).

The principle that you write for the reader guides you whenever you have to make a difficult decision about how your document should look. By asking yourself what would be best for the reader you focus your thoughts on the one criterion that counts. To make your document attractive, ask yourself just how much your reader needs to know. It is unprofessional to be longer than you need to be, as your typical reader faces many competing concerns. Too little detail, on the other hand, may leave the reader unable to make a decision, and may lead to further back-and-forth.

Remember that you yourself want documents (including this book) to be written so that they meet your needs. Do others the same favour. If you keep setting a good example in your organisation, others will soon follow.

To understand the right approach, it helps to reflect on the difference between professional and other types of writing. Writing e-mails or messages to friends mostly is about expressing yourself. You do that in whichever way you want. You expect your friends to understand your style, as it reflects your feelings. Friendship at least in part is about understanding each other.

Professional communication is different. It has the purpose of achieving tangible results in an effective way. Unlike the communication between friends, its prime purpose is not that people should enjoy each other's company.

Note, too, the difference to literature. Literature entertains and at its best inspires us. If it is good it encourages various interpretations of its meaning. Its language often is complex, because decoding texts can be a thrill.

Professional communication is more narrowly strategic. You do not want multiple interpretations. Instead, readers should act. They must know precisely what you want to say. Your priority in the use of language should be clarity.

- **Present your conclusion first**

Present your main idea first. Only then introduce the ideas that support this main idea. In other words: state your conclusion first and then say why this is the right conclusion. Readers find it easier to understand your text if you follow that sequence.

Do not take the reader through your thought process. Taking the reader through your thinking takes more time and you may lose the attention of the person you are addressing. Consider the example:

In the river Mtkvari: what would you use?

Version 1 --- “You, listen to me and look over here, I’m not in a good situation and I cannot get out by myself so I think that you could be pretty important to me. I need you to take off your clothes, and your shoes too, now jump into the river and quickly swim in my direction. Then grab me and pull me out.”

Version 2 --- “Help!”

The extreme example illustrates a reality we often encounter in writing. While struggling in the river practically everyone will use a simple call for help. Yet often, when it comes to writing, people resort to the kind of convoluted message of the first version. Too much detail drowns out the core idea. Putting the main first helps to make sure this does not happen.

The principle of “main idea first” applies to all communication, unless there is a specific exception. You should use this principle in essays, in memos, in professional letters, when answering questions. You even use the principle when presenting options: you present the idea that there is a good choice between these specific alternatives and you make the case that there are no other viable courses of action. How it works in detail will be explained in the next section on structures.

There are some exceptions to this conclusion-first format. An obvious exception is most literature. Because she wants you to remain curious, Agatha Christie does not tell you right away who the murderer is. Moreover, for some professional documents you must pass on “neutral” information for other people to make their own choices. Here you must keep out your own ideas. We will discuss the exceptions in the section on formats. In the meantime, use every opportunity to structure whatever you write according to the principle that the main idea comes first.

- **Always think before you type & be precise**

Much of what has been said above can be summarised as “think before you type”. Use paper and pencil to plan your documents. Make the necessary choices. Your documents will be more compelling, clearer, and mostly shorter. You will increase your chances of success and save yourself frustration.

Thinking thoroughly before you type goes along with another principle: be precise. I could repeat this principle throughout this book but I hope that saying it once with emphasis is enough. Without precision, you cannot think well because your thoughts will remain vague and unspecified: they cannot work together to generate substantial and authoritative results.

For example, when we want to get together we would never agree to “meet somewhere on David Agmanesheli some time Thursday afternoon”. Yet, in professional contexts we often see documents that are vague on how institutions will

work together and achieve results, only stating a broad intention to collaborate. Precision here can save much effort, in the same way that precise arrangements on where to meet will save us the effort of looking for each other.

To be effective, we can go back to the action formula, and specify who does what how when where why. Specifying these aspects early greatly assists your planning, and your writing. Note that precision is a great tool to get ahead, within and between organizations. You have a good chance of prevailing if you continue being more precise, even against the odds. Precision, as the story of David's victory over Goliath illustrates, is a powerful weapon for the underdog.

Precision, therefore, is a basic professional virtue. If you practice it, you will feel in control and be effective. Without it, your other abilities are diminished.

- **The hierarchy of the four principles**

Keep the four principles above in mind. They follow from each other. If you have a clear purpose and an image of what you want the reader to do, you automatically want to write for the reader. If you write for the reader, you will always structure it so that it is easy to understand. You will put the main idea in the beginning. And, if you do all that, you will spend more time planning your documents in the future, thinking first so that you can save yourself work later.

The relationship of the principles is hierarchical, with the higher principles dominating over the lower ones: if you have diverse readers (Second Principle) with potentially contradicting views, you may sacrifice precision (Fourth Principle). This is what advertisements or political slogans do, deliberately targeting their messages to a diverse audience. The term “compassionate conservatism” used in the US presidential election in 2000 is perhaps one of the most powerful examples. The term was finely crafted to send two different messages: to mostly secular voters in the middle of the political spectrum it can sound like conservatism distinguished by moderation (it appears compassionate, not “tough”); to committed Christians it sounds like an emphasis on Christian doctrine (with policies against what they see as liberal excess).

Similarly, if your reader (Second Principle) is negatively disposed to your conclusions, you may decide not to begin by putting your main idea first (Third Principle), but instead show that all other options have been exhausted. Moreover, if your purpose is to convince (First Principle) readers who may feel threatened (Second Principle) by your main message, you will demonstrate and establish your empathy first, removing or at least reducing their anxiety before delivering your main message. As these examples illustrate, the principles give you a robust structure for thinking about communication.

Writing is like building a house. Texts structure meaning in the way that buildings structure space. Both ventures tend to succeed if they are accessible, rather than labyrinthine. When we put together texts and buildings we tend to have limited resources. For both, if they are more than emergency cover, you need to plan sensibly, putting different materials together in a single unit. Good writing like good building is primarily about planning, and less about typing (or about putting one

brick on top of the other). The next sections will give you some more advice on how to assemble the plan for successful communication.