

Write Right:

A Proposal to Improve Professional Writing Skills

Among the Network Operations Staff

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I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The technical and support staff of the Network Operations (NetOps) team in the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) of the US Department of Energy (DOE) Headquarters (HQ) are required to prepare professional communication in the form of memos and short reports, delivered via electronic mail or in hardcopy, on a recurring basis. While this requirement is generally carried out without incident, a message will, on occasion, be incorrectly conveyed or misinterpreted due to the use of format, tone, or diction that is inappropriate for the audience or situation. It is recommended that workshops or seminars focusing on the development of professional writing skills be offered to NetOps staff, and that a set of guidelines for professional communication that address such topics as audience analysis and reader-centered writing be prepared and included in the NetOps standard operating procedures (SOP) manual for review by all NetOps personnel.

II INTRODUCTION

As information technology professionals, we would not expect our network engineers to perform their job functions without ever having had education or training to do so, nor would we hold our program managers responsible for the performance of their contracts and projects without properly equipping them to succeed with business and leadership skills. We do however regularly expect professional writing from colleagues and associates who have had no practical experience drafting such communications and no prior exposure to the tools and techniques of the craft. Why should one be any different than the other? If we continue to demand professional quality reports and memos from our staff, it is prudent that we implement a mechanism from which they may learn the key aspects to address in their writing.

Recent Issues in Communications

Faux pas on behalf of the NetOps staff in recent communications have resulted in management intervention twice in the recent past, once on July 11, 2005, and again ten (10) days later on July 21, 2005. Comments received from the Director of Network Operations on these dates were, respectively:

Please remember your audience whenever you think about sending a message. If you think it will likely cause confusion or end up with a question, change the message to clarify / answer the question before someone asks (Bullock 1), and

As always, think about what you are about to say and consider the audience you are going to say it to. If there is any doubt if it is appropriate, ask for guidance (Bullock 2).

These two directives speak directly to three of the most important facets of professional writing: performing adequate audience analysis before writing; writing reader-centered writing rather than writer-centered writing; and monitoring tone and diction to maintain professionalism and avoid emotional writing. Each of these areas will be treated in further detail later.

Rationale for Change

Busy professionals everywhere are bombarded with more information daily than they could possibly digest. As Mr. Bernard suggests in his e-mail message to a group of his peers in the professional information security community, keeping the message concise and the language accessible are vital to successfully conveying your meaning. His statements, "I have to tell you that if you haven't gotten to the point within two or three sentences that you've lost me regardless of how interesting the mini-essay was to begin with. So from a business communications perspective some of these message [sic] are not reaching the target" is more than an assertion of fact (Bernard). For those on our team responsible for drafting messages to our senior management and customer, it should be considered a call to action.

III DESCRIPTION

Audience Analysis

Audience analysis consists primarily of three separate components:

1. Audience Classification
2. Task Analysis
3. Special Needs Analysis

Audience classification entails determining the primary and secondary audiences that will receive the message and if the audience is a general audience, or a specific individual or small group. The goal of task analysis is to determine how the audience will "react to, or act on," the message. Lastly, special needs analysis aims to determine if there are unique qualities of a particular audience that must be compensated for such as cultural or language differences, or physical or mental handicaps.

Giving due attention to these three techniques enables the writer to craft a message that is easily understood by a diverse audience and is free from language constructions that may be difficult to understand or offending to readers who do not share a common perspective with the writer.

Writing Reader-centered Writing

The concept of reader-centered writing is writing that takes into account the needs and perspective of the intended audience rather than just the knowledge of the writer. You can successfully compose a reader-centered work by following the four strategies outlined by Linda Flower in her essay titled *Writing Reader-Based Prose*:

1. Set up a shared goal
2. Develop a reader-based structure
3. Give your readers cues
4. Develop a persuasive argument

The first strategy, "set up a shared goal," means that the writer should find a reason for writing his message that is also a reason for the audience to want to read it. If there is no interest on the reader's part in the message being conveyed, it is unlikely that they will feel compelled to give it their full attention.

The second strategy, "develop a reader-based structure," is one of the more difficult to implement. A reader-centered work should not read like a textbook or narrative; instead, it should be focused around a problem or thesis. The writing should have a clear purpose that is shared between the writer and reader and should focus on addressing that purpose in a logical manner rather than merely relating information in a chronological order. It is of utmost importance that the writer explicitly indicates what he wants the reader to come away from the reading feeling or what action he wants them to

take (Flower). If the writer fails to clearly state his intentions, the reader may draw different conclusions or meaning from the message than was desired.

The last two strategies Flower discusses go a long way to assisting the reader in navigating a writing. Giving the reader cues means helping “the reader to know which points are major, which are minor, and how they are related to one another” (Flower). Techniques such as the use of headings and topic sentences are examples of cues to the reader. Additionally, major points discussed in the writing should be summarized at the end of either the section or document. Formatting the message for readability and using tables, charts, and graphics to draw the reader's attention to key data are other forms of cues the writer can use.

Lastly, through the use of a clear thesis and supporting text, professional writing should be structured to convey a persuasive argument. What is it I want the reader to do or feel? Why did I write this message? How do I feel about the issue? If the writer can not answer these questions through his writing, then the reader will hardly be compelled to read the message. Without an argument, our writing is simply a list of facts or data that will neither engage our readers nor require them to think critically about the issue we are presenting.

The following table demonstrates the significant differences in style, format, and content between reader-centered writing and egocentric, or writer-centered, writing.

Table 1

Reader-centered Writing (RCW)	Writer-centered Writing (WCW)
1. Written from the writer's perspective	1. Written with the reader's perspective in mind
2. "Elliptical" writing; lacking clear connections between topics	2. "Linear" writing; clear and logical organization from point to point
3. Does not take audience's needs into consideration	3. Uses language, examples, and concepts that are familiar to the audience
4. Found in early stages of writing	4. Signals end-stage writing (i.e. final draft)
5. Narrative in nature	5. Rhetorical in nature

Professional Tone and Diction

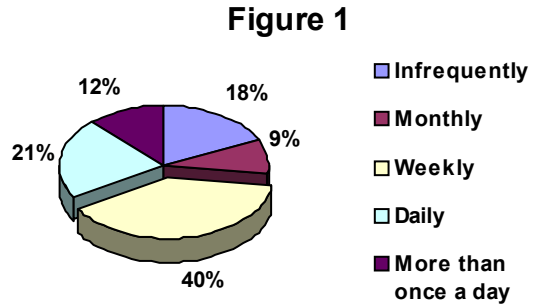
Appropriate word choice and usage is no more important anywhere else than in professional communications. An otherwise innocuous message can cause tempers to flare if the meaning is misinterpreted due to use of the wrong word at the wrong time. Professional writing should have a warm tone and carry feeling as well as fact while at all times remaining objective (Bell & Smith 96). Obviously, the results of your audience analysis will indicate what tone to adopt when drafting a message. Word choice should be common and easy to read. Unnecessary use of large or complicated words will turn off your audience and is not conducive to producing a reader-centered work.

IV ANALYSIS

Frequency of Professional Writing

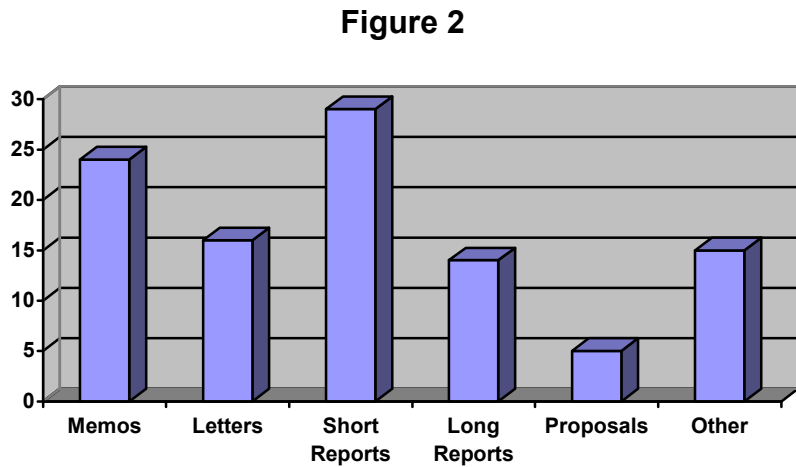
In a recent survey of eighty members of the NetOps staff and other technical associates in the OCIO, 30% of respondents indicated that they were required to draft professional communications at least once a day as part of their job duties (Von Alt).

As *Figure 1* demonstrates, an additional 40% write professionally on at least a weekly basis. With an average of 70% of technical staff communicating with management and the customer on a weekly or more frequent basis, it would most certainly prove prudent to furnish them with the necessary "tools" to do the job to the best of their abilities.



Types of Professional Writing

The types of communications that respondents to the survey indicated they write on a regular basis should come as no surprise. Twenty-nine (29) of thirty-two (32), a full 91% of respondents, indicated that they are responsible for writing short reports. Twenty-four of thirty-two respondents, or 75%, answered that they commonly draft memos as



part of their job duties. The other types of professional writing indicated were letters, long reports, and proposals. The frequency distribution among these types of writing can be seen in *Figure 2* above.

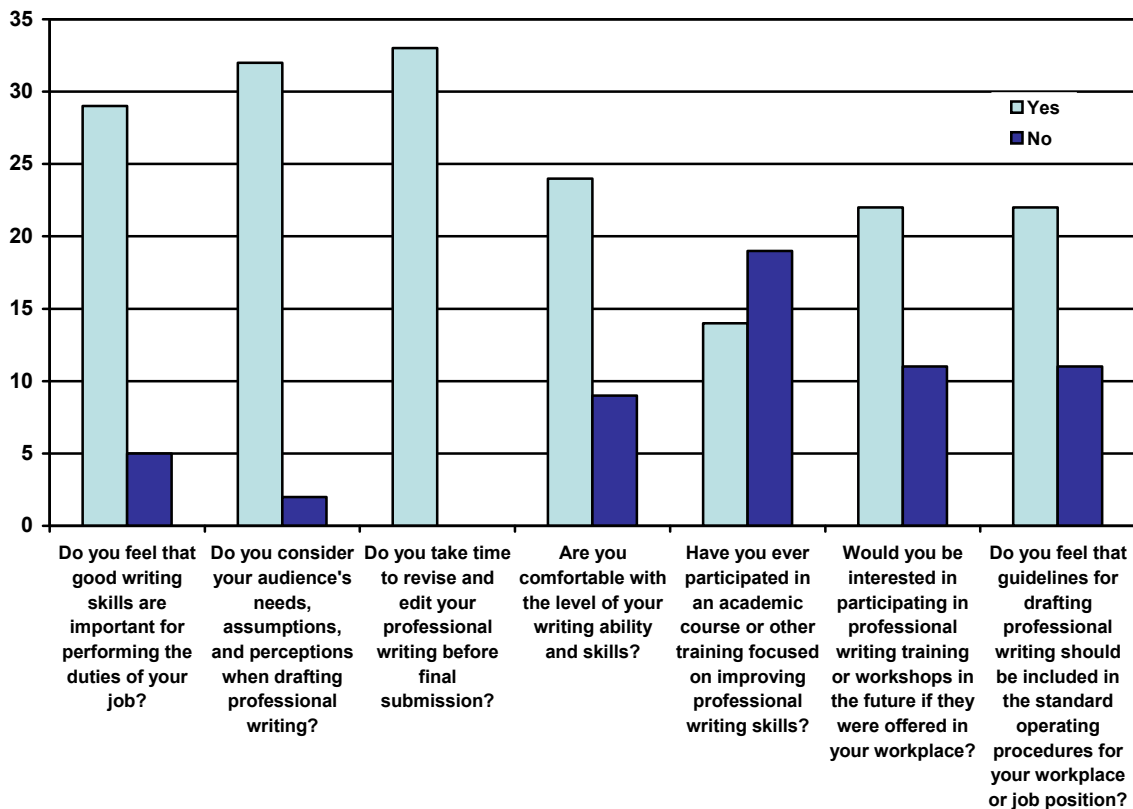
Of respondents who indicate "Other" among the types of writing that they were responsible for, the principal example given was technical documentation and specifications. Other responses included e-mail, instruction manuals, tutorials, project plans, business cases, white papers, and work orders and help desk tickets (Von Alt). Clearly with such a diverse requirement for professional writing within our organization, we must ensure that it is communicating the message we desire to send.

Responses to *Workplace Communications Questionnaire*

Additional responses to the questions posed in the *Workplace Communications Questionnaire* are depicted in *Figure 3* below. It is reassuring to know that at least 85% of respondents answered that they felt good writing skills were important in the performance of their job duties. However, while 94% answered that they conduct some form of audience analysis before drafting a message and 100% answered that they revise and edit their writing before transmittal, anecdotal evidence and experience in our every daily lives would prove otherwise. The *Professional Communication Sample 1* and *Professional Communication Sample 2*, found in Appendix B, serve as stark examples of workplace messages written hastily and with little regard for the intended audience. The tone and word choice of the messages are entirely inappropriate for the professional arena, and the writing is largely egocentric. These are not the works of someone who took the time to perform audience analysis and revise his draft before submission.

In regards to writing skill acquisition and comfort level, the responses were fairly positive and promising. Over 72% of respondents indicated that they were comfortable with their writing skills, and more than 57% have had some form of academic coursework or training in the past relating specifically to developing writing skills. Few of these experiences however focused on professional writing or technical writing - the types performed most often by the staff. 22% of respondents indicated both that they would be eager to participate in writing skill development if offered in the workplace and that guidelines for professional writing should be incorporated into the SOP for their jobs.

Figure 3



V RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to better prepare NetOps personnel to fulfill the writing responsibilities of their jobs, I am proposing that two new initiatives be funded for the upcoming fiscal year.

Table 2

	Objective(s)	Action Items
Initiative 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce staff to the fundamental concepts of professional writing: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. audience analysis b. reader-centered writing c. tone and diction 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Investigate delivery methods for professional writing skills training (i.e. online courseware; off-campus seminars; contracted on-campus instructors; etc.) 2. Select most competitive training provider 3. Adjust budget request to accommodate writing training 4. Inform staff of availability of professional writing skill training
Initiative 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide continued reinforcement of professional writing skills 2. Provide properly constructed and formatted examples of the most frequently used types of writing for reference 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare a summary of the writing skills and techniques outlined in this proposal; other useful writing topics such as the use of headings, chunking, and information mapping may be included as well 2. Present the compiled information in a clear, organized, and easy to understand manner 3. Include the summary information from step 2 above along with annotated sample writings in a new section of the NetOps SOP titled <i>Effective Writing for the Workplace</i>

VI CONCLUSION

Staff and personnel at every level of the organization have a need, on occasion, to communicate with peers, customers, supervisors and senior management via professional communication devices such as reports and memos. As the results of the attached survey shows, this type of communication can occur more often than one would suspect. Training employees in the proper techniques of professional writing and incorporating awareness of professional writing skills and techniques into the everyday operations of the organization will enhance this communication, raise employee confidence in their communication abilities, and provide a clear ROI in enhanced workplace communication.

APPENDIX A***Workplace Communications Questionnaire*****Introduction**

Please take a few moments to complete this short survey which will collect data on your thoughts, feelings, and experiences with professional writing in the workplace. The data are collected anonymously, and will be compiled and analyzed for inclusion in a final paper for UMUC's COMM390 - 'Writing for Managers' course. Your assistance in this effort is greatly appreciated!

Simply click "Next" to get started with the survey. If you'd like to leave the survey at any time, just click "Exit this survey".

Question 1 of 10

Do you feel that good writing skills are important for performing the duties of your job?

Yes

No

Question 2 of 10

What types of professional writing do you prepare while performing the duties of your job? (Check all that apply)

Memos

Letters

Short reports

Long reports

Proposals

Other (please specify)

Question 3 of 10

With what frequency are you required to prepare a piece professional writing in the workplace?

Infrequently

Monthly

Weekly

Daily

More than once a day

Question 4 of 10

Do you follow a clear process (i.e. brainstorm, outline, first draft, revise/edit, final draft) when drafting professional writing? If yes, please explain briefly the process used.

Yes

No

Question 5 of 10

Do you consider your audience's needs, assumptions, and perceptions when drafting professional writing?

Yes

No

Question 6 of 10

Do you take time to revise and edit your professional writing before final submission?

Yes

No

Question 7 of 10

Are you comfortable with the level of your writing ability and skills?

Yes

No

Question 8 of 10

Have you ever participated in an academic course or other training focused on improving professional writing skills? If yes, please list.

Yes

No

Question 9 of 10

Would you be interested in participating in professional writing training or workshops in the future if they were offered in your workplace?

Yes

No

Question 10 of 10

Do you feel that guidelines for drafting professional writing should be included in the standard operating procedures for your workplace or job position?

Yes

No

Thanks!

Your contribution to this project is greatly appreciated.

Thanks again!



William J. Von Alt II

Results for Workplace Communications Questionnaire

Eighty (80) colleagues were solicited to participate in the *Workplace Communications Questionnaire*. Of those, thirty-four (34) responses were received. A summary of those responses follows in the table below.



2. Question 1 of 10

1. Do you feel that good writing skills are important for performing the duties of your job?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes		85.3%	29
No		14.7%	5
Total Respondents			34
(skipped this question)			0

3. Question 2 of 10

1. What types of professional writing do you prepare while performing the duties of your job? (Check all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Total
Memos		75%	24
Letters		50%	16

Short reports		90.6%	29
Long reports		43.8%	14
Proposals		15.6%	5
View Other (please specify)		46.9%	15
Total Respondents			32
(skipped this question)			2

4. Question 3 of 10

1. With what frequency are you required to prepare a piece professional writing in the workplace?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Infrequently		18.2%	6
Monthly		9.1%	3
Weekly		39.4%	13
Daily		21.2%	7
More than once a day		12.1%	4
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

5. Question 4 of 10

1. Do you follow a clear process (i.e. brainstorm, outline, first draft, revise/edit, final draft) when drafting professional writing? If yes, please explain briefly the process used.



		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes		15.2%	5
No		45.5%	15
View Explanation (if 'Yes'):		39.4%	13
Total Respondents			33

(skipped this question)

1


6. Question 5 of 10

1. Do you consider your audience's needs, assumptions, and perceptions when drafting professional writing?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes		94.1%	32
No		5.9%	2
Total Respondents			34
(skipped this question)			1



7. Question 6 of 10

1. Do you take time to revise and edit your professional writing before final submission?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes		100%	33
No		0%	0
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

8. Question 7 of 10

1. Are you comfortable with the level of your writing ability and skills?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes		72.7%	24
No		27.3%	9
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

9. Question 8 of 10

1. Have you ever participated in an academic course or other training focused on improving professional writing skills? If yes, please list.

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes	<input type="text"/>	9.1%	3
No	<input type="text"/>	57.6%	19
View List (if 'Yes'):	<input type="text"/>	33.3%	11
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

10. Question 9 of 10

1. Would you be interested in participating in professional writing training or workshops in the future if they were offered in your workplace?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes	<input type="text"/>	66.7%	22
No	<input type="text"/>	33.3%	11
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

11. Question 10 of 10

1. Do you feel that guidelines for drafting professional writing should be included in the standard operating procedures for your workplace or job position?

		Response Percent	Response Total
Yes	<input type="text"/>	66.7%	22
No	<input type="text"/>	33.3%	11
Total Respondents			33
(skipped this question)			1

APPENDIX B

Professional Communication Sample 1

From: Jones, Patricia
Sent: Tuesday, April 26, 2005 4:26 PM
To: NetworkDistro

Subject: RE: on-site tomorrow morning

Bottom line up front: We may need to have somebody physically inspect CA0016K4 port 4/7 and port 4/8, trace where the cables go.

SIDEBAR:

We need to start hard-coding trunking state. Access ports should **NOT** be allowed to flip into trunks, and vice versa; especially when facing customer equipment!
Why aren't we using "switchport mode access" & "switchport mode trunk" more often???

BACK ON TOPIC:

This is very odd, as it looks a lot like we've got one interface plugged into the other. Is there a device that's part of MITS that is designed to forward/bridge layer-2 traffic? The two ports have negotiated into trunk mode and don't appear to have any MAC addresses in the forwarding table that would show a neighboring/connected device other than itself.

Spanning tree has all VLAN's forwarding on 4/7 and blocked on 4/8.

Professional Communication Sample 2

From: Jones, Patricia
Sent: Saturday, June 25, 2005 1:42 PM
To: NetworkManagement
Cc: NetworkDistro

Subject: S-1 Residence Setup

For our management systems, there are two new routers on the network:

1.2.3.4, MAN-GA093-RES, Cisco 2621
1.2.3.5, MAN-RES, Cisco 1841

As to the setup that was deployed...

In a word, disappointing. Certainly a good example of our team moving too fast and not paying attention to detail.

No passwords on the console and aux ports on the 1841 at the S-1's residence
Debugging mode left running on the 1841
Duplex mismatch errors between the 2621 and GA0936K3 causing interface errors and cdp log noise

No consistent config on the 1841 nor 2621; not in compliance with our templates, especially for outside routers

This deployment was in direct support of the highest ranking official in the Department of Energy, and if he asked for an audit we'd fail miserably.

We've got to slow down and do things better! Do it right the first time, or don't do it at all.

There's no excuse for leaving a job half-way when it's little more than a few config changes to ensure the path is setup securely and performing without errors. Today I corrected the duplex mismatch, set passwords for the console ports on the 1841, turned on SNMP read, and a few other items. I'll go back later today and apply the Internet router templates to both the 2621 and 1841 to finish the job.

Professional Communication 3

Message: 25
Date: Mon, 1 Aug 2005 10:57:51 -0300
From: "Mark Bernard"
Subject: Business Communications 101

Dear Associates,

During one of our previous threads we discussed the need to validate the people that we communicate with through the use of signatures and identifiable email addresses that can reasonably be authenticated.

In addition I would appreciate it, as I'm sure that other members would, if communications and content were kept concise, succinct. It would also be nice if the language used was designed to reach the masses and not just the elitist. Of course none of these requests apply to the use of humour, which is also very appreciated!!!

BTW: I have to tell you that if you haven't gotten to the point within two or three sentences that you've lost me regardless of how interesting the mini-essay was to begin with. So from a business communications perspective some of these message are not reaching the target.

I receive and send lots of email everyday, as many of you do I'm sure, and would like to make the entire electronic communication process as effective and efficient as possible.

Your cooperation is appreciated.

Best regards,
Mark.

Mark E. S. Bernard, CISM, CISSP, PM,
Principal, Risk Management Services,

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