How to write a report

Michael Astrop, Principal at 'Coach the Mind', presented a workshop at BTME 2014 on Preparing and Writing Effective Reports, which is becoming increasingly important for turf managers. Here Michael tells the story of a fictional Head Greenkeeper 'Eric' and how he can write a comprehensive, persuasive and accurate report

Eric, Head Greenkeeper at Dagmire Court Golf Club, walked towards the clubhouse with a furrowed brow and slumped shoulders. He had been at the club since he left school at 15 and he completed his City and Guilds in greenkeeping at the local agricultural college.

Today he looked as though he had the troubles of the world on his shoulders.

As he approached the clubhouse, one of the younger members came out and said, "What's up Eric?"

He replied: "The new club manager needs everything in writing, but writing is not really my forte.

"The last four holes need refurbishment, so the manager wants me to write a feasibility report to present to the next committee meeting. In the past I would go to the meeting and give a verbal rundown of what we wanted to do, with some broad costings, and the committee trusted me to get it done.

"I've never let them down and never gone over agreed budgets but now it's all reports and proposals, I really just don't know where to start".

The member replied: "I deliver seminars on this subject Eric, so I can guide you through the process. Why don't we go into your office and I'll give you some pointers?"

The Systematic Approach to Preparation

Follow these key steps in the right order to ensure a professional report is produced:

• Establish the objectives - the scope and purpose of your document

• Know your reader - pitch it at the right level

• Structure the argument – prepare an outline of what will be covered

• Organise topics or points into related groups

• Use plain English and correct grammar - keep it clear and concise

• Present the report professionally – headings, styles and consistent layout

• Proofread and edit

As you write, keep focused on the overall objective and think of the reader.

This will guide you on just how much information to include (and what to leave out).

about the author

Michael spent his early years in sales and marketing, eventually setting up his own agency then moving into management consultancy.
He obtained a degree in Organisational Psychology and became a lecturer in organisational and human behaviour at Huddersfield University before moving into training and coaching.
As the principal of Coach the Mind he continually seeks to improve how learning is shared and has sought different ways to make taking on new learning an easier and more exciting process.

Know your Audience and Understand your Reader

Your document should be pitched according to the reader. There is no point using long, complex words if the reader will not understand. Equally, if you make your writing too simple, you may alienate your reader and you may be seen as patronising.

Ask yourself a few questions to establish who the reader is.

• What do they know already about the subject?

• What do they need to know?

• Will they understand technical terms?

• What do I want them to do?

• What worries or reassures them?

• What will persuade them to my view?

• What other arguments do I need to present?

• How are they likely to react to what I say?

If you imagine yourself in your reader's position you are more likely to write a good document.

Preparing an Outline

Once you have decided what you want to say, prepare an outline. This will help you stick to the point. Make a list of the topics you want to cover, but don't worry about the order yet. Under each topic list key words, examples, arguments and facts. Review each topic in your outline for relevance to your reader.

Organising the Arguments

The classic report structure has four vital stages (the 4 P's):

• Outline the position
• Describe the problem
• Examine the possibilities
• Put forward the proposal

Structuring the Report

Reports are normally presented something like this:

1. Title Page
2. Foreword and or Preface
3. Table of Contents
4. Executive Summary Page (sometimes called an Abstract)
5. An Introduction
6. The Main Body, including headings and sub-headings
7. Past position
8. Problem/Current Situation
9. Possibilities – pros and cons
10. Proposal
11. Conclusions and Recommendations
12. Appendices

The Key Sections

The structure and layout of reports will obviously vary according to the organisation and the

purpose of the report, but there are some key components which should always be included:

The Executive Summary or Abstract - This should be written last as it summarises all the findings. Its purpose is to give an outline for those who won't read the entire report. Make sure it appears first.

The Introduction - This is a key component which sets the scene. It needs to capture the reader's interest and include everything they need to know. This section usually includes:

• Why the report was written, who requested it
• The objectives or terms of reference
• What resources were available
• What sources of information were used
• The approach used to compile the report

Main Body - Where the bulk of the content appears.

Conclusions - These need to link to the terms of reference, so what you stated you were trying to do in your introduction with your findings. They should therefore flow from the main body of the report and should be clear, impartial and written with the impact on the reader in mind. Bullet points are often used to keep conclusions brief and to the point.

Recommendations - While conclusions look to the past, recommendations look to the future.

If you are asked to give recommendations, again there should be no surprises. You need to be realistic and ensure they are clearly linked to your initial objective.

Well-Constructed Paragraphs and Sentences

Keep paragraphs to one theme. Use one idea in one sentence and keep the sentences as short as you can, without making them sound too simplistic. An average sentence should contain 15 to 20 words, but a good writer will vary the length and rhythm balancing longer sentences with shorter ones. Try and keep your paragraphs relatively short and use lists and bullet points to split information up.

You can make your main assertion then support it by starting with a strong opening sentence, followed by others that expand on the theme. Alternatively, build your argument to a climax so the final sentence is the strongest.

Executive Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

These cannot be written until after the main body has been written. So:

• Reread the whole report
• Rewrite any sections that can be improved
• Make a list of key points from each section
• Using new language, compose the first draft of the summary. Include the key points to summarise the entire report
• Unless you are satisfied it is a clear and accurate summary, repeat the steps

Writing conclusions:

• Compare and cross check all your information, assure yourself it is valid
• Examine the terms of reference and check each has been addressed
• Test out your findings on others to gauge reactions
• Try and end on a positive and upbeat note

Writing Recommendations:

• Recommendations should follow any conclusions
• Can the recommendations be justified?
• Use bullet points to list recommendations

Proof-Reading and Editing

Once you are happy with your first draft, wait at least a few hours or even days, then re-read it. Does it flow? Are the headings clear? Is everything you have written valid? Also, don't be afraid to delete anything that is not strictly necessary, bearing in mind the objectives and terms of reference.

"There you are Eric", said the member, "all you need for a great report that I think will surprise the new manager".

"I'll need a bit of luck as well you know" replied Eric.

"Not if you follow my suggestions" replied the member.