

# Improving Written Reports

## Hazy, Unclear Writing Is Result of Hazy, Unclear Thinking

CHARLES E. WAGER

All too often, training courses in report writing treat the ability to write clearly as strictly a mechanical skill. Trainees are taught a few stunts and gimmicks, such as use of shorter, simpler sentences; use of shorter words; use of active rather than passive verbs; and the like. They are treated to a general review of the same rules of grammar and punctuation which they have already been taught, with indifferent success, in both high school and college. Rarely is the course adapted to the specific subject matter of the reports which the trainee will be called on to write. Still more rarely does the course cover the thinking process which the trainee will have to go through to produce these reports.

Many times the results of such courses are disappointing. Hazy, unclear thinking continues to be reflected in hazy, unclear writing. The administrator who initiated the training course may ultimately conclude, as did a recent writer in the *Veterans Administration Personnel Information Bulletin*,<sup>1</sup> that:

“We are convinced that refresher training for improved correspondence must be individualized for each major operating program . . . Continued generalizations about 4-S principles are of limited value unless put to work through specific examples and exercises.”

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1. Henry V. Millner, “Outline for Subject, ‘Letter Writing,’” *Veterans Administration Personnel Information Bulletin*, October, 1958.

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This article describes a training course which was developed in the U. S. Civil Service Commission in 1956<sup>2</sup> with the specific objective of improving the quality of Civil Service inspection reports. It is an example of a course which attempts to overcome the handicaps described above. Primary attention was given to the content of inspection reports; the purpose of inspection reports; and the thought processes an inspector goes through in deciding what to put in his report. Decision as to what to cover in the course was based on an analysis of a number of actual reports, and a determination of what improvements were needed in them. Examples and exercises throughout the course were taken from or based on actual experience of inspectors in writing reports. The training was tailored to meet the specific needs of Civil Service inspectors; it was in no sense a general course in "how to write reports."

As many readers of the *ASTD Journal* know, Civil Service inspection reports describe and evaluate the effectiveness of agency personnel programs and suggest program improvements. In the majority of cases, adoption of the suggested improvements is optional with the agency inspected. In view of this, the objective of the training course was established as "providing information on how the language of reports can more usefully perform the function for which the reports are intended—to *inform* and *persuade*."

A large number of reports prepared during 1954 and 1955 were reviewed. Many were found to be effectively written. However, the review resulted in the identification of five major types of weaknesses. These are summarized briefly below:

- a. Some inspectors tended to limit themselves to statements of conclusions, without providing supporting facts (*e.g.*, "The agency has a satisfactory program for so-and-so," or "The program lacks sufficient provision for so-and-so."). Without sufficient factual back-up, such conclusions are mere statements of opinion, subject to challenge, and rarely achieve the stated objective of persuading the inspected agency of a need for corrective action.
- b. Other inspectors went to the opposite extreme: they recited endless factual detail but gave no conclusions or evaluative judgments with relation to these facts. The reader was left wondering, "So what?"
- c. Some inspectors seemed almost exclusively preoccupied with negative or unfavorable elements in the programs they reviewed. Like the pessimist in the old rhyme, they saw only the hole in the doughnut, and ignored the existence of the doughnut itself.

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2. By the writer, in collaboration with Miss Margaret McCamy of the Commission's staff, under direction of Frank Barley, Chief, Bureau of Inspections and Classification Audits.

- d. Some conclusions and the resulting suggestions were based on faulty deductive reasoning. On analysis, they resembled the old faulty syllogism, "Men are mortal; Fido is mortal; therefore, Fido is a man."
- e. In some instances, reports contained errors in grammar and sentence structure of the less obvious-sort.

The training course which was finally used consisted of seven two-hour sessions. In the first, the basic objectives of the course were outlined. Participants were advised of the content of the remaining six sessions, as follows:

Session II—*Fact, Inference, and Judgment*—A discussion of the difference between facts, inferences, and judgments, and the part each plays in the inspection report.

Session III—*Facts in Reports*—A case study illustrating two erroneous approaches to the use of facts in Civil Service inspection reports.

Session IV—*Inferences in Reports*—A discussion of levels of abstraction, related to the manner in which inspectors abstract inferences and conclusions, through inductive reasoning, from the facts set forth in their reports.

Session V—*Judgments in Reports*—A discussion of the dangers of generalization, and of proper and improper uses of judgments in reports.

Session VI—*Positive and Negative*—Quoted in full below.

Session VII—*How to Suggest or Recommend*—Discussion of how to write self-selling suggestions, and of the use of deductive reasoning in arriving at sound, logical suggestions and recommendations.

The introductory session also provided an opportunity to touch on the subject of correct grammar and sentence structure in reports. Participants in the course were advised that this subject would not be covered in the training session; that employment as a Civil Service Inspector presupposes a certain degree of skill in English usage; and that those needing a review of these subjects should do so on their own responsibility. To aid the participants in determining their own needs, a self-administered test was provided, consisting of ungrammatical or incorrect sentences taken from or paraphrased from actual inspection reports. Some examples follow:

18. *Appointing officers failed to give reasons for passing over the following veterans as required by Chapter X-1-20 of the Federal Personnel Manual.*
23. *Employees are relatively uninformed on the subject and disinterested.*
24. *Bureau-wide publicity has been given the program which has resulted in noticeable employee interest and participation over recent years.*

The remaining sessions were presented on six successive days. Whenever possible, examples and illustrations used in the course were taken from actual Civil

Service inspection reports. Maximum use was made of training aids—tape recordings, flannel board presentations, charts, etc.—to sustain interest. Each session was followed by discussion and a written exercise based on the subject-matter of the day's presentation. An illustrative unit—Session VI—is quoted in full below:

BUREAU OF INSPECTIONS AND CLASSIFICATION AUDITS  
REPORT WRITING

Session VI

*Positive and Negative*

"There are different kinds of people;  
Each plays his separate role —  
The optimist sees the doughnut,  
The pessimist sees the hole."

Inspectors are also people  
And divide like the rest of the pack;  
Some see program achievements  
And others note the lack.

Some inspectors fix their sights consistently and excessively on the hole in the doughnut—the things the agency has not done. Others see that, were it not for the

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does not mean that you lack the talent for it."***

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existence of the doughnut, there would be no hole—in other words, a discussion of what an agency *needs to do* must be based on an understanding of what it is already doing.

It is interesting to note how different the same fact appears when viewed from the positive and negative viewpoints. Here are a few examples:

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1. Eight out of fifty jobs desk audited were found to be incorrectly classified as to grade or series.
2. The agency lacks a planned, systematic program for placement followup in the case of all new appointments.
3. Classification authority is not delegated to the field offices.
4. The agency personnel staff has been unable to recruit sufficient engineers to fill all vacancies; eight positions have been vacant for more than six months.
5. The agency lacks policy statements in the fields of employee relations and employee development.

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1. Forty-two of fifty jobs desk audited were classified correctly in accordance with Commission standards.
2. In a limited number of instances of new appointments, placement technicians have “followed through” to determine extent of adjustment of the new employee to his job.
3. Field positions are classified by the agency central office.
4. In spite of shortages the agency personnel staff has succeeded in recruiting more than 30 engineers for hard-to-fill positions. Only eight vacancies remained unfilled at the time of inspection.
5. Agency personnel policy statements provide coverage of all elements listed in Chapter A4 of the Federal Personnel Manual, with the exception of employee relations and employee development.

Consider the following quotation from an inspection report:

“There is no systematic method in effect which provides for continuous evaluation of qualifications requirements, although the utilization survey program touches on it.”

What was in the writer’s mind when he wrote this sentence? Perhaps it was something like this:

“Just what can I do to get these guys to improve the quality of their placement work? Seems to me that now, when they have a vacancy, they just check to see if the person recommended meets the minimum CSC requirements. What can I suggest that might get them to do more?”

“Well, it seems to me they ought to realize there is more to placement than that. I need to point out that they should have more specific job requirements. It probably hasn’t occurred to them to make any effort along this line. Well, that’s simple. I can report that they aren’t doing anything and that fact will lead neatly into a suggestion. Here goes —

“Hey, wait. They do make utilization surveys to see if employees’ abilities are being used to advantage. In a few cases this resulted in development of information

about specific job requirements for some of the positions. I ought to mention it. I can tack a weak acknowledgement of that on to my statement. Want to be fair."

What was the agency personnel officer thinking as he read the report? Perhaps something like this:

"Wonder what this guy has to say about me? Hope he doesn't say anything to queer me with the boss. I still have that recommendation for a raise pending. Oh, well, he seemed like a nice enough guy.

"Let's see—"There is no systematic method in effect which provides for continuous evaluation of qualifications requirements.' That's a heck of a thing to say. Sounds like we've neglected something important. What will the boss say? What does it mean, anyhow? No systematic method? What does he mean, 'systematic method?' Does he mean our method is unsystematic? He's a fine one to be calling names. Or does he mean we don't have a method? That's a lie! Oh, here it is, stuck way in the back of the sentence: 'The utilization survey program touches on it.' Touches on it, indeed! That's our *method*. Shall I give that inspector a piece of my mind, or just keep quiet and hope nobody reads that paragraph?"

Note that the inspector was more concerned with what he wanted the agency officials to do than with how to get them to do it. Notice, too, how often "I," in some form, appears in each individual's thoughts.

Effective writing demands that we constantly keep in mind this question: "How can I get the other fellow to do what I want him to do?" And this demands an ability to put ourselves in the other fellow's position, and read what we have written as he would read it.

Suppose the inspector were to approach the problem from that standpoint. What would he think and write? Perhaps something like this:

"This fellow is, after all, a pretty good personnel officer. He has some good programs and knows as much as I do about personnel practices—probably a lot more about some things. He must have some idea of what he needs to do. He isn't a dope.

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"Of course, they aren't doing much positive placement. I might be able to get a little activity started there. But he's a good guy. I don't want his boss to overlook what he has done. He can't do much unless the agency people have confidence in him.

"So let's see if I can't find something that they are doing to use as a starter—something good that they are doing which I can give them credit for, and which could be expanded into a satisfactory program.

"I see that their utilization surveys did develop some specific information on job requirements. Suppose I write it up like this:

"Through the periodic utilization surveys that are conducted, some valuable information has been obtained concerning job requirements for several positions. For example, it was learned through the utilization survey that adoption of a much larger scale for plot maps, with a consequent increase in the weight and size of these maps, had created a problem with respect to handling the maps in the file room, with its all-female staff. Qualifications requirements were noted to show the need for some male personnel in this organization.

"In view of the worthwhileness of the results which have been obtained from studying the requirements of individual jobs in such cases, the inspectors *suggest* that the Personnel Division consider expanding this activity by inaugurating a program for continuous systematic evaluation of the qualifications requirements for all positions."

### Exercises

1. Consider the following statements. What would the agency reaction probably be? Rewrite them into positive statements. (You may wish to add facts consistent with the clues contained in the negative statements, such as "no convenient means," "no formal plan.")

"In the development of policies and operating practices affecting the employee group as a whole, the agency's present program makes no provision for soliciting employee views, and there is no convenient means established for direct communication between the management and individual employees or groups of employees." (Sole point discussed under Employee Relations and Services.)

"The agency does not have a plan for handling employee grievances as required by the regulations." (No further discussion.)

"There is no formal plan for the development of employees for future assignments as vacancies occur or for training supervisors in their currently assigned positions."

2. Discuss circumstances under which a negative approach in reporting might be useful.

Evaluations of the results of the training will probably vary. Many participants and their supervisors were highly enthusiastic over the course. A majority of Civil Service Regional Offices have subsequently used the material in training their field inspectors. However, in the last analysis, the recipients of Commission inspection reports are probably in the best position to evaluate the training results. Regardless of what that evaluation may be, one thing is clear. The officials who initiated the training cannot be accused of the all-too-common failing of letting false pride of authorship stand in the way of a serious attempt to better their product.