

Writing Tip: Find Your Hidden List

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

Eighty percent of all emails and reports that you write has a list of key points. This could be a list of reasons, alternatives, findings, conclusions, chronological events (background), steps in a process, and so forth. How you frame your list determines whether people will understand it. Most people hide their list buried within paragraphs.



Stan Berry

All business writing has two parts: information and the business application of that information. This writing tip is about the first part: making the information clear to the reader. From this day forward, think of information as a list of key points with supporting detail. To add clarity, organize your key points under a forecasting sentence.

Benefits of Finding Your List

Finding and formatting your list offers several important benefits:

- *Speed.* Lists are quick to read and write.
- *Comprehension.* Lists are easier to understand than blocks of text.
- *Retention.* Lists are easier to remember.

Before and After Example

Let's look at a hidden list of Rambling Rose and rewrite with a list organized under a forecasting sentence.

The hidden list of Rambling Rose

The sound facilities in our department training room are bad for small groups. The microphone does not work consistently, and one of the speakers makes a buzzing noise. The acoustics are also poor. The training room has a poor geographical location. Sometimes, the sunlight glares directly into people's eyes. In the afternoon, the sun, glaring through the western windows, transforms the room into an oven. Also, the room overlooks a busy parking lot with distracting sights. Many physical aspects of the room are not ideal for small classes. The room is too large. Smaller classes feel swamped. Since the chairs are bolted to the floor, they cannot be moved into small groups.

You probably stopped focusing by the second line as your mind began to wander. This often happens when writers ramble. In this example, the clarity of the information has three problems:

- You don't know what it's about.
- You don't know how many key points the writer is making.
- You can't tell the difference between key points and supporting detail.

A list organized under a forecasting sentence

Our department training room is inadequate for a number of reasons:

- *The sound facilities are bad for small groups.* The microphone does not work consistently, and one of the speakers makes a buzzing noise. The acoustics are also poor.
- *The training room has a poor geographical location.* Sometimes, the sunlight glares directly into people's eyes. In the afternoon, the sun, glaring through the western windows, transforms the room into an oven. Also, the room overlooks a busy parking lot with distracting sights.
- *Many physical aspects of the room are not ideal for small classes.* The room is too large. Smaller classes feel swamped. Since the chairs are bolted to the floor, they cannot be moved into small groups.

Would you agree that the difference between the two examples is remarkable?

A Process for Finding Your List

The first step to clear writing is to clarify your information. Figure this out and you can cut your writing time by 50%. The next time you write an email, letter, or report,

1. Find your list of key points
2. Support them with detail
3. Organize them under a forecasting sentence
4. Present your information using this outline diagram:

Forecasting Sentence

Key Point

Detail Support

Detail Support

Detail Support

Key Point

Detail Support

Detail Support

Detail Support

Key Point

Detail Support

Detail Support

Detail Support

Before you begin to write, find your list and organize it under a forecasting sentence. This makes your information clear and saves time for you--and your readers!



Stan Berry has devoted the past 34 years to improving the writing skills of over 55,000 business and government professionals. After completing his Master's degree from Yale University, he co-authored five books on writing that he uses in his seminars. He's been a member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) since 1975 when he served as the newsletter editor and on the Board of Directors for the Twin Cities Chapter. Stan can be reached at www.BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-578-1487.

Stu Tanquist has presented at four American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) National Leadership and TechKnowledge conferences and written two best selling ASTD Info-Lines. With over 20 years in the learning and development field, Stu's expertise has ranged from working as a professional trainer to serving as a strategic-level director for training and development. He holds three degrees including a Masters in management. Stu can be reached at Stu@BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-799-1686.



Stu Tanquist



Sign-up to receive free Writing Tips by email at www.BerryWritingGroup.com

© Copyright 2010 Berry Writing Group, Inc.
All Rights Reserved

This document may not be reproduced or distributed when used in conjunction with any for-profit endeavor or instructional activity without prior written authorization.