TEACHING THE FORMAL REPORT: FROM OUTLINE TO PRESENTATION DRAFT

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INTRODUCTION

In the Spring 1983 issue of Technostyle I described my first three units in teaching the formal report; in this paper I describe how I teach outlining, designing illustrations, writing the draft, revising, and preparing the supplements. Of these, I have found the outlining and revising units to be the most critical to the success of the reports, and so I now tend to spend about five hours on each. The presentation draft is due in the eleventh week.

OUTLINING

A detailed formal outline of the body of the report is due at the end of the sixth week. Although I do not mark it, I do check it very carefully and interview any students whose outlines require major revisions.

In the outlining unit I provide an overview of report structure, assign the formal outline and explain how to prepare it, review common errors in organizing a report, and discuss sample outlines and tables of contents.

Overview of Report Structure

The main differences between the structure of an essay and the structure of a formal report stem, ultimately, from the way the two kinds of discourse are usually read. Unlike essays, formal reports are seldom read from beginning to end by all readers: instead, various readers may read different combinations of sections, depending in part upon their responsibilities and needs as members of the organization within which the report was prepared. This kind of reading is facilitated by two structural features, the supplements and the headings.

Since the supplements are more or less directly derived from the material in the body of the report, they should be written last, and do not have to be considered in outlining the body. However, I do at this point provide the following brief overview of the purposes of the supplements:

1. letter of transmittal – introduces the report to the recipient
   – provides an extremely condensed overview of the report
2. abstract – provides a very condensed version of the purpose, methods, and conclusions of the report
3. table of contents – provides a structural overview of the report
   – helps to locate the sections of the report
4. introduction – introduces and describes the body of the report
5. conclusions – summarizes the main findings of the report
6. recommendations – lists the main recommendations discussed in the body of the report
7. appendix – provides supplementary data and materials

I also note that the order of frequency with which the parts of a report are read by managers appears to be the following: summary (or abstract), introduction, conclusions, body.[1]

The other structural feature of formal reports, headings, is what makes a formal outline imperative. Headings are used primarily to locate subsections of the body of the report and to indicate their hierarchical relationships.[2] The aim of the outline, then, is to determine what the headings will be, to determine the hierarchical order of the headings, to determine the sequence of the headings, and, of course, to determine what material will be located under each heading.

Preliminary Steps

I separate the outlining of a report into the following interrelated processes that precede the actual preparation of the formal outline:

1. the gathering of all the material to be included in the report
2. the establishing of a hierarchy of sections and subsections
3. the establishing of a sequence of sections and subsections

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[1] Richard W. Dodge, "What to Report," reprinted in Kevin J. Harty, ed., Strategies for Business and Technical Writing, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, pp. 205-212.

[2] For an excellent discussion of how to teach students about the function and use of headings, see Paul V. Anderson, "Organizing Is Not Enough!" in Dwight W. Stevenson, ed., Courses, Components, and Exercises in Technical Communication, NCTE, 1981, pp. 163-184.

Gathering Material

The purpose of this process is to identify all the main points that will be made in the report. This can be done in part by free brainstorming, and in part by listing problems to be considered. The questions the students prepared for the evidence gathering step are, of course, also a substep of this step.

Establishing a Hierarchy of Sections

To establish the hierarchy of sections, I suggest the students construct a tree diagram like Figure 1. I usually demonstrate the making of this kind of diagram for a sample topic. Since by this time the class is quite familiar with the whole-parts organization structure they have used in the description of a mechanism, very few students have problems establishing the two to four main divisions of the report.

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                      TOPIC
          _____/  |  _____
         /              |                      \
   Main Section    Main Section            Main Section
     /    \          /   |   \               /    \
  subs.   subs.  subs. subs. subs.        subs.    subs.
         /    \
   sub-subs. sub-subs.
```
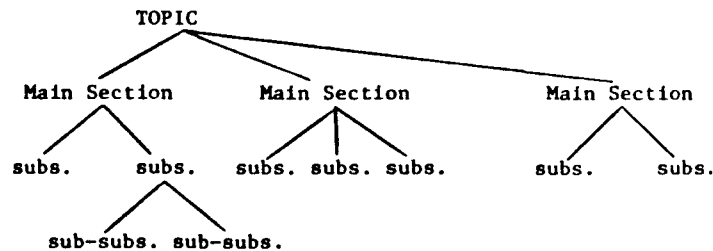
Figure 1: A Sample Tree Diagram of the Hierarchical Relationship of the Sections of a Formal Report

After the main sections are determined, the process of subdivision is repeated to establish the second level of sections, and then these are subdivided further, if necessary, to establish the third level. It is very unusual in a report of this length to have fewer than two levels, or to need more than four levels of subdivision. Some sections will, obviously, lend themselves to more levels of subdivision than others; the first main section in Figure 1 has three levels of subdivision, while the other two have only two. Also, it is important to note that a section can be subdivided to another level only if there are going to be at least two subdivisions. For some reason this point seems to be a very difficult one for some students to grasp, and the single subdivision is probably the most common error I find in outlining.

Establishing a Sequence of Sections

The purpose of this step is to decide in what linear order the material will be presented in the report. While this is an important step, it is usually not critical, because often there is no principle that demands that one section precede another; sections are often of equal importance and relatively independent of each other. For example, there may be no reason for discussing problems of scheduling either before or after discussing problems of the physical layout of an office.

In determining sequence, the student first decides on the sequence of the main sections. Then, within each main section, he works his way down the tree, deciding on the sequence of each group of subheadings that are at the same level.

Preparing the Formal Outline

The preparation of the actual formal outline now consists of the following steps:
1. assigning letters and numbers to the divisions and subdivisions so that they reflect the hierarchy and sequence established in the preliminary steps,
2. converting section designations into headings,
3. distributing the main points to the appropriate subsections,
4. checking the outline for errors.

Common Errors in Formal Outlines

The following seem to be the most common errors in outlining:
1. single subdivision - if there aren't at least two subdivisions at a level, then that level must be eliminated.
2. over-subdivision - if there are not enough points listed under the lowest level of subdivision to make a well-developed

paragraph, the subdivision should be eliminated and the points should be moved to the next highest subdivision.

3. under-subdivision - if there are too many points to be included in two or three paragraphs, another level of subdivision is usually needed.

4. cross-classification - if the same point appears in more than one place, the subdivisions must be rearranged so that the point will appear only once. It may be that the "point" should become a subdivision and the "subdivisions" should become points.

5. separation of problems and solutions - to facilitate ease of reading, it is generally better to place the recommended solution of a problem next to the description of the problem. The following is a very common sequence: identification of a problem, explanation of how it is a problem, identification of a solution, explanation of how it is a solution.

6. misjudgment of scope - provided that the outline is quite detailed, it is usually two to three pages long for a ten-page report. As many as a quarter of my students misjudge scope and prepare outlines that would result in reports of fewer than six pages or more than twenty pages. Sometimes there is so much material that just one of the main sections can be raised to the topic position in the tree, and its second level subsections can then become main sections.

Exercises in Evaluating Outlines

Because very few students seem to be able to prepare an adequate formal outline on their first attempt, I use the following exercises:

1. each student evaluates a faulty outline prepared by a former student. Then groups of students compare their evaluations, and finally the entire class discusses the outline.

2. the former student's revised version of the same outline is discussed by the class.

3. each student exchanges his own initial outline with another student and then revises it before submitting it to me.

Although these exercises have not eliminated all problems with outlines, the first versions I see are generally much closer to being acceptable than they were in previous years.

DESIGNING ILLUSTRATIONS

A list of proposed illustrations, together with an indication of their placement in the formal outline, is due at the same time as the formal outline. Although by this time in the course students will already have some experience in using illustrations, the decisions they have had to make about illustrations have been somewhat restricted. My purpose now is to teach them more about recognizing when to use illustrations and about designing illustrations that are appropriate to the report's audience and purpose. In other words, they should understand the general principles governing the use of illustrations in technical discourse and be able to apply these to their reports.

I suggest the following guidelines for using illustrations in the formal report:

1. use an illustration whenever it is a more clear or more concise means of presenting information, but do not use it if it is merely decorative. Most 301 reports have between three and six illustrations.

2. place in the body of the report those illustrations that will be discussed in any way, and place in the appendices any illustrations that provide further supporting data or that are only included for the reference of some readers.

Next I review the special features of the most common types of illustrations:

1. Photographs. Photographs are by far the most frequently used types of illustrations in student reports because they are very easy and inexpensive to make. Their main disadvantage or danger is that their ease of production may blind the writer to the need for choice. They should be reserved for showing the surface appearance of specific objects and locations; they cannot show structure.

2. Drawings. In using a drawing instead of a photograph, the writer has greater control over what the illustration includes; he can be more selective. Also, a drawing can show the generic, whereas a photograph cannot. The most serious disadvantage of drawings is that they are relatively difficult to execute.

3. Diagrams. Diagrams are used to show the structure of objects, and are quite rare in student reports, simply because the reports seldom discuss structure.

4. Maps. Maps are very useful for orienting the reader and can often be helpful in 301 reports. The most common weakness in using maps is failing to simplify and adapt them so that they include only the features that are relevant to the discourse and the audience.

5. Floorplans. Floorplans, a common kind of illustration in 301 reports, are very useful for showing the arrangement and proposed rearrangement of facilities.

6. Flow Charts. Flow charts, although seldom used in 301 reports, are useful for showing the interrelationship of process steps and the hierarchies in organizations.

7. Tables. Tables are very useful for presenting statistical data and for condensing repetitive statements. Students tend not to use tables as much as they should, usually because they don't recognize all the situations in which a table would help them present material more clearly and concisely than prose.

8. Graphs. Graphs show relationships in data, but since very few students are likely to be discussing the kinds and quantities of data for which graphs are appropriate, they are seldom used in 301 reports, and I don't spend much time talking about them.

Finally, I discuss how some sample illustrations could be adapted for different purposes so that the students become aware of the range of choices available to them, for while a writer usually hires a professional to execute his illustrations, it is his responsibility to provide the illustrator with a specific design for his illustrations.

WRITING THE DRAFT

A student can begin writing the draft as soon as I have approved the outline. My discussion of this step includes the following reminders:

1. There should be some prose after each heading. In other words, a main heading should be followed by a paragraph that introduces that section and at least prepares the reader for the headings that follow.
2. Paragraphs should usually have topic sentences.
3. Claims should be supported with evidence.
4. A draft should be clear and complete.

Students submit about three pages of the draft of the body of the report, including rough versions of any illustrations that are to be included in these pages. I do not grade these pages or proofread them, but simply comment on any serious faults in general clarity, completeness, and coherence. Sometimes this portion of the draft can also show that the student has either too much or too little to say and that the outline has to be modified further.

REVISION

Because I have found that very few students normally bother to revise their reports, or understand what revising is, I spend as much as five hours explaining how to revise and having students revise sample passages of reports in class. I emphasize that they should not confuse revision with re-copying, that they should be systematic, and that they should start with the largest units and move to the smallest units; in other words, they should move from checking general organization, to checking paragraph structure, to checking sentence structure, and finally to checking mechanics.

PREPARING THE SUPPLEMENTS

In discussing each supplement, I explain its function, review the content and format guidelines, and discuss a sample. I have found that the abstract and introduction pose the greatest problems. Usually students are troubled by the redundancy of the supplements and have to be reminded why this redundancy is needed.