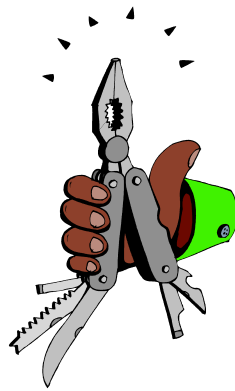


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HOW TO USE THE STEP-BY-STEP MODEL



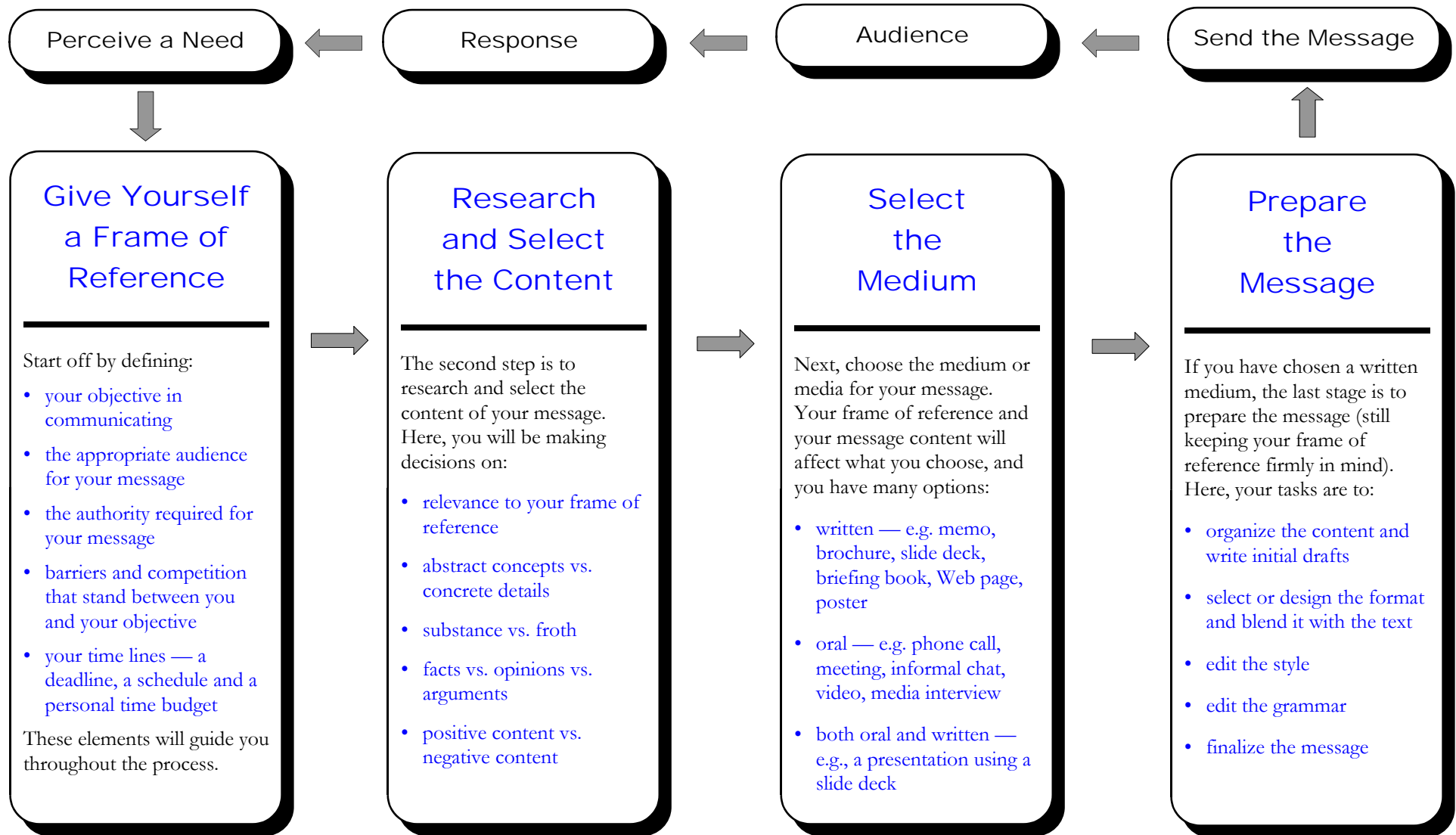
A Tool, Not a Rule

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Writing for Results

A Step-by-Step Model for Writing Executive Documents



THE THEORY

Communicating in any form involves making many decisions about a surprising number of factors. You often make these decisions instinctively and unconsciously — and effectively. And that's just fine for messages where you are entirely confident of what you are doing.

For complex or high-stakes situations, however, you may need to slow down, take a deep breath, and approach things systematically. The model on the previous page presents a step-by-step model for communicating in such a fashion. It sets out a logical sequence of events:

- You need to define your objective, audience, authority and time lines before you can decide on the content of your message.
- You need to know what the content of your message will be before you can decide what medium is best-suited to conveying it.
- You need to know what medium you will use before you prepare the message itself.

THE PRACTICE

In practice, communication rarely works out so smoothly as the step-by-step model would have you believe. Rather, it's more like the fuzzy logic that computer scientists dream of perfecting one day. For example, I said above that choosing your medium should follow developing the content. However, in setting your time lines you will need to speculate on what your medium is likely to be, even though you might reserve final judgement on it until later.

The step-by-step model is a tool, not a rule. No two people will use it alike, but all will find that it offers valuable insights into their writing tasks.

As you proceed, you will often gain new perspectives on your subject matter — perspectives that may lead you to decide to make one, two or a dozen changes in your approach. The model will help you to focus your energy on the right element of the process when you need to do this.

For example, at some point you might realize that your subject matter is more urgent than you thought at first. That will change your time lines. But it might also mean changing your audience or your medium. That, in turn, could have a radical impact on the content of your message. It might also mean that you no longer have the authority to sign your message, or that you need to get clearances from other divisions, branches or sectors before your message goes ahead — or even that you have to change the objective, audience and content of your message because you don't have time to get those clearances.

Sometimes you will find that it is helpful to just start writing, even though you have reserved judgement (or even drawn a complete blank) on many of the decisions that must precede preparing a message in final form. That's fine. In time, things will become clearer in your mind, and you can then go back and make decisions that, in theory at least, should have preceded the writing.

In short, you will often find yourself jumping back and forth from one stage in the model to another and periodically revising your approach. It's often a messy process that cannot be reduced to a nice neat flow chart.

Despite this messiness, the model covers decisions that at some point you must make — and do make (consciously or not) — for every message. For a complex or high-stakes message, you will find it helpful to be aware of those decisions and to ask yourself if there are alternatives that might be more effective in achieving your objective.

TROUBLESHOOTING

The step-by-step model can be an excellent troubleshooting tool. It is futile to try to resolve a problem by focusing on one element of the process (style is a common target) if in fact the problem lies elsewhere — with, say, the objective, audience, content, medium or format you have chosen for your message. The model will help you to focus on the right element of your message when you need to address problems.

The model is equally useful in following up on your message after you have sent it. Ask yourself if it got the results you wanted it to. If it didn't, ask yourself why. The model gives you a checklist that will help you to figure out what went wrong, what you can do to fix it now, and how you might avoid similar problems in future messages.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Many messages are just one step in a much larger process. It can be helpful to map out a strategy of how you expect that process to unfold. The elements of your strategy would be nothing more than the frame of reference for each message. This enables you to plan for what lies ahead and to be better equipped to deal with the inevitable surprises that come up along the way.

The chart on the [next page](#) provides an example of such a process for a major initiative that you think will need your minister's OK. This chart presents only the major steps. Each of these steps might involve sub-steps of its own — perhaps consultations with other divisions, other sectors or other departments. Indeed, the success of your message might rest on your ability to plan for those sub-steps.

CREATIVE TENSION

As you apply the techniques of this handbook, you will find yourself dealing with a recurring theme: creative tension between the general and the specific. I have already touched on this above.

This tension will surface in many ways. For example:

- In briefing your minister, you don't want to be misleading or to leave him or her with inaccurate information. However, you can't afford to bury key messages in hair-splitting detail either. One of the challenges of your job is to decide when it is sufficient to convey a general idea, and when it is essential to provide precise details.
- Sometimes you will be clear on the abstract ideas that you need to get across to your audience, but it is a challenge to find the concrete details you will need to achieve that. Other times, you will have ample concrete detail in front of you, but you will be at a loss to give them an umbrella concept that makes sense of them.
- Sometimes you will be able to proceed logically with the step-by-step model, with each stage following the sequence shown. You'll be able to progress from the general concepts of your frame of reference through to the very specific final text of your message. Other times, you will find that you find it is helpful to start by drafting the text, and then moving back to define the general elements of your frame of reference — and then moving back again to revise the text.

Sample Communication Strategy

The chart below shows how a communication strategy might look for a major initiative that you think will need your minister's OK. This is just an example. In your organization or for your objective, the process might unfold in an entirely different fashion.

①

You discuss the idea informally with your director. He or she says, "Sounds interesting. Why don't you put something in writing on that for me?"

②

So, you write to your director . . .

③

. . . to persuade him or her to write to the director general (DG) . . .

④

. . . to persuade him or her to write to the assistant deputy minister (ADM) . . .

⑤

. . . to persuade the ADM to discuss it with the deputy minister (DM) and ask him or her to OK the idea of sending a memo to the Minister.

If the DM OKs the idea, the ADM conveys the approval back through the DG and the director to you.

⑥

You draft a memo to your minister and give it to your director. (You might start working on this while steps 3 to 5 are proceeding.)

⑦

If your director approves, he or she signs off on it and sends it to the DG.

⑧

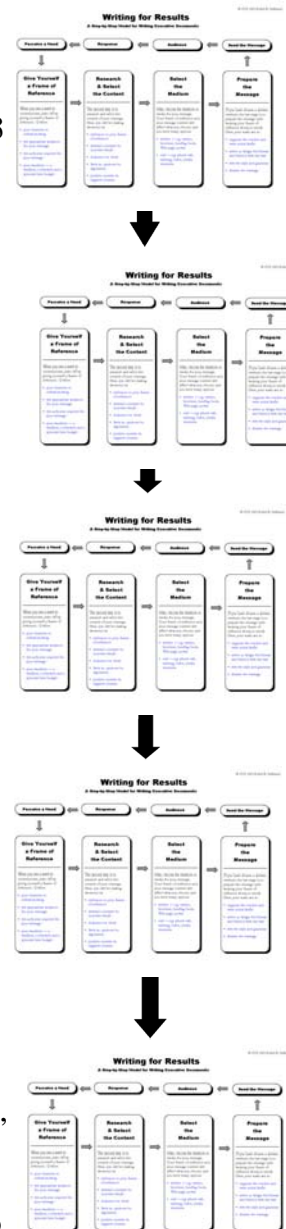
If the DG approves, he or she signs off on it and sends it to the ADM.

⑨

If the ADM approves, he or she signs off on it and sends it to the DM.

⑩

Finally, if the DM approves, he or she signs the memo and sends it to the minister for a decision on whether to proceed with the initiative.



Remember to take account of all these stages when you plan your time lines. Sometimes an approval can take days, weeks or even longer. And you will need still more time if co-approvals are needed from different branches, departments, governments or other stakeholders.

- Sometimes you will be able to develop an organization structure for your message before you have put together a first draft for it. Other times, you will have to write at least the first draft before you can decide on an organization structure.
- Sometimes you will be able to start writing a memo to your minister by drafting the opening and closing paragraphs. You can then write the body of the memo to link the opening paragraph with the closing paragraph. Other times, you will find that you have to write the body of the memo first, and then add the opening and closing paragraphs to make sense of it all.

When such tensions arise, you will find it helpful to be aware of what is happening and to identify the source of the tension. For example, as you are going along you might find that the writing — the most specific part of the process — becomes exceedingly difficult. This might just mean that you're in the midst of sorting out a difficult issue. However, it might also be a sign that something has gone wrong in the earlier, more general, stages of the process:

- you might not have researched your subject sufficiently; or
- you might realize that while your objective is sound, you are addressing the wrong audience to achieve it — or vice versa; or
- you might find that you have started to examine a problem that needs to be addressed in a separate message.