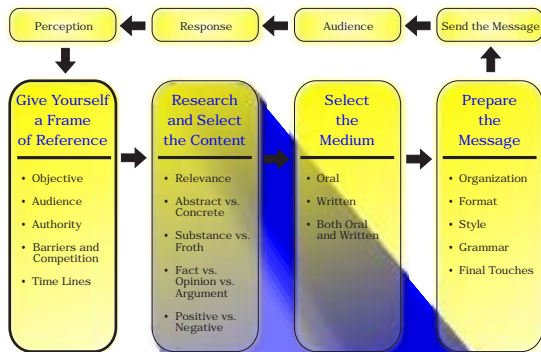


Writing for Results

A Step-by-Step Model for Executive Documents



Research and Select the Content

- Relevance
- Abstract vs. Concrete
- Substance vs. Froth
- Fact vs. Opinion vs. Argument
- Positive vs. Negative

Substance vs. Froth

SUBSTANCE



VS.

FROTH



*Read over your compositions and,
when you meet a passage which you think
is particularly fine, strike it out.*

Samuel Johnson

Froth, however impressive it might appear, is notable for its lack of persuasiveness. I will illustrate with an example that dates from a time some people placed an undue premium on elegant writing — much as is the case today.

In the early days of U.S. history, there was a lively debate over whether men should be required to own property in order to have the right to vote. (People hadn't even dreamed of letting women vote back then.) Benjamin Franklin was one of those involved in this debate. When he read the passage below, he knew that he agreed with it. But he also knew that it wasn't going to change many minds.

Voting Rights

It cannot be adhered to with any reasonable degree of intellectual or moral certainty that the inalienable right man possesses to exercise his political preferences by employing his vote in referendums is rooted in anything other than man's own nature, and is, therefore, properly called a natural right. To hold, for instance, that this natural right can be limited externally by making its exercise dependent on a prior condition of ownership of property is to wrongly suppose that man's natural right to vote is somehow more inherent in and more dependent on the property of man than it is on the nature of man. It is obvious that such belief is unreasonable, for it reverses the order of rights intended by nature.*

Figure 1

Franklin cared deeply about this issue, so he set about putting that message into words that people would understand. He came up with something along these lines:

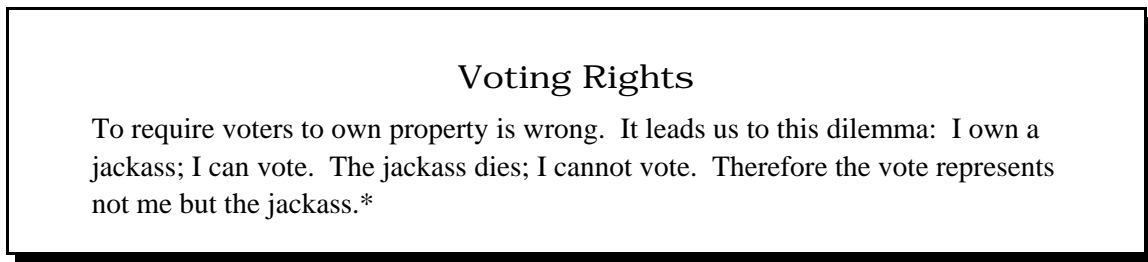


Figure 2

Let's look at what Franklin did there. First, he took all that bafflegab and reduced it to a single abstract sentence:

To require voters to own property is wrong.

Then, he added a simple argument — using a concrete example — to show why he thought it was wrong:

It leads us to this dilemma: I own a jackass; I can vote. The jackass dies; I cannot vote. Therefore the vote represents not me but the jackass.

-
- Figures 1 and 2 are drawn from *Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go*, 1966, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. I have changed the text in Figure 2 slightly.