In this lecture you will learn

• Varieties of report-writing situations
• How your readers want to use the information you provide
• The questions readers ask most often
• Sample outlines
• Planning guide
• Sample reports
• General superstructure for reports
  – Introduction
  – Method of obtaining facts
  – Facts
  – Discussion
  – Conclusions
  – Recommendations

Varieties of report-writing situations

• Reports come in many varieties such as
  – A hone-hundred-page report on a seventh-month project to test a special method of venting high-speed engines for use in space vehicles
  – A twelve-page report based on library research to determine which long-distance telephone company provides the most reliable service
  – A two-paragraph report based upon a manufacturing engineer’s visit to a new plant that is about to be put into service
  – A two-hundred-page report addressed to the general public concerning the environmental impact of mining certain portions of public land in Balauchistan

• As these examples suggest, there are many ways in which reports you write may differ from one another and from the reports written by other people
  – *Sources of your information*: You may base your report on information gathered from one or more of a wide variety of sources, including your own research, reading, and interviews.
  – *Amount of time you spent gathering your information*: This may vary from a few minutes to many years.
  – *Number of readers*: Your report may have many readers or only one.
  – *Kinds of readers*: Your readers may be people employed in your own organization or they may be employed in other organizations. In some situations, you may address the general public.
How readers want to use the information you provide

- Despite these and the many other differences among them, almost all report-writing situations have one factor in common: your readers will want to put the information you provide to some professional or practical use.

- Example: Your readers may want to use your information to solve
  - An organizational problem: Where typical goals are to increase efficiency and profit
  - A social problem: Where typical goals are to improve the general health and welfare of groups of people
  - A personal problem: Where typical goals are to satisfy individual preferences and values

- The way your readers will use your communications is very important.
- They persuade themselves that their purpose is to “tell what I know” or “tell what I have done” rather than to provide their readers with information that the readers can use.

The questions that readers ask most often

- When trying to use the information they find in reports, readers usually ask the same basic questions.
- The general superstructure for reports is a pattern that writers and readers have found to be successful for answering those basic questions.
- The typical questions asked by readers are as follows:
  - What will we gain from your report? You need to explain your communications’ relevance to the readers’ interests responsibilities and concerns since most people at work want to read only those communications that are directly useful to them.
  - Are your facts reliable? Readers want to be certain that the facts you supply will provide a sound basis for their decisions or actions.
  - What do you know that is useful to us? Readers only want you to tell them only those facts they must know to do the job that lies before them, not everything you know about your subject.
  - How do you interpret those facts from our point of view?
    - Facts alone are meaningless; to give facts meaning, people must interpret them by pointing out relationships or patterns among them
    - For example: “The sales figures show a rising demand for two products but not for two others.”
    - Usually, your readers will want you to make those interpretations rather than leave that work to them.
– How are those facts significant to us?
  • Readers generally want you to go beyond an interpretation of the facts to explain what the facts mean in terms of the readers’ responsibilities, interests or goals.
  • For example, “The demand for one product falls during this season every year, through not quite this sharply. The falling demand for the other may signal that the product is no longer competitive.”

– What do you think we should do?
  • Because you will have studied the facts in detail, you readers will often want you to tell them what action you think they should take.
  • For example, “You should continue to produce the first product, but monitor its future sales closely. You should find a way to improve the second product or else quit producing it.”
  • These six questions are very general, in fact, for large reports people need to take hundreds, even thousands of pages to answer them.
  • That’s because business people seek answers to these basic questions by asking multitude of more specific, subsidiary questions.

General superstructure of reports

• The general superstructure of reports contains six elements, one for each of the six basic questions.
  − Introduction
  − Method of obtaining facts
  − Facts
  − Discussion
  − Conclusions,
  − Recommendations

The questions that readers ask most often

• In some brief reports, for example, the writers begin with a recommendation, move to a paragraph in which the facts and conclusions are treated together, and state the sources of their facts in a concluding, single-sentence paragraph.

• Other people sometimes present two or more of the six elements under a single heading.

• For instance, they may include in their introduction information about how they obtained their facts, and they frequently present and interpret their facts in a single section of their report.
Introduction

- In the introduction of a report, you answer your readers’ question, “What will we gain by reading your report?”
- Consider, for instance, the first sentence of a report written by Ayesha, an employee of a university’s fund-raising office, who was asked to investigate the university’s facilities and programs in horseback riding.

Because the reader, Sarwar, had assigned her to prepare the report, she could tell him what he would gain from it simply by remind him why he had requested it:

In this report I present the information you wanted to have before deciding whether to place new university stables on next years list of major funding drives.

- In longer reports, your explanation of the relevance of your report to your readers may take many pages, in which you tell such things as
  - What problem your report will help solve
  - What activities you performed toward solving that problem
  - How your audience can apply your information in their own efforts towards solving the problem
- Besides telling your readers what your communication offers them, your introduction may serve many other functions, the most important of which is to tell your main points.
- In most reports, your main point will be your major conclusions and recommendations.
- You should save a full discussion of these topics for the sections devoted to them at the end of your report.
- Your readers will usually appreciate a brief summary of the full discussion—perhaps in a sentence or two—in your introduction.
- Ayesha provided such a summary in the second, third, and fourth sentences of her horseback-riding report.
- Summary of conclusions and the summary of recommendations are shown in the upcoming slide.

Summary of conclusions

- Overall, it seems that the stables would make a good fund-raising project because of the strength of the current programs offered there, the condition of the current facilities, and the existence of a loyal core of alumni who used the facilities while under-graduates.
Summary of Recommendations

- The fund-raising should focus on the construction of a new barn, costing $125,000. An additional $150,000 could be sought for a much-needed arena and classroom, but I recommend that this construction be saved for a future fund-raising drive.

Introduction

- In brief reports (for example, one-page memos), a statement of your main points may even replace the conclusions and recommendations that would otherwise appear at the end.
- At the beginning of a communication it is often important to state the main point of your message.
- Five other important functions that an introduction may serve are to tell how the report is organized, outline its scope, encourage openness to your message, and provide background information the readers will need in order to understand the rest of the report.
  - Method of obtaining facts
  - Facts
  - Discussion
  - Conclusions
  - Recommendations

Method of Obtaining Facts

- In a report, your discussion of your model of obtaining your facts can serve a wide variety of purposes.
- Report readers want to assess the reliability of the facts you present: your discussion of your method tells them how and where you got your facts.
- It also suggests to your readers how they can gain additional information on the same subject.
- If you obtained your information through reading, for example, you direct your readers to those sources, if you obtained your information through an experiment, survey or other special technique, your account of your method may help others design similar projects.
- In her investigation of the university stables, Ayesha gathered her information through interviews. She reported her method in the following way:
  - I obtained the information given below from Junaid, Stable Manager. Also, at last month’s Alumni Weekend, I spoke with a half-dozen alumni interested in the riding programs.
Facts

- Your facts are the individual pieces of evidence that underlie and support your conclusions and recommendations.
- If your report, like Ayesha’s, is based upon interviews, your facts are the things people told you.
- If your report is based upon laboratory, field, or library research, your facts are the verifiable pieces of information that you gathered.
- If your report is based upon your efforts to design a new product, procedure or system, your facts are the various aspects of the thing you designed or created.
- Your may present your facts in a section of their own or you may combine your presentation of your facts with your discussion of them.

Discussion

- Taken alone, facts mean nothing; they are a table of data, a series of isolated observations or pieces of information without meaning.
- Therefore, an essential element of every report you prepare will be your discussion of the facts, in which you interpret the facts in a way significant to your research.
- Sometimes, writers have trouble distinguishing between a presentation of the facts and discussion of them.
- The following example may help you to make the distinction clear:
  - Imagine that you observed that when the temperature on the floor of your factory is 65°F, workers produce 3 percent rejected parts; when it is 70°F, they produce 3 percent rejected parts; when it is 75°F, they produce 4.5 percent rejected parts, and when it is 80°F, they produce 7 percent rejected parts.
- If you were to say, “As the temperature rises above 70°F, so too does the percentage of rejected parts,” you would be interpreting those facts.
- Of course, in many reports you will be dealing with much larger and more complicated sets of facts that require much more sophisticated and extended interpretation.
- In many of the communications you write, you will weave your discussion of the facts together with your presentation of them.
- In such situations, the interpretations often serve as the topic sentences for paragraphs.
- Following is a paragraph, in which Ayesha mixes facts and discussion
- The university’s horseback riding courses have grown substantially in recent years, due largely to the enthusiastic and effective leadership of Mr. Junaid, who took over as Stable Manager five years ago. When Mr. Junaid arrived, the university offered three courses: beginning, intermediate, and advanced riding. Since then two new courses have been added, one in mounted instruction and one in the training of horses.
Whether you integrate your presentation and discussion of the facts or treat the two separately, it is important for you to remember that your readers count upon you to select the facts that are relevant to them.

They also count on you to discuss those facts in a way that is meaningful to them.

**Conclusions**

- Like interpretations, conclusions are general statements based on your facts.
- However, conclusions focus not simply on interpreting the facts but on answering the readers’ question, “How are those facts significant to us?”
- In her report, for instance, Ayesha provided many paragraphs of information about the university riding programs, the state of the current stable facilities, and the likely interest among alumni in contributing money for the new stable facilities.
- Ayesha’s reader Sarwar might ask, “But what, exactly, does all that mean in terms of my decision about whether to start a fund-raising project for the stables?”
- To anticipate and answer this question, Ayesha provided the following conclusions:
  - In conclusion, my investigation indicates that the university’s riding programs could benefit substantially from a fund-raising effort. However, the appeal of such a program will be limited primarily to the very supportive alumni who used the university stables while students.

**Recommendations**

- Just as conclusions grow out of interpretations of the facts, recommendations grow out of conclusions.
- They answer the reader’s question, “If your conclusions are valid, what should we do?”
- Depending on many factors, including the number and complexity of the things you are recommending, you may state your recommendations in a single sentence or in many pages.
- You can help your readers immensely by stating your major recommendations in a few words or sentences, this may be the only place you need to present them.
- On the other hand, if your communication is long or if a full discussion of your recommendations requires much space, you can summarize your recommendations generally at the beginning of your report and then treat them more extensively at the end.
- That is what Ayesha did when she summarized her recommendations in two sentences in the first paragraph of her introduction and presented and explained the recommendations in three paragraphs at the end of her report.
- She placed them under the heading “Conclusions and Recommendations” to make them easier to find.
• Although readers usually want recommendations in reports, you may encounter some situations in which you will not want to include them.
• That might happen, for instance, in either of the two following situations:

• **Situations:**
  – The decision being made is clearly beyond your competence and you have been asked to provide only a small part of the information your readers need to make the decision.
  – You are working in a situation where the responsibility for making recommendations belongs to your boss or other people.
• Nevertheless, in the usual situation your recommendations will be expected, or at least welcomed.
• If you are uncertain about whether to provide them, ask your boss or the person who asked you to report.
• Don’t omit recommendations out of shyness or because you are guessing about what is wanted.

**A note about summaries**
• The preceding discussion concentrates on the elements found in most reports written on the job.
• Many longer reports share another feature: they are preceded by a separate summary of the report overall.
• Such summaries are often called executive summaries because they usually are addressed to decision-makers.

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