Executive Writing, Executive Thinking: Transferring Genre Knowledge from the Academy to the E-Suite

Workshop Handout

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Executive Summaries

Genres: Executive Summaries 1

- Most readers don't read anything else
- It creates anchors or reference points for the reader, forcing the writer to
  - consider big themes
  - select only the most important information
  - check their work and logic
- Principles for Success and Rough Guidelines
  - Selection: based on the taxonomy (next slide), select only the most important facts and ideas
  - Accuracy: should represent the points of the paper without skewing perceptions or understanding
  - Concision: no more than 10% of total document length, summaries can be 1-10 pages.
  - Purpose: it is not a substitute for the remainder of the document; it highlights key points and directs the reader's attention.
  - Order and Patterns of Development: Generally, the structure of thought and order of development in the document represent the same order for the executive summary.

Genres: Executive Summaries 2

- Context (what is happening and/or what conditions existed that led to activity/analysis)
- Problem statement or statement of failures
- Statement of Purpose, for review or analysis
- Process/Methods
  - More common in business writing, academic writing, and unique or complicated analytical tools
  - For "political documents" this is descriptive of the rigor and whether the findings are based on a consensus of the group
- Findings
- Recommendations

Papers

Genres: Papers

- Papers are considered less formal tha**n** a memo, but they often contain the same parts.
- Considered internal working documents resulting from a task or extended research
- A paper often leads to or is a precursor to a memorandum.
- The lower degree of formality allows for greater explanation and inclusion of rationale and supporting facts.
- The content dictates the length, but one page is preferrable and exceeding two pages is discouraged.

Position Paper

Genres: Position Paper

- SUBJECT: Topic or Issue Identification (e.g., *Crisis Situation in Zaire*)
- PROBLEM: The issue under consideration or point of unresolved difference in concise specific terms, sometimes phrased as a question.
- BACKGROUND: Usually one or two brief paragraphs suffice to give the immediate background required to setup discussion, conclusions or recommendation. Remote historical data is unnecessary. Determine the essential issues, events, or actions to frame the problem and subsequent discussion points.
- DISCUSSION: This section is the essence of the Point Paper where action officers develop their core case. Be brief, consider the reader's position, be specific, and focus on the important points. Points are generally presented in a sequence that logically flows from one point to the next and lead the reader to accept the conclusions or recommendations in the final section. Discussion points can be anywhere from one to three sentences; brevity and clarity are key to making your points.
  - Point #1 stated in 1-3 brief sentences.
  - Point #2 stated in 1-3 brief sentences.
  - Point #3 stated in 1-3 brief sentences.
  - Point #4 stated in 1-3 brief sentences.
  - Etc.
- CONCLUSION (OR RECOMMENDATION): If the tasker does not call for recommendations, the author should succinctly synthesize the discussion points in a major conclusion in as few sentences as possible. Try to answer the question, "What should all this discussion mean to the reader in the forum for which the paper is being used?" If a specific recommendation is called for, then the conclusion should lead to a statement of specific recommendation.

Information Paper

Genres: Information Paper

- SUBJECT: Information Paper Format
- PURPOSE: To provide guidance on the preparation and use of an information paper.
- FACTS:
  - An information paper provides facts in a clear and concise format (e.g., for use in a read ahead or trip book.) The format may be altered to meet a specific need.
  - Include the subject and the purpose. Paragraphs will contain only the essential facts concerning the subject. Papers will be self explanatory and will not refer to enclosures except for tabular data, charts, or photographs.
  - Papers should not exceed one page in length and need not be signed, but must include the action officer's name and telephone number in the lower right corner. Include an approval line below the AO name and number to indicate agency approval by principal, deputy, or director (initial, if possible)
  - Avoid using acronyms and abbreviations. Except for those that are very common (e.g., DoD, OSD, JS, CJCS, CCDR, NORTHCOM, etc.)
  - Avoid using classified information when it does not contribute to understanding the issue.
  - Notice the bullet and sub-bullet structure.

Comment and Response

Genres: Comment/ Response

- The leader has requested input on the issue as either a document or a broader activity
- The comment/response paper is the formal step, often after informal discussion, that documents different stakeholder's positions, interests, and points of view on the issue

- SUBJECT: State the issue in the terms everyone else is using and understands
- Paragraph form. Indent and offer a one sentence position regarding the subject.
- In most cases, more explanation is warranted, but it is not always necessary. This is a document leading to decision making, so it is still an opportunity to influence and persuade.
  - Organize the points relative to supporting your position AND highlighting/explaining the dangers of opposing positions

General Correspondence

Email/Ghost Email

Genres: (Ghost) Email 1

- Emails are considered, in business and organizational arenas, functional messages
- The function, the purpose, is to convey information or engage in dialogue, not merely converse or engage in pleasantries
- They are not as formal as letters or memorandums, but they shoul follow specific patterns of development
- Ghost email authors have the burden of both writing to the audience needs/specifications and employing the style of the purported author

Genres: (Ghost) Email 2

- Context: Explain why you are writing, the situation or the task, and indicate what you are asking for the receiver
- Identify the key elements that should contribute to the achievement of the action you are requesting. That breakdown is the organization of subsequent paragraphs.
- The paragraphs should follow a simple format:
  - idea and relevance
  - explanation of details and relevant evidence
  - how the idea shapes or changes understanding or situation
- Final paragraph
  - Restate the action or request
  - summarize the key pieces of information that sustain or support why you are making the request
- Formatting:
  - Account for how systems will reformat
    - Line breaks versus bullets

Personal Letter

Genres: Personal Letter

- Similar to an essay format in the sense that the first paragraph should indicate some of the key points and the paragraphs should be organized around those key points
- These are personal but formal, so don't number the paragraphs and don't use bullets unless the content itself benefits from bullets.
- Salutation
- 1st Paragraph
  - Introduction if appropriate, depending on familiarity
  - Establish context and purpose (Why are you writing)
- 2nd through N -th Paragraph
  - General topic sentence
  - Explanation and evidence
  - Closing/summarizing thought
- Final Paragraph
  - Restate purpose and major ideas
  - Thank them for time and offer availability for future correspondence or meeting
- Closing
  - Complimentary and ingratiating line
  - Signature

Meeting Prep

Read Ahead

Genres: Read Ahead 1

- Read aheads are relatively informal compared to other document types.
- The goal is to prepare a senior leader for a meeting or event.
- The document should provide information, discussion, and explanation to familiarize the leader with the issues relevant to the engagement.
- Read aheads have a symbiotic relationship with Talking Points because the content of the read ahead should lead into and suppo the talking points.

Genres: Read Ahead 2

- Lead: Briefer and Organization
- Key Attendees: Names and Titles
- Objective:
  - Key points of information (3-4 bullets) that influence outcome of meeting
  - Important areas or topics principle will want to influence
- Background:
  - Only pertinent information
  - Short and clear statements
  - Details regarding disagreements/controversy
  - Identify alternate perspectives
  - External Audiences:
    - Foreign visitor's actions relative to priorities
    - Foreign visitor efforts to support U.S.
    - Basic defense relationship and country information

Talking Points

Genres: Talking Points/ Discussion Points

- Imagine the leader reading these on the car ride or walk to the to the event or meeting minutes before the event
- One to two pages in length
- It should speak to achieving the objectives of the meeting or engagement
- Understandable as a standalone document
- Key elements only, look at the agenda for organization and arrangement
- Mirror order of topics in background section of supporting documents
- Include "if raised" points
- Internal Audiences
  - Function as discussion guidelines
  - Identify any decisions that will be asked for
  - Provide key points/takeaways from discussion
- External Audiences
  - Crisp language and key phrases
  - Organized in the anticipated development of discussion
  - Identify potential "land mine issues"
  - Fit on a 5x8 card
  - Names and phonetic pronunciations, especially if foreign
  - Classification markings

Memorandum

Genres: Memoranda

- Memorandums fulfill specific functions within an organization by transmitting different types of notificationj.e. policy, guidance, ideas/concepts, to ensure conformity of an organization
- The various types of memoranda are adapted to quickly fulfill their specific purpose
  - Action memos should be developed with the purpose of acting and phrased accordingly.
  - Decision memos are about resolving disagreement or making broad decisions without a specific action.
  - Information memos are descriptive, often leading to decision or action memos.
- Memos also serve to create a publicj.e. FOIA record.
  - Keep memoranda professional, impersonal/objective/factual and to the point.
- Word choice should limit acronyms and generally follow the prescriptions of professional English, i.e. The Plain Language Act of 2010

Action

Genres: Action Memo

- FOR:
- FROM:
- SUBJECT: The first word and all principal words are capitalized in the subject line and the second line is aligned below the first word in the subject.
  - Bullets
  - Bullets with a double space between the bullets
  - Attach Signature Item as TAB A
  - Relevant incoming correspondence as TAB B
  - Supplementary background documents as TAB C, the information should be concise, based on key points only, which should parallel what you have in these bullets
- RECOMMENDATION: As TAB A
- Or
- RECOMMENDATION:
  - Approve___ Disapprove___ Other:___
- COORDINATION: TAB D
- Attachments:

Decision

Genres: Decision Memo 1

- When a decision memo is drafted, debate is generally over.
- The document is a formal, official record of a commander's choice.
- It should highlight the specific decision.
- If a commander believes explanation is necessary, due to unusual circumstances or contentious debate, they will require bullet point explanations of their reasoning.
- The points of explanation should be stated as facts, because given the final disposition, they stand to support command decisions.

Genres: Decision Memo 2

- FOR:
- FROM:
- SUBJECT:
- REQUESTED DECISIONS:
- DISCUSSION:
  - Use bullets points. Facts are concise but complete sentences.
  - Order the bullets in most important or strongest statement first.
  - Think about the order as a deductive argument, aka the format resembles a mathematical formula, the last line is the most direct support for the decision.

Information

Genres: Information Memo 1

- Provides and speaks to matters of fact
- They provide information without asking for a decision or guidance
- The content dictates the length, so the key task is identifying and selecting only the pertinent information
- The goal is to ensure that all elements of an organization are operating on the same information.
- The audience is generally the entirety of a document or all leadership elements in a command.
- Facts and Supporting points can be in the form of:
  - traditional analytical qualitative or quantitative facts
  - commander's interpretation, application of policy, or concepts

Genres: Information Memo 2

- FOR:
- FROM:
- SUBJECT:
- Bottom Line Up Front (No bullet just a concise statement.)
  - Supporting information and points (indented with a bullet.)
  - No more than three lines per bullet. The preference is for 1 -2 lines per bullet in the form of a single sentence or two concise sentences.

Genres: Commander's Guidance/ Intent 1

- Commander's Guidance/Intent is a specific form of an information paper.
- Not only do they present facts, but they provide guidance and concepts for interpretation of future circumstances and situations
  - The writer needs to be thinking about future application and interpretation
- The goal is to ensure disparate groups within a command are working towards similar objectives and enable unity of effort.

Genres: Commander's Guidance/ Intent 2

- FOR:
- FROM:
- SUBJECT:
- BLUF:
- Supporting details as bullets