

Being precise and clear up front: writing effective purpose statements

A purpose statement is the opening of any paper

This short masterclass seeks to unpack this and give some advice about what makes a good purpose statement.

Other than the title, it's the opening gambit of any paper. It may also be on a covering page containing some administrative tracking details. But it is usually right at the beginning of a paper before heading into a Summary/Key points and then recommendations.

So, it's the first thing a decision maker reads – once they've read the title.¹

It seems simple. But it isn't. It sets the tone for the whole paper and needs to count.

Other guidance doesn't help all that much

The Policy Quality Framework (PQF) doesn't say much about the purpose statement – other than it should be clear.

The Cabinet Manual² suggests that it should be a couple of sentences outlining the purpose of the paper. It also suggests using a dot-point list if several matters are to be covered.

But, a clue is in the dictionary definition of 'purpose'.

The Oxford Dictionary defines it as

“the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists”.

We've done a couple of masterclasses on related topics

Firstly, one on the best approach to Executive Summaries.³ This included the concept of the 'golden page' – getting everything critically important on the first page as that's what people read first.

And secondly, one on the Background or Context section of a paper.⁴

This usually follows straight on from the purpose (and perhaps the Executive Summary, too), and they shouldn't be confused.

We see plenty of terrible ones

Common mistakes we see are:

- **Being too general**, e.g. indicating the paper is for noting but not explaining why it's important or relevant.
- **Not tying in with the recommendations** – recommendations might require decisions on several issues, and the purpose statement only mentions some of them.

¹ Titles count too – but that's another matter.

²² <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabinet-policy-paper-template>

³ See Masterclass no.3 Executive Summaries [https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_3_masterclass_executive_summaries.pdf)

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⁴ See Masterclass no. 37 Background <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2037%20Background%20-%202022.pdf>

- **Missing a key element** of the paper, e.g. indicating that the paper is for background information but failing to tell a Minister that the topic will be discussed at an upcoming meeting – and the background information is to help them prepare for this.
- **An introduction** particularly focusing on the structure and content of the paper – rather than explaining the purpose of the paper.
- **Not covering the ‘why’** – the purpose should explain why the Minister is getting the paper. For example, explaining (very briefly) why the Minister is being asked to make a decision – not just what that decision is.

They have to be short and pithy

A few quick lines that boil down the essentials of the paper are all that’s needed.

Plain language is particularly important – as Ministers may be reading the purpose statement before you’ve fully introduced them to the topic.

Make sure you don’t use long sentences – it needs to be easy to read and understand at pace.

Use dot points if there are several matters to be covered

As the Cabinet Manual indicates, sometimes papers cover several different but interrelated decisions or actions. Good practice is to list the different purposes of the paper in a dot-point list.

Ideally, this hierarchy should reflect the relative importance of the issues and the structure of the paper. This helps to make the paper as a whole easier to read.

Purpose statements are used as a guide by decision makers

Ministers read the purpose statement right after the title. It tells them what to do (read, think about, decide, act etc.).

This colours how they read the paper and how much importance they attach to it.

After all, for a busy Minister, something just for information – and not related to a specific event or decision they have to make – it’s a ‘nice to have’ rather than something they must do. It can often go to the bottom of a reading pile.

A clear purpose statement also helps the office staff prioritise papers for reading. It makes their life much easier if they can get the essentials about what is required and when straight away, rather than reading the paper to find this out.

Being clear also eliminates any confusion.

A good purpose statement focuses on the what and the why

It should be very clear about what the Minister has to do, e.g. make a decision, sign off on a paper/document, talk to colleagues, refer a paper to colleagues, or whether it is just background information.

It also needs to say why. At its most vague, this might be to “take the next step in the process” or be specifically related to the problem at hand. For example:

- If you are seeking agreement to refer a matter to a colleague, it might be to get their agreement as required in legislation or to get their comment on the proposal as it is an issue that impacts their portfolio.
- To authorise the release of a consultation document on a particular topic.
- To provide you with a summary of the feedback received ahead of a discussion with officials next week.
- To seek a decision on your preferred approach to the upcoming (Budget bid – for example).
- To authorise an increase in the fees charged to recognise increased costs.

One concept is to see them as a ‘super-summary’ of the paper’s content. That is, it should boil down to the essentials – and whet the appetite for further reading.

In other words, think of it as the opening statement in an elevator pitch – which is then elaborated on in the Key points or Executive Summary.

They aren’t easy to write – they take careful framing

We often dash a quick purpose statement off before we write anything else. But they aren’t easy to write.

The trick is saying enough to be precise but not too much.

Take care in your drafting.

Always recheck the purpose statement once you’ve finished drafting the paper

It’s sensible to draft a purpose statement early in the development of a paper. This helps keep the paper focused and on topic.

But, the arguments may change as you develop your thinking or respond to comments from others. This might mean the actions/decisions you started thinking about have morphed. So, always ensure the purpose statement works once you reach the end.

Not doing this final check (and checking in peer review and sign-out processes) can lead to the purpose statement not matching the content and recommendations of the paper. We see this more often than we expect.

Make sure it’s carefully looked at in peer review and sign-out

We’re not always the best editor of our own work. It’s easy to skip over something that seems simple.

A fresh set of eyes is always helpful in ensuring the purpose statement matches the paper’s purpose.

In summary

The purpose statement is a critical piece of the paper. It’s amongst the first pieces that are read. Make sure it does the job.

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