

Structuring papers to make them easier to read and do their job

A poorly structured paper can make for a hard read. Whereas a carefully structured paper with clear logic and flow can make even the most complex topics comparatively easy to read.

Great structure is particularly important for longer papers. A busy Minister might need several cracks at reading one between meetings, phone calls and other interruptions. Any paper must be easy to pick up where they left off reading it.

This masterclass provides tips and tricks to help you better structure your papers. This relates particularly to traditional papers – not A3s or slide packs (our masterclasses¹ on these have advice about their structure).

The title counts

Firstly, getting the title right helps. It's simple but powerful. Make sure it helps to explain the content of the paper. This will establish expectations in the reader's mind and make the story easier to tell.

So instead of calling the paper "Sausage quality policy: further analysis", try something like, "Regulating sausages by quality – results of investigations show that the local government approach works best". In other words, convey the core message in the bit read first.

We know that agencies sometimes shy away from detailed titles because of the Official

Information Act. But this should not be standard practice.

Use numbering

For most people, paragraph numbering and page numbering is standard practice. The only usual exception is one-page papers written entirely in dot points. Numbering helps readers to provide comments and easily reference parts of the document in any discussion on the paper. Keep doing it.

A paper without numbering is hard to navigate.

Lists of dot points are fine. But don't let them get too long as they get hard to read. If they are getting long, consider numbering them instead.

Follow the template – but adapt accordingly

Many organisations have a standard set of templates that must be followed. That's fine – it gives papers a standard look and feel, ensures all the necessary matters are included, and can aid navigation for a reader used to your template.

But they don't work in all situations and can unhelpfully make a complex paper worse.

We see two main faults:

- Papers which have too much content in some sections, making them very dense and difficult to read. These sections would be better broken up with further headings or subheadings.

¹ See Masterclass No. 23 Experimenting with PowerPoint https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_23_powerpoint_slide_pack_1.pdf and Masterclass No. 19 Getting the best from A3s

https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_19_getting_the_best_from_a3s.pdf

- Sections with very little content are dealt with at the same level as longer sections. Thus, the relative importance of points is lost. It's better to amalgamate these.

Standard templates also don't work well for omnibus-type papers – see the separate discussion below.

We suggest applying some careful flexibility to templates.

Have a standard heading level structure and stick to it

A systematised heading level structure helps to mark out distinct parts of any paper and gives a sense of the relative importance of the various topics covered.

Typically, they involve three (maybe four) distinct levels. For example:

- **Heading 1**
- **Heading 2**
- **Heading 3**

Most agencies have a style guide (or this might be embedded in templates), which includes an organisation-wide approach to heading levels.

If your agency doesn't have a style guide, there is some excellent advice on this (and a wide range of other helpful writing tips) in The Write Style Guide.²

Use active headings and subheadings

No doubt we sound like a broken record on headings and subheadings – and we've written a previous masterclass on this topic.³ But make them count. Use signposting or storylining. This helps guide the reader as to the paper's content and reinforces the key points.

² <https://write.co.nz/shop/>

Headings like Comment, Analysis, or Implementation mean very little.

But if your organisation has a mandated paper template/s with these sorts of headings, make sure your subheadings count. They become even more important.

This type of approach can be used in Cabinet papers too.

Include a road map

For longer papers, a useful tip is to include a paragraph early in the paper explaining the paper's structure. This could be in an introductory section or immediately following the Background/Context section.

This helps the reader understand the paper's logic and flow and anticipate what comes next.

This can be a dot point list, a numbered list (corresponding to section numbers in the paper), or a diagram.

Use appendices

There are times you (or someone else) want to provide a bit more detail on a particular topic, e.g. some data, further examples etc., and this can disrupt the flow of the paper.

First, check whether it is useful or not. If it is, then consider putting it in an appendix.

Another way of doing this is to use boxes in the paper. These tend to be more effectively used as a further or different explanation rather than just providing more material. These are for case studies, quotes, data etc.

³ See Masterclass No. 15 Make papers pop https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_15_make_papers_pop.pdf

Omnibus papers – a special category

Omnibus papers⁴ are those which deal with a multitude of small, connected, but separate issues. They are very distinct types of papers, which can be very lengthy. They tend to be regulatory decision-making papers, papers to support decisions on drafting instructions, or complex levy/fee-setting papers, for example.

These can be hard work because of the number of matters a decision maker has to work through.

The key to structuring them is to take the same structure and headings to deal with each issue, e.g. problem, options considered, stakeholder views, risks, and recommendations.

We've seen this done effectively in A3 tables.

A table of contents, listing the issues to be covered, is also a worthwhile addition to these sorts of papers.

Structuring first or later?

Some people like to map out their paper's structure first, which can help to get a clear logic and flow. This is particularly the case if you use storyboarding techniques.

But be prepared to change it as you go along. What you think at the beginning is not always the best way. There are clues which give you an indication that your structure isn't working.

These can be:

- Repetition
- Some sections of the paper are considerably longer than others
- Long lists – whether this be dot point lists or lots of subheadings under a particular heading.

And finally, check the structure works

You can use the 'outline' tools in Microsoft Word to check the heading structure and the content of the headings to see if it flows logically.

The structure should also be something for peer reviewers to look at. A fresh set of eyes can spot and help iron out problems.

This paper was written by NZIER, June 2023.

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⁴ See Paper 11 in [https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_10_masterclass_thinking_through_the_11_key_papers.pdf)

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