

Ministerial preferences: Providing advice in a way that best suits

Ministers have been in their jobs for about six months now

That means their feet should be well under the desk. The new ones will have learnt much about being a Minister and what it entails. Hopefully, you'll be building robust working relationships with them as part of providing policy advice and decision-making.

Part of this relationship-building will be about working out how your advice best hits the spot. We don't mean advice that tells the Minister what they want to hear. That's verging into the political and away from the ideals of free, frank and robust advice.¹ We mean advice that is easy for the Minister to absorb at pace, understand and act on by being tailored to the reader's own specific likes.

Of course, all the usual principles of clear communication apply

Take care with your drafting and presentation. We know policy problems can be very complex, but the art is in explaining them succinctly and clearly.

Figure 1 Key things to consider



Source: NZIER

This should be a focus of peer review and QA, too.

But different people absorb and process information differently

In a couple of our earlier masterclasses, we discuss these learning and comprehension preferences.^{2,3} Even though Ministers are all doing the same job, and all are politicians – they have very different backgrounds.

¹ See Masterclass No. 51 Advocacy and Advice <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2051%20Advocacy%20or%20advice.pdf>

² Masterclass No. 1 Communication with aliens https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_1_communication_with_aliens.pdf

³ Masterclass No. 2 Learning from other professions https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_2_learning_from_other_professions.pdf

In our experience, we've found that Ministers' professional backgrounds and experience often colour the way they 'process' information and analysis.

For example, lawyers tend to prefer standard written papers.

Accountants are quite comfortable with financial statements (of course) and tables and graphs. Some prefer tables showing the raw data, while others prefer graphs and charts.

Doctors (like the current Minister of Health) will understand medical terminology – for others, a definition and some explanation is needed.

There is much in the educational literature about learning styles that could broadly apply here, e.g. written, visual, auditory or more practical learning being the dimensions often discussed.

Data is everywhere

More and more data is being collected and processed by government. Big data is being used to increase our understanding of policy problems and solutions. That's not just in government but in the wider world as well. We've written about this before.⁴

This demands more from advisors. They need to be comfortable analysing, understanding and communicating data. Decision-makers also need these skills. However, they can be helped by advisors presenting information in ways they can best manage it, e.g. by choosing between tables, charts, infographics, case studies, etc. But also by drawing out the key points of these analyses.

The internet has changed how we absorb information

Web pages present information in many different ways, e.g. a combination of written and visual information, different pathways into the details are provided, and the presentation can be in different styles, sizes, typefaces, etc. Most of us, especially digital natives, have got used to this.

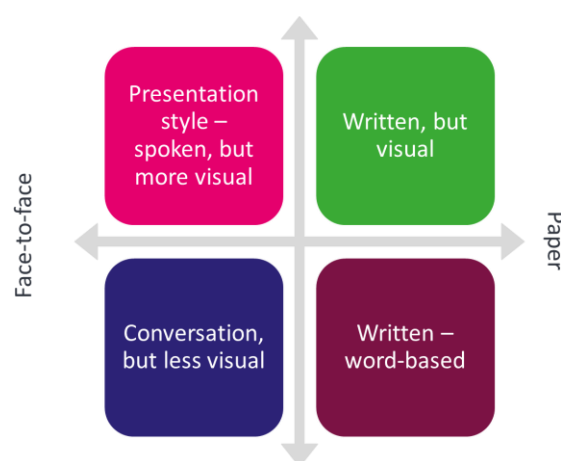
This contrasts dramatically with the linear nature of a traditional policy paper.

The traditional options for providing policy advice are narrower

Our options for policy advising tend to boil down to papers or discussions. However, there are different ways of working within these bounds to ensure that advice is presented in a way that fits your Minister's strengths.

A helpful way of thinking about this is on two axes – from less visual to more visual and from spoken to written. We deal with each in turn. See the diagram below.

Figure 2 Ways of presenting advice



Source: NZIER

⁴ Masterclass No. 33 Access to knowledge
[https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2033%20Access%20to%20knowledge%20-%202022%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2033%20Access%20to%20knowledge%20-%202022%20(1).pdf)

Presentations: this may not be a formal presentation (although we've seen these used) but can involve visual material that is then talked through, e.g. the use of a slide pack or, for something different, a site visit.

Conversation, but less visual: not used so often on its own, but frequently accompanying a paper. However, good preparation is needed – including research, clear objectives and a structure that succinctly frames a story about what you are saying.

Written, but more visual: might involve A3s⁵ or slide packs.⁶

Written – word-based: these are traditional papers – submissions or aides-mémoire. Of course, they still have to be well-written and succinct.

There is a clear continuum between the two types of written advice mentioned above – from largely written papers to ones which include graphs, diagrams, tables, and infographics, through to an A3 or slide pack.

Some questions to ask your Minister to help you fine-tune your advice

It's worth asking how comfortable your Minister is with different communication styles and formats.

Things to ask about are their levels of comfort with or preference for:

- graphs/charts
- data tables
- using tables to present analysis
- infographics
- diagrams
- standard written material

- A3s
- slide packs
- Gantt charts
- maps.

You can supplement the questions with examples in which you used different techniques (see Appendix A for a list of questions to ask your Minister about how they like receiving information).

Ministers rely on their office staff, including your departmental secondees, to manage the paper flow. These staff can also be a source of insight. Both general insight on preferences, but also in relation to specific pieces of advice or types of communication.

It will be time soon for the Ministerial satisfaction survey to go out

As part of annual reporting, Ministers are asked to give feedback on the quality of advice they receive from agencies. This is usually done based on the guidance of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.⁷ While not all Ministers respond, it can be valuable if they do.

This might be an opportunity to ask more about Ministerial preferences.

Although, this could have been done informally already. Your seconded office staff will be able to help.

Writing for Cabinet or groups of Ministers is different

You are writing for a number of people – with different interests, perspectives, ways of absorbing information, and very different levels of knowledge about the issues.

You need to approach it differently. You can't assume knowledge or understanding of the issues.

⁵ 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

⁶ Masterclass No. 23 Experimenting with PowerPoint reports https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_23_powerpoint_slide_pack_1.pdf

⁷ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/guide-ministerial-policy-satisfaction-survey#guide-to-the-ministerial-policy-satisfaction-survey>

Some may know a lot about it because of previous roles and responsibilities or from an overlap with their own responsibilities; for others, it will be completely new.

The convention of Cabinet collective responsibility is fundamental to the operation and decision-making role of Cabinet. Thus, papers must ensure that all Ministers are well-informed and can make decisions based on the paper.

So, the most important principle should be writing in a succinct, clear way that is easy for all Ministers to read and understand.

So, all the normal practices of good communication (as mentioned above) should be paid more attention.

Peer review with a fresh set of eyes⁸ to test your 'pitch' becomes even more important.

You should also take care when referring a paper designed for your Minister to another Minister. This happens often. It can be used to inform the other Minister/s or seek comment. Either way, the best practice is to draft a short cover note or email for your Minister to accompany the paper – rather than just sending it on its own. Ideally, this should point out what relates to the other Minister's portfolio and the rationale for referring the paper – particularly if you are seeking a specific response.

Accessibility needs to be considered

Whenever we write about using visual techniques, we need to sound a note of caution about the need to consider accessibility.

Here's a couple of references to help you out:

From MSD <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/accessibility/accessibility-guide/index.html>

From Whaikaha: Ministry of Disabled People <https://www.od.govt.nz/guidance-and-resources/the-accessibility-charter/>

The Government web standards <https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/nz-government-web-standards/web-accessibility-standard-1-2>

Give it a go

It's always worth experimenting with different things. Borrowing ideas from what you see other agencies doing is a good place to start.

But check in with your Minister – different people have different preferences and ways of processing information – and these can be strongly held.

Further reading

We'd recommend a book from our Prime Minister's Summer Reading list from 2022.⁹

This is full of practical tips for presenting data in a way which tells a story.

Nancy Duarte **Data Story: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story**, Ideapress Publishing, 2019.

⁸ Masterclass No. 56 A fresh set of eyes <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2056%20Fresh%20set%20of%20eyes.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.nzier.org.nz/publications/2022-summer-reading-list-for-the-prime-minister>

Appendix A Questions to ask your Minister

How do you prefer to receive information and advice?	Yes	No	Maybe
Standard written papers			
One-pagers on simple issues			
Using tables to present analysis			
Data tables – showing raw data			
Graphs and charts for presenting analysis			
Case studies and examples			
Diagrams			
Infographics			
Maps and geographical data			
A3s for advice			
A3s for discussion			
Slide packs as an alternative to papers			
Slide packs for a discussion			
Hyperlinks to more detailed information			
Anything else you find helpful?			

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