Policy advice
MASTERCLASS

Paper 15

Make your papers pop: Better headings and subheadings

Headings can improve impact and readability

We often comment about how you can use headings to add value. Headings and subheadings:

- **Help the reader to navigate the paper** – they tell the reader what is covered in the following paragraphs (which sets the tone) and break up information into manageable chunks. This is important, not only for their first reading of the paper, but also in a different way during a subsequent reading or in a meeting as they help relocate key pieces within the paper.
- **Provide a structure and logic to the paper** – the direction given by the headings strengthens the arguments and rationale for the conclusions and recommendations.
- **Highlight key pieces of information** that are of importance to readers, particularly those readers with special interests within the broader topic, or particular roles within the decision-making process e.g. financial implications, legal questions, or implementation issues.
- **Help to "tell the story**" – well-designed headings emphasise the key messages. This allows readers to get an "at a glance" summary of the paper and its content. Headings like this are useful as a skim read refresher just before a meeting or discussion on the paper.

Newspapers have been using headlines for similar purposes for centuries. Much of the basics about effective headings in papers derives from this sort of thinking. Content on the internet, (both webpages, and blogs) has further developed the art of headings and subheadings to help navigation and to attract attention.

Over the past couple of years, we have seen the better policy shops moving towards this style of "story-lining" headings.

By this we don't mean the sensationalism of click-bait – which rarely seems to provide a realistic indicator of the information covered – but, an accurate encapsulation of the following content.

Get the basics right

Just about everyone has a standard template for papers. Word or similar programmes allow this to be set up so it is easily followed by all authors. These templates typically include guidance on:

Heading levels and sizes/styles – these are really important and must naturally guide readers through the paper's logic. Different heading levels provide a way of grouping certain sorts of information to make the paper easier to follow. We don't have strong preferences about levels – just make sure they are clearly distinguishable, easy to read, and used consistently.

Key headings: issues that must be in papers – the most common one is financial implications. But many organisations have their own set of compliance matters which must be addressed in papers.

The Cabinet Office templates for Cabinet papers have a wide range of compliance matters which must be addressed e.g. gender implications, legislative implications, Bill of Rights compliance etc.

We know they are important. But, these lists of compliance-type headings can easily overwhelm what is otherwise a tight paper. We suggest grouping these together in a list. You can even make this into a checklist or table in the paper. However, if some of these compliance matters raise significant matters, it's still worth a discussion in the paper itself under their own heading.

Standard elements of a paper – include:

- Executive Summary/key points
- Purpose/proposal
- Background/previous decisions.

And then to…

- Conclusions
- Next steps
- Recommendations.

These are concepts that must be included, but best practice is to add extra material; to them so they structure the paper and make it more of a story. For example, "**Key points**" might become "**Key points: a problem of adverse selection**"; or "**Conclusions**" might be reframed as "**Conclusion: the implementation has failed**".

But, it's the bit in the middle that we see the best and worst of headings and subheadings.

Headings and subheadings are a readers' guide to the guts of the paper….

The middle of the paper usually covers the actual analysis and displays the evidence. It's the guts of the paper.

We strongly advise not to use headings like Content or Discussion or other similarly bland terms. We often see these sneaking into papers and in standard templates. They add little to the paper. They don't help with the logic, nor provide any guide as to the information below.

We saw a move to questions as headings a few years ago. Things like Why? And When? This was a useful step to improve on the standard heading structure. But using statement headings and story-lining further enhances readability and impact.

This middle part of the paper is where you have to:

- Think about the logic and structure of this specific paper;
- Plan the way the story will unfold; and then
- Choose appropriate headings and subheadings which follow the logic and emphasise the key points.

…so make an effort to get it right

This can be done on a whiteboard as an interactive team session, electronically so you can juggle it around to get it right, or in a PowerPoint style story-board. Whatever suits you best.

This can be a good time for an initial peer review on a more complex paper, as to critique the logic and structure from a reader's point of view can be invaluable.

The use of generalist headings is still acceptable, if there are good subheadings to highlight the content. For example, "Results from public consultation" might be reasonable if the subheadings clearly highlight key issues. Another example is "Options Analysis" when the range of options are articulated and their assessment presented in a clear table.

Don't be afraid of providing a road-map for a larger more complex paper. This usually takes the form of a clear paragraph, at the beginning of the middle section, which briefly summarises the structure of the analysis. This is particularly useful in omnibus-type papers which contain a number of separate, but related, issues.

Some great examples….

This is one of the best examples we've seen recently.

Figure 1 Planning Brexit: Silence is not a strategy (excerpt)

The Civil Service must ensure it has the right skills to support Brexit

Capability depends on skills, knowledge and resources. Many of the tasks involved in the initial preparations for the UK's exit from the EU require classic Civil Service skills – analysis, coordination and hammering out positions within Whitehall. A key issue right now is to ensure that these core skills are available to deliver Brexit work, alongside the Government's other priorities. Other more specialist skills will also be required, some of which may need to be brought in from the outside.

Prioritisation and coordination will be vital given the scale of the task

The difference between Brexit and other tasks faced by the Civil Service is the scale of the coordination required – David Davis has described Brexit as likely to be the "most complicated negotiation of modern times". For the Government, there are multiple counterparts to negotiate with and multiple interests to reconcile, which link to important domestic policies and interests. This is not just an issue for negotiations with the European institutions once Article 50 is triggered. In the preparation phase, there will be huge complexities in reconciling the positions of the devolved and UK governments. The Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Assembly, whose people voted Remain, have ambitions to maintain single market access and, for Northern Ireland, an open border with the Republic.

Whitehall has lots of experience of the EU and EU negotiations…

DExEU's staff include the 40 staff of the former Cabinet Office European and Global Issues Secretariat (EGIS), which has extensive experience of coordinating the UK's lines in European meetings, and 30–40 officials who were previously working in the FCO's European Internal directorate. EU negotiation is the bread and butter of the 130 staff of UKRep, who now report into DExEU for Brexit purposes. There has been a conscious decision not to denude other departments of the EU expertise which will be needed to coordinate their input into the preparations. Across Whitehall there are a lot of people who have worked in the EU or on EU issues at some point in their careers, but are currently in jobs that do not utilise that knowledge. A review is underway to map this capacity and ensure that it is properly utilised in the Brexit process.

Hyperlink to the report: **Institute of Government**

Statistics New Zealand also use the technique to good effect in their information releases. Here's an example, but there are many more on their website.

Figure 2 Government finance statistics (snapshot)

Commentary

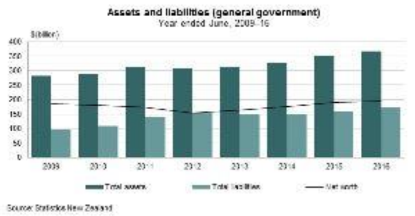
- Net operating balance surplus continues to grow
- Slower rise in net worth
- Net debt to GDP ratio increases

Net operating balance surplus continues to grow

Government finance statistics for general government show the net operating surplus was $7.0 billion in the year ended June 2016. This was an improvement from the June 2015 year, when the net operating balance was a surplus of $3.2 billion. The 2016 surplus was due to large and continuing income growth (up 7.0 percent from 2015), driven by an increase in tax intake, combined with relatively low growth in expenses (up 2.9 percent).

Slower rise in net worth

General government net worth totalled $196.1 billion at 30 June 2016, up $5.4 billion from 2015. This $5.4 billion increase compares with the $14.8 billion increase in the previous year. The slower growth in 2016 is due to a relatively large increase in central government liabilities, up $10.5 billion from 2015. Local government net worth grew by $2.7 billion in 2016, which compares with $3.5 billion in 2015. Local government makes up 57.6 percent of total general government net worth.



Hyperlink to the report: **[Statistics New Zealand]**

Some tips and tricks….

Just a few points to help you story-line the headings:

- Use a consistent style.
- Keep them reasonably short – preferably a single line.
- Include a verb – this means they become a set of statements, and have more impact.
- Stay on message – make sure they are consistent with the key points of the paper and the Executive Summary.
- Don't try to be too funny or clever – this can detract from the messages and be obscure.
- It's OK to use a key piece of data – it can boost the impact of a statement.

One way of checking headings after you have drafted the paper is to use the table of contents function in Word. This allows you to pull out the headings only for review. This will help you to assess the structure and logic flow, and determine whether the headings give the key messages.

This paper was written by at NZIER, April 2017.

For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

John Ballingall at john.ballingall@nzier.org.nz;

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz;

John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

Todd Krieble at todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz

NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | econ@nzier.org.nz