

Polishing your message

Writing, re-writing, and re-writing again....

Writing for Henry Kissinger when he was Secretary of State was notoriously difficult. There are lots of stories in his biographies about constant editing and re-writing.

This one comes from The Kissinger principle.¹ It concerns preparing a speech.

The story goes that one of his advisors prepares and submits a "first" draft of a speech to Kissinger one evening. Kissinger then calls the next morning for feedback on the speech and asks "Is this the best you can do?"

The advisor replies "Henry, I thought so, but I'll try again."

He then goes back to the drawing board, tweaks, revises and resubmits another a draft a few days later.

The next day, Kissinger calls the advisor into his office and again asks "Are you sure this is the best you can do?"

The advisor begins to question his work and says "Well, I really thought so. I'll try one more time."

Believe it or not, this uncomfortable and rejecting process goes on for EIGHT times; EIGHT drafts; each time Kissinger standing firm to his original feedback of "Is this the best you can do?"

The advisor returns to Kissinger's office with the now NINTH draft and awaits his response.

Surely enough, Kissinger calls the advisor in the next day and asks him the question, "Is this the best you can do?"

The advisor, now completely fed up, furiously replies "Henry! I've beaten my brains out - this is the ninth draft! I know it's the best I can do; I can't possibly improve one more word!!!"

Kissinger then looks at him and nonchalantly says "Well, in that case, now I'll read it."

There is always room for improvement....

We don't necessarily advocate this approach – although we've seen it from some Ministers at times!

Usually it's more fruitful to have an ongoing dialogue with decision makers on a tricky piece of policy development. Reaching a decision on the best way to go can often be an iterative process. This can be done through discussion (perhaps supported by A3s), commenting on paper outlines, or through feedback on early drafts.

It's more appropriate when refining a final product, after the content has been discussed and agreed. For example, in a speech (like this example), a press release, or a Cabinet paper after the Minister or Ministers have agreed the broad policy direction.

But it is a useful reminder that a paper can always be improved through editing, review and peer review.

Make sure in your planning that you save enough time for this process of review and refinement. It never works well when it is rushed through at last minute.

This paper was written at NZIER, May 2017.

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¹ Source: Interview with Ambassador Winston Lord (and speechwriter for Henry Kissinger), National Security Archive, WSU.

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-15/lord1.html>