

## Dealing with attachments

Lots of papers have attachments. And they can be used for very different reasons.

In this Masterclass we describe the different types of attachments and provide guidance on how to make sure they still integrate well into the paper.

We'll cover meeting briefs in a later Masterclass – as they often have very specific attachments too, e.g. biographical information on participants, talking points, annotated agendas, location maps, and the like.

### Papers should stand alone

Our general principle is that a reader should be able to understand the key issues without reference to the attachments.

A reader pushed for time will focus on the Executive Summary, then on the paper itself, and only then, if time allows, on the attachments.

So, don't rely on attachments to make the case.

### Make sure the attachments add value

Remember Ministers are dealing with very large quantities of paper. Attachments can often be numerous and lengthy.

So, do make sure that they are necessary. And apply the same rules to them as you do to papers – keep them succinct, clearly structured, and well laid out so that they are easy to read and digest quickly.

### Add value in the cover paper too

Don't just repeat clunks of text of the attachment in the paper, or in the Executive Summary.

Similarly, don't do a content free cover paper. You may as well not have bothered.

To assist the busy reader, ensure the paper captures the vital elements of the attachment and pushes on to draw out the "so what".

### There are different types of attachments

And they need to be dealt with differently.

The types we usually see are:

#### Traditional appendices

These contain additional, more detailed information. Some of which is "nice to know" and other material, which potentially covers off obvious next questions about the substantive issues in the paper.

They might be read by a particularly interested or concerned reader but are not **essential** to supporting the arguments in the paper itself. They might include extra data, maps, full details to support evidence cited,<sup>1</sup> lists of stakeholders consulted, detailed timelines etc. They help to keep the paper itself succinct, and focused, which is always appreciated by a busy reader.

But, they must be clearly referenced in the paper, including explaining how they fit in or add to the arguments in the paper. Also, they must be important and useful. Otherwise, it's best to leave them out as they add unnecessary bulk.

Consider using hyperlinks to refer to other documents,<sup>2</sup> rather than physically attaching them (if your Minister uses electronic papers).

From what we see in reviews, these are generally handled pretty well. But perhaps, more things could be pulled out of the paper and put into appendices to make the papers snappier.

#### Executing instruments

These are documents that the Minister (or Ministers) need to deal with in some way. The recommendations of the paper are usually to approve and "sign the attached document". For example, letters for the Minister to sign, Gazette notices, contracts and agreements, and other legal documents.

This category could also include signing up a final copy of a Cabinet paper which has been discussed and refined in consultation with the Minister, or a Cab LEG paper.

<sup>1</sup> See Masterclass No 20 Presenting evidence.

<sup>2</sup> See Masterclass No 12 Going electronic.

In these cases, the cover note needs to cover:

- What action is required of the Minister e.g. signing, sending to other Ministers for signature, lodging etc. and timeframes.
- The significant points in the document.
- An explanation of its purpose.
- Any risks or issues that might arise.
- Next steps.

In some cases, talking points or Q&As might also be required e.g. for papers to Cabinet that the Minister will have to introduce or respond to queries.

### Substantive documents for decision or approval

These are documents that you are seeking Ministerial comment on or approval to. These traditionally have a short cover paper. These might include consultation documents, strategy documents which are being released publicly, draft legislation, etc.

In these cases, the cover paper should include:

- Not just a summary of the content of the attachment, but a quick precis of the logic and arguments.
- An explanation of how it fits with the overall policy direction.
- A road map of the contents of the substantive document.
- A short description of the development/sign-off process for the document i.e. whether it has had legal sign-off, been reviewed by experts, who have been consulted in its development and what they said (including other Ministers and Departments).
- Identification of any risks and how these are to be mitigated.
- Next steps.
- Supporting communications material.

Remember to clearly reference the substantive document through page/paragraph numbers or use hyperlinks.

### Documents for information

These are documents you are asking decision-makers to “note”.

These might be research or evaluation reports, monitoring reports, or backgrounders on new issues. We suspect you’ve written quite a few of these for your new Ministers over the last six months!

But take care. Pushing these into the Minister’s bag can be an over-used device and eat into your Minister’s reading time.

Make sure the Minister does **need to know** – or has expressed an interest in gathering background. Noting recommendations give it a status of nice to know anyway, but make sure it’s not superfluous. There may be other ways to cover relevant, but not critical, information e.g. in a weekly report.

It also raises the issue as to what “noting” means. If the document contains matters for discussion between Ministers and officials – it is better to say that and focus the cover paper on those issues.

To get the best out of these attachments the cover paper should focus on succinctly presenting the key points from the attached document. A short set of dot points can work well. Focus on what the Minister needs to know, and the implications for policy, operations or the work programme.

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