



Writings Within Your Organisation

Overview

Welcome to this toolkit: writings within your organisation. We hope you will pick up many useful tips, tools and ideas that will help you strengthen your organisation's writings.

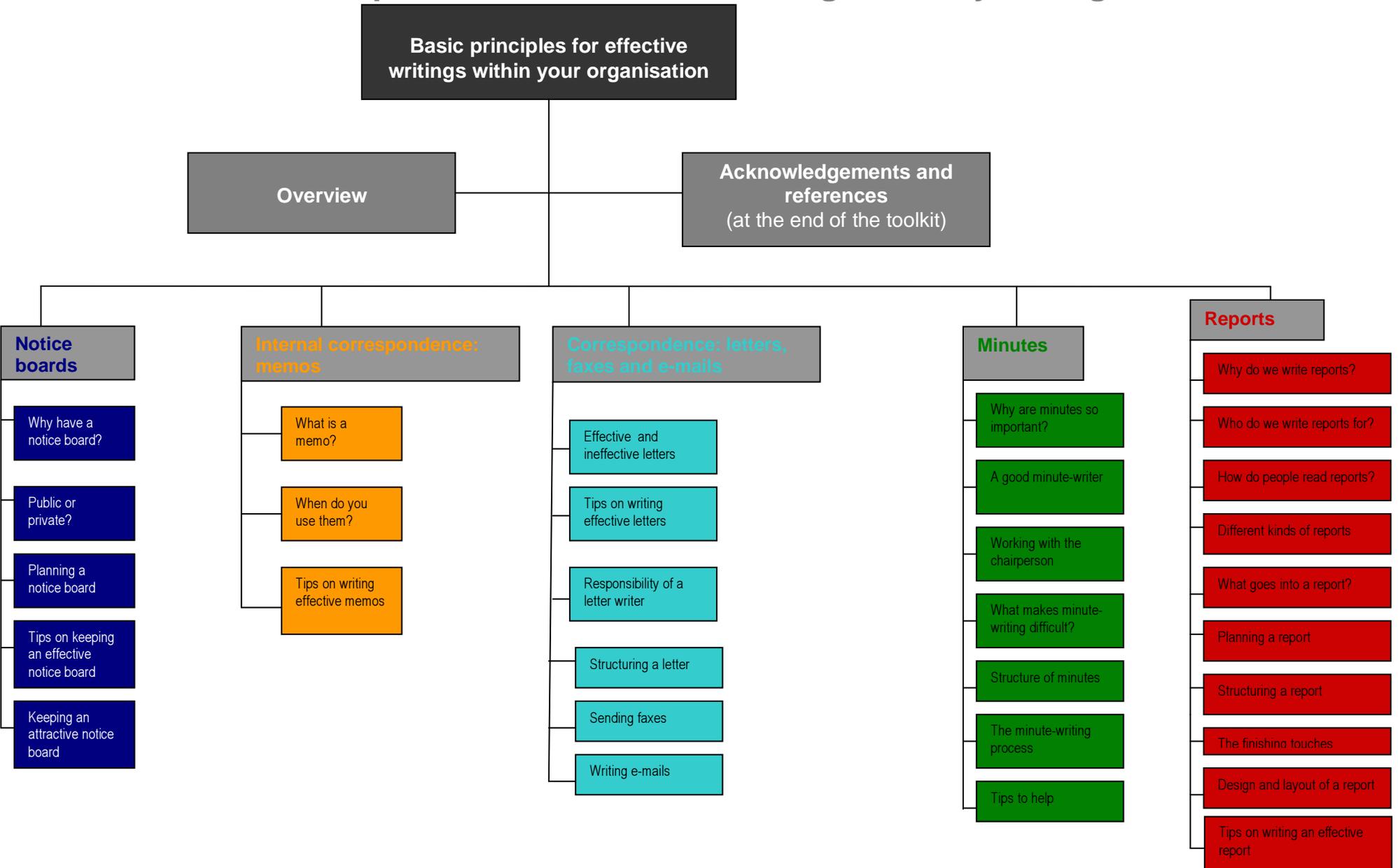
Our aim is to help civil society organisations build their capacity. We hope in some way this toolkit will help your organisation achieve its goals for greater justice nationally, regionally and globally.

In this overview we offer you:

- the site map
- who will find this site useful
- a brief description of what is on the site

Writings Within Your Organisation

Site map: Toolkit for effective writings within your organisation



Who will find this site useful?

This site offers valuable tips and tools for both inexperienced and experienced writers. This site will be particularly useful for people who write internal documents for their organisation.

A brief description of the toolkit

This site is rich in tips, tools and examples for strengthening the writings within your organisation.

On this site you will find information about:

▪ Notice boards

We look at the role that a dynamic notice board can play in an organisation's life. We also provide you with some ideas on how to set up and maintain a notice board.

▪ Internal correspondence: memos

Here we look at how to write a memo that will get the job done.

▪ Correspondence: letters, faxes and e-mails

Letters, faxes and e-mails are all different kinds of letters. In this section we look at how to be an effective communicator using them.

▪ Minutes

Many people find minute-writing daunting. There is confusion about what is required of a minute-writer. This section looks at the vital role that minutes play in an organisation's life, and at how to become a stronger minute-writer.

▪ Reports

Organisational people spend a lot of their time writing and reading reports. Yet so many reports remain half-read, and do not provide the key to promoting progress in the organisation that they could. This section looks at how you can make reports far more effective in your organisation.

Basic principles for effective writings within your organisation

Just a note before we go into the different kinds of writings that you do within your organisation. There are many reasons why we communicate. And we have many different ways of communicating to choose from. Those of you who have e-mail may find that you choose it as your main method of communicating. It is quick and easy – and you usually get responses quickly too. But it is worthwhile to stop and think first about what the most appropriate way to communicate is so that you meet your objective.

E-mail, for example, much as it is convenient, can be very impersonal. A personalised letter or note with a real signature on it can make the receiver feel more special. Or making a phone call instead of an e-mail shows that you have taken the time and interest to communicate in a personal way. It boils down to thinking about your objective with your communication and how best you can achieve your objective. If, for example, you are angry with one staff member for leaving his coffee cups unwashed on his desk every day instead of taking them to the kitchen and washing them, then an angry memo to all staff about coffee cups will make you more enemies than friends. Sometimes we use memos and e-mails to avoid dealing in person with a problem.

Also, sometimes we send messages electronically, like with e-mails and faxes, but we do not always know for sure whether they have been received. Sometimes technology fails, and sometimes we may send our message to the wrong phone number or e-mail address. There are times when a combination of methods – like e-mailing and a follow-up call – will help the smooth running of your organisation!

We hope you find some useful ideas in this toolkit.

Notice boards

Notice boards can be a very positive communication feature in your organisation or community.

Why have a notice board?

A notice board can reflect part of your organisation's life, and its mission. If it is effectively used, it can be a dynamic and powerful communication tool in your organisation. Your organisation or community will decide what role it wants a notice board to play in its life. You may want to use it to:

- help keep people in touch with your work
- offer information, like minutes of meetings or dates of events
- remind people about certain things
- attract people to your cause
- report back
- offer news clippings and other media snippets that relate to your work

Private or public or both?

This is an important decision to make in your organisation. If your notice board is in a public place where visitors to your office can read it, then it is worth thinking about:

- The fact that your notice board plays a public relations function.
- By its nature, a notice board is a rather public communication tool.
- Which documents are okay to put up on the notice board? If, for example, your organisation is having an internal crisis then you may not want to put up documents that reflect this.
- What can you put on the notice board to make visitors or board members feel inspired by the work you do?

Planning a notice board

Whether you have a notice board already, or you want to set one up, it is useful to answer these, amongst other questions you will have:

- Why do we want to have a notice board? What is our aim?
- What specific function or functions do we want our notice board to serve?
- Who will look at our notice board, and what are their needs?
- How can we best go about meeting their needs?
- Who will take responsibility for maintaining an attractive, relevant and updated notice board?
- How often will it be updated?
- How will we know if we have achieved our aims with our notice board?
- You might like to use some writing tools for thinking through this. You'll find some in the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Effectively and Powerfully*, particularly the section called How to get started?

Tips on keeping an effective notice board

It is important to keep a notice board that:

- Is newsworthy.
- Has appropriate items on it for your audience.
- Is regularly updated – know who in your organisation is responsible for this.
- Is attractive.
- Is uncluttered.
- Is clearly set out.

Keeping an attractive notice board

- The vital thing is to keep your notice board alive. People lose interest if it always looks the same.
- Choose a notice board that is easy to stick or pin notices on, and that is protected from wind and rain especially.
- Try to make it stand out in some way – perhaps with a colourful background cloth or bright lettering.
- Think of dividing the notice board up in some way, using headings like: news, events, report back, and debate. You could use string, ribbon or paper of some kind to make the divisions.
- Use cartoons, graphics, and photographs. People are very attracted to these and they are especially relevant to people who are illiterate.
- Cut out arrows and use effective headings to draw people's attention. For example, “the fundraising committee’s latest minutes”, or “what do you think?” next to a controversial newspaper article.
- You could consider having a graffiti section to your notice board where people write responses on a cartoon, or another item.

Internal correspondence: memos

What is a memo?

Memo is the short name for memorandum. It is an accurate, brief, official written message that is sent within an organisation.

When do you use memos?

You only use memos to send a message to people within your organisation.

People use memos to convey a short, clear message about one topic. You use memos to:

- Remind or inform people inside your organisation about something.
- Ask people inside your organisation to do something.
- Ask for information.
- Encourage, motivate or persuade.

You can send a memo to one person, a department, or all staff.

Tips on writing effective memos

- A memo should include, in this order:
 - Who the sender is, including a department if appropriate.
 - Who the receiver is, including a department if appropriate.
 - The date.
 - A clear, short heading that captures exactly what the memo is about.
 - The message – very clearly and concisely.
 - The signature of the person writing the memo.
- Because it is an internal document, you do not need to include your organisation's address and contact details. Just what is included in the list above is fine.
- Your memo must be as short as possible – certainly not longer than a page.
- Although you need to be direct and to the point with a memo, it is important to use a language, style and tone that will not offend. When you write a memo, put yourself in the shoes of the receiver of your memo. Imagine how they would respond to your message. Always bear in mind the objective of your memo. What do you want the receiver/s to know, think, feel or do after they have read it.
- Never write a memo when you are angry with people within your organisation. Your anger will come through and you will make the situation worse. Calm yourself first. Establish your objective. Then write your memo in such a way that you will achieve your objective.
- These days a conversational style is the modern style for communicating through memos, letters and reports.
- If you have bad news to convey, consider carefully first whether a memo will be the best way for the receiver/s to receive the news.

- Try not to use all CAPITAL LETTERS, underlining, **bold** lettering or *italics* for the main part of your memo. The first three may come across to the reader as if you are shouting at them. And italics is more difficult to read.

An example of a memo

<p style="text-align: center;">Community Resource Centre Memorandum</p> <p>To: all staff From: Gloria dos Santos, director Date: 2 December 2002</p> <p>Staff Christmas party</p> <p>Please note that this year's Christmas party will be on 18 December, from 11h00 to 15h00. We will be having a picnic at the park across the road. Your children and partners are welcome.</p> <p>Please let Maria know by 9 December how many people from your family are coming. This will help with catering.</p> <p></p>
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External correspondence: letters, faxes and e-mails

A fax is a letter that is sent quickly, electronically, through a facsimile machine. These days, the modern way of communicating in a letter is to use plain, everyday language rather than old-style formal language.

Effective and ineffective letters

Sometimes it is worthwhile looking at something that is ineffective to help you work out what could make something effective.

Have a look at the letters that follow and compare them. You might like to print them out to do this exercise.

Example of an ineffective letter

<p style="text-align: center;">The Community Resource Centre 29 Viva Street, Victory Park, Freedomville, Comradia Telephone: (0120) 6789 Fax: (012) 10112 e-mail: vivacamradia@upbeat.org.cx</p>
<p>Attention: Mr Gabriel Promotions Books Forever Victory Park, Freedomville Comradia Telephone: (0120) 121314 Fax: (012) 151617</p> <p>Dear Mr Gabriel</p> <p>We, the members of The Community Resource Centre, hereby wish to bring it to your attention that we offer a lending library service free of charge to the community. As you are no doubt conscious and aware the people of our community are very, very poor. But the people nevertheless have a very strong thirst for reading and learning. The aforementioned resource centre does not contain enough books. We have been referred to you by a member of our community to make a special request of you to consider sending our resource centre any unused over-prints of books that you may have stored in your storage space. If you could do this we would be ever grateful and appreciative, we know you must get lots and lots of similar requests but you can believe me ours is a very deserving cause. Please telephone me on the above listed contact details to get hold of me to discuss this further, should you be able to assist our resource centre.</p> <p>Thank you in eternal gratitude and hope</p> <p> Ms Rosa Costello The Community Resource Centre co-ordinator</p>

Now compare it to this letter:

Example of a more effective letter

<p style="text-align: center;">The Community Resource Centre 29 Viva Street, Victory Park, Freedomville, Comradia Telephone: (0120) 6789 Fax: (012) 10112 e-mail: vivacamradia@upbeat.org.cx</p> <hr/>
<p style="text-align: right;">27 September 2004</p>
<p>Mr. John Gabriel Promotions Books Forever Victory Park, Freedomville Comradia Telephone: (0120) 121314 Fax: (012) 151617</p>
<p>Dear Mr Gabriel,</p>
<p>Re: Request for over-printed books</p>
<p>The Community Resource Centre is a not-for-profit organisation that serves the poor people of our community.</p>
<p>We need more books</p>
<p>Unfortunately, our centre does not have enough books to serve the great demand. We have heard that your company may be able to help us by donating books that the printers over print. If you agree to this request we would be happy to offer your company a square metre of regular advertising space on our resource centre wall.</p>
<p>We hope you can help us. Please contact me if you are interested.</p>
<p>Best wishes</p>

<p>Ms Rosa Costello The Community Resource Centre co-ordinator</p>

Tips on writing effective letters

An effective letter works if it:

- Gets straight to the point, after an appropriate greeting. You can do this through a heading, and putting your main point in the first paragraph.
- Has sub-headings, if necessary. This helps both the writer and the reader.
- Is short and precise. It is best to keep a letter to one page if you can.
- Has short sentences – you can try using one point, one sentence.
- Has short paragraphs.
- Does not repeat information.
- Uses everyday language rather than formal language.
- Gives the right amount of information – to meet the reader's needs.
- Has a professional style and tone.
- Is written in a fresh, vibrant, to-the-point way.
- Says what you mean – you can ask someone in your organisation to read it and give you feedback, especially if it is a very important letter.
- Has no spelling or language mistakes.
- Is not crammed full of dense writing.

Responsibility of a letter writer

When you write a letter, it will help if you ask yourself:

- What do I want to communicate?
- Who do I want to communicate my message to?
- Why do I want to communicate it? What is my aim?
- What response am I hoping to get from the reader?
- What do I want the reader to think, feel and do once they have read my letter?

You may like to refer to the CIVICUS toolkit *Writing Effectively and Powerfully* in more detail.

Structuring a letter

If your letter is very important, then it is worthwhile going into the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Effectively and Powerfully*. When you get to it, go to the section called *How to get started?* And then go to the section on *Mindmaps* for this thinking phase of writing.

Once you are clear about the letter you want to write, and its contents, when you write up the final version make sure you:

- Include your name, and your organisation's name, address and other contact details.
- Start your letter with the full and correct name/s, title/s and address and other contact details of the reader/s.
- Use an appropriate greeting.
- Have a main heading.
- Make your main point in the first paragraph.
- Have the following paragraphs support your main point.
- Use sub-headings, if they will help.
- End off by saying how you hope the reader will respond to your letter. Follow this up with a suggestion of what can be done if she or he does. For example, *We hope you will be able to give a talk at our conference. Please let us know by 15 February 2003 if you can.*
- Include your final greeting, and sign off with your name printed alongside your organisational title.

Sending faxes

You will decide whether the document that you are faxing needs a standard organisation cover sheet. If you think it does, then remember to include on it:

- your organisation and all of its contact details
- your name, as the sender, and your title, if necessary
- the receiver's name and title, if necessary
- the date
- the number of pages you are sending
- a brief message, even if it is a courtesy message

Also, remember to number all of your pages so that if there is a problem with the faxing you will be able to check which pages went through and which did not.

To: Gabriel Pele, fieldworker, Jojo Agricultural Project

Telephone: (012) 112233

Fax: (012) 445566

Date: 22 July 2003

Number of pages: 5, including this page

Message: Thank you for agreeing to speak at our conference. With this fax cover sheet you will receive the conference programme. Please let us know if you need any special equipment for your presentation.
Thank you.

From: Karabu Xavier, fieldwork manager

The Community Resource Centre
29 Viva Street, Victory Park, Freedomville, Comradia
Telephone: (0120) 6789 Fax: (012) 10112
e-mail: vi.vacamradia@upbeat.org.cx

Writing e-mails

E-mail is the shortened name for electronic mail. It is the correspondence we send through computers and modems.

An e-mail message is usually a short letter. Most of the principles for letter writing that we spoke about in the letter section apply to writing e-mails. With e-mail, however, you do not have to worry about writing addresses out, nor the date. It is helpful to your e-mail message receiver if you programme your e-mail programme to automatically insert your contact details, like telephone and fax numbers at the end of every e-mail you send. This is called your signature.

Things to watch out for

- Because e-mail is such an almost immediate and sometimes quite rushed way of corresponding it is easy to make mistakes, like spelling.
- Always carefully read over your message before you press the send button. E-mails fly into cyberspace so quickly when you are on-line and you cannot get them back to make an amendment. This checking will help to maintain a professional correspondence.
- Check that you have entered the correct receiver – mistakes can happen.
- E-mail can make it easy to drop formality, like greetings. It can be easy to correspond in a familiar tone with a person you may not have an established relationship with. Try to pace this in an appropriate way – stick with a language, style and tone that will maintain the level of professionalism required of you.
- Sometimes people drop formal greetings like *Dear Carlos* and *Wishing you well* when they write e-mails. When you stop formal greetings, it can make communication sound abrupt, almost rude. So watch out for this.
- The age of computers has brought with it nasty computer viruses. Some viruses are known to invade your e-mail set-up and then send messages to people on your address list. Sometimes you know and sometimes you may not know that your computer is infected. Check for viruses regularly – at least once a week, and download virus protection updates regularly.
- Because of viruses that attach documents and send them indiscriminately, and also because e-mails can easily be forwarded to other people, e-mail is really quite a public form of correspondence. Be aware of this in using e-mail in corresponding.
- As with all forms of communication, using appropriate language, style and tone are important when you correspond using e-mail.

Minutes

Many people groan when it is their turn to be the minute-taker at a meeting. Somehow minute writing feels like a burden. But it need not be. Minutes are vital documents in the smooth running of your organisation, so the opportunity to write them in way that will help your organisation run more effectively can be an exciting challenge.

Why are minutes so important?

Minutes are an official record of a meeting. It can impact very badly on your organisation's smooth running if minutes are inaccurate, unclear or get lost. You have probably experienced the frustration this can cause.

Minutes are important because they:

- Are a record of your organisation's work – for present and future reference.
- Reflect decisions made in a meeting.
- Are like action notes that members of your organisation can refer to in carrying out their day-to-day work.
- Help remind people to do the tasks they have been given responsibility for, and help the organisation to hold those people accountable.
- Help the next meeting to pick up on matters arising to monitor progress.
- Inform those who were absent from the meeting as to what decisions were taken.

What do minutes record?

Maybe we can start by saying what minutes do not record. Minutes are not meant to be a direct record of everything that was said at a meeting. It would be inhuman to expect someone to do this. If your organisation wants a transcript, it should arrange for it to be recorded by a machine and transcribed.

Minutes should mainly record:

- The agenda of the meeting.
- Who attended the meeting and who sent apologies.
- When and where the meeting was held, and at what time.
- Whether previously decided actions were implemented, and if so, the outcomes and consequences – as matters arising.
- What was discussed (in brief).
- Outcome of the discussion – decisions taken, points noted.
- What action the meeting decided to take, by whom and by when.
- Time of closure, and date, time and venue for the next meeting.

A good minute-writer

An effective minute-writer needs to be able to:

- Concentrate.
- Listen carefully.
- Summarise.
- Capture key issues to note, issues to agree upon, and decisions.
- Identify what needs to be captured in the minutes and what does not need to be.
- Work co-operatively with the chairperson.
- A minute-writer needs to:

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- Understand the objectives of each agenda item, and make sure there is a set structure.
- Understand what is going on in the meeting, both contents and dynamics, if possible.

Working with the chairperson

If you are the minute-writer you need to sit next to the chairperson.

You need to:

- Be assertive, so that you can:
 - ask for clarification from the chairperson if you need them to summarise a decision for the purposes of the minutes;
 - point out to the chairperson if the agenda is not being followed; and
 - make sure everybody has signed the attendance register, giving the required details.
- Identify what documents need to be attached as appendixes, if any. Appendixes should only be attached if they are directly relevant to a decision taken by the meeting.
- Follow up, for example, if it is your duty, to make sure that the proposer and seconder of the previous minutes do sign them.

The more often you take minutes, the better you get at it!

What makes minute-writing difficult?

Minute writing is difficult when:

- You don't understand what is going on in the meeting.
- There is no set structure to the meeting.
- You are expected to record the meeting word by word. This is almost impossible and can make minute writing very stressful and ineffective.
- The meeting is chaotic, badly chaired, and does not stick to the agenda.
- The chairperson is uncooperative.
- The meeting does not have a clear, specific agenda.

Structure of minutes

Model minutes:

- Include an agenda.
- Include who was present and who sent apologies.
- Have clear numbering of main issues, and sub-numbering in line with them so that they are easy to refer to.
- Record action decisions in a way that they stand out, for example by using *italics* or **bold**.
- Action decisions should state *who is responsible* for doing something and *by when*.
- Minutes should include a summary of action decisions and referrals.

Minutes should be distributed within one week of the meeting.

The minute-writing process

- When you are the minute-writer, you will take detailed, accurate notes during the meeting.
- You will then write or type the minutes from your notes. If there are any parts you are unsure of, consult the chairperson or another office bearer, so that your minutes are accurate.

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- Once you have written up the minutes, show them to the chairperson or another officer bearer to check they are accurate and appropriate. Ask that person:
 - Are they clear?
 - Are they easy to read?
 - Have they left out any essential information?
 - Have they included the important information?
 - Are the decisions clear?
 - Do they say who must do what by when?
 - Do the final amendments.
 - Check grammar and spelling so they have a professional touch.
 - Within a few days of the meeting, hand the final minutes over to the person responsible for distributing them before the next meeting.

Tips to help

You will be able to write really effective minutes if you:

- Are aware of the important role you play as minute-writer.
- Know how vitally important accurate and effective minutes are for the smooth running of your organisation.
- Are familiar with the issues to be discussed.
- Prepare yourself before the meeting – become familiar with the content area, issues, previous minutes and agenda.
- Clarify with the chairperson, at the beginning of the meeting, what kind of minutes you are expected to take. If a full recording of the meeting is required, suggest they organise a tape recorder. Suggest decisions-made and action-orientated minutes.
- Clarify which documents presented at the meeting, or other relevant documents, should be included as attachments.
- Sit next to the chairperson so that it is easy to communicate.
- Are assertive in asking the chairperson for clarification.
- Have a clear agenda.
- Have a clear structure for your minutes, and, for regular meetings, standard headings. This includes *title, date, time, venue, names, agenda contents list*, and other relevant information e.g. region, union of those present, noting *apologies*, and *matters arising*.
- Are clear about the purpose of each agenda item.
- Number each different agenda item in such a way that your reader can easily refer to the number when raising an issue in the next meeting.
- Ask the chairperson to summarise after a decision is taken by stating the actions needed to be taken by when and by whom, at the end of each agenda item. This helps you as minute-taker. It also helps everyone at the meeting.
- Circulate an attendance register and make sure that by the end of the meeting, every person present has signed it appropriately.
- Develop your own shorthand if you do not have one. Like the letter *c* could mean committee, the letter *o* could mean your organisation, and so on.

Reports

Many people agonise over writing reports, other people enjoy the opportunity it gives them to reflect. Many people do not look forward to reading reports because they are often too long and unclear.

We hope these ideas around report writing will inspire you – and help you to write more effective reports. In turn, this will help your organisation be more effective in achieving its objectives.

Why do we write reports?

Effective reports are critical organisational documents because they:

- Communicate information and ideas about your work, and that of your organisation.
- Reflect and explain progress with work – and lack of progress.
- Make it easier for your organisation to assess progress and plan anew.
- Promote accountability.
- Promote discussion and informed decision-making.
- Emphasise problems and make recommendations.
- Share information, learnings and experiences.
- Provide analysis and offer insights into the way forward.
- Help with effective and strategic planning.
- Help members to participate in the democratic processes of your organisation.

Who do we write reports for?

Who you write reports for varies from organisation to organisation. Depending on the purpose of your report, your audience could include:

- staff
- members
- executive committee
- board
- funders
- other organisations
- members of the public

It is important to be completely clear about why you are writing your report. See the section in the Civicus toolkit *Writing Effectively and Powerfully* called Know why you are writing and Who you are writing it for, and also from the same toolkit Know your audience. These are critical to an effective report.

How do people read reports?

Ask some people you know who read reports. Then see if you think they fit into this kind of pattern of report reading:

- Skim read the report first, reading the headings and sub-headings. This way they get a sense of what the main points of the report are, and how long it will take them to read it.
- Get a heavy heart feeling if the report is long.
- Want to know up-front what main message the report contains.
- Read the summary, if one is provided.

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- Read the introduction and conclusion.
- Skim the report again, reading the headings and sub-headings and the first line or two below the sub-headings.
- As they skim the headings, they will stop and look at graphs, or other kinds of illustrations, because these are easy to get information from quickly.
- If the report is very long and not very interesting, they will probably put it low on their list of things to do. They may even dread the job of reading it.
- If the report is very long they may never read the whole report.
- If the report is short, to the point and written in an easy way, they may read the whole report straight away.

Knowing about how people read reports helps us to write more effective ones. After you have read this section, think about what you might decide to do differently next time you write a report.

So, why do so many reports not get read?

To summarise, many reports do not get read because they:

- Are too long – if your report is one page long it is likely to be read from beginning to end. The longer your report gets, the smaller the percentage of it that is likely to get read.
- Are too boring.
- Look too dense.
- Do not make the main point straightaway.
- Have language that is heavy, difficult and full of jargon.

Different kinds of reports

There are many different kinds of reports – we are sure you are familiar with them. They include:

- annual reports
- committee reports
- financial reports
- staff reports
- membership reports
- research reports
- special reports
- progress reports

We give some more details around annual reports, committee reports and financial reports.

Annual reports

- Your organisation's chairperson makes sure the annual report is written, and usually writes parts of it herself.
- It is written for, and should be circulated before your organisation's annual general meeting.
- You may include in your readership, other organisations and individuals, funders, and other institutions that are interested in the work you do. Use the audience analysis tool from the Civicus toolkit *Writing Powerfully*, the section called Know your audience, to be clear about who you are writing your report for.

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- The report covers things like:
 - What work your organisation has done over the past year, including committee reports, and financial reports.
 - What your organisation planned to do and what it managed to do.
 - Challenges your organisation faced in realising its plans.
 - What your organisation plans to do in the next year.

Committee reports

- A committee member is usually delegated to write a committee report.
- Committee reports are progress reports, and are written more frequently than annual reports.
- They are short reports to explain progress.

Financial reports

Your organisation's treasurer needs to make sure this report is written. The report should say:

- How much money the organisation has.
- How much was spent in the last month and what it was spent on.
- How much money came into your organisation.
- How the finances are looking for the months ahead.

A full financial report with an explanation must be written for the organisation's annual general meeting so everyone knows how money has been spent.

For more detailed information see the Civicus toolkit called *Financial Control and Accountability*.

Long reports

If your report is long, then it would be best to include a summary near the beginning. Your summary could be a paragraph or a page, depending on how long your report is. You will need a contents section.

Short reports

If your report is short, you do not need a summary. However, a contents section is always helpful for the reader.

What goes into a report?

Many people hate writing reports. This can generate stress and resistance. Report writing can end up feeling like a huge burden, a thankless task. If you feel like this it will take you longer and be harder to write. Keep reminding yourself what a crucial role reports play in the life of your organisation, helping to make sure your organisation reflects on its progress and its problems.

Here are some suggestions that will help you work out what to include into your report:

- Start off by making your report your friend.
- Use some of the tools from the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Effectively and Powerfully* to help you.

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- The section called How to get started will help you to think through what needs to go into your report. Especially try using *mindmaps* and *freewriting* before you get started trying to write a first draft of your report. Once you have used the tools, you will feel more confident and creative about what should go into your report.
- After you have brainstormed your ideas, then go to the section called *Know your audience* to help you fine-tune exactly what you think your reader needs to read in your report.
- Double check that you, *Know why you are writing* your report by looking at that section. This always helps to keep you on track.

Planning a report

After you have brainstormed the contents of your report, draw up a plan for what you want to include. As part of this process, you will also be able to decide where you need to put lots of detail, what you can leave out, and what you can just mention. Remember KISS – keep it short, simple and straightforward. Use headings and sub-headings for your main points, and write from there.

Structuring a report

Your report must make sense. It needs a logical flow. You will be able to test for logical flow by asking someone to read it and give you feedback. See the toolkit *Writing Effectively and Powerfully* – the section called Getting feedback. You can also test it by reading it aloud to yourself.

Your report should include:

- A meaningful (and interesting, if possible) title.
- The date of the report.
- The author of the report.
- The contents list, if it is a fairly long report.
- A summary of the main point/s of the report, especially if it is a long report. Your report's objective must be clearly stated. Have a look at the section in the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Powerfully and Effectively* called Know why you are writing if you need help with clarifying this.
- A logical flow of items, with meaningful sub-headings for each. The main point of the paragraph should be at the top of it.
- A conclusion, which could be your recommendations section. Don't use your conclusion to restate everything already stated. Try to use it creatively.

The finishing touches

The key to an effective report is that it is easy and interesting to read. To help you with the finishing touches go to the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Effectively and Powerfully*, to the section called Edit for effectiveness.

Design and layout of a report

Ask yourself what you like in a report. Do you like to read lots of heavy text? Do you appreciate a report that has some illustration – even a cartoon, maybe? Jot down a few ideas for yourself as to what you do and don't like when you have to read another person's report.

Here are some guidelines:

- Typeface. It does matter what kind of lettering you write in. Some lettering is easier on the eye than others. Here are some tips, especially for people who type their reports:
 - Use a serif typeface (like this one, with the little feet at the bottom) for the main text.
 - Use a sans serif typeface (like this one, without the little feet at the bottom) for your headings and sub-headings only as it is harder on the eye to read.
 - Avoid THE USE OF CAPITAL LETTERS EXCEPT FOR PROPER NOUNS. Capital letters are harder to read and tend to “shout”.
- *Try not to use italics like this too much as it takes more effort to read.*
- Use underlining as little as possible as it dazzles the reader.
- **Use bold to a minimum as it is also rather dazzling.**
- Keep the size of the print comfortable to read – not too big and not too small.
- Use lots of headings and subheadings.
- Use uncomplicated numbering.
- Number your pages.
- Allow for uncluttered space, have wide margins, let the text breathe.
- Use photos, graphics, cartoons where appropriate.

Tips on writing an effective report

Have you ever had someone give you a thirty-page report to read that is pages and pages of typing? Doesn't your heart drop? How will you ever plough through all the words, let alone remember key points?

There is an idea around that if your report is not long then it must be. This is not true. If you want to write an effective report then:

- Plan ahead – don't leave it to the last minute!
- Plan time in for reflecting and revising your report.
- Ask yourself what you want your reader to know, think, feel and do after they have read your report. This helps to keep you on track.
- Write it in a short, simple and straightforward style.
- Use appropriate language, style and tone.
- Give it a title that tells the reader what to expect.
- Give it a contents section for the reader to skim and know what to expect.
- Be logical.
- Be informative.
- Be clear.
- Be accurate.
- Be analytical.
- Offer insights.
- Make sure you have not left any information gaps.
- Make your point up-front – don't keep the reader guessing by leaving it to the conclusion. You can do that with a novel but not a report.
- Use lots of sub-headings.
- Use the first sentence under each sub-heading to make the paragraph's main point. This helps the busy reader.
- Present it in an airy way, with lots of spaces to help keep the reader going.
- Collect information, newspaper clippings, graphs, cartoons – any information that will be useful for your next report along the way. You can keep a file especially for this so that when it is time to write, you are already prepared.

Presenting your report

If you have to present your report, go to the Civicus toolkit called *Producing your own media*, the section on Presentations for some ideas. Here are some tips for preparing a report presentation:

- Keep it short and clear.
- Use everyday language. Lots of jargon and fancy words can make people feel left out or undermined. Have a look at the Civicus toolkit *Writing Effectively and Powerfully*, the section called Edit for effectiveness for some help here.
- If your presentation needs to be translated as you speak, then make it as easy as possible by not saying a lot before giving the translator their turn.
- Have eye contact with your audience.
- Talk loudly and clearly – make sure everyone can hear you.
- Try to talk in an interesting, varied tone of voice.
- Know your report well enough so that you only refer to notes, and do not have to read it out word-for-word.
- Knowing your report well will help to make you feel confident.
- Use examples where appropriate.
- Write up your notes in big lettering so you can refer to them easily.
- Give your audience a handout if it will help them follow and remember.
- Offer your audience an opportunity to ask you questions about your report. You can refer some of the questions to other people present, if appropriate.
- Highlight the most important points that your audience needs. The audience analysis tool in the Civicus toolkit called *Writing Effectively and Powerfully*, the section Know your audience can help here.
- If you are reporting on an issue where there are differences of opinion within your organisation, then make sure that you give a balanced report. You may have to report putting forward a position that you do not personally agree with.

Good luck!

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Advanced Communication Skills for Organisational Success. By Lisel Erasmus-Kritzinger, Marietta Swart and Vusi Mona. Published by Afritech, 2000. South Africa.

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CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is an international alliance established in 1993 to nurture the foundation, growth and protection of citizen action throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are threatened. CIVICUS envisions a worldwide community of informed, inspired, committed citizens in confronting the challenges facing humanity.

These CIVICUS Toolkits have been produced to assist civil society Organisations build their capacity and achieve their goals. The topics range from budgeting, strategic planning and dealing with the media, to developing a financial strategy and writing an effective funding proposal. All are available on-line, in MS-Word and PDF format at www.civicus.org and on CD-ROM.

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