Editing for Effect – Some "Rules of Thumb" for Departmental Statements

In the course of my involvement with Sussex Circle, I have worked on Reports on Plans and Priorities (RPPs) and on Departmental Performance Reports (DPRs), and have, out of necessity, developed a few "rules of thumb" for the drafting and editing of these very important, "for the record" Departmental statements.

1. Start Strong

a) **"Say it first best": A**ddress a given theme or issue once, at the most appropriate place and with effect, and then do not revisit it again.

b) **Do not "bury the lead":** Decision-makers read notes from the top down and not the bottom up – so, don't make them work to find the essence of your argument

2. Stay Strong

c) **Always write from front to back**: Too many briefing notes are written "from the middle out", and too many Memoranda to Cabinet are written "from the back forwards", all of which runs directly counter to the fact that decision-makers read from the front to the back. *Make sure you start with a clear and compelling lead, build momentum through a disciplined "middle" or "hinge" section, and finish with a strong close.*

d) **Collapse and aggregate text wherever possible:** Long, dense paragraphs are not *visually accessible*, so wherever possible use introductory framework sentences and then bullet points – this will break up an overly long passage, make your key points more accessible, and almost certainly reduce word count significantly.

3. Make Every Word & Every Segment Count

e) **Use "active voice" constructions wherever possible:** Remember, these "for the record" documents are about the Department acting, and not about programs being acted upon, so keep the focus on the Department as the driving force and use power verbs wherever possible.

f) **Focus on "difference maker" facts and statements (and either don't use or park everything else in an explanatory note or annex)**: All too often in the drafting of major documents, like RPPs or DPRs, the burden of proof seems to fall on having to justify *not* including some fascinating detail in the body of the text. Developing compelling and convincing public policy statements is all about reversing this burden of proof, and forcing contributors to make a good argument for including their material in the document. *If the text "on offer" is not a "difference maker" or does not really "add value" to the power of the statement, then it needs to be "annexed".*

g) **Be ferocious about meaning:** Never take the meaning of a passage for granted, especially in the case of RPPs or DPRs, or Cabinet submissions, where the credibility of the Department is on the line

4. **Avoid Practices that Weaken the Text**

h) **Avoid "vague":** Be specific as possible, and use powerful "difference maker" details.

i) **Avoid "jargon":** Remember that when you are working on an RPP or DPR, or an equivalent kind of "for the record" public statement, you are involved in a process of Parliamentary accountability or public engagement, or both. Using jargon runs the risk of setting an "insider's" tone which could make your text look either patronizing or evasive, or both.

j) **Avoid "long and dull:** This is all about respecting your audience. Always remember that "less is (much) more".

While I developed these "rules (of thumb)" working on RPPs and DPRs, they travel well and are applicable when dealing with a wide variety of other public policy documents, including, for example, briefing notes, policy statements, submissions to Cabinet, or disciplining the bullets in a slide presentation to an ADM or DM or Minister.

These "rules of thumb" are derived from a more extensive training module on "Editing for Effect" that I have delivered in my work with Sussex Circle.

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