

Last updated: 16:00 (GMT+04) Wednesday, July 23, 2008. Rajab 20, 1429.

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The positive side of writing reports

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
Published: December 10, 2007, 23:21

For a busy director, the writing of a major report can generate a surprising degree of stress. So you face the stressful contradictions of this job. It's a solid slog, a grind requiring painstaking accuracy down to the last detail, without earning any glory for you. It lacks any creative satisfaction. It takes up a lot of time you haven't strictly got. It demands uninterrupted intervals of deep concentration, in an environment where interruptions are endemic.

A partial solution is to try accepted time management routines such as limiting your availability, keeping meetings brisk and businesslike, 'walking the talk' to forestall drop-in visits, among other sensible good-housekeeping drills around the office, so that you manage your time, instead of your time managing you.

However, an alternative solution is to reduce the demoralising effect of the job by trying to see it as something other than a chore. For example, you probably feel that it's a classic example of responsibility without power. Yet report writing is actually full of power. Partly the sheer power of language - which is not something confined to poetry or drama, by any means. (Think of classic advertising slogans.) While a report may outwardly appear to be a purely factual digest, it is also an instrument of persuasion and promotion. It amplifies key messages, sometimes subliminally. It supports the image of a corporation or a department. It can also support the image of the writer.

As for creativity, there is in fact much scope for imagination in the generating of a reader-friendly report, right from the opening page (executive summary), which greatly influences the reader's decision of whether to bother continue reading, at all. Then there is the overall format: how the report is to be mapped out. This again requires creative imagination. (The idea that reports should look and sound stuffy, to assert gravitas, has long since been disproved).

Finally, there is the actual writing style. It makes a big difference if you can blend long and short sentences, to achieve a satisfying rhythm and avoid monotony. And this essential 'music' should not be interrupted by careless errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation, which can seriously ruin the effect and lose the attention. Those who claim that correctness indicates a nit-picking and petty mind have probably never written a successful report. This is where professionalism and good manners touch

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hands. You show respect for the reader by achieving accuracy and polish. And the reader responds by forming a better image of you and your organisation.

With this new positive attitude to the job, allied to sensible time management, you'll find that report writing can be a satisfying achievement that may earn you credit, and not be just the stressful and thankless chore you imagined.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

Key points: Report writing

- Report writing is seen to combine many serious stressor-elements.
- You can alleviate some pressure by standard time management routines.
- You can also view it as creative work, conceived in a stress-free spirit.

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