

Writer's Edge



By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or at 416-259-3399.

The Ideal Length

What's the ideal length for a report? I think you'll agree, the answer is: it depends. In a perfect world, the length of every document would be the exact number of pages (or sentences or paragraphs) needed to concisely convey the information — nothing more, nothing less.

But, we don't live in a perfect world and length is sometimes dictated by arbitrary criteria, such as:

- the space a publisher is willing to give an author — for example, the maximum space for this column is 500 words;
- the attention span of the reader — I once worked for someone who refused to read anything longer than three pages; and
- the writer's belief that a given explanation "should not" take more than X pages.

Even when there isn't an absolute limit on the length of something you're writing, keep in mind that the length will depend on choices you make regarding:

- what you include, and
- the level of detail you go into on any given topic.

Your decision about to include might be dictated by the document's purpose. For example, Valuation Reports governed by CICBV Practice Standard 110 must include information specified in subsection 110(10.1). In most business writing, however, you have discretion regarding what you'll include and you decide based on what you believe will be of interest to your target audience.

In deciding the level of detail to include, you must assess things like: your readers' interest, their background knowledge of the topic, and even their education. Further complicating your assessment is the fact that the audience for a given writing may be diverse. Fortunately, devices like footnotes/endnotes, appendices, and schedules can be used to help you meet the needs and interests of diverse audiences. Of course, if you use any of these devices, be sure to include all information you consider essential in the main text because not all readers will look at footnotes or appendices.

Footnotes/endnotes are great for providing details and explanations some readers may crave but that others may not be interested in. (If you have a choice, I recommend footnotes because all the reader has to do is glance down to get the information. With endnotes, the reader must remember the number, flip to the end of the document to find the note, and then flip back to the text.)

Appendices and schedules are useful for including examples, calculations, and other information that supports or expands on a thesis or point but that isn't absolutely necessary for readers to understand or follow your reasoning. If you use them, title appendices and schedules to help the reader, for example: "Appendix A – Additional Statistics Regarding XYZ".

Conclusion

The length of a document will depend on a number of factors, some of which may be out of your control. But even when there are no restrictions on length, readers will appreciate your reasoned decisions regarding what you include, the level of detail you go into, and how you present details.

Building your "guru factor"

By Carl Friesen

Have you ever heard that a colleague has been asked to chair a professional task force and thought, "They should have asked me – I know more about it than she does"? Or read an article in a business magazine by someone you know and thought, "I really should get some articles published?" Maybe you've seen names you recognize on the agenda for a conference and thought, "I've got a lot of knowledge to offer – I should be contributing to conferences like this?"

What could be missing in your career is the "guru factor." A guru is a recognized authority, with significant experience overcoming challenging issues in his or her field, someone accepted as a thought-leader. In a valuations context, it could be someone with credibility in an area such as family-owned businesses, mining companies or the financial services sector.

A recognized subject matter expert gets short-listed when promotions and new jobs become available, they can choose the kind of work they do and at a higher rate of pay. If they work as consultants, they have their pick of assignments and will always have a backlog of billable work.

You can be skilled, knowledgeable and experienced – and still a "best-kept secret," unacknowledged by your peers. You need to make sure that other people are aware of what you have to offer.

"Begin with the end in mind," preaches Stephen "Seven Habits" Covey, and your first step is to determine the end result. Are you seeking to build your profile because you are or want to be a consultant in your field? Do you want to change the kind of work you do – perhaps a promotion, or work in another field?

Another aspect of keeping the "end in mind" is thinking through the area of knowledge you want to be known for. Do you want to be known as a solid project manager, as shown by the case studies you'll discuss in your speeches and writing? Or, a visionary able to understand the future and help others prepare for it?

Then, think of whom you want to reach – who do you need to have know about you? If you want to be known just within your geographic area, for example, you can concentrate your message accordingly. If you want to be known within your profession nationally or internationally, you'll need a wider profile.

YOUR PROFILE-BUILDING TOOLBOX

Here are three of the most useful, powerful tools in your profile-building toolbox.