

20 August 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT : Readability of Office Memoranda

REFERENCES : (a) Memo to you from Acting Director of Training,
12 March 1956, subject same as above

(b) Your request for Comments on reference (a)
at 27 July 1956 Deputies' Meeting, and form
237, dated 27 July 1956

We must concur in the principles of readability expressed in [redacted] memorandum, dated 16 February 1956, attached to reference (a). There are, however, certain aspects of format which need to be clarified. These points are made below.

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1. The organization of a memorandum in which action is recommended should follow the standard staff study pattern, viz., statement of the problem, facts bearing on the problem, discussion, conclusions, recommendation.

2. The last sentence in section II, paragraph 3 (unnumbered) of [redacted] paper is "Conclusions are explicitly formulated." This sentence should have been followed by phraseology along lines of "and clear-cut recommendations for action stated." The drawing of a conclusion does not necessarily obviate the recommendation for action.

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3. The discussion of length of line suggests an increase in that memorandum of 33 per cent in terms of sheets of paper. Translated into safes, this format could mean that 4 safes would be required to hold what 3 could hold with ordinary length lines. An obvious corollary problem is how to train people to be terse in memoranda preparation.

MOR/CDF Pages 4-7

4. It is unclear from section IV, second paragraph what action to relieve these deficiencies is being taken or is planned.

There are many facets of readability not discussed in [redacted] study which should be examined for adaptation to our purposes. The expert journalist uses a lead sentence which answers the questions who, where, when, what, why, and how. Perhaps an outline based on these six points would be useful to us. I am certain that much research has been done on this general subject in the Government.

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I recommend:

That the Office of Training make a study of the subject of readability in all its ramifications (format, language, psychological effect, etc.);

That the study be submitted to you for approval; and upon such approval

That the principles of readability identified be used to the maximum extent possible in the Agency.

FOR THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR/INTELLIGENCE:

[redacted]

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Assistant to DD/I (Planning)

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY OFFICIAL ROUTING SLIP			
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ACTION		DIRECT REPLY	PREPARE REPLY
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COMMENT		FILE	RETURN
CONCURRENCE		INFORMATION	SIGNATURE
Remarks:			
<p>Pursuant to the Director's instructions at the Deputies' Meeting on 27 July 1956 your comments are requested on the enclosure (Readability of Office Memoranda) dated 16 February 1956) to the attached memorandum dated 12 March 1956.</p>			
FOLD HERE TO RETURN TO SENDER			
FROM: NAME, ADDRESS AND PHONE NO.			DATE
[Redacted]			27 July 56
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Executive Registry
8-0233

12 MAR 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Your Request to Chief of Reading Improvement Branch for Information on Readability of Office Memoranda.

This memorandum is for information only.

In an interview of 24 January 1956, you requested the Chief of the Reading Improvement Branch to submit suggestions to aid CIA employees in the preparation of readable memoranda. Her response to the request is incorporated in the attached brief study, which describes the organization and format of a readable typewritten manuscript and discusses the effects of certain format features on readability.

The study conforms in format to the principles it sets forth. It is based on research findings.

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[Redacted Signature]

Acting Director of Training

Attachment

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16 February 1956

READABILITY OF OFFICE MEMORANDAI. Introduction

This study describes certain organizational and format features which make memoranda easier to read. It is designed to assist CIA staff members in the preparation of readable memoranda by expressing the reader's point of view. It conforms in format to the principles it sets forth.

II. Importance of Organization

Most people can read reasonably legible print at rates of several thousand words per minute. Even cable material can be accurately scanned at 1,000 words per minute, while 500 words per minute is a rapid rate for thorough understanding of clearly printed written information.

Poor organization of ideas retards reading rate much more than such factors as size of print, line length, and spacing. The reader can understand a well-organized document with poor print more readily than a poorly-organized, well-printed document.

To be well organized, a typewritten manuscript must have a clearly stated purpose, with an amount of background information suitable to the purpose and reader. Facts, evidence, and opinions are arranged in an orderly pattern, for example: time-sequence, problem-solution, cause-effect, or opinion-reasons. Sentences and paragraphs are short, simple, and direct. Vocabulary is simple, and technical jargon is avoided. Conclusions are explicitly formulated.

III. Effect of Format on Readability

Format must be judiciously adapted to organization and subject matter. Important sections are

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blackened by overtyping, or underscored, and subtitles indicate logical thought units. Paragraphs are separated by spacing, and indented at least two spaces. The manuscript may be single-spaced, with black type of medium boldness on white paper. Evidence suggests that lines should be 3 to 4 inches long, although the best line length for typewritten print is not definitely established.

American typewriter print is one of the least readable type faces. Since small variations in other type faces do not affect readability, it is unlikely that there are significant differences among the different kinds of typewriters. Some of the format characteristics which affect readability of typewritten material are:

1. Emphasis. Blackening important sections by overtyping, or stressing the words which would be emphasized in oral reading by capitalization or underscoring can increase reading rate.

2. Subtitles and paragraphs. Logically arranged or numbered subtitles help the reader in surveying his reading task. Further breakdown of thoughts by paragraphing is also an aid.

3. Length of line. The feasibility of preparing all typewritten memoranda in lines no longer than 4 inches should be considered.

The best line length varies for different print faces, but it is around 88 millimeters, or $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Typewritten matter presented in two columns is definitely more readable than that in long lines. Very short lines decrease the usefulness of peripheral vision, and excessively long lines increase the frequency of eye pauses and regressions.

The line length in this memorandum is shortened to approximately 4 inches. The original draft was typed in the usual line length of 6 inches. It was approximately $2\frac{1}{4}$ pages, and shortening the lines produced 3 pages in the final form.

In any case, typewritten material should always be prepared with very wide margins.

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4. Paragraph spacing and indentation. Paragraph indentation and spacing between paragraphs increase reading rate substantially by separating thought units. Research indicates that reading ease is increased by indentation, but no evidence is available as to the best amount of indentation for typewriter print.

Paragraph numbering facilitates cross reference, but there is no evidence that it increases reading rate or comprehension.

5. Line spacing. Single-spaced manuscripts appear to be as easily read as double-spaced manuscripts.

One group of Agency employees read a single-spaced test at an average rate of 267 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. A comparable group read the same selection in double-spaced form at an average rate of 275 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. The difference of 8 words per minute is very small.

6. Boldness. Type "boldness" refers to both its heaviness and its darkness. Neither very bold nor very light type is as readable as type of medium boldness. Medium typewriter ribbons should be used, rather than heavy or light ribbons.

7. Color schemes. Black print on white or cream paper is the most readable color combination, because it provides maximum contrast.

IV. Conclusions

If writers apply the principles suggested above, memoranda will be more readable.

Further research needs to be done on line length, variations in typewriter print faces, and organizational principles.



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Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Executive Assistant to the Director

DATE: AUG 21 1956

FROM : Acting Deputy Director (Support)

Executive Registry

8-5873

SUBJECT: Information Furnished the DCI by the Office of Training on
Readability of Office Memoranda.

1. I agree thoroughly that readability is primarily the result of simple, clear, well organized writing, as pointed out by [redacted] of the Office of Training in her study on Readability of Office Memoranda.

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2. In July 1955 Colonel White wrote to the heads of all major DD/S components, urging them to train their employees in writing clear and simple English. Such training should consist of (a) good example, (b) study of "Plain Letters," a handbook setting forth most of the organization principles advocated by [redacted] and (c) taking the OTR course in Effective Writing. He has also emphasized at his staff meetings the necessity for plain, workaday English.

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3. I also agree with her that format must be judiciously adapted to organization and subject matter. For example, the standard format for staff studies has proven very well adapted for submitting problems for decision or action.

4. Generally, [redacted] suggestions for improvement in format conform with standards published by the Agency, with the biggest exception being line length and, to a lesser degree, techniques for providing emphasis. About [redacted] pages of typewritten material were produced in headquarters in F.Y. 1956. The use of four-inch lines would increase the volume by approximately one-third. The annual increase in costs would be about [redacted] for paper and over [redacted] for safes to store the increased volume. It is difficult to estimate the increased clerical costs.

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5. Emphasis should be achieved mainly through the arrangement of words and ideas without too much reliance upon exclamation marks, capital letters, underlinings, etc. as advocated in a manual published by the Office of Training.

6. We will continue to use all available means to improve the readability of memoranda produced in the DD/S Area and to use all productive ideas, including [redacted] in Agency training courses.

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<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	SIGNATURE
Remarks:			
<p>Pursuant to the Director's instructions at the Deputies' Meeting on 27 July 1956 your comments are requested on the enclosure (Readability of Office Memoranda) dated 16 February 1956) to the attached memorandum dated 12 March 1956.</p> <p>DD/P Comment "There once was a man from Marseilles Who read memoranda all day. Lines were 4 inches wide, Type bold, paper bright, But they still hadn't a damn thing to say."</p>			
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