

How to be a Civil Servant

MANDARIN ENGLISH Part 2

A Short Course for New Recruits

Lessons 6-9: Writing Government Documents

It is no accident that Whitehall officials are known as Mandarins. Their language is often as hard to understand as anything spoken in Beijing. This advice from Martin Jones of the Department for Transport will provide you with the basic writing skills you will need to survive in Whitehall.

Lesson 6 – The Title

This is normally written at the last minute. Bland titles such as “The Environment White Paper” are now out. So use table 1 to create your own title.

Table 1

Better	Opportunities
Sustainable	Places
More efficient	Schools
Cleaner	Hospitals
Healthier	Roads
Even better	Technology
Sustainabler	International relations
More competitive	Government
Greener	Engagement
Stronger	Communities
More natural	Transport
Higher	Future
Better still	Life
Broader	Universe
Sustainablerer	Everything
Unbelievably better	Nirvana
Best	
Perfect	

Lesson 7 – The Foreword

Always a bit of a problem. Why do we need new action when all our policies are working perfectly?

The following template may help.

Issue “A” matters deeply to every member of the human race.

Since [date of last change of administration] we have invested mega dosh and achieved a stunning amount. We are well on the road to Nirvana. People are starting to walk around with huge smiles on their faces, overjoyed at the prospect of a world entirely without problems.

But we are not complacent (oh no!). Too many people (well don't get the idea it's *that* many, just one is too many) are enduring conditions that fall slightly short of paradise. So we must act. Not that we haven't been acting. Oh no. Just we need to act a bit more. I mean, er, intensify our efforts.

This document sets out how we are getting to make perfection even better.

We will be fully consultative, work with everyone under the sun etc etc, so long as we meet our Treasury targets, carry out Treasury policy, etc

Lesson 8 - The text

Let's start with three basic Civil Service rules

Rule 1: The more words the better

Rule 2: Writing it down is as good as making it happen, if not better

Rule 3: Anything remotely connected to the subject matter has to be mentioned to show how "joined up" (coagulated) we are.

Doing a first draft is fairly easy. From that stage it's a long process of seeking comments and contributions. Contributors fall into various categories.

(a) The stars

Before the moans, some recognition of the stars who tirelessly read successive drafts and provide crisp, relevant drafting suggestions. Then they patiently repeat them when the author has inadvertently deleted them. Again and again. These are the unsung heroes of Government documents.

(b) The sentence extenders

"You could take my point on board by adding the following (97 words) to sentence x". Or "If you are mentioning x and y you really need to mention z too".

If Harry Potter were written in this style it would go something like this:

Harry, along with other key stakeholders such as English Partnerships, the RDAs and Gandalf, and in the light of a wide-ranging consultation exercise, thought that, subject to appropriate consideration of the options, he would head, in an integrated and holistic way, respecting the four key principles of public service reform, for the cottage built on greenfield land situated close to major transport infrastructure interchanges by the end of April 2004.

(c) The highlighters

These people normally come from other government departments and wear fluorescent yellow coats. They put their Ministers up to writing letters saying that the document should “highlight” x, y and z, promising that officials can follow up with textual suggestions. These officials normally fall into category (b) above.

(d) The More-ons

These people phone up asking that the document say “more-on” this and “more-on” that. The purpose of saying more is rarely clear (except as an application of the general rule that more words equals better). So “more-on” crime could read: “The government is determined to stamp out crime, which is a very bad thing (“more, more!) and we’re joining up with lots of people to stamp out crime (more, more!) and we’re working, yes, *across government!* (more, more!) oh and with lots of stakeholders too (more, more!) including the police (can’t you mention any more?) OK, and Darth Vader, Superman and the Social Exclusion Unit...

(e) Clear and strong people

“We think the document should make a clear and strong statement on x/y/z”.

(f) The positively incomprehensible

“We welcome the cross-references in Chapter 1 to existing documents including A Better Quality of Life (the UK’s sustainable development strategy). However, we still need to ensure that action is clearly targeted so as to support the UK’s national and regional sustainable development targets. These targets, and the definition of sustainable communities, should cascade into the regional daughter documents.”

(g) The hyped-up ideas-mongers

These are the people who, in wondering how to improve the quality of construction, come up with a string of original ideas, e.g. a better building task force leading to a better building plan, led by a better building unit reporting to Departmental better building champions who will ensure that all policies are better building-proofed, and that there should be a better building kite-mark.

Lesson 9: Drafting Meetings

The production of a Government document will require interminable meetings. These fall into various categories:

(a) Those where participants decide to re-open policy discussions that have long since been settled

(b) Those where participants agree that everything in the plan is so important that it needs to be “highlighted” and “brought out more” usually by reordering the text to put them before everything else that needed to be “highlighted” last week

(c) Those that are positively incomprehensible. It helps to be able to join in these, though a little preparation is normally necessary. This involves jotting down impressive-sounding phrases from previous meetings and reproducing them in random order. Table 2 is for meetings on housing institutional reform, but the principles can be applied to any subject. For that snap phrase, just cobble together words from each column in sequence

Table 2

A	B	C
Combined	Incentivisation	Process
Phased	Sub-regional	Asymmetry
Integral	Partnership	Drivers
Robust	Accountability	Strategy
Local	Democratic	Architecture
Convincing	Regional	Lever
Joined-up	National	Governance

Or for that more rounded contribution, try the same principle with Table 3. A series of sentences can even be put together, demonstrating a thorough grasp of the subject.

Table 3

A	B	C	D
In the context of an organisational step-change ...	... the introduction of discrete lines of accountability ...	... must be integrated with ...	... the targeted use of carrots and sticks
With regard to the key drivers ...	... the development of robust targets ...	... could fatally counteract ...	... the development of generic reporting structures
Notwithstanding reporting norms ...	... any proposal for strengthening of two-way communication lines ...	... must be weighed carefully alongside ...	... the need for delivery on the ground
In the light of a thorough analysis and needs assessment ...	... joined-up policies ...	... can be developed at local and regional level taking account of ...	... the risks and opportunities inherent in the developing strategic function
Given the policy and institutional imperatives ...	... the design of institutional arrangements ...	... should be sub-regionally consistent with ...	... the need to ensure win-win outcomes at every level of delivery
Bearing in mind the new priorities ...	... the change programme ...	... fundamentally underpins ...	... the imperative of ministerial discretion

Further Reading

If you enjoyed this, you will also enjoy:-

- Lessons 1-5 in this series:-
Mandarin:- A Guide to Civil Service Jargon, and
- On a scale of 1 to 5:- A Course or Conference Questionnaire

Both can be downloaded free of charge from the “How to be a Civil Servant” website at:- www.civilservant.org.uk