
The Power of Writing

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Every year, in my Introduction to the Academic Community course, I ask my students at some point: “What is the most important skill a college president can have?” They always have a wonderful range of answers: charisma, decisiveness, financial acumen, etc. Finally, they want the answer *ex officio*. My response invariably disappoints them. “Writing skills? You can’t be serious! How could writing possibly be so important?”

Their disbelief reflects a basic prejudice in our society today. As a nation, we prize oral communication. The political candidate who speaks well on television or before a live audience is a person who has a key credential for leadership. In this electronic age, writing power may be important to novelists or poets, but surely not decision-makers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Media presentations of leadership leave out an important ingredient in decision-making, and that is the role of the written document. Whether in business, politics, or the academic world, most corporate decisions involve complex choices. To understand the complexity of a problem, as well as the available solutions, executives and board members must turn to written communications. The written report can present data and a level of analysis that would be difficult to convey in oral form. While we think of a document only as a background piece for committee discussion, it is far more important than that. It often shapes the decision-making process itself, profoundly affecting how the readers decide the issue. A television shot, picturing a board chair announcing a corporate decision, or a chief executive introducing a new product, may capture the drama

of corporate leadership, but it misses the countless hours of analysis that led up to the decision or product. Much of that analysis occurs in written form.

Many people minimize the importance of writing because they believe it goes unread. They observe the huge volume of material that crosses any decision-maker's desk and conclude that the written message has no impact. It is true that most of us receive pounds of paper every week, and that we read only a portion of it. One study of executives in a major U.S. corporation found that only fifteen percent read the body of the reports that came across their desks.¹ Most of them read selected portions, however, such as the Introduction, the Background section, and the Conclusion. My personal experience confirms this finding. During my years on the USNH Board of Trustees, for example, I have noted that the most effective trustees are readers. They may not read everything, but they scan what they receive and judiciously study what they deem important. Since these members greatly influence others on the Board, their reaction to a report is critical.

The very volume of written material underscores the importance of good writing. Effective board members and executives are good assessors of junk communication. They quickly relegate to the wastebasket the puff article, the self-serving critique, the irrelevant publication, or the unnecessary report. On the other hand, they will read (and appreciate) the clear memorandum that states the problem well and argues succinctly.

The impact of a report, a proposal, or even a letter can be so great that I rarely entrust the writing of any document under my signature to another person. I insist on doing it myself, not because I am a great author, but because I want to control my own communication. A well-written letter can avoid a lawsuit, secure a grant, or achieve a vote. A badly written one can lose each of these, including respect for the writer.

For someone who is a president, a CEO, or high-ranking executive, the power of writing rests in its ability to achieve closure. Talk is always just that—talk, no matter what the level. It is the written document that

¹Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen, *Technical Writing and Professional Communication* (New York, 1991), p. 61.

propels discussion to a deeper level and to a conclusion. For the person who is not in a position of authority, though, writing offers another kind of power, and that is the power of access.

Years ago, when I took my first job in academic administration, I was responsible for securing grants from major foundations across the country. As I quickly found out, foundation heads do not particularly want to talk with young development officers who wish to pry funds out of their trust accounts. The hardest problem I had was securing entry. Once I was able to visit the foundation and talk with a foundation officer, I could determine whether the foundation was a possible resource or not. The only access I had was the letter. You cannot imagine how skilled I became at writing letters, not for grants, but for appointments. The serious, cogent, well-written letter is the one way we can reach someone who is beyond our ability to visit or to telephone. It can be remarkably successful in achieving that goal.

I would like to conclude my remarks on the power of writing with one final observation. Did you ever notice that, when people become serious about communication, they want it in writing? For example, New Hampshire voters are normally willing to listen to the oral comments of presidential hopefuls. This year, in the midst of a recession, off-the-cuff remarks were not enough. The voters wanted written plans on how the candidates would improve the economy. Clearly, for all its intrusiveness and power, television has not supplanted the written report when dialogue is truly serious. Writing is still mightier than the screen.