

Chemistry 3250
Writing good technical briefs

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*The first commandment of writing:
Know thy audience.*

- ▶ Your first thought when writing *anything* should go to who your audience is.
- ▶ Who will read what you are writing?
- ▶ What expertise can your readers reasonably be expected to have?
- ▶ What terminology are they familiar with?
- ▶ What do they need or want to know?

Two types of technical briefing notes

Informational briefing notes: intended to relay information only

Persuasive briefing notes: intended to persuade the audience to adopt a particular course of action

Know thy audience (continued)

- ▶ For a document to be distributed to a small audience (less than 10 people), aim for every single member of the audience to understand *everything* on *some* level.
- ▶ For larger audiences, this ideal may not be possible.
- ▶ For an informational briefing note, aim to write a note that can be fully understood by the people who need the information, possibly the technical staff, but also possibly some managers.
- ▶ For a persuasive briefing note, aim for the people who are most influential in the group to understand everything. The “most influential” people may not be the deciders, but the deciders’ technical advisors.
- ▶ Everyone should be able to understand the basic issues, if not every technical detail.

Organize!

- ▶ Even for a short work like a briefing note, think in terms of sections:
 - ▶ Introduction
 - ▶ Body
 - ▶ Conclusion (persuasive briefing note only)

The sections of a briefing note would normally *not* have titles. This is a way for *you* to think of the writing task.

- ▶ Think about the main points you want to make in the body (maybe make some point-form notes), and then think about introductory material (context, significance) that will help the message of the body be understood.

Introduction

- ▶ Depending on how the note is to be distributed and to whom, this can include basic information about its purpose, but also some context:
 - ▶ Problem addressed
 - ▶ Where the problem came from
 - ▶ Why it's important
 - ▶ Range of alternatives
- ▶ For a very short technical briefing note (less than one page), the introduction might be just one sentence, but could be longer if necessary.
- ▶ Try to keep the introduction under one third of the total length.

Body

- ▶ Tension between need for brevity and need to be clear
- ▶ As a rule, it's better to leave points out completely than to write something that isn't very illuminating.
The shorter the note, the more selective you have to be about what you include.
- ▶ Major points define paragraphs
- ▶ In a persuasive technical note, there should be a sense of building to a conclusion.
This requires a *logical ordering of ideas.*

Conclusion

- ▶ Mostly found in persuasive technical notes
- ▶ Should feel like a completely logical end point given the arguments previously presented
- ▶ Does not need to be subtle
- ▶ In shorter technical briefing notes, this should be kept to a single, short paragraph, possibly containing just one sentence.

General writing tips

- ▶ Avoid jargon, abbreviations and acronyms, unless you are sure they are well known to the audience.
- ▶ Write in a style that is natural to you. Avoid words and sentence constructions you would not normally use.
- ▶ Avoid excessively long sentences.
- ▶ Especially in short briefing notes, after writing a first draft, go back over your text and ask yourself if any words, phrases, clauses or sentences can be simplified or deleted.
- ▶ Turn on your word processor's spelling and grammatical highlighting, and pay attention to the hints they provide. Especially in technical writing, you can sometimes ignore some warnings (e.g. spelling of unusual technical words), but you should look at and think about every warning.