

Local Government advice MASTERCLASS



Paper 7

Better use of headings and subheadings

Headings can be used to improve impact and readability

We often comment about how you can use headings to add value. Headings and subheadings:

- **Help the reader to navigate the paper** – they tell the reader what will be covered in the paragraphs that follow. This is important not only for the first reading of the paper, but also for a subsequent reading or in a meeting situation as they help the reader relocate key pieces of information within the paper. They serve to break up information into manageable chunks.
- **Provide a structure and logic to the paper** – this strengthens the arguments and rationale for the conclusions and recommendations.
- **Highlight key pieces of information** that are of importance to readers, particularly for those readers with special interests in the topic or particular roles within the decision-making process e.g. financial implications; legal issues; or implementation issues.
- **Help to “tell the story”** – they can be used to emphasise the key messages. This allows readers to get a good summary of the paper and its contents as they are going through it. Headings like this are useful as a refresher just before a meeting or discussion on the paper.

Newspapers have been using similar techniques for centuries. Content on the internet, both webpages and blogs, has further developed the art of headings and subheadings to help navigation and to attract attention.

Over the past couple of years, we have seen a number of the better policy shops moving towards this style of “story-lining” headings. By this we don’t mean the sensationalism of click-bait – which rarely seems to provide a realistic indicator of the information covered. An accurate encapsulation of the content is critical.

Get the basics right

Just about everyone has a standard template for papers. Word or similar programmes allow templates to be set up so they can easily be followed by all authors. These templates typically include guidance on:

Heading levels and sizes/styles guide a reader through the paper. Different heading levels provide a way of grouping certain sorts of information that make the paper easier to follow. We don’t have strong preferences about levels – just make sure they are clearly distinguishable, easy to read, and used consistently.

Headings for issues that must be covered in papers – the most common one is financial implications. But individual Councils have their own set of compliance matters which must be addressed in papers e.g. significance and engagement; impact on rates; implications for local Māori; consistency with the long-term plan; legal implications etc. We know they are important. But, these lists of compliance type headings can easily overwhelm what is otherwise a tight paper. A better way to address them is to group them together into a checklist or table attached to the paper. However, if they raise significant issues – they are still worth covering in the paper itself, each issue discussed under its own heading.

Standard elements of a paper – including:

- Executive Summary/Key points
- Purpose/proposal
- Background/previous decisions...

And then to...

- Conclusions
- Next steps
- Recommendations.

It’s the bit in the middle where we see the best and worst of headings and subheadings.

Headings and subheadings provide a guide to the guts of a paper...

The middle of the paper is usually the bit that covers the actual analysis. It's the guts of the paper.

We strongly advise not to use headings like "Content" or "Discussion" or other similarly bland terms. We often see these sneaking into papers and in standard templates. They add little to the paper. They don't help with the logic, nor provide any guide as to the information that follows.

We saw a move to using questions as headings a few years ago. Things like "Why?" and "When?". This was a useful enhancement of the standard heading structure. But using statement headings and story-lining further improves readability and impact.

This middle part of the paper is where you have to:

- Think about the logic and structure of the paper
- Plan the paper out, i.e. the way the story will unfold
- Choose appropriate headings and subheadings which follow the logic and emphasise the key points.

This can be done as an interactive team session using a whiteboard or electronic means e.g. a PowerPoint-style storyboard, so you can juggle things around to get it right. Use whatever method suits you best.

This can also be a good time for a peer review on a more complex paper, as a critique of the logic and structure from a reader's point of view can be invaluable.

The use of some generalist headings is still acceptable, if there are good subheadings below which highlight the content. For example, "Results from public consultation" might be a reasonable heading if the subheadings underneath this clearly highlight the key issues raised. Another example might be "Options analysis" if the range of options were then articulated and the assessment of them presented in a clear table.

Don't be afraid of providing a road-map for a larger more complex paper. This usually takes the form of a clear paragraph, at the beginning of the middle section, which briefly summarises the structure of the analysis. This is particularly useful in omnibus-type papers which contain a number of separate, but related issues.

Some great examples...

This is one of the best examples we've seen recently.

Figure 1 Planning Brexit: silence is not a strategy (excerpt)

The Civil Service must ensure it has the right skills to support Brexit

Capability depends on skills, knowledge and resources. Many of the tasks involved in the initial preparations for the UK's exit from the EU require classic Civil Service skills – analysis, coordination and hammering out positions within Whitehall. A key issue right now is to ensure that these core skills are available to deliver Brexit work, alongside the Government's other priorities. Other more specialist skills will also be required, some of which may need to be brought in from the outside.

Prioritisation and coordination will be vital given the scale of the task

The difference between Brexit and other tasks faced by the Civil Service is the scale of the coordination required – David Davis has described Brexit as likely to be the "most complicated negotiation of modern times". For the Government, there are multiple counterparts to negotiate with and multiple interests to reconcile, which link to important domestic policies and interests. This is not just an issue for negotiations with the European institutions once Article 50 is triggered. In the preparation phase, there will be huge complexities in reconciling the positions of the devolved and UK governments. The Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Assembly, whose people voted Remain, have ambitions to maintain single market access and, for Northern Ireland, an open border with the Republic.

Whitehall has lots of experience of the EU and EU negotiations...

DExEU's staff include the 40 staff of the former Cabinet Office European and Global Issues Secretariat (EGIS), which has extensive experience of coordinating the UK's lines in European meetings, and 30–40 officials who were previously working in the FCO's European Internal directorate. EU negotiation is the bread and butter of the 130 staff of UKRep, who now report into DExEU for Brexit purposes. There has been a conscious decision not to denude other departments of the EU expertise which will be needed to coordinate their input into the preparations. Across Whitehall there are a lot of people who have worked in the EU or on EU issues at some point in their careers, but are currently in jobs that do not utilise that knowledge. A review is underway to map this capacity and ensure that it is properly utilised in the Brexit process.

Source: [Institute for Government](#)

Statistics NZ also uses the technique to good effect in their information releases. Here’s an example, but there are many more on their website.

Figure 2 Government finance statistics (snapshot)

Commentary

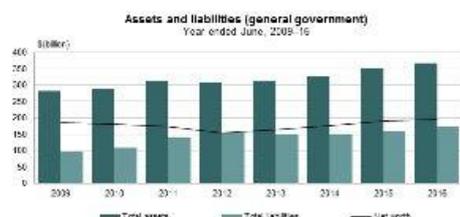
- [Net operating balance surplus continues to grow](#)
- [Slower rise in net worth](#)
- [Net debt to GDP ratio increases](#)

Net operating balance surplus continues to grow

Government finance statistics for general government show the net operating surplus was \$7.0 billion in the year ended June 2016. This was an improvement from the June 2015 year, when the net operating balance was a surplus of \$3.2 billion. The 2016 surplus was due to large and continuing income growth (up 7.0 percent from 2015), driven by an increase in tax intake, combined with relatively low growth in expenses (up 2.9 percent).

Slower rise in net worth

General government net worth totalled \$196.1 billion at 30 June 2016, up \$5.4 billion from 2015. This \$5.4 billion increase compares with the \$14.8 billion increase in the previous year. The slower growth in 2016 is due to a relatively large increase in central government liabilities, up \$10.5 billion from 2015. Local government net worth grew by \$2.7 billion in 2016, which compares with \$3.5 billion in 2015. Local government makes up 57.6 percent of total general government net worth.



Source: [Statistics NZ](#)

Some tips and tricks...

Just a few points to help you story-line the headings:

- Use a consistent style
- Keep them reasonably short – preferably to a single line
- Include a verb – this means they become a set of statements, and have more impact
- Stay on message – make sure they are consistent with the key points of the paper and the Executive Summary
- Don’t try to be too funny or clever – this can detract from the messages and be a bit obscure
- It’s OK to use a key piece of data – it can boost the impact of a statement.

One way of checking headings after you have drafted the paper is to use the table of contents function within Word. This allows you to pull out the headings only for review. It will help you to assess the structure and logical flow, and determine whether the headings relay the key messages.

This paper was written at NZIER in August 2017.

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