

Forms of Business Writing

There are numerous forms of what we might informally call business writing. These include: major reports, business plans, research studies, and memos. Some of these business writings may be rather long (20 to 30 pages), such as business plans; other business documents, such as memos, may be one or two pages. Regardless of length, you should strive to be concise, clear, and organized. Therefore, a longer report should not be longer because it contains more padding and fluff; rather, a long report may be warranted in instances where there is an enormous amount of material that needs to be covered. For example, an involved research study may require a long report with numerous tables and graphs. A simple analysis of some data related to a specific question may best be reported in a two to three page memo.

The major reason why business writing should be concise, clear, and organized is that business decision makers have an enormous amount of paper cross their desks (or across their computer screens nowadays). They have to quickly read something, or the most relevant parts, and move on to the next thing.

Large Reports and Business Plans

We cannot cover all forms of large business reports here, but we can make a few comments about them. Although organization is always important in writing, it is particularly important when a document is relatively long. You should make sure that the report or plan is well organized and the flow has logical consistency. Headings and subheadings for sections will aid in this. Headings not only help you organize the document, but they allow the reader to quickly locate a section of particular interest.

An important element of a longer document is an *executive summary*. An executive summary is the abstract of the entire report or plan. In the normal course of business, a decision maker may only read the executive summary (for such reports done in academic classes, your professor will read the entire document). Since a decision maker may only read the executive summary, you should make sure that it highlights the important points of the entire document. You should be sure that it includes the implications of any analyses and important recommendations that you are making. Write the summary with the assumption that it may be the only part of the document that a decision maker will read. Executive summaries are typically two to five pages long.

Memos

Memos are written for a variety of reasons. Typically, they are used to provide a brief discussion of an issue, a short analysis of some information, or a point of view about something. Memos may also present some specific information (e.g., the time and place a meeting will occur). The format of a memo will vary, depending on the purpose of it; however, there is a premium on conciseness. Most decision makers (your boss and people above him/her) will read

an enormous number of memos daily, either in paper form or via email. In a memo, you want to get to the point quickly, concisely, and clearly.

As noted, memos are often used to present a brief discussion of an analysis. This analysis may be of some sort of quantitative or qualitative information. Individuals in a variety of positions will often find themselves doing a short analysis and then reporting that analysis in a memo. This type of memo is often called a *memo report* in that it reports an analysis of information, but is shorter than a business report. A memo report is usually an internal document, written to a few others in your organization. Alternatively, a business report generally would be bound with colored covers and is suitable for distribution beyond your organization (depending on whether there is private or classified information in it).

An example of a short memo report is presented here **to illustrate the way you should organize information from an analysis**. This example presents the shipments/retail sales of Blu-ray discs for the third quarter of 2010, and then uses information from the first three quarters of the year and previous years' data to project the sales for the fourth quarter of 2010. The specific headings a memo report can use may differ from this particular example; you should follow any specific instructions that a professor or manager may give you. The important thing to note is that this example presents the most important material up front; the key information a decision maker needs to see is on the first page.

After the "TO," "FROM," and "DATE" of the memo, it should have a subject line (either "SUBJECT:" or "RE:"). This subject line and the first paragraph of the memo should provide the reader with enough information to decide whether he/she needs to read it. As Holly Weeks states, "Your opening must answer the reader's question 'Why am I reading this?' To do so, it needs to establish the relevance and the utility of the document as a whole."¹ If you believe that your analysis is important, you should make sure that the nature of it and the relevance to the reader is clear in the subject line and the first paragraph. Therefore, the first paragraph should be a clear statement of the purpose of the memo (e.g., what it reports).

A short statement of the method comes next. The Method section should provide the reader with enough information to evaluate the worth of what is being presented. Thus, the Method section should deal with such topics as the sources of the information presented and the nature of the analyses performed. If primary research was conducted (e.g., a study of some sort was conducted by the person writing the memo report), the Method section should spell out such things as the procedures that were followed, the nature of the questionnaire (if one was used), and the sampling procedures used to acquire respondents.

In this memo, a Findings section follows the Method section. In this particular case, the findings are somewhat more important than the recommendations. If the recommendations are the most important thing, then you may want to organize the memo to present them before findings.

¹ Weeks, Holly (2005), "The Best Memo You'll Ever Write," *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, Spring 2005, p. 3.

Note that the Findings section briefly presents the important results of the analysis without unnecessary embellishment. At this point, you do not want to overwhelm the reader with a lot of detail. Leave the detail for the Detailed Analysis section that begins on the second page. Therefore, if a decision maker wants to further investigate something you report in the Findings section, he/she can go to the Detailed Analysis section. The Findings section provides the most important *findings* of your analysis and the *implications*, stated briefly.

The Recommendations section provides a statement about what you believe should occur as a function of your analysis. In many cases, you may not have a Recommendations section; it depends on the nature of the analysis. When appropriate, however, you should state what course of action should be taken (or considered). This may take the form of a specific decision that should be made. In this case, you have recommended how much of an increase in the production of Blu-ray discs should be made, given your prediction of sales for the 4th quarter.

Depending on the depth of the analysis, you may have a Detailed Analysis section. You can think of this section as similar to an appendix. It presents the findings in greater detail. Here is where you would present detailed tables, charts, figures, and numbers. When possible, it is always better to present a lot of numbers in a table or chart, as it is difficult for a reader to deal with numbers in the middle of text. Remember the old saying “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

There will be some redundancy between the Findings and the Detailed Analysis sections. In fact, there should be nothing presented in the Findings that is not presented in the Detailed Analysis section in a more thorough manner. These two sections do not provide different information, just different levels of detail of the same information.

Again, this example of a memo report is not the only acceptable format. It illustrates the important aspects of any memo. This example presents the purpose of the memo immediately. The findings and recommendations are presented early in the memo (on the first page). The presentation of detailed information is relegated to the end of the memo. This organization allows the decision maker to decide quickly if he/she needs to read it, then presents the important information concisely and quickly.

TO: Justin Blake, Vice President of Marketing

FROM: John Willis, Research Associate

DATE: Oct. 6, 2010

RE: Estimated Sales of Blu-ray Discs for 2010

The 3rd quarter Blu-ray disc shipments in the United States were recently published by Digital Entertainment Group. Given that figures for the first three quarters of 2010 are now available, retail sales (which corresponds very closely to shipments to retailers) for the 4th quarter of this year and for the total of 2010 can now be estimated.

Method

The data were published by Digital Entertainment Group (<http://www.degonline.org/>) and collected for them by Swicker and Associates. The data show the shipments of Blu-ray discs to retailers for each of the quarters of a year from the 1st quarter of 2007 to the 3rd quarter of 2010. Previous analyses have indicated that shipments are an excellent proxy measure for retail sales in the same quarter.

Findings

Shipments of Blu-ray discs for the 3rd quarter of 2010 were 21.10 million units.

Assuming that shipments in the fourth quarter of 2010 are approximately 35% of the shipments for the year, it is predicted that shipments (and therefore retail sales) for the 4th quarter of 2010 will be about 52.82 million discs, a 36.7% increase from the 4th quarter of 2009.

Total retail sales for 2010 are predicted to be 150.92 million discs. Therefore, Blu-ray disc sales continue to increase and are expected to do so for the near future. It is also noted that there is some shifting of sales from the 4th quarter to other quarters of the year.

Recommendations

It is recommended that production of Blu-ray discs be increased by 20% over last year fourth quarter levels. This assumes that predicted figures are relatively accurate and that the discs continue to be a popular holiday gift.

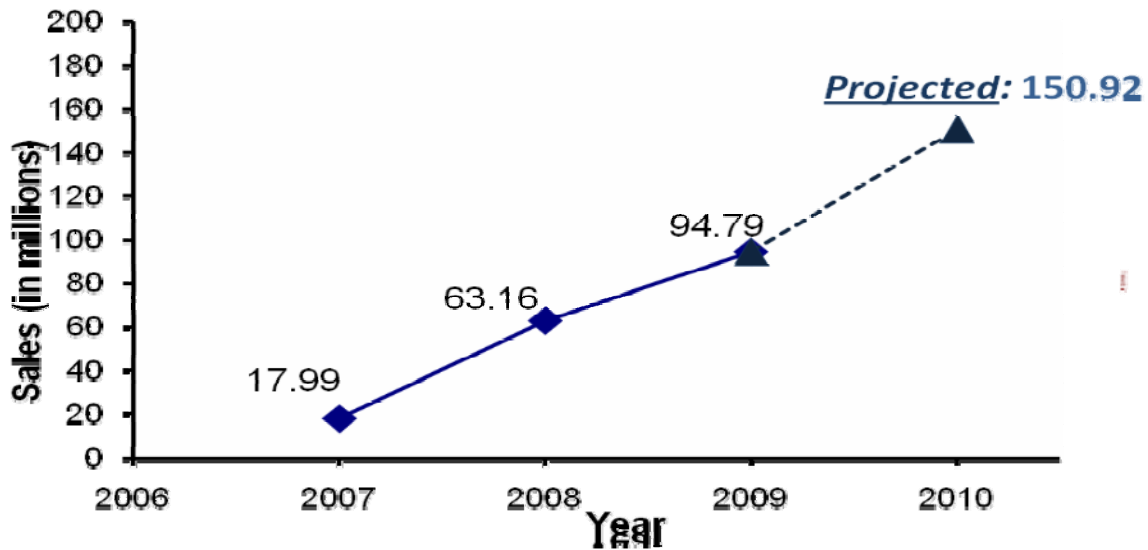
Detailed Analysis

- Shipments of Blu-ray discs for the 3rd quarter of 2010 were 21.10 million units.
- The 4th quarter of each of the past three years has been the strongest quarter, although the percentage of total yearly shipments that the 4th quarter represents has declined over those years (as Blu-ray discs become more popular and purchased more frequently for reasons other than as holiday gifts).

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Year Shipments (in millions)</u>	<u>4th Quarter Shipments (in millions)</u>	<u>Ratio 4th Q/Total Year</u>
2007	17.99	9.54	53.0%
2008	63.16	28.60	45.3%
2009	94.79	38.64	40.8%

- Assuming that there will be some decline in the ratio of 4th quarter to total year sales in 2010 from that of previous years, 4th quarter shipments are estimated to represent about 35.0% of the shipments for 2010. It is projected that shipments of Blu-ray discs in the US in the 4th quarter of 2010 will be 52.82 million units.
- Based on data from the first three quarters, projected shipments/sales for the total year 2010 are 150.92 million units, as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Annual Shipments of Blu-ray Discs



- The projected sales of 150.92 for 2010 (projected from the first three quarters of the year) is slightly higher (about 12% higher) than a linear prediction using regression. The linear regression was based on only three years of data and should only be considered a rough and potentially unreliable estimation. However, the proximity of the projected sales to the level predicted via regression suggests that sales for the total year will likely be in the 135 to 150 million range.

Chart 2: Annual Shipments of Blu-ray Discs (with linear prediction)

