

Written Reports

Overview

Narrative Report

Report Memo

Top-Line Report

Bulleted Report

Focus group reports have traditionally been presented in a narrative style. Alternatives include the report memo, the top-line report, and the bulleted report. Let's review the key ingredients of each of these. Because the narrative report is the most traditional, we'll examine it first.

Narrative Report

The narrative report is recognized by its length and its use of quotations. Typically, these reports are somewhere between 10 and 30 pages long, but occasionally, a report might become lengthy, reaching close to 100 pages. The danger of excessive length is that it limits readability, except for the most interested and ardent client.

Besides being clear and logical, the written report must also look attractive. Poor-quality printing, inadequate covers, and shoddy assembly convey undesirable impressions of the total research effort. If necessary, the researcher should seek assistance in editing the report for clarity, misspellings, and grammatical mistakes.



BACKGROUND

**Outline for
Written Report**

1. *Cover Page.* The front cover should include the title, names of people receiving or commissioning the report, the names of the researchers, and the date the report is submitted.
2. *Summary.* The brief, well-written executive summary describes why the focus groups were conducted and lists the major findings and recommendations. The summary is often limited to two pages and should be able to stand alone. Although this section is placed first in the written report, it is often the last part written.
3. *Table of Contents.* This section is optional and need not be included when the report is brief. The table of contents provides the reader with information on how the report is organized and where various parts are located.
4. *Purpose and Procedures.* In this section, the researcher should describe the purpose of the study and include a brief description of the focus group interviews. Remember your audience. Academics may want a detailed description of procedures, but most readers aren't interested in much beyond the number of groups, types of people included as participants, and where the groups were held. Often, it is helpful to describe in general terms the thought process behind the question route. The questions are not included here but may be included in the appendix. Sometimes, the discussion of procedures or methods is moved to the appendix.
5. *Results or Findings.* Most often, results are organized around key questions, themes, or big ideas. The decision on how to arrange your findings should be based on the purpose of the study. The conventional style is to take the questions in sequence. The limitation is that this style begins with the least important information, for indeed, the critical questions and more valuable results occur later in the focus group. In addition, some of the information is redundant because the same themes appear in several questions. Therefore, consider organizing by themes and begin with those points that are most beneficial to the reader.
6. *Summary or Conclusions.* A limited number of themes or key points are cited here. These statements are not limited to specific questions but often tie together themes that bridge several questions, if not the entire discussion. In this section, the researcher discusses factors or threads that cut across specific points. Occasionally, the researcher will draw attention to a finding that was unanticipated but nevertheless important to the study.
7. *Recommendations.* Recommendations are optional and not automatically included in focus group reports. The recommendations are future-oriented and provide suggestions as to what might be done with the results. Sometimes, they are expressed in very specific terms, and in other circumstances, they are more generally stated. This section is sometimes presented as "suggestions" or "ideas to consider" or other words that convey less formality.
8. *Appendix.* The final part of the written report is the appendix, which includes additional materials that might be helpful to the reader. For example, it is advisable to include the questioning route and the screening questionnaire. Additional quotations may also be included in the appendix. In some situations, the author may wish to include limitations and alternative interpretations.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the written report is the preparation of recommendations. The ability to do this well is what some people say distinguishes “data collectors” from “valuable consultants.” Consultants have the ability to see implications and recommend action that results in successful changes. Recommendations are challenging because they go beyond the evidence from the study to include other insights about the environment—traditions, barriers, and context of the organization and the problem. Therefore, it is valuable to have others assist the research team in preparing these recommendations. Decision makers may see the need for an entirely different course of action, and discussion is needed to arrive at the most desirable course of action. For example, in a recent university study, an important finding was the discovery of low faculty morale. The research team assumed that clear administrative changes were needed to address inequalities, remove barriers, and change incentives. When administrators read the report, their recommendation was that faculty should just quit whining.

A basic decision made by the analyst is what to include in the narrative report. The skeleton or framework of the report is typically composed of the key questions or the big ideas that have emerged from the discussion. These questions and big ideas serve as the outline for the results or findings section. These results can be presented using three different styles or models. The first style of presentation consists of the question or idea, followed by participant comments (the raw data model). The second style is a summary description, followed by illustrative quotes (the descriptive model). The third style is a summary description with illustrative quotes, followed by an interpretation (the interpretive model).

Here are examples of these styles from a series of focus group interviews with parents. The first example illustrates the reporting of raw data. In this example, the researcher included comments arranged into clusters or categories. The categories were selected by the researcher after reviewing all comments.

When appropriate, the comments can be arranged on a continuum, such as degree of support, agreement versus disagreement, intensity, and so on. This style of reporting has the advantage of providing the reader with a range of comments; however, the sheer length of the resulting report discourages careful reading. The raw data model of reporting is particularly appropriate when you are summarizing one focus group, when the researcher has limited experience (when volunteers conduct the focus groups), when the sponsor is interested in receiving a sizable number of comments, or when a descriptive or interpretive report follows.



EXAMPLE

Raw Data

Q. What do you look for in a youth organization?

Responses from parents included:

Category 1: Quality of Leaders

Good leaders who can be a role model. (J., May 2)

The person in charge must be a good influence because children idolize their leaders. (M., May 2)

I would like my son in a youth organization that has a dedicated adult leader. My son needs to succeed in something other than school. I want him to have the feeling of accomplishment that comes with hard work. (B., May 2)

Leaders are the most important thing in a youth organization. I don't want a crank for a leader. (E., May 2)

I want an adult who is patient and kind to work with my kids. (G., May 3)

Good leaders can accept kids just as they are. These adults can have fun with kids. They can laugh with kids and enjoy the company of young people. (S., May 3)

When I drop my daughter off at the youth organization for the first time, I watch what she does. If the leader brings her into the group and makes her feel welcome, I know that is a good leader. (R., May 3)

I was in scouts when I was young, and I still remember my scoutmaster. He had a sense of humor and always brought out the best in all of us. He always had time to listen to our problems. (B., May 3)

Category 2: Fits with Lifestyle: Cost or Convenience

Low cost. I can't afford uniforms and costly trips. (B., May 2)

I've got four kids, and I'm not going to run them to four different organizations. Either all the kids get involved in one organization, or none at all. (T., May 3)

Any organization that we would consider must be convenient. We have certain family times, and the group can't interfere with that. (E., May 2)

Both my wife and I work. We just don't have time to run both Jim and Jessica, our two kids, to different organizations. The youth organization has to be close enough so that our kids can walk. (B., May 3)

Distance from our home. The organization needs to be within walking or biking distance of our house. (G., May 3)

Cost is somewhat of a factor. (R., May 3)

Category 3: Emphasis of the Youth Organization

You know, what is most important for me is to be certain that the other parents are like me. I mean, we must have the same values on things like drinking and drugs. (J., May 2)

A wholesome environment. I want my son to be around the good kids in the community. (B., May 2)

A chance to get exercise and be out-of-doors. (M., May 2)

My son needs to be in a group setting. He has trouble getting along with others and needs to learn to cooperate and compromise. (G., May 3)

The only group activity my children need is the church. Everything they need is within the church. (S., May 2)

My daughter needs to be able to do something she can feel good about and to have the opportunity to do well. She's not sports-minded and needs an opportunity to get recognition for her own talents. (R., May 3)

Lots of activities. I want my kid to be busy. You know what they say about idle hands. (T., May 3)

The next example is a descriptive summary. This style of reporting begins with a summary paragraph and then includes illustrative quotes. The quotes selected are intended to help the reader understand the way in which respondents answered the question.

Q. What do you as a parent look for in a youth organization?

Parents most often cited two characteristics: quality of adult leadership and how the organization fits with the family lifestyle. Parents want their children exposed to adults who understand and relate well to youth. The issue of quality leadership was expressed in different ways, with more attention placed on personal attributes than on the knowledge or technical expertise of the volunteer. In this community, parents are also very concerned that youth organizations not get in the way of family, employment, or other social commitments. Parents favored youth organizations that fit with their present lifestyle. Factors mentioned with lesser frequency related to the emphasis of the youth organization and the opportunity for youth to achieve.

Typical comments by these parents included:

The person in charge must be a good influence because children idolize their leaders. (M., May 2)

Leaders are the most important thing in a youth organization. I don't want a crank for a leader. (E., May 2)

I want an adult who is patient and kind to work with my kids. (G., May 3)

Low cost. I can't afford uniforms and costly trips. (B., May 2)

I've got four kids, and I'm not going to run them to four different organizations. Either all the kids get involved in one organization, or none at all. (T., May 3)

Any organization that we would consider must be convenient. We have certain family times, and the group can't interfere with that. (E., May 2)



EXAMPLE

Descriptive Summary

The interpretive report builds on the descriptive report by including a section on what the data mean.



EXAMPLE

Interpretive Summary

Q. What do you as a parent look for in a youth organization?

In each group session, the parents cited a number of factors with two characteristics mentioned most often. These were the quality of adult leadership and the importance of convenience. Parents were concerned that their children be exposed to adults who understood and related well to youth. The issue of quality leadership was expressed in different ways, with attention placed more on personal attributes rather than on the knowledge or technical expertise of the volunteer. In this community, the parents were also very concerned about youth organizations not getting in the way of family, employment, or other social commitments. Parents favored youth organizations that were convenient, given their present lifestyle. Factors mentioned with lesser frequency related to the emphasis of the youth organization and the opportunity for youth to achieve.

Typical comments by these parents included:

The person in charge must be a good influence because children idolize their leaders. (M., May 2)

Leaders are the most important thing in a youth organization. I don't want a crank for a leader. (E., May 2)

I want an adult who is patient and kind to work with my kids. (G., May 3)

Low cost. I can't afford uniforms and costly trips. (B., May 2)

I've got four kids, and I'm not going to run them to four different organizations. Either all the kids get involved in one organization, or none at all. (T., May 3)

Any organization that we would consider must be convenient. We have certain family times, and the group can't interfere with that. (E., May 2)

Some parents had a strong sense of family values and recognized that participation in youth organizations can support those values (through caring leaders with similar values) or erode them (by taking time away from family activities). Other parents were tired from their hectic work schedules. They don't want anything that makes an already overloaded life more difficult.

The raw data reporting style is faster and easier for the researcher, but this style essentially transfers the work of analysis to the readers of the report. This style is recommended only as a prelude to the descriptive or interpretive styles or in situations where the analyst has limited skills or the audience prefers reviewing a sizable number of relevant comments. Both the descriptive and interpretive styles have the advantage of data reduction, with the interpretive procedure providing the greatest depth in analysis.

Report Memo

The report memo is a brief summary of key findings that typically is one or two pages in length. This report is usually written by the sponsor, with help from the analyst, and sent to people who participated in the series of focus groups. The purpose is to assure participants that they were heard by highlighting the key findings and the response by the sponsor. This report often goes beyond the findings to identify recommendations or suggestions for action. In some cases, it also identifies progress toward these goals. Often, this report is used in concert with a longer narrative report that might reference this document. The information in the memo is personalized to a particular audience, and more than one memo may be prepared from the same report, each one emphasizing items of concern for a particular group.

In the public and nonprofit sectors, the report memo can be sent to focus group participants and others interested in the study results. Focus groups in the public and nonprofit environments are dramatically different from private sector focus groups because public sector results are often shared widely with members, customers, patrons, or elected officials, whereas the private sector tends to have greater concern about proprietary information. Often, focus group participants in the public sector want to see the results of the listening process, especially if there was considerable participant energy involved in the focus group discussions. If no results are evident, there is a tendency for the participants to assume that the organization is nonresponsive. For example, in some communities of color and in some organizations, people have expressed hesitancy to participate in focus groups because they haven't seen results from past listening.

An effective strategy is to include four items in the report memo. First, the memo thanks participants for sharing their ideas and taking the time to participate. Second, the memo contains a summary of key findings. Third, the recommendations that resulted from the findings are described. Finally, there is a description of what is now being done, or what will be done, to accomplish the recommendations.

The following report was prepared for the Chair of the Department of Rhetoric at the University of Minnesota and for a planning committee for the annual Institute for Technical Communication (ITC). In previous years, the Institute had been offered for academics. The committee wanted to change the focus and design a program that would interest practicing technical communicators as well as academics. Thus, they commissioned a small market study of technical communicators from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to gather information about their continuing education practices and needs.



EXAMPLE

Report Memo

MEMORANDUM

To: ITC Planning Committee
From: Sandra Becker
Re: Focus Group Report

As you requested, I have completed two group interviews of technical communicators from the Twin Cities area. Using the membership list of the Twin Cities' Society for Technical Communicators, I invited an equal mix of managers and non-managers as well as corporate and contract writers drawn at random. The uniformity of responses between the two groups seems to indicate that the results of the interviews are reasonably reliable.

The following information provided by the groups should help you make decisions about the program, pricing, and promotional tactics for next year's ITC. Based on those findings, I offer several recommendations for your consideration.

Findings

- 1. Employers sponsored outside training opportunities for all respondents. Companies paid up to \$200/day for courses that lasted up to three days. All of the courses were technical in nature.*
- 2. Courses longer than three days would not be well received by employers.*
- 3. Sponsorship and credibility of instructors, the topics of training, timing, and location were the most important factors considered by potential participants. No single factor seemed more important than others.*
- 4. The following topics, in descending order of importance, were suggested as areas where employers weren't providing adequate training:*
 - a. On-line documentation*
 - b. Company politics, especially the role of the writer on the design team and within the company*
 - c. Project management, i.e., scheduling, estimating, budgeting*
 - d. Design, graphics, and graphics production*
 - e. Product evaluation*
 - f. The writer as teacher*
 - g. Product liability and the technical writer*

Recommendations

- 1. Keep the Institute less than four days. One of those days (or at least a half-day) could fall on a Saturday to demonstrate to employers the seriousness of the writers' desire to participate in the program. Keep the Institute in July as you have in the past.*
- 2. Charge over \$100/day, since the market will bear a \$200/day fee if the topics are of interest to potential participants.*
- 3. Since both groups concurred about the topics listed above, I think you should incorporate as many of their suggestions as possible into the program.*

4. Use their language in your promotional materials. For example, instead of listing instructional design as a topic, use their phrase, the writer as teacher or simply teaching.
5. Stress that the University is sponsoring the Institute and include some well-known experts on the program, since sponsorship and the expertise of presenters are considered important.

I would be happy to meet with your program subcommittee to provide additional information about the topics suggested by the respondents.

The following report memo was sent to focus group participants following a national series of focus groups on customer service. Note that the letter describes actions already taken and actions anticipated.



EXAMPLE

Report Memo Cover Letter

*United States Department of Agriculture
National Food and Agriculture Council*

Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Thank you for having taken time from your busy schedule to do us the favor of participating in one of the USDA focus groups we held this past winter. We knew of no better way to ensure that our USDA Service Centers will truly serve you than to ask you about your experiences, opinions and needs. That was our goal with these focus groups. You came, you talked, and I assure you we have been listening.

I read the enclosed report very carefully and have shared it with Secretary Glickman and the key management team in USDA. They, like I, are struck by your honesty, frankness and commitment to helping us improve our service to you. We have begun to act on what you told us. Here are some of the things we have already done.

We have developed and published customer service standards, reflecting what you told us. These standards are part of the enclosed USDA Service Center brochure. Copies are being sent to every USDA Service Center around the country. To make sure we deliver on those standards, the Secretary wants to make sure all our employees who work directly with the public are familiar with these customer service standards and how to achieve them. The Secretary also wants an easy-to-use, responsive, feedback and complaint system to be available to our customers.

Between now and the first of October 1996 we are pilot testing a training course for our employees who work directly with the public. Our goal is to do more than just meet your expectations of us. We want to exceed your expectations. You and all our customers deserve nothing less than the finest service which can be provided. We have also been testing a process where a sample of customers receive a telephone call shortly after they do business with us. The purpose of this call is to learn what we are doing well and what we can improve. We have contacted other customers by mail to learn more about how we are doing. We will probably conduct some more focus groups on selected customer service topics. Finally, I have also directed a small group to look at developing

a feedback and complaint system which will be, as you suggested, easy-to-use, prompt and responsive. I want a complaint system to be in-place soon—before Thanksgiving Day.

One additional, over-due change is on its way. We now have a system, which has been tested in several USDA Service Centers, where your name and address and related information will only have to be given once. We will share it among all the USDA Service Center partner agencies. We are committed to making the changes you asked for. We want these changes to be operational, in USDA Service Centers, this year.

I am grateful that most of our employees you deal with each day are thoughtful, knowledgeable and just plain "good neighbors" to you. But until all of us at USDA meet this same ideal of service, we are going to work at improving ourselves.

Again, thank you for helping the USDA do a better job of serving the American people.

—Maureen Kennedy
Chairperson

Top-Line Report

The top-line report seeks to convey the critical points in the most economical manner. It is a combination of bullets and narrative points that are prepared quickly for sharing with the client. These brief reports are prepared primarily from field notes and moderator memory and are presented back to the client within a day or two of the focus group. These reports are also called "top-of-mind reports," a term which is actually more descriptive of the process. Top-line reports are oriented toward the particular decision or problem that gave rise to the focus group. As a result, this report won't contain information unless it is specifically relevant to the purpose of the study. The top-line report is usually an interim or preliminary report that is prepared quickly and provides immediate findings that are expanded on in the later narrative report (sometimes called the full report). Top-line reports vary in length but are usually several pages long.

The top-line report is sometimes confused with the executive summary because they are approximately the same length. The executive summary is derived from the narrative report analysis, is prepared at the conclusion of the narrative report, and seeks to highlight critical points. By contrast, the top-line report is prepared quickly, without benefit of the careful analysis found in the narrative report. The emphasis of top-line reports is speed in reporting.

Top-line reports are standard in market research because sponsors want immediate results. Sponsors often view the groups from behind the one-way mirror and will make decisions based

on their own impressions if the analyst doesn't quickly provide a report. In many cases in market research, the study is completed by a seasoned moderator and is very focused (e.g., which ad has greatest appeal), which makes top-line reports straightforward. The top-line report possesses risks for novice moderators and in complex studies. Because they are prepared quickly and with minimal time for reflection, there is danger of error. The first impressions of the sponsor are difficult to modify, and sometimes the rapidly produced top-line report presents concepts that are later discounted, revised, or eliminated completely. The top-line report exists for a particular function—that of providing rapid, yet often sketchy, results to concerned clients.



**Top-Line Reports
Are Preliminary
and May Be
Subject to
Later Revision**

A friend told me about leaving his new car at the airport parking lot. The car was about a week old and his pride and joy. When he returned from the trip, he was shocked to find that the passenger door had a gigantic dent. It was consoling to discover that there was a note under the windshield wiper. His first impression was that the problem was now solved. The handwritten note said, "I banged into your car. There are lots of people watching me. They think I'm writing down my license number, but I'm not."



**First Impressions
Can Be Wrong**

REACHING VULNERABLE YOUTH: KEYS TO SUCCESS

What makes a successful program in working with young people at risk? What are the characteristics of a successful youth worker?

Characteristics of Successful Programs

- *Focused and articulated vision*

Best programs have a clear mission and a vision of how the organization will accomplish the mission.

- *Sustained and holistic approach*

Best youth programs make long-term commitments to people and integrate needs and strengths of child, family, school, and community.

- *Supportive, flexible atmosphere for staff*

Best youth programs have rules, policies, and expectations that are flexible and allow for creative problem-solving by staff.

- *Community-based collaboration*

Best youth programs are created from the community, not from the outside.

COMMENT: *While focus group participants often distinguished between the characteristics of people and programs, one cannot exist without the other. Caring, non-judgmental, creative staff cannot function as good youth workers without the support of an effective organization. Likewise, no organization can be effective without qualified people involved.*



EXAMPLE

Top-Line Report

Bulleted Report

The bulleted report is like an outline of the narrative report, but with carefully chosen phrases and words to convey the concepts clearly. The bulleted report is increasingly gaining popularity because of the speed with which it can be prepared and consumed.



Bulleted Report

REDUCING ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND OTHER DRUG PROBLEMS IN THE COMMUNITY

Most Serious Problem

- *Teens' opinion: Internal family conflict*
- *Parents' opinion: Alcohol use by teens*

Attitudes about Alcohol

- *Occasional use by older teens is acceptable*
- *Excessive use or drinking and driving are unacceptable*

Most Effective Preventive Strategy

- *Positive example of parents*
- *Realistic messages are effective*
- *Rules are important*
- *Keep teens busy*

Teen Advice to Parents

- *Listen carefully and offer practical advice*
- *Avoid nagging or lectures*

Influential Adults

- *Show respect, fairness, and consistency in enforcing rules*
- *Provide positive role models through their own behavior*

Suggestions

- *Parents should spend more time with teens*
- *Improve communication skills*
- *Teens can teach parents to communicate*
- *Inventory chemical-free activities for teens*
- *Community groups should work together*
- *Create jobs and community service opportunities*
- *Use cross-age and peer teaching*
- *Extend DARE through middle school*

Oral Reports

Overview

Types of Oral Reports—A Continuum of Possibilities

- *Unstructured Conversational Report*
- *Structured Conversational Report*
 - *Sponsor Debriefing*
 - *Informal Briefing*
 - *Formal Briefing*
- *Formal Presentation/Lecture/Professional Meeting*

Tips on Oral Reporting

- *Allow Time for Questions*
- *Sequence Your Comments*
- *Be Careful of the Ho-Hum Syndrome*
 - *Limit Your Points*
 - *Use Visuals and Quotes*
- *Tell Your Audience What You Want Them to Do*
- *Select the Right Reporter*

A key challenge to oral reporting is to know what type of report you are presenting and then to present your information in the most effective manner. Here are some thoughts about categories of reports and tips that make those reports successful.

Types of Oral Reports—A Continuum of Possibilities

It's a mistake to assume that all oral reports are alike, any more than all written reports are alike. Again, the maxim is that the report, be it written or oral, should be tailored to the circumstances. In some places, the oral report is the primary means of communication, and the written document, if it even exists, serves merely as a reference. Another organization might have an entirely different tradition where the oral report is a mere formality and decisions are based on the written document. Therefore, the guiding principle is to find out the sponsor's traditions and expectations, and to adjust the oral and written reports accordingly.

Oral reports can range from conversational sharing of ideas and findings to formal briefings. You may wish to include more than one of the following types of presentations.

Unstructured Conversational Report

The unstructured conversational report is an informal sharing of results between a team member, volunteer, or focus group participant and another person. These are spontaneous conversations that are not anticipated. Suppose that it's the day after a focus group on organizational morale, and you're walking down the hall on your way to a meeting. The agency head who requested that you do the focus group study sees you and asks, "Well, how's it going? Learned anything about morale?" This is an opportune moment! You can say that you're not yet ready to share results, or you can use the moment to bring up an early point. Admittedly, it's difficult when the study is not yet complete, and it's virtually impossible unless you've given it some thought. Yet, this teachable moment might not happen again.

This is perhaps the most neglected form of oral reporting. Unfortunately, too often the researcher does not anticipate the opportunity to share and is caught unaware. As a result, the messages presented are typically immediate unthinking reactions, highlighting the unusual results or emphasizing trivia. In the worst form, the messages can be harmful to the study because they confuse the recipient. Often, the results are given in the form of a story—perhaps an example shared by a focus group participant. Researchers should anticipate these opportunities and encourage team members to reflect on what they might say. Indeed, the team members might actually practice with each other and offer feedback and suggestions to others on the team to ensure consistency, clarity, and accuracy.

Structured Conversational Report

The structured conversational report is similar to the unstructured conversational report, except that the contents of the report are planned in advance and organized in a systematic manner. This reporting consists of one-to-one sharing of results, sometimes with a short handout of bulleted findings, a top-line report, or an executive summary. If more time is available, a complete narrative report could also be given. Sometimes, researchers have considerable time to organize their thoughts and structure the report, but in other situations, such as sponsor debriefings, the timing can be almost immediate. What is distinctive about the structured conversational report is that the content is deliberately arranged, but interruptions or questions can occur throughout the conversation. Therefore, the reporter must be thoroughly familiar with the information and able to adjust emphasis or points, depending on the conversation.

Sponsor Debriefing

In the market research tradition, the moderator concludes the focus group and then goes behind the one-way mirror to conduct a debriefing with the sponsor. The moderator or analyst has literally seconds to arrange the findings. Those who are most successful at this task anticipate the report from the moment they begin the focus group. Analysis and sharing results are thought about throughout the discussion, and, after a bit of experience, the results can be impressive. The debriefing usually addresses only the focus group that the sponsors observed, although the analyst might compare and contrast the discussion with those held previously.

Informal Briefing

The informal briefing is a short presentation to a committee or business meeting. Handouts are often used. This report is unique because it addresses the series of focus groups and presents findings in an informal manner. Points are carefully organized for brevity and completeness. In some situations, participants interrupt, challenge, ask questions, or reinforce the points. Other times, there are no interruptions, and questions are asked at the end of the presentation. Those who are most successful at informal briefings are clear about the major points and keep coming back to reinforce those central themes.

Formal Briefing

The formal briefing is orderly, civilized, and guided by traditions and rules. As a result, it tends to be more organized and involves the recipient to a lesser extent. There are fewer interruptions, and the reporter is given a time allotment that he or she is expected to fill. Following the presentation, participants are expected to ask questions. Handouts can be used effectively in this kind of format.

Formal Presentation/Lecture/Professional Meeting

At the highest level of structure, the formal presentation is often used for larger groups where exact amounts of time are allocated and questions may challenge the methodology, the findings, or the recommendations. Again, handouts should be used, and visuals are often desirable. These presentations are typical at annual meetings and professional societies.

Tips on Oral Reporting

Here are some suggestions that we would like to pass on about oral reporting. Experts tend to use these strategies, and indeed, we developed them from observing the best oral reports.

Allow Time for Questions

Before preparing the oral briefing or presentation, the speaker should find out how much time is available, where the report will be given, and who the audience will be. Those receiving an oral report usually wish to discuss findings, respond to the results, or ask questions. The most successful oral reports often allocate only one third to one half of the time for the presentation; the remainder is spent in follow-up discussion. Therefore, a 15-minute report may include a 5-minute presentation and 10 minutes for questions, clarifications, and discussion of future action.

Sequence Your Comments

The first few minutes in an oral report are critical because the speaker needs to set the stage quickly for the presentation of findings. The speaker should carefully lay out the framework, describing why the study is important to the audience. The oral presentation must focus on the key points, citing the most important finding first and then moving to less important find-

ings. Within these first few moments, the speaker should highlight several key factors. For example: Why was the study needed? What do we know now that we didn't know before? How can these findings be used? It is important to engage the audience quickly, to involve them in the report, to hook them into the study, and to explain clearly why the research effort was important.

The outline used in the written report does not transfer well to oral reporting. Often, researchers assume that a report is a report, whether it be oral or written, and that the sequence of information presented should be consistent in both kinds of reports. Oral reporting is different, and it requires special forethought and preparation. Some communications experts have recommended that the most important points be presented at the end of an oral presentation—that lesser points build toward the most critical point. This recommendation does not work well in evaluation or research reporting. Most reporting occurs in environments where people have time restrictions and limited patience, and where interruptions regularly occur. In these situations, brevity and conciseness are valued. Thus, the most important findings are better placed at the top of the list.

Be Careful of the Ho-Hum Syndrome

When planning for the oral report, it is helpful to consider the ho-hum syndrome, a predictable reaction of many decision makers. Ho-hum is best characterized by the questions going through the minds of the audience, such as: Do we really need this study? Don't we know this already? We paid to have somebody study this? Shouldn't this staff member be doing something really important instead of conducting these studies? To us, the results may seem enormously important with far-reaching implications, but to a busy decision maker, they can sound like hair-splitting and avoidance of real work. Much of what we discover in program evaluation and research efforts does tend to sound like common sense, and this tendency needs to be defused in the oral presentation. Often, the best procedure is to address it head-on by saying, "This study is of importance because. . . ." You can also tell the audience what the other possible hypotheses were, that we now know the correct course of action, and, as a result, time and resources are saved.

Limit Your Points

Attempt to present oral reports with fewer than seven points. This recommendation stems from studies in cognitive psychology that suggest that short-term memory capacity for most people is

limited to five to seven items. In addition, use short, active phrases to describe points as opposed to complete sentences. These brief phrases are designed to do two things: to convey the important concepts and to be easily remembered.

Use Visuals and Quotes

Visuals can effectively highlight the points. Key points and quotes tend to be more memorable when displayed visually. Selected quotations or even brief tape recordings of actual comments can also be very effective in the oral report, but they must be used in moderation. When it comes to visuals, the researcher has an array of options at differing levels of technology. One of the most basic is the briefing chart. This can be made on poster-board or foamboard and used to highlight key points. In addition, these charts can be reproduced as smaller 8½-by-11-inch hand-outs and shared with the audience. Investigate the possibility of using presentation software on your computer. Professional-quality results can be obtained with minimal skill. Equipment is available to project computer results on the screen, and portable large screen displays are just around the corner.

Tell Your Audience What You Want Them to Do

Sometimes, the purpose of the oral report is unclear to the audience. We have observed the presentation of oral reports to organizations, and when the reporter was finished, the group members just looked at each other for a few awkward moments. This uncomfortable silence was then followed by the type of action typical of elected bodies. Someone usually moved that the report be approved or accepted so they could then move on to really important matters. In these situations, the group receiving the oral report did not know why they were receiving the briefing because they were never told why it was being presented. At the beginning or end of the report, the reporter should have indicated what action was recommended or why the report was presented, such as to provide a briefing, to form a study committee, to continue discussion at a later time, to seek funds to implement the findings, to approve a new course of action, and so on. It is dangerous to assume that the audience will know what to do with the report.

Select the Right Reporter

Some people have a natural or acquired talent for preparing written reports or presenting oral reports. Select your reporter based on ability and credibility, not because of his or her role in

the focus group interview. Some individuals are gifted in presenting findings, and these people should be considered when selecting the reporter. As important, however, is the credibility of the reporter. At times, a volunteer or someone from outside of the agency or organization is deemed more credible. The best choice is to have an individual who is both skillful and credible present the results.

Naturally, the reporter will need to be sufficiently acquainted with both the process and findings. The reporter should practice the oral report and allow sufficient time for preparation and collegial feedback. Hastily prepared reports often have awkward construction, vague points, misspellings, and other problems that limit their acceptance by users.