Student’s Guide to Writing and Speaking Assignments

MPA Program

Written by Dr. Sandy Ribando, Professor Emeritus

Edited and Updated by MPA Faculty

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Writing

During the course of your time as an MPA student, you will have to do a lot of writing. Unlike your time as an undergraduate, these assignments will vary quite a bit. Some of your assignments will be typical, academic assignments. Others will help prepare you for the type of writing you are more likely to be asked to do in a work setting. This guide will help you sort out which is which, and how you should approach writing assignments.

Who is your audience?

Academic and applied writing are different because they are aimed at different audiences. An academic paper is meant for your professor to read, or perhaps for other academics to read if you are publishing your work. The style guide we use in the program (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*) applies to academic writing, it is published to help academics and graduate students who are writing for the purpose of publishing their work in academic journals.

But when you write in the workplace, you must give some serious thought to who will be reading (and perhaps taking action) on a report, memo, or press release you have written. So, think carefully about that audience and your purpose. For example, if you are writing a report to recommend the county change a portion of its zoning laws, your work will most likely go the county administrator and the commission. In other words, your work will be read by educated people with important positions who already have an understanding of zoning. That is quite different from writing a memo to all county employees to explain a change in the employee evaluation process. In the latter case, your memo will have to be written so it can be understood by people outside of the human resource management office, with widely varying positions and levels of education. Here are some questions to consider when approaching an applied writing assignment:

- What level of the organization is your audience on?
- How much does your audience already know about this issue or problem?
- What is the audience’s educational level?
- How sensitive is this topic? (NOTE: Typically, very sensitive issues are handled in face-to-face meetings, not by writing a memo or sending an e-mail. The reasons are simple: 1. In face-to-face meeting you can see the audience’s non-verbal communications, so you know how they are reacting in real time. That allows you to adjust your message as needed to ensure that your audience understands your message completely. 2. Memos can end up in the wrong hands, potentially embarrassing people and perhaps the whole organization.)
- What do I want to accomplish?
  - Send information
  - Persuade the reader to take a particular action
  - Identify a problem along with one or more potential solutions (Career tip: Whenever you identify a problem, identify one or more possible solutions. Leaders like problem-solvers, not complainers.)
Yes, when you are given an applied writing assignment, your professor will read it and grade it. But for you to get the best grade—and the best preparation for work—you should write as though you were writing this in a real workplace.

**Academic vs. Applied Writing Style**

The difference in audience makes a huge difference in style. Use the style that is suited to the type of writing you are doing. Here are some of the most significant differences between academic and applied writing styles:

**Table 1**  
* Differences between Academic and Applied Writing Styles  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Applied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>Typically rigid, following a set format</td>
<td>Flexible, but in large organizations, the structures may conform to set standards (Tip: know your organization’s expectations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence structure</strong></td>
<td>More complex structures (subordinate/dependent clauses, etc.); passive voice common</td>
<td>Simple sentences in the classic “subject-verb-object” pattern; direct voice is the norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td>More formal, complex words</td>
<td>Simpler vocabulary, suited to the educational level of the intended audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No jargon or colloquialisms</td>
<td>Jargon &amp; colloquialisms common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Sharing information for the purpose of adding knowledge to the field</td>
<td>Sharing information to get action or results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length</strong></td>
<td>Typically longer due to the need to ensure other scholars can 1) replicate the research if appropriate, and/or 2) to ensure clear connections are drawn and fully explained</td>
<td>Short and to the point—readers often already know the context and processes behind the subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Writing

Typical assignments in this program are research papers and case analyses. Your professors will provide information about these assignments in their syllabi and through assignment guidelines and rubrics. Read those instructions carefully and follow the guidelines in the style manual for how to cite work in the body of your paper and construct a reference page. For information on how to incorporate tables and other graphics in your academic writing, follow the guidelines the program provides in the *Tables and Graphs* portion of this guide.

Applied Writing

Typical assignments in this program are memos (letters), reports, and press releases. Here are some general tips for workplace writing:

- State your main point up front and build everything else around it.
- Double check your facts.
- Adopt a tone that is confident, courteous, and sincere.
- Don’t approach the writing focusing on what you want the recipient to do for you. Instead, emphasize how what you are writing about can benefit the reader (or the reader’s constituents if this is an elected official you are writing to). One exception: if your message is negative (such as, “I am not going to hire you”), don’t discuss how this could benefit the reader. It sounds fake—and you never want to come across as fake.
- Use bolding, underlining, or italics to call attention to information that is particularly important, such as a due date.
- Put all the information your audience needs in the memo or report **and no more**.
- Be concise. Generally, as people move up in the organization, they have less and less time to waste reading wordy, poorly written documents with missing information.
- Edit your work!!!! Your writing may be the first impression an elected official, citizen, or senior manager in your organization gets of you. Don’t make a bad impression with bad grammar or misspelled words. At best, your audience will think you aren’t very smart. At worst, they will interpret your work as the product of laziness.

Keep your writing **accurate, brief, and clear**.

And, for any writing taking place in a government workplace, there is always one central question: If this is printed in the newspaper, what will my grandmother think?

**Memos**

A memo is basically just a letter. It should include the date, the recipient’s address, a salutation, a body which contains one or more paragraphs conveying the content of your message, and a closing. The most common format is what is known as “block”
where everything is left justified (flush with the left margin). The sample below illustrates the different parts of a memo, along with proper spacing.

In the sample below, notice how the first full sentence announces the purpose of the letter.

July 2, 2014
Future Leader
2222 Smith Street
Augusta, GA 30904

Dear Future Leader

Congratulations! You have been accepted into Georgia Regents University’s Master of Public Administration degree program as a regular student beginning with the Fall 2014 term.

Orientation for new MPA students will take place on the first night of class in PADM 6000, Survey of Public Administration. During orientation, we will discuss program policies, the advising process, and introduce you to some of the opportunities you will have as an MPA student.

In the meantime, I have attached for you a long-range advising plan. This plan is a draft, and is subject to your agreement and/or change. If you choose to pursue the Criminal Justice track you will need to let me know that because it will result in changes to this advising plan. A schedule of classes which runs through Summer 2015 is also included for your information. All MPA courses are “by permission” only, which means you must clear all class selections through me before enrolling. Otherwise, you will be “locked out” of courses.

For the fall term, I suggest you enroll in PADM 6000, Survey of Public Administration along with PADM 6600, Tools for Decision Makers. Both courses are required for all students and provide a good foundation for all future coursework.

Please feel free to contact me at (706) 737-1710 with any questions you may have or to discuss this proposed schedule.

Sincerely,

Saundra J. Reinke, DPA
Professor and Director, MPA Program
Reports

Reports can take a variety of forms. Typically, however, they contain the following elements:

- **Executive summary**—like an abstract, this summarizes the major findings and recommendations from the report.
- **Introduction**—covers the purpose of the report and indicates who asked for it and why
- **Body**—the content of the report, may use a problem-solution, chronological, geographical, or topical organizational structure
- **Conclusions**—the report should end with a summary of the major findings and provide recommendations to decision-makers
- **Appendices**—these may include such things as the data collection instrument(s), a reference list, a discussion of the methodology used to collect the data, copies of important memos, etc.

The structure of the body of the report should be dictated by the purpose of the report.

Report format

- **Single-space**
- **Block format** like a letter (everything flush to the left margin, with no paragraph indentation). Put an extra blank line between each paragraph like a memo.
- **Use footnotes instead of endnotes.**
- **Use a cover page**
- **Use headings and subheadings to help the reader navigate.** Headings should be flush with the left margin, in bold type. Subheadings should be flush with the left margin, and underlined.

Due to the length of reports, an example is not included. However, if you would like to look at samples, go to the General Accountability Office (GAO) or the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and look at their reports.

Press Releases

A press release is a written statement to the media. It may announce a public meeting, a road closure, opening of a new park—really anything your organization may want to have covered in the press. They key to getting your material in the news is to find out what local news media considers “newsworthy” and giving that to them!

A typical press release includes a title (in bold face), opening paragraph that expands a bit on the headline, followed up by the rest of the story’s content. End with directions for readers/listeners that may be helpful, such as where they might go to get additional information. Keys to success
• Choose a headline that is catchy
• Write the release exactly the way you want it to appear in the local paper (reporters can be lazy, too, you know!)
• Answer the critical “who, what, when, where, and why along with how” questions.
• Keep it compact, clear, to the point
• Stick to the facts—and make sure they are facts!
• Avoid complicated language, jargon, complex sentences—keep your writing simple and straightforward!
• Make sure your work is free of grammar and spelling errors.
• Send your press release out in the morning to give reporters enough time to consider what to add/subtract before deadlines hit.

A sample begins on the next page.
MIXED USE PLAN UNVEILED FOR NORTH AUGUSTA’S HAMMOND’S FERRY
AND AUGUSTA GREENJACKETS SALE ANNOUNCED

Plan to include Hotel and Conference Center, and Sports & Entertainment Facility

North Augusta, SC -- A proposed mixed use plan for North Augusta’s riverfront calls for a $150 million public-private investment that would include restaurants, retail, apartments, townhouses, a hotel, offices, conference center, parking and a City owned sports & entertainment facility, which would be the new home of the Augusta GreenJackets, as well as many other events throughout the year. The proposed plan for the Riverfront Center at Hammond's Ferry will link downtown North Augusta with the Savannah River in accordance with the project's original vision and master plan.

City Administrator Todd Glover emphasized that the plans for the project are proposed, and many steps need to be taken before the project becomes a reality.

Mayor Lark Jones stated that, “For years the City has had a vision for a mixed use development on our riverfront. Hammond’s Ferry is an excellent beginning. This proposal is the most exciting thing to happen in North Augusta since the building of the Hampton Terrace. For years our citizens have been clamoring for more restaurant and entertainment opportunities in the City, and we have long needed more lodging space. This project would fulfill those demands and be a catalyst for other development in our downtown area and the rest of our City. There will be a detailed approval process that requires the consent and cooperation of the Aiken County Council, The Aiken County School Board, City Council and most importantly, the Citizens of North Augusta.”

The proposed plan is a further enhancement to the previously approved plans for the Hammond's Ferry Riverfront Center. The new mixed-use neighborhood is proposed to
be located within the community’s previously zoned commercial district adjacent to the 13th Street Bridge crossing the Savannah River. Development would initially include a new hotel, 75 townhouses, 225 apartment units, three to four restaurants, retail space totaling 30,000 square feet, 40,000 square feet of offices, 20,000 square feet of conference space, 900 parking spaces and a $28 million sports & entertainment center.

Additionally, it was announced today that the Augusta GreenJackets club is being sold by Ripken Baseball to a local and regional group comprised mostly of Augusta, Atlanta, North Augusta and Aiken, South Carolina based investors. Glenn Tilley, President and CEO of Ripken Baseball stated, “Ripken Baseball is in the process of transferring the majority of our ownership stake in the Augusta GreenJackets. We have proudly owned and operated the GreenJackets for the last seven years; however, our focus is evolving and shifting more squarely to the youth market. As a result, it is time for a transition.”

Cal Ripken, Jr. added, “We have built wonderful relationships in Augusta and want to see baseball succeed in the region. The way I see it, we aren’t leaving Augusta, simply changing roles. Multi-purpose development along the river has always been exciting to me and I look forward to the success of our new ownership group.”

The team’s sale is led by Agon Sports & Entertainment whose principals are Jeff Eiseman, former Ripken Baseball Vice President, and Chris Schoen, of Greenstone Properties, an Atlanta based developer who has had Minor League Baseball ownership with previous teams in Salem, VA, Fort Wayne, IN, and Savannah, GA. At present this Augusta sale is pending formal approval of Minor League and Major League Baseball.

Schoen commented, “Greenstone is delighted to have the opportunity to work on such an exciting mixed-use waterfront development. The riverfront offers extraordinary investment appeal as a sustainable addition to both North Augusta and Augusta. The proposed public-private investment would be delivered at a quality level consistent with the original vision of Hammond’s Ferry and would create a pedestrian and live-work-play environment unequaled anywhere in the Southeastern United States.”

According to the City, the GreenJackets and Greenstone Properties of Atlanta expressed interest in developing some of the mixed-use components of the project at Hammond’s Ferry, along with master developer LeylandAlliance LLC. Howard Kaufman of LeylandAlliance LLC said, "The Hammond's Ferry Riverfront Center will help the City fulfill its vision to complete North Augusta's original 1892 master plan by bringing downtown North Augusta to the riverfront. This comprehensive development plan, particularly with the multipurpose public facilities, will truly create a meaningful destination for the citizens of North Augusta, and offers a tremendous economic development opportunity for the City.”

“We have been working with the City of North Augusta for the past few months” said Jeff Eiseman of the GreenJackets. “We are all hopeful the result will be something with which everyone will be very happy. It is truly a regional solution that will benefit not only the City of North Augusta, but downtown Augusta, Aiken and the surrounding region. In addition
to housing the GreenJackets, the new center would accommodate a variety of entertainment and sporting events including concerts, football, soccer, lacrosse, and both City-sponsored and private special events."

The City would extend the existing Tax Increment Finance district (TIF) that encompasses Hammond's Ferry. One of the keys for the project is the construction of a new hotel, as this will be a large contributor to resultant TIF revenues. The City has been working with a group that would own and operate the proposed hotel.

The City would lease the new sports & entertainment venue to the GreenJackets on a long term basis with the team committing to pay annual rent, a surcharge on tickets for both baseball and special events, and potentially a percentage of other revenue. The lease would be guaranteed by the minor league baseball team, and the City would issue development bonds to fund the facility, parking, and other infrastructure, with all other components provided by the private sector. The development bonds would be repaid from lease and other payments from the GreenJackets, and from resultant TIF revenues. Glover stressed that the City would not be spending any general fund property tax dollars on the project and that the new development would essentially pay for the public investment.

When all phases of the project are completed, Glover said the overall spending would be about 70 percent by the private sector and 30 percent public. The public financing components of the project would have to be approved by City Council. Glover said that Council had been briefed on numerous occasions about the potential of the project, which does include a public park along the riverfront as well. Several components of the project could be built simultaneously, and if the City reaches all necessary approvals and agreements, construction could begin as early as the summer of 2013, allowing for delivery of the heart of the project, including the sports facility, for opening day of baseball for the spring of 2015.
E-mail

In today’s workplace most written communication comes in the form of e-mail. E-mail is quick and easy. But it is also easily misused and abused. To help you handle e-mail in a professional manner, here are some handy guidelines.

1. Keep to one subject. Trying to cover multiple subjects in one e-mail usually creates a really long e-mail no one reads.

2. Be brief and to the point.

3. Have your own style, but make sure it is not sloppy. Your message reflects you (and possibly your organization if it is going to an outside audience), so make sure it is grammatically correct, capitalizes appropriately, and is free of spelling errors.

4. Use group e-mail sparingly. Send e-mail to groups only when every person in the group needs the information. Don’t hit the “reply all” button unless you have something substantive to contribute and it is a situation when collective input is needed. (No one wants to read your “me too.”)

5. Use blind copy and courtesy copy appropriately. Only send a courtesy copy to people who are involved. Use blind copy whenever you have a long list of recipients (to keep others from having to scroll through long lines of addresses) or there is a need to protect people’s identities (for example, when surveying people through e-mail).

6. Do not use e-mail as a way to avoid personal contact. E-mail is not appropriate when sending confusing or emotional messages; face-to-face contact is always better for those situations.

7. Remember that e-mail isn’t private. E-mail is organizational property and can be retrieved, examined, and used in court. Never put anything in e-mail you wouldn’t be willing to write on a postcard. Remember that e-mail can be forwarded—your message could easily end up going to an unintended audience.

8. Use the subject field to indicate content and purpose. If the message is long, add the word “long” in parenthesis at the end to alert the receiver that they will need to take some time with your message.

9. Don’t send chain e-mails, virus warnings, or junk mail around the workplace (or to your professors, either!). Virus warnings should be handled by your IT professionals—and the rest is just unprofessional.
10. Remember: Tone can’t be heard in an e-mail. No one can see your body language, or hear your tone of voice, to know “it’s just a joke.” All they can read are your words. So, choose them carefully.

Tables and Graphs

During the course of your time in the MPA Program, you will be asked to write both academic research papers and reports and letters more typical in the workplace. Regardless of the type of writing you are doing, graphics can be a great way to communicate and help your audience “see” statistical data. A well-designed graphic can summarize data and present it in a way that engages your audience unlike a paragraph stuffed with numbers that puts audiences to sleep. However, most people do NOT know how to select a graphic that suits the data or design it in a way that will effectively communicate. The information below is meant to cover that gap.

Types of Graphics

- **Tables** are matrices with cells to hold data for various groups/alternatives along certain dimensions.
- **Pie charts** are circles cut into proportional chunks based on relative share of the “pie”
- **Line graphs** use lines that show changes in data values over time
- **Bar graphs** are a series of bars that depict how much of the data falls into each group

Basic Rules for Graphics

1. Decide what you want the graphic to communicate. It is best to write down a purpose statement for the graphic, such as “This graphic will show how much the State of Georgia has spent on higher education over the past 25 years.”
2. Use the purpose statement to choose an appropriate type of graphic.
3. Place the graphic in the text where you will discuss it. If the graphic will be cut in parts because it is too close to the bottom of the page, place it on the next page but make sure you refer the reader to the table or graph on the next page. **DO NOT put graphics in appendices.** That is a common practice when sending articles out for publication—it is totally inappropriate for all other types of writing. (Yes, I know the style manual says this is the way you should do it, but this is an exception to the rules.)
4. Label!!! Labeling should be clear, detailed, precise, and thorough. Your audience should not have to wonder what a particular color, column, or row means.
   a. If two or more things are to be compared with each other, put them next to each other.
   b. Put labels next to what they are labeling.
   c. Use fonts big enough to read.
5. If you do not intend to discuss the graphic, don’t include it. As a general rule of thumb, you should have 2-3 sentences above or below the graphic that underline the importance of the data and the message you want your reader to receive.

6. Honor the source by noting the source at the bottom of the graphic and again in your reference list.

7. DO NOT BLINDLY copy graphics you find on-line and drop them into your paper. That may be quick and easy, but it is rare that such graphics conform to APA style. NOTE: The style manual only covers tables, so use this guide for other graphics.

8. DO NOT add “extra stuff” in an attempt to make your graphic more attractive. Doing so, just clutters up the graphic—and usually muddles your message.

Tables

- Best used to present large amounts of data in an efficient manner.
- They do NOT show trends or impact.
- Resist the temptation to “jazz it up” with colors, etc. Let the data speak for itself.

Example

Table 1
Veteran and Retiree Populations by Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Type</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>State of Georgia</th>
<th>Burke</th>
<th>Columbia</th>
<th>McDuffie</th>
<th>Richmond</th>
<th>Aiken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veteran population</td>
<td>21,798,077</td>
<td>717,855</td>
<td>1,953</td>
<td>13,664</td>
<td>2,080</td>
<td>21,228</td>
<td>14,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran population as a % of total population</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military retirees as a % of veteran population</td>
<td>1,917,242</td>
<td>90,554</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4,458</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>7,016</td>
<td>1,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of veteran population</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a American Community Survey, 2005-2009, U.S. Census Bureau

TIPS:

- The table above was created using the “insert table” option in Word.
- Once I finished creating it, I went back to the Table Tools tab (which appears on the top of the screen when you start creating a table), chose the “design” tab,
then went to borders. Once there, you will see you can actually make the lines in
the table “disappear.” Taking advantage of that option lets you create the table in
an easy to see and use format, then eliminate all the lines except the bottom and
top ones to meet APA style expectations.

• Notice that I pulled data from two different sources for this table. In this case, the
goals was to account for all “military affiliated” populations, so both veterans and
retirees had to counted. If you check, you will see that the Census Bureau’s
definition of “veteran” does not include retirees. Hence the need to go to another
source for that population. Lesson Learned: ALWAYS check to see how
variables are defined to see if the data you found actually meets your need.

Pie Chart

• Use ONLY to show the relationship between parts of a whole adding up to 100%.
• Limit the number of slices to no more than 6 or 7. If you have more categories
than that, lump the remainder into a category called “other.”
• It is best to start with the largest category or slice at the 12:00 position and move
counterclockwise to your smallest segment, saving “other” for last.
• Resist the temptation to “jazz it up” with 3-D effects, etc. They typically just
distract.
• Pay careful attention to color choices. They may show up beautifully on your
screen. But if you have to print your document for others to read, what will they
look like in black, white and grey?
• Pie, line, and bar charts can be created in Word itself, using the “insert” and
“chart” option OR you can create an Excel spreadsheet, create the graph, then
copy it into Word (or PowerPoint).
• Normally, pie charts should be used when only absolutely necessary.
Example

Figure 1
U.S. Federal Spending 2013

Source: Office of Management and Budget

TIPS:

- First, note that the pieces cover all types of spending—a piece ALWAYS represents parts of a whole.
- There are different ways to label pie charts. The example in Figure 1 places the names and percentages on the pie itself. I could have put just the percentages on the slices and had a “legend” or listing on the graph that showed what each color meant.
- I could have put the dollar figure here, but my purpose was to help the reader see how the slices related to the whole and to each other. Using the percentages helps the reader quickly see that the biggest portion of federal spending is social security, not national defense. This is why you need to think carefully about the message you want your graph to send before you create it.

Line Graph

- Use primarily to show how things change over time (trends). You can use multiple lines to show how different categories change over time as shown in the example.
- The X axis (horizontal line) is always time; the Y (vertical) axis uses a measure that is appropriate to what the graph is trying to communicate.
• Line graphs illustrate trends quite well; however, it can be difficult to spot discrete data points. In the example on the next page, you can see what I mean by trying to figure out what the difference is between U.S. federal government receipts and outlays in 2002.

• Another great use for line graphs is projections. That is, projecting what a trend will be in the future. This is a common use for line graphs in budgeting because it quickly communicates where things are headed—very handy when trying to communicate with an audience that may not be familiar with the budget (such as elected officials or the general public).

Example

Figure 2
U.S. Federal Government Receipts and Outlays Since 1975 in Millions of Dollars

![Graph of U.S. Federal Government Receipts and Outlays Since 1975 in Millions of Dollars](image)

Source: Office of Management and Budget

TIPS:

• Be careful about putting TOO much data into a line graph. For example, the data in the example above is part of a MUCH bigger Excel spreadsheet (downloaded from the White House website) that shows federal government receipts and outlays since the founding of our nation, then breaks them down into on-budget
and off-budget. If I had tried to put ALL that into one chart, it would have been an unreadable mess. Since all I wanted to do was show recent trends in overall spending, I highlighted the portion of the spreadsheet I wanted, then created the graph.

- Pay careful attention to color choices. They may show up beautifully on your screen. But if you have to print your document for others to read, what will they look like in black, white and grey?
- Think about scale. For example, I put the fact that the numbers in the Y axis are actually in millions of dollars in the title. If I had put the number in completely (added 6 zeros), imagine what that would have looked like. Whenever you do something like this, your labels need to alert the reader so he or she will know what you have done. If I didn’t have that in the title, the graph would have been quite misleading as to the size of federal spending/receipts.

**Bar Chart**

- Use when you want to compare values that are noticeably different
- They can be used to convey information that could have been in table form (see the example on the next page)
- You can also use a bar graph to compare values over time.
Figure 3
Comparison of Educational Attainment between the Five Census Tracts with the Highest Poverty Rate in Augusta-Richmond County (2013)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

TIPS:

- As always, pay careful attention to color choices. They may show up beautifully on your screen. But if you have to print your document for others to read, what will they look like in black, white and grey?
- Make sure your labels and title clearly communicate what is being depicted in your bar chart.
- And, as always don’t clutter your chart up with complicated shading, patterns, or other visuals in an attempt to make your graphic more impressive or “entertaining.” Let the data do your talking and don’t distract the reader with anything that isn’t essential to communicating your message.
Public Speaking

Almost everyone is nervous about being asked to speak to a group—it is the most common fear in the United States. So, if you are nervous, you are normal. Hopefully, this guide—and practice in our classrooms with our professors—will help you overcome your nerves and develop good, solid speaking skills you will be able to count on in your professional future.

Who is your audience?

Just as with writing, thinking carefully about your audience is critically important. For example, if you are presenting a proposed zoning ordinance to the county commission, you are probably dealing with a group that has some familiarity with zoning—and perhaps with the proposed ordinance. On the other hand, if you are doing a presentation for the general public, to explain that same ordinance, you have to remember you will be talking to people who may know little or nothing about zoning, much less the proposal. (Or they may THINK they know everything about it, which may be scarier for you as the presenter!) Here are some things to consider:

- What level of the organization is your audience on?
- How much does your audience already know about this issue or problem?
- What is the audience’s educational level?
- What do I want to accomplish?
  - Send information
  - Persuade the reader to take a particular action
  - Identify a problem along with one or more potential solutions (Career tip: Whenever you identify a problem, identify one or more possible solutions. Leaders like problem-solvers, not complainers.)

Structuring your presentation

Once you have put together the information you need to create your presentation (you know—do research!), give some thought to how you structure it. The structure can either hinder, or help, your audience get your message. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, every audience needs the answers to these three questions:

1. Why should I pay attention to you when I can think about more interesting things? (Or play on my smart phone, answer my e-mail, hang out on Facebook, etc.)
2. Now that I am listening, why should I care about this issue?
3. I agree with the significance of the topic, but how are you justifying your ideas?
4. So, now that I am convinced, what do you want from me?
If you don’t answer these questions, it is guaranteed that at least some members of your audience will tune out your presentation, and that could mean your ideas never get put into action!

To structure your presentation effectively, it is best to

- begin by placing your topic in context
- providing an outline or road map of where your presentation will be going can also be helpful to an audience
- organize your material logically
  - problem-solution (be sure to discuss the pros and cons of each solution—it reinforces your credibility)
  - chronological (sometimes time order makes the most sense)
  - geographical (sometimes, discussing different locales makes the most sense)
  - whichever pattern you use, make sure it fits with your material and is easy for your audience to follow
- conclude by briefly recapping your presentation and offering proposed actions or options

Preparing for your presentation

- Practice, practice, practice!!!!! This is particularly true when
  - You have a time limit. Presentations at formal meetings such as commission meetings or to senior leaders often have time limits. Busting a time limit is NEVER a good career move. The only way to make sure you will stay within your time limit is to practice.
  - You are nervous or afraid of public speaking. Practice helps you become comfortable with the material. The more comfortable you are with your material, the less nervous you will be.
- Develop an appropriate style—controlled enthusiasm is the best approach
  - Pay attention to your posture—stand up straight, don’t lean
  - Make sure your gestures are natural and relaxed
  - Make eye contact with your audience and smile at them. It relaxes you and reminds you that you are talking to people who actually want you to succeed (well, most of them do anyway!).
  - The best voice to use is your own
  - Don’t distract your audience from your material. Common ways speakers do this is by
    - pacing back and forth
    - playing with keys, pointers, or other items held in the hands
    - playing with one’s hair or clothing
    - dressing or presenting oneself in an unprofessional or inappropriate manner. Think about the audience when trying to decide whether your clothing or jewelry could be considered unprofessional or inappropriate.
• telling jokes
  o Don’t bore your audience to death. This can be a tougher assignment than you think, since some work-related material is considered boring by most people (think budgets!). Common ways speakers do this is by
    ▪ using a monotone voice
    ▪ repeating the same point over and over . . .
    ▪ reading PowerPoint slides or a prepared statement to the audience (after all, you could have just given them the written material)
  
• Get familiar with where the presentation is to take place—check out its size, audiovisual equipment, etc.
• Make sure you have any supporting materials you need with you for the presentation—charts, photos, handouts, etc. And make sure those materials look professional and are free of errors. They represent you—and your organization.
• Create a list of likely questions—and prepare answers for them in advance. You will look amazingly smart and professional when you can answer questions in a comfortable, relaxed, professional manner.
  o BUT, if someone throws a question at you that you don’t know the answer to, DO NOT try to fake it. Simply respond with “I don’t know the answer, but I will be glad to get back to you with the answer.”
  o Then make sure you know how to contact the person—and get back to them with the answer!

Sometimes, you may find yourself having to lead or participate in a public meeting. In forums like this, where audience members can ask questions (and sometimes speeches!), you will not only need to be ready to answer questions—you will also have to know how to handle interchanges in a professional manner. These tips can help you

• Set a time limit for audience members “speeches” to keep one individual from dominating the meeting.
• Answer the question you were asked in a polite manner (no matter how irritating or insulting the questioner was) then move on to the next person’s question.
• Avoid isolated one-on-one type dialogues with specific individuals.
• When challenged, be candid and firm but avoid over responding
• Stay in control of yourself—and the meeting. You can’t control the meeting if you are not in control of yourself.
• Try to keep audience members from wandering off into unrelated topics. Do your best to bring the conversation back on track, politely.
• If you are not sure just what the person is asking, try repeating it back to them then adding “is that what you meant” to the end.

The Do’s and Don’ts of PowerPoint

Students (and professionals in the workplace) often abuse PowerPoint. The first thing to remember is that it is visual AID. In other words, it isn’t your presentation—it is a way to assist your audience in following your presentation, understanding it, and
remembering it. It is NOT supposed to be your report or memo stuck up on a series of slides. For best effect,

- **Keep your visual aids**
  - Visible (watch your color choices and font size here—and check them in the setting where you will do the presentation)
  - Simple
  - Colorful—but do not let your visual aids upstage you—or distract from your message
  - Justified by your content (the number you need to get your message across, and no more)

- **Don’t read your slides to your audience!!!** Seriously, you are insulting your audience—it implies that you think they are too stupid to read so you have to read to them.

- Choose color schemes that make your text easier to read.
- Use bullet points, not full sentences.
- Avoid the use of animations or “flying text” or other options that tend to distract the audience from your content.
- When using charts, diagrams, or other graphics, make sure they are large enough for the audience to read.