Specific Steps for Writing an Inspection Report

Office of Inspector General

Office of Evaluation and Inspections

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Introduction

After analyzing the information gathered during the Program Inspection, OEI's next step is to produce a written report of findings and recommendations. It is certainly true, as we see in OEI Technical Assistance Guide #7, that a personal briefing is often very helpful for conveying this information. A written report is still essential, however, for two reasons.

First, the written report is the Inspection's most tangible, lasting product. Personal briefings are very effective, but they are transitory. Once the briefing ends, there is little left to remind persons of the Inspection. A written report, on the other hand, can be referred to again and again, even years later.

Related to this, the written report forms the basis, in terms of both content and structure, for any personal briefings which are subsequently given. If the written report is well-planned and well-executed, briefings are that much easier to plan and conduct.

Also, since effective briefings usually involve only a small, select audience, they necessarily exclude many persons who are nonetheless very interested in the Inspection. The written report is thus the only available presentation of the Inspection for most persons.

Second, recognize that "Paper moves the bureaucracy." In a decentralized, compartmentalized system, written material is the normal method for sharing information and making decisions among the many policy makers involved in each issue. If OEI is to be an effective participant in these circles, then it must produce materials which focus attention on issues important to the Inspector General and the Department.

As we discuss Inspection reports, however, it is important to remember that OEI also uses other written techniques to make its points. Some of these highly effective methods are:

- **Interim progress reports** *to key policy makers while an Inspection is underway, especially if high-priority information is obtained early in a study;*

- **Management Advisory Reports** *(MARs) on significant program issues as they are uncovered;*

- **Internal Departmental memoranda** *or* **personal letters** *from the Inspector General on selected findings and recommendations relevant to one or a few key persons;*

- **Congressional testimony** *on issues that an Inspection is addressing or has addressed;*

- **Speeches** *by the Inspector General to persons inside or outside the Department;*

- **Regulatory comments** *from the OIG on proposed Department regulations;*

- **Secretary's daily activity report** *of highly important issues uncovered by an Inspection;*

- **"Op-ed" articles** *under the Inspector General's name for newspapers and magazines;*

- **Semi-annual reports** *to the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency (PCIE) and to the Congress; and/or*

- **Articles for professional journals** *specializing in evaluation in general or in specific substantive areas.*

Nonetheless, even if OEI staff use some or all of the above methods for writing about the Inspection results, a formal Inspection report is still required, and this report must be well-written. Policy makers are busy people, and most are not trained in evaluation or analysis. They simply **will not** *take the time to read a long, complex, poorly written report. As a result, the quality of OEI's written reports will directly determine if the OEI message is heard, much less acted upon.*

The remainder of this Guide discusses nine specific steps for planning, drafting, and revising an effective Inspection report. It focuses on those aspects of report writing that will make our reports easy for decision-makers to use. In a few of these steps, this Guide reinforces some of the advice offered in the OEI course "Write to the Point." Overall, both this Guide and the "Write to the Point" course address important aspects of writing an effective Inspection report, and each resource should be considered in each of the following steps:

1. *Remember the primary audience for the report*
2. *Plan the structure of the report*
3. *Develop an outline for the report*
4. *Write the first draft of the text*
5. *Add the "enhancements" to complement the text*
6. *Add effective graphics to the report*
7. *Add effective recommendations to the report*
8. *Make the report graphically appealing*
9. *Revise the report as appropriate*

*Notice that Steps #1-3 are **planning** steps; that is, they urge OEI staff to think carefully about each Inspection report before actually beginning to write. By stressing the importance of careful planning, these three steps also illustrate that OEI writers should not wait until the information has been analyzed (or even collected) to begin writing. In fact, there is a great deal of writing which can be done before the findings and recommendations become known.*

Specific Steps for Writing an Inspection Report

Planning the Inspection Report

Step #1: Remember the Primary Audience for the Report.

While Inspection reports are eventually read by a wide variety of persons including an increasing number of non-federal audiences, they are written primarily for top-level HHS and other government officials.

This represents a unique readership with unique traits, and we must remember these traits as we write the report. Otherwise, we could end up as in an (1987) example: Worthen and Sanders' "Writing an evaluation report without defining the audience is like firing a gun blind, then hurrying to draw the bulls-eye in the path of the speeding bullet." For Inspections reports, our audience members are:

- *Extremely busy.* They have little time to devote to any single issue. If they cannot read an Inspection report quickly—and only once—they are likely not to read it at all.

- *Constantly pulled in different directions.* They have many competing demands on their time. If an Inspection report cannot maintain their interest, it may not be read in its entirety or with the proper amount of attention.

- *Self-interested.* That is, when they read an Inspection report, they want to quickly discern its implications for themselves and their offices. Unless a report directly explains its implications, readers might not reach the conclusions intended by OEI staff.

- *Compelled to interact with other persons.* They will often want to explain the Inspection findings to some of these persons. They will look for an aspect of the report—a key fact, an anecdote, or a graphic, for example—which captures the essence of the findings and can be easily passed along.

- *Action-oriented.* They want to know what is being asked of them, in terms of either direct action or further study on an issue. As a result, they look for recommendations which are clear and to-the-point (see Step #7 which discusses effective recommendations to the report).

Step #2: Plan the Structure of the Report.

The first step in actually producing the Inspection report is to plan its structure. For example, will there be a single report or a series of reports? A single report has the advantage of including all Inspection findings and recommendations under one cover, often leading to a powerful document.

However, multiple reports also offer advantages, including the ability to *focus greater attention* on individual aspects of the topic and the ability to *build interest* as the reports in the series are released. For complex topics or topics which have yet to generate strong interest, a series of short (15 pages maximum) reports might be a more effective way to present the Inspection results.

In either case, every Inspection report, whether part of a series of reports or not, must be a "stand alone" document which provides all the necessary information. To accomplish this, OEI has developed a standard report format (detailed in its official Procedures for Program Inspections) which includes the following sections:

- Executive Summary
- Table of Contents
- Introduction (including purpose of the Inspection, background of the topic, and methodology used)
- Findings
- Recommendations

To reinforce its message, and to make it easier to read an Inspection report, OEI uses the same format in three different places in the report: in the Executive Summary, the Table of Contents, and the full text of the report.

In addition—but only when absolutely necessary—some Inspection reports contain one or more short appendixes which include detailed information which would otherwise slow down a reader. Sampling plans, information-gathering instruments, maps of sites visited, specific procedures used, raw data, and methods for computing costs savings and avoidances are commonly included in appendixes.

One final decision about the report's structure is whether to use one side or both sides of a page. Some reports have effectively used both sides by printing the "standard" text on the right-side pages and using the left-side pages as "billboards" to catch the reader's eye and maintain interest. In past reports, left-side pages have contained GAO-style summary sentences, graphics of various kinds, and even reproductions of photographs, all complementing the text on the right-side pages and all to generally good effect.

Step #3: Develop an Outline for the Report.

It does help to outline before we begin to write, so long as we do not limit our outlines to rigid patterns which constrict our thinking. A flexible, appropriate outline lets us see the "big picture" of the entire product, determine what sections are needed, and categorize specific information into its proper sections. It also reveals gaps in our logic or information, before we become immersed in the writing. While it takes time to develop this outline, the time is well spent, since the writing generally goes much faster once we begin writing.

Whenever an Inspection's material has been written in outline form or is reduced to such a form, then those notes can be used, as amended by subsequent analyses, as a starting point for the report outline.

Conceptually, the best way to outline is from a "top down" approach. First, state the report's most important message, and then add supporting ideas and examples to this message. One way to visualize this process is as a "tree and roots" of information, with the basic message standing clear but supported by as much detailed information as necessary.

Practically, first write the basic message (the "tree") in a few direct sentences. This message might be something like: "This activity is important to the Department, but it is being done poorly. Some improvements have been made, and more are planned, but these will not be sufficient. We recommend that the following steps be taken." Basic messages such as these comprise the *first-level* outline for the report, and there are several computer software programs to help develop such an outline.

Next, elaborate on each aspect of this basic message in somewhat more detail (the "first roots"). For example, a finding of the Inspection might be that "This activity is important to the Department because (a) many persons are affected by this activity, (b) the activity expends a great deal of money, (c) the Administration has made this activity a priority, (d) how well this activity is done affects other HHS components, etc." More detailed messages such as these comprise the *second-level* outline of the report. Third-level outlines and below comprise the "deeper roots" of the report.

Each of these messages should be written as a sentence. This lets you use sentences as section headings in the Executive Summary, Table of Contents, and the text of the report, and it lets the reader *learn* and *remember* something from these stand alone headings.

Drafting the Inspection Report

Step #4: Write the First Draft of the Report.

When you begin to write the first draft, it is important to keep in mind your *approach to writing* and *specific writing techniques*. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Approach to writing. Many people find it difficult to write, and many more find it especially difficult to write quickly. Often this reluctance can be traced to an unrealistic expectation that the first draft—of an Inspection report, of a study design, even of a personal letter—should be as nearly perfect as possible. *The secret of good writing is good re-writing.* Professional writers often revise their products 5, 10, or even more times before publication.

This secret has clear implications for writing an Inspection report: If at all possible, write a "fast first draft." Use your initial outline if it helps, or write without an outline if that seems easier. Even though some persons find it difficult to write fast, it is worth the effort. (It may be wise to remind your Regional Inspector General to expect a rough first product.)

Write quickly, without censoring yourself as you go. Do not correct misspellings or typographical errors, much less try to edit sentences or paragraphs. Instead, aim only to get everything of importance "down on paper" as quickly as possible. There will be plenty of time for polishing after the initial "grist for the mill" is produced.

In writing this "fast first draft," remember that readers are more interested in findings and recommendations than in purpose, background, and methods, so write more of that material. Also, write more on those findings which might be controversial or on which the report's credibility might be attacked. This strategy gives you more raw material to work with during later revisions.

After completing this "fast first draft," you can rewrite, revise, reorganize, and edit as appropriate. Obtain a variety of input from both informed and "cold" readers, and use this input to hone the report into a releasable final draft.

Specific writing techniques. The OEI course "Write to the Point" has many excellent lessons about how to write effectively. All OEI staff should study and apply those lessons. Three particularly relevant lessons are reinforced below:

* Even though OEI staff use an inductive learning style, they should use a *deductive writing style.* That is, a conclusion comes first, then the individual findings which support this conclusion follow. One advantage of the "tree and roots" outlining style suggested earlier is that it automatically produces a deductive writing style.
* Remember the importance of *paragraphs* as the building blocks of almost all written materials. Each paragraph should convey only one idea, and the paragraphs should link logically to tell a story. Step #9 under "Revising the Inspection Report" offers one technique for ensuring that paragraphs of a report do connect logically.

- Keep the report *simple*. Have a simple message, and use simple words, terms, concepts, declarative sentences, numbers, and stories to illustrate points. Being as simple as possible helps the reader to understand the report, and helps him or her to explain the report to someone else. There are currently on the market several computer software programs for calculating a "readability analysis" of any text.

Step #5: Add the "Enhancements" to Complement the Text.

In addition to its basic text, an Inspection report contains other features which complement the narrative. These features are important because they supplement the narrative, emphasize major points, and maintain the reader's interest. These features are especially important because some readers may be too busy to read the full text. These "enhancements" may be all these readers ever know or read of the Inspection's results.

There are a variety of enhancements which could be utilized in an Inspection report, including:

- *Numerical tables* present detailed quantitative information not easily handled by text. The OEI staff should make judicious use of numerical tables, keeping their number to a minimum and simplifying them as much as possible.

- *Graphics* present numerical information more dramatically than do tables. Various possible graphics are listed below in Step #6, "Add effective graphics to the report."

- *Direct quotes* from key respondents or others knowledgeable about the issues, when used properly, illustrate and flesh out points, convey emotion, and retain the "human touch." However, be careful not to violate guarantees of confidentiality or to use quotes out of context.

- *Extended quotes* allow an individual to describe, in detail and in his/her own words, a particular situation or event and his/her feelings about it.

- *Questions and answers* provide an effective way to focus on certain important issues and to show a key respondent's reactions to each one.

- *Anecdotes* or *personal examples* also illustrate findings well. While a quote often illustrates a point or conveys the depth of feeling about a specific point, anecdotes often illustrate a larger issue or situation.

- *Case studies* illustrate even larger scenarios, and they often cover a longer timeframe. Case studies of nursing home patients, for example, might describe their initial condition, how they came to be admitted, what has occurred since, and their plans for the future.

- *Portrayals* are fictional case studies which capture and present a "typical" situation or event.

- *Metaphors and analogies* capture the essence of a situation through the use of comparisons and/or symbolisms.

- *Photographs* that portray vividly and realistically the actual situations and activities documented in the Inspection can add to a report's credibility and appeal.

Step #6: Add Effective Graphics to the Report.

One feature which can best complement a report's narrative is a graphic display of Inspection findings. An effective graphic can convey a lot of information quickly and easily, reveal underlying patterns of findings, and allow quick comparisons among findings. In addition, a well-designed graphic is attractive and has a powerful impact on the viewer.

There are several different types of graphics, and each is used to convey different types of information:

- *Pie charts* serve one primary purpose: to display the relative size of different "slices" as a percentage of the whole "pie." Two or more pie charts can compare the size of the slices for different subgroups or settings.

- *Bar charts* display the relative sizes of different items when they are ranked against each other.

- *Column charts* often display longitudinal changes over time for a few data points or for different discrete time periods.

- *Time series* (i.e., line charts extending horizontally across the graphic) display longitudinal changes over time for more continuous time periods or for many data points.

- *Scatterplots* display the relationship (correlation) between two different variables for each sample case individually.

- *Maps* display the area covered by discrete geographic areas.

- *Small multiples,* such as the filled-in circles which report automobiles' frequency-of-repair records in Consumer Reports, condense an enormous amount of data into small, repeated graphics.

- *Pictographs* (or space-time continuums) simultaneously display both geographic movement and the passage of time.

In addition to these basic graphic forms, there are variations or enhancements which can add significantly to a graphic's impact and effectiveness: superimposing and juxtaposing, reference lines and pointers, dual scales, paired-bar charts, and dot charts.

Step #7: Add Effective Recommendations to the Report.

Recommendations are one of the most important aspects of any Program Inspection. Policy makers spend more time studying recommendations than they do any other aspect of the Inspection report, including the findings. Also, previous Inspections have proven that intelligent recommendations can improve HHS programs in many different ways.

Furthermore, the Inspector General Act Amendments of 1988 established time frames for Operating Divisions to: (1) make a decision to agree or disagree with OIG recommendations, and (2) implement those recommendations with which they agree. These recent amendments also require both the OIG and Department heads to report on the status of all open OIG recommendations for each prior six-month period.

ɔns" (chapter 3); Program Evaluation and Methodology al Accounting Office; Washington, DC; 1984.

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With this legislation, it is more important than ever before that Inspection staff develop recommendations which tell Operating Divisions exactly what we recommend and exactly how to respond in order to implement our recommendations. In other words, Inspection staff must make sure that our recommendations are very clear regarding the actions we recommend and the payoff for program administrators if they adopt our advice.

However, effective recommendations do not simply happen, and they certainly do not "flow automatically from the findings." On the contrary, Inspection staff take great pains to develop, present, and follow-up effectively on their recommendations. As they do so, they often practice the following (in Table 1) Tips for Offering Effective Recommendations.

Table 1

Tips for Offering Effective Recommendations

Establish a Receptive Environment

- *Recognize explicitly that it is always threatening when an outsider offers recommendations, and develop a strategy to minimize the perceived threat.*
- *Don't overlook the possibility of using "options" instead of, or along with, recommendations.*

Develop Effective Recommendations

- *Allocate enough time and resources to develop recommendations. Don't wait until the end of the Inspection to begin thinking about recommendations. Keep recording possibilities as the Inspection progresses.*
- *Consider all issues in your Inspection to be "fair game." Be alert to all possibilities for improvement.*
- *Draw possible recommendations from a wide variety of sources (e.g., earlier Inspections, other studies, particularly successful sites, similar programs, our own insights). Especially consider input from all OEI persons involved in the Inspection.*
- *Consider the larger context into which the Inspection recommendations must fit. Remember that recommendations must make sense within an existing organizational setting.*
- *Work closely with agency personnel throughout the process. Work to avoid surprises.*

Present Effective Recommendations

- *Generally offer only realistic recommendations. Consider how the operating component might be able to implement your recommendations.*
- *Decide how general or specific to be, taking into account each situation.*
- *Before recommending fundamental changes, consider whether it is possible to reach the same objective more incrementally.*
- *Show the future implications of recommendations, especially the benefits expected from each recommendation. If helpful, spell out the resources necessary to implement each recommendation.*
- *Make your recommendations easy to understand. Categorize recommendations in a meaningful way, and tie each one directly to the Inspection findings. If possible, convey recommendations to key audiences in a personal briefing as well as a written report.*

Effectively Follow-Up on Recommendations

- *Stay involved after recommendations have been accepted. If asked, help to develop a corrective action plan for the recommendations and/or monitor the progress of the recommended actions.*
- *If a viable recommendation is not accepted, look for other opportunities to recommend it (or a modified version) again. Continue to monitor the issues in the future, especially for decision points at which the recommendations could be offered again.*

Step #8: Make the Report Graphically Appealing.

After preparing the narrative and adding any additional features, OEI staff should make the report as appealing to readers as possible. After all, it is part of OEI's responsibility to make it as easy as possible for busy policy makers to read the report quickly. An appealingly written and formatted document undoubtedly influences decisions about the report.

Some of this appeal comes from an attractive *layout* of the report. The judicious use of different type fonts, **bolding,** <u>underlining,</u> *italics,* and/or CAPITALIZING can provide the report with a recognizable hierarchy assisting the reader to differentiate the important points from the less important ones. It can also vary the routine of reading the report. The same is true for using large enough margins, spaces between sections, numbered or bulleted lists, and boxes within the text.

A report can also be made appealing by using attractive *materials.* Covers of Inspection reports are distinctive and attractive, and they are bound neatly and professionally. Different color paper could be used on appendixes, recommendations, or other sections, at least for a limited number of copies for top-level officials.

Revising the Inspection Report

Step #9: Revise the Report as Appropriate.

Internal reviews. After the Inspection report has been drafted, it will receive two very different types of reviews: *internal* reviews and *external* reviews. Internal reviews, both from the OEI office drafting the report and from other OEI offices, ensure that the report is accurate, complete, logical, consistent, and easily understood. Reviewers also look for factual errors, unclear interpretations, significant omissions, and superfluous information as well as errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

One effective technique for writers and reviewers to assess the logic and consistency of the report is to construct an outline of the various paragraphs in the report. As we discussed earlier, paragraphs are the "building blocks" of written materials, and a careful, paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the document reveals very clearly its strengths and weaknesses.

To use this technique, summarize each paragraph of the report into a one-line phrase, and list these phrases one after another on a sheet of paper. Thus, for a report with 43 paragraphs, an analysis sheet has 43 lines, each containing one phrase summarizing one paragraph. Then read down the list from beginning to end, and see if the message of the Inspection report unfolds as planned.

Such an analysis reveals several things. First, if it is difficult to summarize a paragraph into a single phrase, then that paragraph most likely contains more than one concept or thought. Those paragraphs need to be revised to capture only a single idea (see Step #4).

Second, if the analysis shows similar phrases, then the report has paragraphs which duplicate each other. Each redundant paragraph should be rewritten or eliminated, so as not to confuse or burden a reader by introducing the same concept into the report at different times.

Third, if there are gaps in the story told by the phrases, such that the Inspection story does not "unfold" logically, then there are gaps in the report. More paragraphs are needed to bridge topics or to fill in gaps.

Finally, if the entire series of phrases tell a confusing story, then the Inspection report has not been organized clearly enough. In this case, Inspection staff need to return to their original outline and ensure that it conveyed the story they had planned. If not, a new outline should be developed.

External reviews. After OEI is comfortable that the Inspection report is top-quality, it is then circulated more widely for review and comment. Within the Department, the report is typically circulated to all Staff Divisions and to all Operating Divisions involved in the topic. Outside the Department, the report is typically circulated to the appropriate officials of organizations that have been involved in the Inspection.

Revisions. After the internal and external reviews, the Inspection report is revised into its final form. This involves acknowledging Operating Division comments, in the Executive Summary, the body of the report, and sometimes in an appendix to the report. The report is then forwarded to the appropriate audiences and forms the basis for a personal briefing. This briefing is discussed in OEI Technical Assistance Guide #7, "Presenting an Effective Inspection Briefing."

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