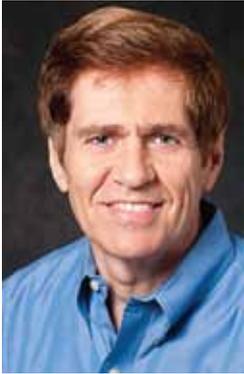# Organize To Promote Understanding

by Jack E. Appleman, CBC

Even if you've got a way with words and can crank out crisp, compelling text, you won't be able to move readers to take action unless your document has a coherent structure. But organizing a document can be challenging because you rarely think of ideas in the order that would make the most sense to readers.

Once you gather all the points to convey, figure out which of the organizing techniques below is best, depending on your personal preference and the type of document.

1. Choose your method

Time: Separate ideas based on chunks of time such as months, quarters or years.

Example: six-month expense report

Space: Divide text based on different geographic regions or organization units.

Example: update on production of salespeople in different territories

Comparison/contrast: Compare two or more sets of results against each other.

Example: report on service for consumer products vs. service for business-to-business products

Problem-solution: Discuss each problem (or the more politically correct term, "challenge") one at a time followed by your suggested solution.

Example: update on unresolved issues of a specific project

Order of importance: Begin with the most critical information, followed by the second most important, third most important, etc. This method—my favorite—helps grab readers' attention.

Example: proposal recommending an investment in customer service training

2. Start with the bottom line—so readers can choose when to stop

If you're unsure about how many details to include, especially when writing to different levels in the organization, begin with the bottom line (*order of importance* method). By doing so, you'll engage others immediately and give them a choice of how much to read. See the e-mail below.

We just signed a letter of agreement contract with XYZ industries, calling for $1.5 million of projects through August 2013.

Here are the next steps:
• Specific products/services…
• Manpower needed…
• Cost of labor…
• Timeline…

For more information, contact…

Some executives will only need to know the basics—$1.5 million through August 2013—and can stop after the

first sentence while others will want to read all the details and background. By leading with the bottom line, you give people a much-appreciated choice of how much to read.

3. Don't mix up ideas

Too many writers make the mistake of including divergent ideas in the same paragraph, causing readers to lose focus. See if you can pick out which of the four sentences below doesn't belong.

> Our division head has directed us to invest $300,000 in 2013 to promote management consulting to financial services companies. I suggest an industry-specific social media campaign and ads in the top five trade magazines. This campaign should focus on the loyalty and satisfaction level of our clients. The print ads should cost $75,000, leaving us more than $200,000 for social media tools.
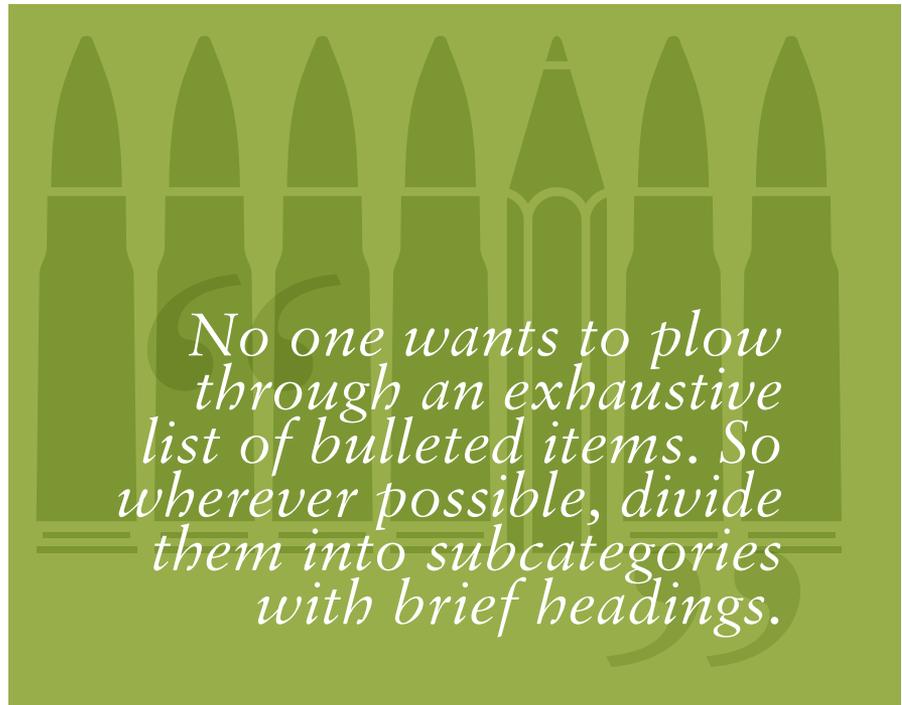
If you selected the third sentence ("This campaign…"), you're right! The first, second and fourth sentences address the business side of the promotion. But the third one, introducing the campaign strategy, is out of place and should instead be part of a new paragraph.

4. Use subheads to separate

We live in a sound-bite era where attention spans keep shrinking. If you bombard busy professionals with too much text at once, they'll quickly tune out and move on to another task. To keep readers engaged, insert short subheads (like in this column) to create manageable chunks of text that can be processed one at a time. See how subheads separate ideas and help establish a logical flow from start to finish in this document:

> Our new medical devices have been cleared for distribution, so we need to finalize production of marketing materials. Please be sure to complete these tasks by the due dates in parentheses.
>
> 1. Spec sheet sign-off

No one wants to plow through an exhaustive list of bulleted items. So wherever possible, divide them into subcategories with brief headings.

Get engineers to approve copy and then forward to the art department (Nov. 20).
2. Brochure printing
Order 10,000 new product brochures to be shipped to the Atlanta office (Dec. 1).
3. Direct mail copy approval
Get department heads to approve the four e-mail blasts scheduled through next spring (Dec. 15).

5. Create subcategories for bullets

No one wants to plow through an exhaustive list of bulleted items. So wherever possible, divide them into subcategories with brief headings. Compare the two versions below.

Too many bullets at once

> Below are some key growth areas identified by the marketing department.
> • Certificates of deposit
> • Student checking accounts
> • Platinum select credit cards
> • Cash reward credit cards
> • Access-account checking
> • Money market accounts
> • Checking overdraft protection

Headings separate bullets into shorter subcategories

Below are some key growth areas identified by the marketing department.

Checking
• Student accounts
• Overdraft protection
• Access accounts

Savings
• Money market
• Certificates of deposit

Credit cards
• Cash rewards
• Platinum select

6. Organize to spur action

Readers crave direction; they want to know where you're going next. Through a logical flow of ideas in short bits of information, you'll help keep coworkers, clients and others focused on your message. And you'll better the chances they'll understand what you're saying and will quickly take the desired action.

About the author:
Jack E. Appleman, CBC, writing instructor and coach, is author of *10 Steps to Successful Business Writing* (ASTD Press), a top seller in its category. His corporate writing workshops have consistently earned outstanding evaluations. Subscribe to Jack's free writing tips newsletter and contact him at jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com, 845-782-2419 or **www.twitter.com/writecoachJack**.