Briefing, Presenting and Communicating for Public Policy and Administration
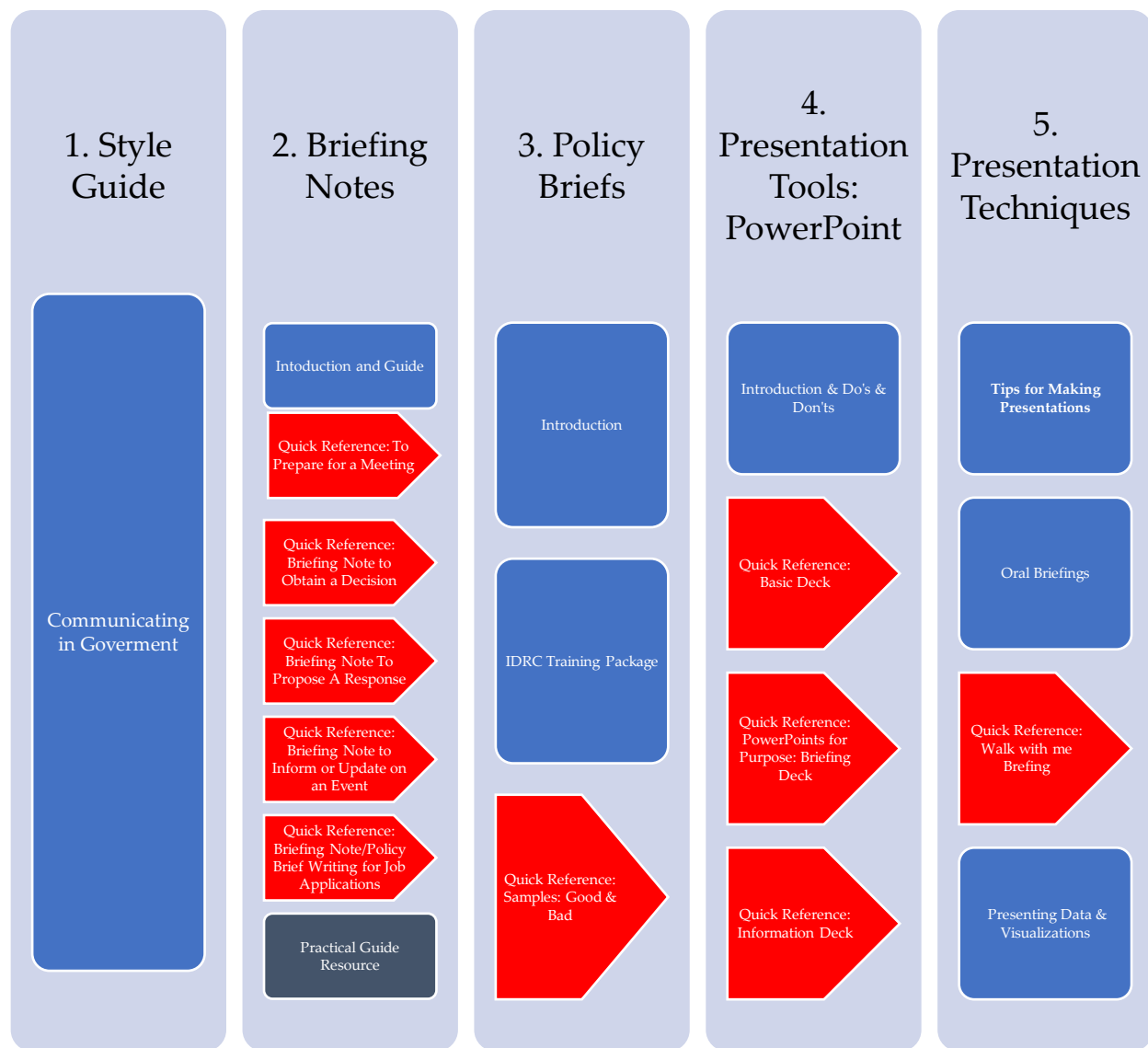
Style Guide for the Series

GovTalk's purpose is to provide information, insights, tools, tips and examples of how to use the primary communication tools of government to get results. It addresses the skills of formulating ideas and proposals, writing using frequently used government formats and presenting ideas and proposals.

There is no material on how to write academic and research papers for coursework. Such resources are available through Queen's Student Academic Success Services at https://sass.queensu.ca/ . This material does not address issues of external communications and public relations.

Instructor expectations may vary. These models are for general application.

The GovTalk series is organized as follows:

- For full reviews and in-depth analysis, follow the Blue Squares in contents.
- For quick reference examples follow the Red Arrows in content.

1. Style Guide	2. Briefing Notes	3. Policy Briefs	4. Presentation Tools: PowerPoint	5. Presentation Techniques
Communicating in Goverment	Intoduction and Guide	Introduction	Introduction & Do's & Don'ts	Tips for Making Presentations
	Quick Reference: To Prepare for a Meeting	IDRC Training Package	Quick Reference: Basic Deck	Oral Briefings
	Quick Reference: Briefing Note to Obtain a Decision	Quick Reference: Samples: Good & Bad	Quick Reference: PowerPoints for Purpose: Briefing Deck	Quick Reference: Walk with me Brefing
	Quick Reference: Briefing Note To Propose A Response		Quick Reference: Information Deck	Presenting Data & Visualizations
	Quick Reference: Briefing Note to Inform or Update on an Event			
	Quick Reference: Briefing Note/Policy Brief Writing for Job Applications			
	Practical Guide Resource			

Does Government Speak Differently?

The original purpose of this work was to give students in public administration advice on how to write for decision-making within government. However, as we researched this matter, discussed with colleagues both in academia and in the public service, we realized that the pathways of communications within government are indeed a terra incognita for many people. Often government internal communications are characterized as bureaucratic, meant more to confuse than inform and certainly not meant for the great unwashed to understand. Like so many things about government, there is some small truth here, but one that fails to reveal the much more powerful reasons for having unique forms of communication. The first and foremost is that government is complicated. It

involves the interface of the political with the administrative. It involves a lot of people doing different things, some for the same purpose, say, within a department, and some for other purposes. Because much of what this training package is about involves an elected official, these forms are meant to serve a democratic purposes as well. They become the tools to get decision, to inform and to advise.

In any government organization, professionalism in preparing and presenting briefing material, no matter its format, is essential. Professionalism means that the material is competently assembled with an eye to the user, as discussed below, and to the result desired. Professionalism does not mean that all material is impersonal, but it does avoid overly personal commentary, the uncalled for the expression of personal views and opinions, flamboyant or needlessly literary or academic language when plain talk will do and virtually any form of lecturing or hectoring the user.

There is a lot of bumf in what bureaucrats write. There is a lot of bumf in what the private sector does too. Our objective is to equip students to write clearly and effectively to serve their minister, boss or get the decisions they need clearly articulated to achieve public policy results, not just talk about them or envisage, but actually implement them. Research for this work drew out many comments from senior government officials that the ability to frame a policy issue, to analyze it in all its aspects, to draft a decision and the key messages associated with it are rare and sure gifts for effective public servants.

The User Comes First

In government, briefing notes are used throughout the organization. They are tools to inform political leaders and senior public servants of what they need to know for the four purposes mentioned. The reality is that most leaders in public organizations are very busy and are handling many issues at once. They may not have the in-depth understanding of an issue as the writer of the note – or may well have but benefit from being updated or having the event set in a policy context – but play a vital role in making decisions about the topic, representing the organization to the public or other colleagues, or will be asked to comment as the item comes under their purview. The writer supports the user of the note in being successful at this. The key advice is to focus on the user's needs, not the writer's desire to be stylistically or substantively outstanding.

Key considerations to keep in mind when considering the user:
- They are busy, engaged in multiple activities at once, are generally time starved.
- They are intelligent and generally capable of integrated well-presented information.

- They are individuals who absorb information and advice in individual ways. Get to know what that is and adjust accordingly. This can mean the use of point form presentations, one-page summaries, or longer briefs as required.
- They want to know why they have this briefing, why now and why for what purpose.
- They come from a variety of educational, cultural and literacy backgrounds and will approach written materially differently. This does not mean they are deficient. It means you will accommodate and support them to get the briefing they need in the way they best benefit from it.

What the Listener/Reader is Thinking

Our normal perspective in GovTalk is that of the preparer and presenter of briefings and presentations. But this whole process is a two-way (at times multi-channel and multi-player) one. It is useful in preparing a briefing to keep in mind that the recipient of the briefing is an active participant, not just a passive black box. They will use filters and, yes, certain cognitive biases, in assessing the briefing.

Remember as well that creating briefings is a continuous business of government. The writer will be around for a while and so will the listener. While this focuses on the preoccupations of the listener, that person will also become familiar with the briefer. Getting to understand styles and concerns on both sides is valuable for the organization.

What You Need to Consider about your Briefing Recipient

Based on the scant research in this area, some talks at professional conferences by senior government officials (the most likely recipient of such briefings) and informal discussions with public sector leaders, here are some points that will either be on their mind:

1. Why here? Why now? The recipient will want to know the urgency or timeliness of the briefing. Is there an event that precipitated it? Is this for something? Do I need to do this now?
2. Am I getting the right expertise here? Is the material provided by the right people that I trust?
3. Are we in catch-up or ahead of the curve? This is not an evaluative question about the briefer, but rather where is this in what might be called the issue cycle. Are we reacting to something here? Is our Minister going to be surprised? Am I surprised? If so, why?

4. Have we looked at the context? What else do we need to understand to put this issue in context? Have circumstances, i.e., context, changed? If so, how and why?
5. Am I hearing a situational response or is this about our outcomes? Is this note about just responding in the moment or does it suggest there is an impact on our basic outcomes, goals, and mission?
6. Does this create a new risk landscape? Linked to No. 4, is what being reported going to have an impact on our short and long term objectives in a way that we need to take on a new risk and start the mitigation process? This is a constant preoccupation of organizational leaders, be they bureaucratic or political.
7. Is this considering other views? Is this briefing or presentation only representative of the organization or does it consider relevant and possibly contrary views?
8. Does this have a whole-of-government impact or what else in government is affected? The principal concern here be whether the issue might escalate from the unit or departmental level to either political or bureaucratic central office concerns. The other side of this question is whether central agencies or other departments are affected and have they been put in the loop.
9. What's next? Where do we go from here? Do I have to do anything? So, we have to do anything? The range of possibilities is large, starting from "We just wanted you to know." to "Immediate action is required." Just have an answer or build it into the note.

The second aspect of this relationship is understanding the context in which the listener is working. While it is impossible to describe all elements of this context, here are a few that are common and need to guide the briefer:

- Time Starved: Senior officials have severe time conflicts, many of which they do not control. Brevity is not only a virtue of the good briefer, but also a way to actually get read. Further, the time constraints will create a distracted listener so attention has to be gotten quickly and remember, it will not last.
- One of Many: Most recipients of one briefing are the recipients of many briefings. This means you are competing for attention. Creating a difference in presentation or making it easy to quickly understand the bottom line (Remember BLUF = Bottom Line Up Front) helps make a difference.
- BS Savvy: Most seasoned briefing listener have developed a finely tune sense of the blatantly superfluous (That's BS in case you thought it was something else.) Respect that. Avoid flights of eloquence or reminding the listener/reader of the obvious. Avoid cliché.
- Assessing the Briefer: Users will determine if they respect the advice they are getting and the briefer providing it. Trusted advisors will have a history and

credibility. The listener will want to know who is in front of them, are they credible and are they competent.

- Idea Hungry and Curious: Senior officials are constantly looking for new ways to do things and new ways to think about a policy or implementation problem. They tend to turn problems over and over and often speak to many people about them to formulate a strategy.

Everything You Write May Become Public

Welcome to the fishbowl of public service. The reality is that much of what you write or is used within government will be accessible. All governments have transparency legislation with access provisions. While there are many exceptions and redactions possible and some governments spend a lot of money inhibiting the release of what is seen as sensitive security information, act as though everything you write, unless you work within clear security guidelines that permit otherwise, will be public. Depending on where you work in government, act as well as if everything you might also be leakable. These two considerations can certainly dampen the writer(s) of briefing material. However, for the most part, it doesn't. Rather it leads to a certain caution in language, some of which can frustrate the using trying to understand what is exactly being said. They also provide a useful boundary for what to write. Here are some pointers in that regard:

- Avoid commentary on political issues, electoral chances, or likely opposition responses, unless this can be documented.
- Do not comment on political matters that might have arisen within the user's party, caucus or Cabinet discussions (versus decisions that re public)
- Be factual and reference government action in decisions that have been made already.
- Use language that is respectful (as noted below), concise and fact-based.
- Meet the user's needs for advice on actions, processes, and follow-up in a professional way.

Professional and Organizational Communication Not Personal

In government, briefing notes provide a department or organization's advice and information to the intended reader, be it a Minister, Deputy Minister or other senior official. As such, a briefing note conveys professional advice or information not personal opinion. Considered advice is policy, operational and communication advice based on the collective processes that an organization uses to create it. This sounds bureaucratic and is, in all the best senses. What this means for the writer of a briefing note is:

- This is professional, not personal writing.

- Stay well within the boundaries of official communications, especially if the material is intended to be provided to a political figure. Comments on election outcome, poling data for parties, political issues are no-go areas.
- Briefing notes seldom originate with the writer thinking it would be a good idea to write one. Rather, it is asked for by a superior or central office, such as the office of the Chief Executive Officer, Deputy Minister or Chief Administrate Officer. Alternatively, it can be part of the routine way in which organizations operate when they advance policy matters or identify the need for the intended user to be informed, especially on an urgent basis.
- While the originator of a briefing note may be the best person to initially frame the advice, it will pass through many layers of editing and approval before reaching its reader.
- Notes will follow an established format each organization uses. There is little freelancing on form.
- in response to an event, initiative, or criticism.

> **Good Advice from Public Sector Writing, at**
> **https://www.publicsectorwriting.com/?cat=6**
>
> "A common mistake when writing for Ministers is to use "imperative" rather than "suggestive" or "conditional" language. For example:
>
> - DON'T SAY the government must do x; DO SAY the government might consider X.
> - DON'T SAY it is imperative the Minister consider or do x; DO SAY it is important that consideration be given to x.
> - DON'T SAY the government should do; DO SAY the government could do.
>
> Remember, we don't tell decision makers what to do. We analyse, provide options and make recommendations for consideration."

An Editor's Note: The text above contains some good quoted advice. That is why the capitalization was permitted. Under virtually no circumstances should excessive capitalization be used. It is unprofessional and melodramatic.

Write and Brief to be Useful and Not Impressive

This theme is core to this Style Book and has many dimensions. Some that are important here, but that will recur, are:
- Simple language, structure and design helps all users.
- Content with too many unfamiliar words slows down the user. Avoid language that begs for a dictionary, long words, acronyms that are not familiar or defined, complex sentence structure.
- Always summarize before providing detail not the other way around. This may be all the user will read.
- Provide headings and titles that let the user decide if they want to read it. Assume skimming.
- Short sentences are easier to read because they limit the scope of an idea. Aim for an average sentence length of 15 words with long sentences no more than 25 words.

Respectful and Culturally and Racially Aware Language

The user of a briefing may come one of the many diverse ethnic and racialized groups that make up this country. They may be from a First Nations or have indigenous heritage. But, regardless of this, all language in briefing material must use respectful and aware language. While more will follow on this, some basic considerations are:
- Avoid trite generalizations to describe specific groups of people. Use specific terms of identification before applying broader labels, e.g., the Riverdale community group rather than the black community of Riverdale.
- Empowering, strengths-based language, e.g., the leadership of Kahnawá:ke versus applicants from Kahnawá:ke.
- Avoid shorthand terms that carry derogative connotations and are blatantly racist, referring to indigenous people, e.g., referring to "Abo" groups as short form.
- Avoid deficit language: us versus them.
- Avoid colonial possessive terms such our First Nations.

Related Diversity Issues in Writing Briefing Material and Presenting It

Diversity and its recognition in all aspects of government work is a core value of public service. It is imperative that it be practiced inside government as a matter of course. Without becoming too enmired in incomprehensible cliché, some sensitivity is required.

Here are some pointers on how to avoid unintended missteps that devalues diversity:

- Avoid age characterization that are not strictly relevant. Is the age of the person relevant?
- Avoid broad generalization beginning with phrases like "Old people will generally…….
- The same applies to younger people.
- Do not use in-house acronyms to describe groups of people, e.g., using CALD instead of culturally and linguistically diverse.
- Lumping individuals into an ethnic group is a form of identification that borders on racism unless they occupy an organizational position in an actual organization that represents a specific ethnic group.
- Use gender neutral language when possible and when relevant. The term "they" is gender neutral.

What is the Difference Between A Briefing Note and a Policy Brief?

You will find that practice varies considerably among governments and even within larger governments with many departments. The same can be said for how instructors in public policy and administration use such terms. It pays to ask about expected formats in specific assignments.

Policy Briefs are different from Briefing Notes in that they are intended to provide a synthesis of a policy issue for general use and information of the reader. A briefing note can be seen as more transactional within government processes. A policy brief may well be part of providing advice to a decision-maker, but it may also be intended to provide the public with an overview of a specific policy issue, update a reader on the state of play of a policy issue or summarize recent developments.
Policy Briefs are often written by advocacy groups trying to influence government policy. An NGO or an industry representative lobbyist may produce a Policy Brief that summarizes their take on a policy issue, advocating for either a specific decision or a policy shift in government. These become communication tools as well, summarizing a particular perspective on the policy issue as a legitimate part of the advocacy and policy influencing process of government.

Briefing Notes	Policy Briefs
Specific	General
Transactional	Background
Action: Tactical	Action: Strategic
Internal	Internal/External
Focused	Summative

Keys to Successful Briefing Notes

Here are the key take aways:
- Be brief enough.
- Get to the point quickly.
- Avoid stuffy language.
- Focus on user and purpose.
- Minimize acronyms.
- Professional language.
- Plain speak language.

- They are concise. This is hard to measure but is characterized by being to the point, avoiding side-issues, linking the reader to previous events or decisions and quickly gets to the point. Churchill called this short-winded-ness.
- Avoid, above all complicated or stuffy language. This chart is but an example of what this means.

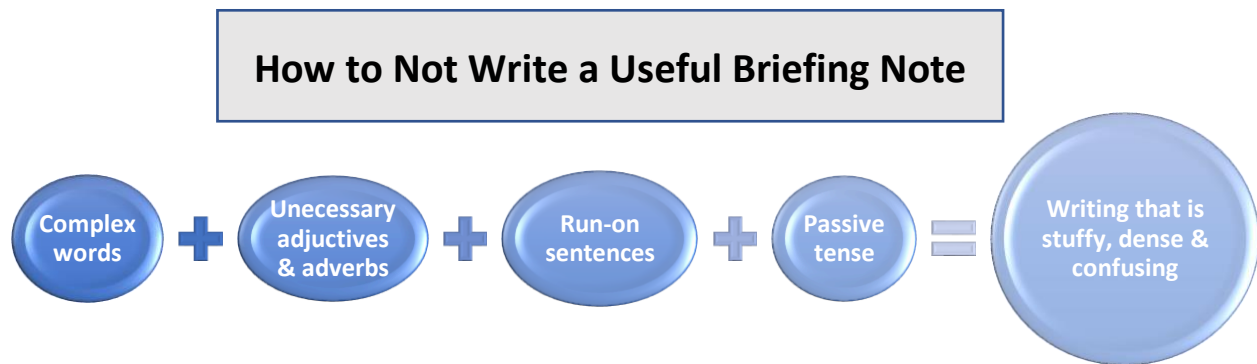| Avoid	Try Instead
A considerable amount/number of.	Much, many, numerous
In addition.	And
Regarding, in regard to, concerning, in reference to…	On, about
In the event that	If
Due to the fact, In light of the fact that	Because, since
Given the information presented here	As noted above/below
To a certain extent, to some extent	XXXX – use nothing
The view has been formed…	I, we, they, the group concluded.
Persons	People
A male/ female person	A man/ woman
A sufficient number of.	Enough
At this point in time	Now
A number of	Some, a few, many
Is able to	Can
On a monthly basis	Monthly
On the grounds that…	Because
In order to	To
Cease and desist	Stop
No fewer than	At least
Not yet attained	Is under
May not…until	May only…when
Is not…unless	Is…only if
The risks/costs/concerns associated with…	The risks/costs/concerns of
On a regular basis	Regularly
Is responsible for the management of…	Manages
In a timely manner	Promptly
For a period of three years	For three years
During the course of	During
Utilize or utilization	Use
At the conclusion of	After
For the purpose	For, to

- They capture the strategic context that matters for the reader. This means:
    - As before, they link to other events, decisions or developments in an issue. "This development will affect the department's commitment to its employment equity targets."

- o They are politically sensitive without being political. "This issue has been raised in the House by M.P. Plunkett who has expressed her views on this matter at Committee as well." Not "Opposition M.P. Plunkett from the marginal riding of Barrie South continues to press the Minister and staff on this issue and is expected to seek press attention as well."
- They are professional in that they are impersonal, reader-centered not writer centered, objective, consistent and focused on their intent, not needless asides, or arguments. "The departmental recommendations for your talking points are consistent with the position paper you tabled at committee. It contains a comprehensive defense of your policy position" Not "My view as an expert in this field is that you would be wrong to advocate this poorly conceived policy."
- They are intelligently written with an eye to possible release to the

> **The Use of Text Boxes**
> Use text boxes to draw attention to information. They set information apart, but for a reason. They can provide summaries, checklist, examples, case studies, quotations, or definitions, for example. Use sparingly in briefing material. Locate them close to the text they support. Remember, text boxes attract the reader before the main text.

public either through some form of leak or through access to information. The briefer, with experience and advice from accessibility to information advisors, will understand what can and cannot be written down. Further, the briefer will ensure the appropriate security classification and distribution of the note. On the other hand, those working in areas of security or where information is classified as it affects individual citizens or employees, will understand that they need to be as informative as they can in this written medium.
- They are useful. The question to ask is "Does this meet the information needs of the recipient and equip her to make a decision, come to an understanding of the situation, contribute to a meeting or gathering as needed with salient messages to convey?"
- They avoid jargon. Jargon is not specialized language relevant to a particular government activity. That is a necessary part of briefing. Rather jargon involves using lofty phraseology, catchphrases and just plain clichés that are not relevant. For instance, "The introduction of this new pay scheme will improve efficiency and save money, based on our detailed study." Is plain language. However, "The new pay system, an integral part of valuing people, will enhance our corporate capacity to meet the aspirations of our staff, increase the value for money of investments in this area and link to and leverage our strategic vision." is blatantly superfluous.

- They minimize acronyms. There is nothing wrong with the use of acronyms. They are vital to brevity, if:
    o You are certain the reader will understand them,
    o They do not create an acronym forest, e.g. "The DMO approved the BN on the OAG report on the EAA."
    o They are acronyms and not short forms, e.g. BN above means briefing note, not an acronym.
- The avoid insider references. Everyone in the bureaucratic chain may understand the following, except the reader. "To bring on an SVS, we will need to complete an SF-40 process and then revert to compliance with rules SF-40-337 and, of course, SF-40-337 (a)i."
- They present data graphically but simply. For more on this, go the GovTalk section, Using Data.
- They do not create a wall of words filing the page with dense material, not broken into paragraphs, trying to cram as much into a confined space as possible. Instead, break up the material into shorter paragraphs and reduce the length.

How to Not Write a Useful Briefing Note

Complex words + Unecessary adjuctives & adverbs + Run-on sentences + Passive tense = Writing that is stuffy, dense & confusing

Edit, Edit, Edit

Briefing Notes are a tool that meet a specific but vital need. It is important that they are comprehensive but also consistent and tightly organized to meet the users need. Too often, in settings like the School and in the real world, notes do not complete the circle of providing a beginning, "Here is what I am going to tell you.", a body, "Here is what I am telling you." , an end, "Here is what I told you." The story line must be consistent. One of the great fault lines in poor notes is that the end does not match up with the summary

at the start. Therefore, editing is important to get consistency of the story line, achieve economy in terms of length and ensure that the focus is the right one.

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges is in getting the summary right both in terms of substance, tone, and conciseness for the user to act up on it. The simple steps in the edit process are:

- Conduct a plain language review to check for wordiness, long sentences, bloviated language, and other malapropisms.
- Proofread for accuracy of references, facts and names.
- Check the design for the best format.
- Do a logic test. Does this make sense. "What would my mother say if she read this?"
- Does the beginning reflect the end? Is the summary what it needs to be. Some people will totally rewrite the summary once the overall note is drafted.

Sources and Appreciation

This service was launched as the result of consultations with students in both the full-time and professional Master of Public Administration program at Queen's University. Faculty of the School were also engaged and will add material as it evolves. In addition, major employers of our students were consulted and confirmed the need for more support for communicating within government. The following were particularly helpful sources:

- Johnson-Shoyama School of Graduate School of Public Policy, Universities of Regina, and Saskatchewan: Permission was given to use its valuable material and for this the author is grateful.
- The Canada School of the Public Service
- Public Sector Writing, material openly available at www.publicsectorwriting.com
- Plain Language: https://www.plainlanguage.gov/ : This site supports the American government's Plain Writing Act, 2010 with many helpful resources and ideas.
- Writing for Results: http://www.writingforresults.net/ : This is an extensive resource based on the Canadian federal government's approach to writing briefing notes, if there can be said to be one approach. One publication by the author of this website, Rob Parkinson, harvested 35 different federal government briefing note formats. His material is extensive and very useful.
- Plain English Foundation, material openly available at www.plainenglishfoundation.com
- The Gang: The many colleagues in government, academia, current students, and alumni who reviewed the material and provided great advice.