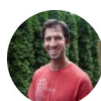


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Writing Tips From the President's Daily Brief

During my more than 15 years as a CIA analyst and manager, I wrote and edited many articles for the President's Daily Brief, for several different Presidents. Here are the basic “101” techniques I learned, which can help anyone writing for busy people making tough decisions. And just for fun, I'll illustrate them with sci-fi themed examples.

Here's the list. These seem quite simple, but are also really hard to do well:

1. Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)
2. Support your argument
3. Use precise but simple language
4. No value-laden language
5. Convey uncertainty clearly

I'll explain these in detail below, and stay tuned for future articles for “201” tips.

1. Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)

Your title/subject (5–7 words) and first sentence (2–3 lines) should have ALL the information needed for a busy reader to understand the key point and, if needed, make a decision. EVERYTHING. Someone should be able to read this and move on, if needed, without reading the rest of what you wrote.

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well-positioned to exploit.

If you're a Rebel leader, you now know basically what you need. And you'll likely want to read on to learn more what the flaw is and how to exploit it.

Now compare this to a poorer alternative:

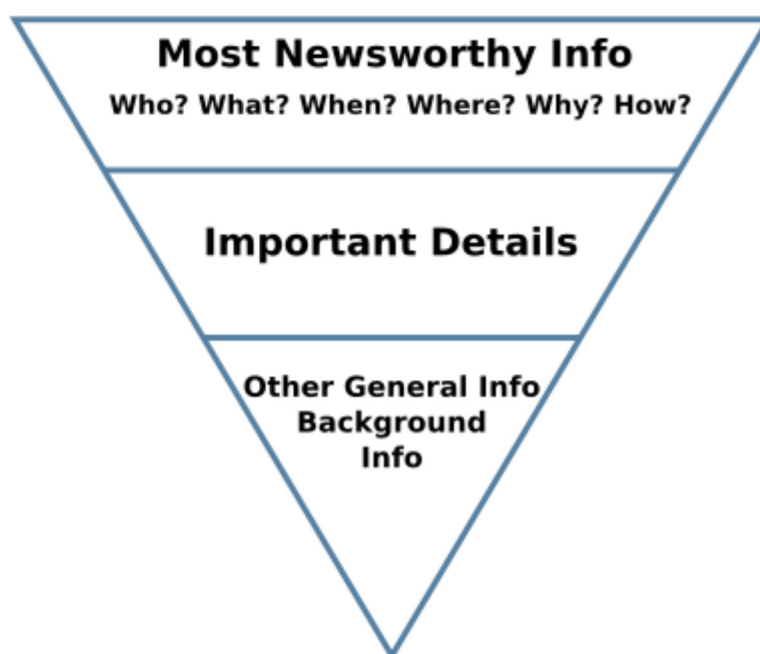
- *New Information About Death Star: Princess Leia has sent us the plans to the Death Star, which will help our military planning.*

This is boring, and it doesn't convey the key point. Rebel leadership would not read on.

2. Support your argument

After you put your "bottom line up front" (see #1), don't forget to include specific sub-arguments and evidence. No one's going to just take your word for it!

Do this in an "inverted pyramid" format as shown here:



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Death Star Plans Show Key Vulnerability: *The plans to the Death Star obtained by Princess Leia show it has a fatal flaw that our X-Wing force could exploit in a massed assault.*

- *The plans show that a shot entering a small thermal exhaust port would start a chain reaction and destroy the Death Star.*
- *This would almost certainly require an assault by a large number of nimble fighters like X-wings, to get close enough while countering TIE fighters.*
- *We are confident the plans are legitimate because Obi-Wan Kenobe received them in a message from Princess Leia hidden in his old droid.*

Also you'll notice I formatted the above with bullets, instead of in a paragraph. It's easier to read that way. More on this in a future article....

3. Use precise but simple language

Say exactly what you mean. EXACTLY. But also, don't use big words that might confuse people, or any extra words to obscure your point. And do both of those things at the same time. Simple, right?

Let's take this sentence, for example:

- *The plans show that a shot entering a small thermal exhaust port would start a chain reaction and destroy the Death Star.*

Here's an alternate version that would be too complex (thank you [Complex Sentence Generator](#)):

- *The technical specifications indicate that a shot entering a diminutive exhaust location would commence a series of explosions and eradicate the Death Star.*

This version is simpler, but not precise enough:

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- *The plans that were obtained show a full schematic of the Death Star including propulsion, weapons, electrical, and waste systems, and when we look at the way the ship expels exhaust from its propulsion system we were able to determine that a shot in one small exhaust port would travel throughout the Death Star into a central area and would explode there, causing cascading other explosions that would undermine the structural integrity of the ship and destroy it.*

4. No value-laden language

This is really an extension of #3, but it's so important I'm calling it out on its own. Value-laden language conveys a subjective judgment. It calls into question your credibility to neutrally analyze the situation, and can prime a decision-maker for an emotional vs. logical response. So don't do it.

Let's move on to a new example:

- *Klingon Faction Seeks to Scuttle Peace Talks: We know there are at least some in the Klingon military, including on the High Chancellor's staff, that seek to sabotage the negotiations and maintain hostilities with the Federation.*

This is neutral, and can prompt a constructive conversation on what steps the Federation should take. But what if it looked like this:

- *Widespread Klingon Plotting Against Peace Talks: There are diabolical elements among the Klingon Chancellor's staff seeking to destroy us. They may be throughout the Klingon military and need to be stopped at all costs.*

There are various subjective statements in this sentence that are not supported and are emotionally charged. It undermines your credibility and makes it harder for decision-makers to have a neutral conversation.

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terms like “probably”, “likely”, “may”, “could”, etc. Why? These terms are ambiguous.

For example:

- *The Sith **will likely** wipe out the Jedi within a week.*

What do you think “will likely” means? 50%, 80%, 99%? Jedi plans would look pretty different if they’re 50% confident, vs. 99%.

Alternative phrasing however can introduce its own problems:

- *The Sith **may** wipe out the Jedi within a week.* Ok, but will they or won’t they?
- *There’s an 80% **chance** the Sith will wipe out the Jedi within a week.* Ok, but how did you calculate that?

There’s a lot more written on this ([here](#) is a good place to start), and every case is different. My go-to here is focus on the RISK and what to do about it.

- *We don’t know how quickly the Sith will wipe the Jedi out, but their forces are stronger and we need to plan for a rout in the near-term.*

(Also I realize I broke tip #3 above with the phrase “wipe out”, which is not precise ... I’m just going to leave that to show how hard this is.)

Ok that’s it for now. All these techniques are basically to help ensure you’re saying exactly what you mean, as quickly and clearly as possible. In future posts I’ll go into “201” tips, like:

- Asking the right question
- Deeper dive on uncertainty and predictions



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