

## Getting the Structure Right: Process, Paradigm, and Persistence (Part 2)

Christopher Balmford

### The story so far ...

In the previous issue of *Clarity*<sup>1</sup>, Part 1 of this article:

- highlighted the importance of getting the structure of a document right for its audience and its purpose; and
- reviewed the structure of 3 documents to show how poor structure inhibits communication.

Now, Part 2 focuses on a paradigm and a process that help us to get the structure right – as long as we are persistent.

In short, Part 1 was about the problem; Part 2 is about the solution.

Many of the ideas here are borrowed from the work of others: notably Dr Betty S Flowers, Professor Joseph Kimble, and Professor David Kelly. My contribution is to synthesise their ideas, and to add some of my own.

My aim, is to present a state-of-the-art approach to getting the structure right. And to encourage others to share their thoughts on structure. Most of the information I see about how to write clearly is about word choice and sentence structure.

Sometimes there is information about paragraphs. There isn't nearly as much about structuring documents at higher levels than the paragraph. And most of what there is seems to be more about the hallmarks of good structure than how to achieve good structure.

We need more on the “how to” because getting the structure right is both hard work and crucial. Only when a document's language, structure, and design work together, is the document likely to communicate successfully.

### The solutions

To avoid poor structure, we need to:

- put material in an order that makes the best sense to the reader;
- put the main message first;
- put closely related material together;
- use headings liberally and rigorously;
- make sure that pieces of information with comparable heading levels have comparable weight, and a comparable level of importance; and

- use a numbering system that forces us to draft clearly – even if we don't use that numbering system when we print the document.

These are the guiding principles, the hallmarks of good structure, or perhaps the goals we are trying to score. And to that extent they are useful. But they don't tell us how to score the goals. To find out how to do that, we need to have a paradigm and a process, and we need to be persistent.

### The paradigm

My favourite paradigm for the writing process was developed by Dr Betty S. Flowers and is called “madman-architect-carpenter-judge”.<sup>2</sup> In her paradigm, Dr Flowers separates the writing process into 4 distinct stages: each requiring the writer to use a quite different approach and to adopt a quite different personality. The 4 personalities are:

- *The madman* who brainstorms, takes notes and, is enthusiastic, experimental, and above all creative;
- *The architect* who reviews the information that the madman has created and gathered, and uses it to develop an outline of the document;
- *The carpenter* who fleshes out the structure by writing the text and producing the first (however many) drafts; and
- *The judge* who edits and reviews drafts.

As Dr Flowers points out, when applying the paradigm, it is important to keep the roles separate, to give each personality its turn without allowing the other personalities to interrupt. For example, the judge must not be allowed to interrupt the madman:

[The judge has] been educated and knows a sentence fragment when he sees one. He peers over your shoulder and says “That's trash!” with such authority that the madman loses his crazy confidence and shrivels up. You know the judge is right; after all, he speaks with the voice of an English teacher. But for all his sharpness of eye, he can't create anything.<sup>3</sup>

The Flowers paradigm is an excellent way to conceptualise the writing process. More than that, it provides us with a methodology that helps us to begin at the beginning and to go through the middle until we get to the end. It's fun too.

However, in the context of this article, it sort of begs the question: what do we actually do when we are in architect mode?

Having taken off our madman's hat and put on our architect's hat, we see before us a pile of information: notes, mind-maps, articles, books (probably blossoming with yellow post-it notes) and perhaps a few pages of hastily written text.

What the architect has to do is use all that information to create a useful outline for the document – a structure that the carpenter can develop into a full-blown draft.

As architects, we have to get the structure right. But how do we go about it? Having found a paradigm, what process can we follow?

### The process

Professor Joseph Kimble has described the process of sorting information to structure a document. And he has developed an analogy that helps us not only to see more clearly what we do, but also to do it: to get the structure right. With Joe's kind permission, I use his material in the plain-language training courses I run (and in this article). His approach and analogy stay in people's heads. They tell me so – sometimes months after they came on the course.

Here's what Joe has to say about the process.

Technically, when you organise the document you are doing three things: dividing, classifying, and sequencing.

- *Dividing* Deciding how to cut into the material, what principle you will use. You may think of it as creating your headings and subheadings....
- *Classifying* Describing what ideas go under what section (heading) and subsection (subheading). The main principle is to put closely related ideas together.
- *Sequencing* Putting the section and subsections in a logical order.

Usually, you divide and classify as one blended operation. As you sort the information into the different sections, you may realise that one of them is too broad or too narrow, or that the sections overlap. So you have to rethink the division. On the other hand, sequencing is pretty much a separate operation.<sup>4</sup>

It is useful to recognise the 3 separate steps in developing a document's structure. (They are, if you like, the paradigm of the architect's role.) In many documents, although the headings at a high level are in a sensible order (that is, the high-level sequencing makes sense), the ideas under the headings have not been properly divided and classified. This dramatically weakens the power of the high-level sequencing. To get the structure right, the dividing and classifying have to be done properly.

So let's look at the dividing and classifying in detail, and then worry about sequencing.

### Dividing and classifying

Here's the analogy that Joe developed to support the first 2 steps in the process: dividing and classifying.

Suppose you're doing the washing. You put whites in one pile and darks in another. Your principle of division is colour. But where do you put the grey T-shirt? If you put it with the whites, then your 'sections' (and headings) have changed: not 'whites' and 'darks', but 'lights' and 'darks'. If you put it with the darks, then that section has a new heading: 'lights and darks'. Or maybe you create three sections: 'whites', 'lights' and 'darks'.

Then there are the sweaters that have to be washed by hand in cold water: they go in a pile called 'handwashables'. And then there's the business suit that goes to the dry-cleaners. Now your principle of division has changed; it's not colour any more. Now the principle of division is how the item will be washed.

By the way, usually it is impossible to use the same principle of division throughout a longer document.

Finally, having sorted things out into their separate piles (with headings), you have to sequence the sections. (And here's a question Why do most people wash the whites first? What sequencing principle is that?)

Of course, when you put away your clothes, all this changes, because your purpose changes.

So much for homely examples. What you should produce by dividing and classifying is a hierarchy of ideas.<sup>5</sup>

When we are in architect mode, sorting information to create a structure and outline for our document, we go through the same process as we do when we sort the washing. That is, we pick up a piece of information, work out what it is about, give it a heading, and put it in a pile. As we go through this process, we may resort the piles and change the headings. That's Joe's "dividing and classifying". Then (perhaps at the same time or perhaps later) we start to put our ideas in an order: we put the information in each pile in order and we put the piles themselves in order. That's Joe's "sequencing".

### Audience and purpose

Before we leave dividing and classifying, and the "sorting the washing analogy", I want to dwell for a moment on Joe's comment "when you put away your clothes, all this changes, because your purpose changes". He makes a crucial point.

To illustrate Joe's point in my training courses, I tell the group a story about sorting the washing at home. It goes like this:

At home, I sort the clean washing into piles that, in my mind, are headed:

- “Gracie”. She's my 5-year-old. I either put her clothes away for her, or help her do it.
- “William”. He's my 7-year-old. I ask him to put his clothes away – I usually have to nag him a bit!
- “Kym”. My wife (whose age I have chosen not to reveal). I leave her clothes on the bed. She's old enough to put them away by herself – without being nagged.
- “Me”. I put them away all by myself.
- “The linen cupboard” – which is of indeterminate age and quite unable to put away the sheets, pillowcases, towels etc. that are stored in it, so we put them away.

The point is, when we sort clean washing to put it away, our audience and purpose are completely different from what they were when we sorted the dirty washing before washing it. When we are sorting the clean washing, it doesn't matter what colour the particular item or garment is, or how it would be washed. What does matter is whose garment it is, or where it goes. We are sorting exactly the same information (except that it's now clean) but we put it in completely different piles with completely different headings. And all because our audience and our purpose have changed.

### Beyond the analogy

Now, there is at least one key difference between dividing and classifying washing (whether it's clean or dirty) and dividing and classifying information for a document: if you like, there's a gap between the analogy and reality. The key difference is that when you reach into a pile of washing and pull out say, a white shirt, you get the whole shirt – no worries. But when you reach into, say, an insurance policy and try to pick up one of the exclusion clauses dealing with why the insurance company won't pay, it is quite likely that you have got only some of the information that is relevant to that clause. (After all, closely related information may be scattered elsewhere in the document.) You can be even less sure that you have all the exclusions. This doubt is caused because (as we saw in Part 1 of this article<sup>6</sup>) many documents are so badly structured that crucial pieces of information that relate to the same idea

are often scattered throughout the document.

There is a solution (to the gap between the analogy and reality) that helps to make dividing and classifying the information for a document as easy as sorting the washing. Not only that, it helps to make sure that your document has lots of useful headings. Here it is, in all its glory.

### A modified decimal numbering system: the benefits

One way to close the gap between the “sorting the washing” analogy and reality is to use a modified decimal numbering system.

The decimal numbering system (unmodified) is recommended by the International Standard (ISO) on the “Numbering of divisions and subdivisions in written documents”<sup>7</sup>. That standard was produced in 1978. The modifications were developed by Professor David Kelly in 1990, when he was the Chairman of the Law Reform Commission of Victoria and working on the Commission's various reports on plain language.<sup>8</sup>

In the decimal numbering system, the whole number (that is, 1, 2, 3, etc.) appears beside the heading. The sub-numbers (that is, 1.1, 2.1, 3.4, etc.) appear beside the relevant paragraph.

In the modified decimal numbering system, the whole number is used for the first paragraph (the heading is not numbered), and the sub-numbers are used for the sub-paragraphs.

This is how the decimal numbering system works, and what it looks like.

How does the modified decimal numbering system work?

1. When you use this system, you put the main message in the first part of the paragraph, where the number is still whole. The number appears below the heading and beside the main paragraph. (This paragraph is an example.)

Where do qualifications and exceptions go?

- 1.1 Qualifications and exceptions are dealt with in subsidiary numbers.

What about procedural or ancillary material?

- 1.2 So is material that is merely procedural or ancillary.

Where do the headings go?

- 1.3 Each whole number gets a heading. Sometimes each subsidiary number also gets a heading.

Why is the modified decimal numbering system helpful?

2. This system helps because it forces you to comb your ideas out into separate threads. The system prevents you from having 2 main ideas in the one main paragraph because when you try to give that paragraph a heading, you can't ... so you're forced to:

- separate your ideas;
- work out which ones are main ideas and which ones are subordinate ideas;
- give each of the main ideas a number and a heading; and
- put subordinate ideas in sub-paragraphs.

All this makes it easier to see the ideas that need to be put together, or that need to be linked in some way.

Is the "forcing" aspect unpleasant?

2.1 Sometimes the discipline imposed by the modified decimal numbering system is frustrating and even irritating. But it helps you "sort the information for the document", and that helps you to get the document's structure right. So, even if it is a bit unpleasant at the time, it's always worth it in the end.

How does the modified decimal numbering system help sort the information?

3. This system helps sort the information because:

- it brings a high level of rigour to the processes of combing out the information into separate threads, giving each thread a heading, and establishing the priority of each thread (that is, the dividing and classifying); and
- it makes it easier to sequence the information because all you have to do is put the headings in the right order. You can rely on the headings, because you know that every main point has a heading and that there aren't any ideas floating around that aren't revealed by the headings. Then, as you edit the document, the system makes it easier to check the validity of the sequencing, and to reorder things if necessary.

How does it make it easier to check the validity of the sequencing?

3.1 The system makes it easier to check the validity of the sequencing because you can do that just by running your eye over the headings. Again, you can rely on them.

How does it make it easier to reorder things?

3.2 The system makes it easier to reorder things because when you want to move information around, you pick up the heading (and the text that hangs off it) and move that block of information around. You do that confidently because you know you're getting all the related ideas. To return to the "sorting the washing analogy", you know you've got the whole garment.

(That's the end of the demonstration.)

### Some concerns about the modified decimal numbering system

Sometimes, people express one or more of the following concerns about the modified decimal numbering system:

- It may lead to the document having too many headings.
- It is ugly when you end up with, too many numbers – for example "clause 2.2.3.2.6".
- A reference to "Section 1" is ambiguous: Does it refer to all of Section 1, or just to the main paragraph where the number is still whole?

Here are my responses to those concerns.

**Too many headings** In fact, having lots of headings is helpful for the reader. According to work done at the Document Design Centre in Washington DC, a document should have a heading "for nearly every paragraph". Many people find that hard to believe. I did when I first read it. But over the last few years I've become convinced – partly through several formal testing projects on insurance documents that I have been involved in, and partly through the training courses I deliver.

In those training courses, we talk a lot about headings. When I say that the Document Design Centre recommends a heading for nearly every paragraph, many audiences visibly flinch. I talk about that reaction with them.

Later, at the end of the first day of the course, I hand out a rewrite exercise that the participants do as "homework" and present to the group the next day. (Each of them gets a different exercise.) I encourage them to use lots of headings in their rewrites. Often, they use 3 or more headings in one page of text. Often, they use a heading for a paragraph that is only one or two lines long. Once, someone used 8 headings in a one-page letter!

The next day, when the participants are presenting their homework, I make a point of asking the group whether there are too many headings. There never has been. They even liked the one-page letter with eight headings! Yet these are the very people who, just the day before, flinched at the thought of a heading for every paragraph.

To be fair, when something I'm writing is getting close to final, I often go back and delete a few headings for aesthetic reasons. At that stage, it always seems easier to delete than to add.

**Too many numbers** This concern is valid.

However, it applies equally to every numbering system. After all, a reference to clause 2.2.3.2.6, awkward as it is, is no worse than a reference to clause 2(2)(c)(ii)(F).

The solution lies in avoiding descending to such depths. To do that:

- for simple lists, it's often best to use dot points; and
- for more complicated material, it's nearly always better to break the flow, and the structure, higher up the chain<sup>10</sup>. (For example, if you are about to create a division at the third decimal point, between, say, "2.3.1" and "2.3.2", it's usually better to change "2.3" into "3" so that what was to be "2.3.1" becomes "3.1" and what was to be "2.3.2" becomes "3.2". This usually requires a slight change to the text of "2", and an introductory thought at the start of the new "3".) Thankfully, one advantage of the modified decimal numbering system, and its call for a heading for each main paragraph, is that it makes it easier to break the structure higher up the chain.

In all the documents I've written using the modified decimal numbering system, I have never been beyond the third decimal point (that is 2.2.3). And I have been that far on only a handful of occasions.

**Ambiguous references** The ambiguity can be overcome in either of these ways:

- a reference to the main paragraph (but not to the sub-paragraphs) can be to "Section 2, first paragraph." A reference to the entire section can be to "Section 2". This can be supported by using a graphic (for example a vertical bar in the margin) that is visually linked to the whole number (that is, "2") to show that a reference to clause "2" includes the subparagraphs 2.1, 2.2 etc; or
- when the document is printed, another numbering system can be used, or the numbers can be abandoned altogether.

Having read this rave about the modified decimal numbering system, it may surprise you that I am not so fussed about what numbering system is used when the document is printed. The reason I'm not fussed is that the main advantage of the system is how it helps the writer to get their thinking straight and the structure of the document right.

The advantage of actually using the modified decimal numbering system in the final, printed version of the document is that the hierarchy of the material is revealed visually and numerically to the reader. It makes the reader immediately aware of the relative importance of each piece of information as soon as they look at the page. However, even if the system is not used in the printed document, that impact can be achieved through careful design.

If you use the modified decimal numbering system, I would be interested to hear whether the ambiguity has actually arisen and how you have tried to solve it. In my experience, it is rarely a problem. And the benefits delivered by the system make it worthwhile.

#### **A conclusion for the modified decimal numbering system**

In short, most numbering systems affect and reveal only those ideas that are related to one another. They do not help writers to determine, or readers to realise:

- the relative priority of the information presented; or
- how the ideas are related.

The beauty of the modified decimal numbering system is that it does reveal the relative priority of the messages and the relationship between them. Importantly, the system does that during the writing process. In this way, it helps writers to get their thinking straight. And that is crucial to successful communication.

#### **Sequencing: the process continued**

After the architect has divided and classified the madman's material, the architect must start to put it all in order. To use Joe Kimble's word, he or she must sequence it. As always, the architect must do that with the audience and purpose firmly in mind.

The guidelines about sequencing for legal writing tend to make the following sorts of points:

- let your audience and purpose determine the structure;
- deal with the more important before the less important;
- put the main message first;
- put known information before unknown information;
- move from the general to the specific;
- place rules of universal application before rules with a narrow application; and
- (Although it is relevant to classifying, it is also relevant to sequencing) put closely related material together.<sup>11</sup>

These points are all extremely useful. In many ways, they apply as much at a sentence or paragraph level as they do at higher levels.

There is another useful set of guidelines that reflect a much more journalistic approach to writing.<sup>12</sup> They deal more with the importance of a good lead and the various ways of telling a story. In the legal context, that journalistic approach to sequencing is particularly relevant to persuasive writing: for example, in some letters, court documents, and marketing documents. Even so, that approach works with (and not against) the approach described in this article. Indeed, the two approaches work together in even the most dry and contractual, or legislative, piece of writing.

But the aspect of sequencing that I want to deal with in this article is at the highest level: if you like, what order to put the chapters and sub-chapters in. At that level, the most useful guideline is to put the material in the order that the reader is

most likely to expect, to need, or to find useful. Easier said than done.

The documents whose sequences work tend to be sequenced either:

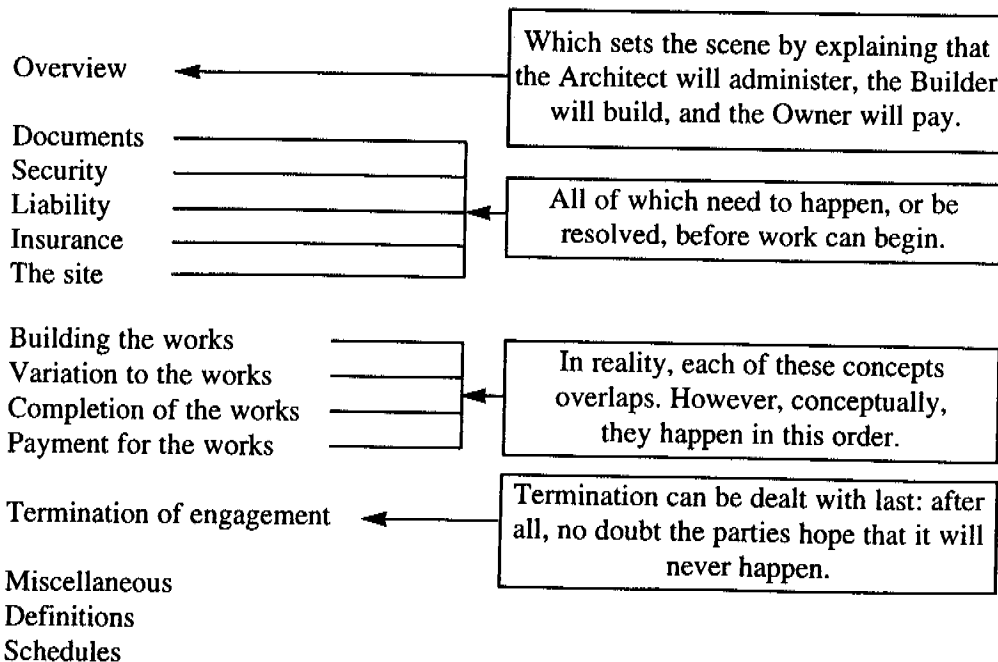
- in a chronological order; or
- in a rights-based order.

**Chronologically structured documents**

A construction contract is, basically, a chronological document. After a few opening clauses dealing with the broad requirements that the builder will build and the owner will pay, the document can go on to deal with the various rights, obligations, and procedures in a chronological order. For example, in a simple building contract (for new homes) produced by the Housing Industry Association (in Australia), the chapters are ordered like this:

- Main obligations
- Before work begins
- During work
- Completion of works
- Variation of obligations
- Remedies
- Disputes
- Miscellaneous
- Schedules

Consider a more complicated construction contract produced by The Royal Australian Institute of Architects. The chapters are arranged in the order shown in this table:



### Rights-based structure

The South African *Labour Relations Act* 1995 is a fine example of a document with a right-based structure. (By the way, Phil Knight, Vancouver, Canada – a Clarity member – was part of the drafting team and was responsible for the Act’s structure, style, and language.) After a preamble, and “Chapter I – Purpose, Application and Interpretation”, the real substance of the Act begins in “Chapter II – Freedom of Association and General Protections”. This Chapter deals with the core rights that employees have.

Those core rights are what the Act is about; they are why the Act exists. The rest of the Act deals with how those rights will be protected, administered, negotiated, and enforced etc. The Act sets up various bodies to be involved in all those activities.

Contrast that structure with the *Equal Opportunity Act* 1984 (Victoria). Like the South African *Labour Relations Act*, this Act also creates rights, sets out how those rights will be protected, and creates a Commissioner to administer the Act and a Board to hear appeals from the Commissioner. These bodies are set up in sections 6 and 8. Yet the rights that those bodies are to administer are not set out until section 17 and following.

Surely, more readers of the Act will be interested in:

- what forms of discrimination are illegal (section 17), and how to enforce the rights the Act creates (section 41);

than in

- the fact that the Commissioner is to be appointed by the Governor in Council, is to hold office for 5 years, and ceases to hold office on death (inter alia!) (all in section 6).

The *Equal Opportunity Act* should begin with the rights it creates. Only much later should it deal with administrative matters. The existing structure of the Act reflects an institutional-based approach to communication, rather than a reader-based approach.

### A methodology for sequencing

There are no sure-fire rules about ordering information in a rights-based document. One approach is to work out the most important information from the reader’s (or, for a document that has more than one audience, the primary audience’s) point of view and put that information first.

Usually, there is one topic that cries out to be dealt with first. After that, various other topics compete for equal attention. This can make it difficult to work out which chapter should come second, third, and so on. One way of simplifying the task is this. There is nearly always a bits-and-pieces chapter that can be put at the back of the document. If there isn’t one, put the least important chapter last.

You then have the beginning and end of the document. That usually makes it simpler to order the remaining chapters. When trying to do that, look at the contents of the chapter and consider whether it should be near “the most important chapter” or near “miscellaneous”.

Usually, the structure of the document will evolve quite readily through this process – as long as you keep an eye on:

- what information is important;
- what information needs to go together;
- what is the best order to tell the story in; and
- above all, who are you writing to? why are you writing to them? (Audience and purpose.)

When you have an appropriate chapter order, you use a similar technique to order the sub-chapters and the provisions within the sub-chapters and chapters. And then the job is done.

As an example of ordering material within a chapter, let’s consider the “general conditions” found in most house and contents insurance policies. These conditions deal with:

- what the insured has to do during the period of insurance: for example, maintain the property, insure it, have someone living in it; and
- one-off issues: for example, how to make a claim, dispute resolution, choice of law, notices, etc. Most of these issues only arise as part of a claim.

All too often, the general conditions appear in no rational order.

The jumble needs to be sorted out. A starting point is to group together the duties of the insured while the house is insured; and in another group, the duties (and rights) of the insured in relation to a claim.

The duties that apply while the house is insured should be dealt with first:

- because every insured needs to be aware of those duties in case a breach of them affects the insured’s right to make a claim; and
- because those conditions apply all the time and to every person insured under the policy.

The conditions that apply at claim time only apply then. And they only ever apply to someone who wants to make a claim – a small percentage (the insurer hopes) of the people covered by the policy. Therefore, the conditions that relate to claims should come after the other conditions.

Another approach to sequencing an insurance policy would be to say that for most people, the only time they would ever read their insurance policy is if they need to make a claim: therefore, a section headed (something like) “How to make a claim” should be the first chapter in the policy. Personally, I feel that it is more important to first describe:

- what risk the policy covers (known in the industry as “the cover”); and
- exceptions to the cover (known in the industry as “the exclusions”, and known to me as the “When we won’t pay”).

Then, once the reason for the contract’s existence is established and explained, we can proceed to the other administrative matters, including “How to make a claim”.

### **Sequencing: audience and purpose**

The way you sequence material depends (like everything else) on your audience and your purpose. For example, I recently ran some training (with Phil Knight) for the South African government body that handles labour disputes, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. One of the documents we used in the training sessions was a letter the Commission sends to employees involved in a dispute. The letter tells them when and where their hearing will be, and how to prepare for it.

Let’s look at the way the Commission’s audience and purpose affected how we structured the section about preparing for the hearing.

The Commission is extremely busy. It is keen to do as much as it can to encourage the parties to do each of the following before the hearing:

- agree on the issues in dispute;
- arrange for witnesses to be there for the hearing; and
- arrange copies of any documents that will be needed at the hearing (and of course to bring them to the hearing).

In the Commission’s experience, those objectives are best achieved if the parties meet before the hearing and sort things out. Accordingly, an obvious way to structure this section of the Commission’s letter would be to say something like:

How can you prepare for the hearing?

Before the hearing, you should meet with the employer to sort out:

- the issues in dispute. Together, you should have a clear idea of the issues you need the CCMA to decide. For example, you will need to tell the Commissioner precisely why you ...;
- who will be called as a witness and any necessary arrangements; and
- which documents will be needed and who will copy them and bring them to the hearing. You will need to ...

But, according to the Commission, the reality is that most employees are extremely reluctant to meet with their employer. Employees fear that the more informed employer may take advantage of them. Because of this sensitivity, when we were rewriting the Commission’s letter with the training group, we structured the relevant section of the letter like this:

How should you prepare for your hearing?

To prepare for your hearing, you need to:

**Work out the issues**

Before the hearing, you should work out the specific issues you want the CCMA to decide. For example, you will need to tell the Commissioner precisely why you ...

You might like to meet with the employer to do that. This will help to save you time at the hearing.

**Organise your witnesses**

Before the hearing, you need to make sure that all the people you might call as a witness will be at the hearing.

**Gather, share, copy, and bring your documents**

Please make sure that when you come to the hearing you bring copies of all the relevant documents that you may want to use.

Before the hearing, you should try to:

- give the employer copies of all those documents;
- ....

Also, please bring this letter with you to the hearing.



In a PS, we added

It is important that you arrive on time and do as much as you can to prepare for the hearing.

The first version makes much of the need for the employer to meet with the employer. It starts out with a direction from the Commission, “Before the hearing, you should meet with the employer to...”. We felt that most employees would stop reading right there. If they did, they would do little, if anything, to prepare for the hearing.

The second version takes a more subtle approach. In the second paragraph under the first sub-heading, the Commission makes a gentle suggestion (not a direction) to the employee: “You might like to meet with the employer to do that.” And then the Commission explains the benefit of following that suggestion: “This will help to save you time at the hearing”. The PS provides a gentle reminder to the employee of the need to prepare.

The Commission’s audience and purpose set the structure of the document.

### **It’s just planning, really**

It’s all about planning. With care, a wide range of disparate information can be brilliantly structured. Consider this example from a short story by Garrison Keilor in which a rock music critic writes about the performance of a punk band. That performance briefly involved a chicken.

Perhaps no bird, not even the eagle, bluebird or robin, has entered so deeply the folk consciousness of the race as has the common chicken (*Gallus gallus*). Indeed, throughout the Christian world, and even in many non-Christian countries, the chicken, from Plymouth Rock to lowly Leghorn, has come to stand for industry, patience, and fecundity, and through its egg, for life itself, rebirth, and the resurrection of Christ, and through its soup, for magical healing and restoration of the spirit. And yet, even as the chicken rides high as a symbol of the Right Life in the pastoral dreams of the post-agrarian bourgeoisie, its name has attracted other connotations – of pettiness, timidity, and foolishness – perhaps reflecting our culture’s doubts about itself.<sup>13</sup>

I reckon that is an exquisitely clever little burst of text. I also reckon the author must have thought of everything he could about chickens, then divided, classified, and sequenced.

### **Conclusion**

Getting the structure right is hard work. Even if you start with a great plan and a great structure, they will often evolve during the writing process. But you can reduce the effort involved in getting the structure right by:

- breaking the writing tasks into separate roles by applying the madman-architect-carpenter-judge paradigm;
- allowing the architect to have free reign to create the structure;
- equipping the architect with the “sorting the washing” analogy;
- using the modified decimal numbering system to aid the dividing, classifying, and sequencing;
- following the guidelines about sequencing set out on pages 18 – 19; and
- aiming for the goals set out on page 14.

Having said all that, it seems to me that there is much more that we need to discover about how to get the structure right.

I hope this article will encourage others to share their ideas about structure. Perhaps you could produce an article, or maybe just a note, about your paradigm, your process, or a guideline or an approach that you find useful. If there are enough contributions, maybe Clarity could publish a “seminar in print” dealing with structure. I think that would be great.

After all, structure is crucial to clarity.



*Christopher Balmford provides plain-language, writing, training, and cultural change services. He is a lawyer and has been specialising in this work since 1990; first at the Law Reform Commission of Victoria and then in the law firm Phillips Fox – including a 2.5 year secondment*

*to AMP Limited. Now, Christopher works for his own company, Words and Beyond Pty Ltd, and is based in the studios of the corporate communication consultancy Horniak & Canny in Sydney. Christopher can be contacted on [christopherb@horniak-canny.com.au](mailto:christopherb@horniak-canny.com.au)*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Clarity* No. 42, September 1998, page 42.
  - <sup>2</sup> Betty S. Flowers, *Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process*, 44 Proceedings of the Conference of College Teachers of English 7-10 (1979). I only know Dr Flowers' work through an article by Bryan A Garner, *Using the Flowers Paradigm to Write More Efficiently*, TRIAL Journal of the Association of Trial Lawyers of America, May 1997, p 79.
  - <sup>3</sup> See Flowers at page 7, or Garner at page 79.
  - <sup>4</sup> See Professor Joseph Kimble, *Drafting Documents in Plain Language*, Business Forms Management Association, 1990, 1993, page 13.
  - <sup>5</sup> See Professor Joseph Kimble, *Drafting Documents in Plain Language*, Business Forms Management Association, 1990, 1993, page 13.
  - <sup>6</sup> See *Clarity* 42, September 1998, p 42.
  - <sup>7</sup> ISO 2145, second edition – 1978, 12-15.
  - <sup>8</sup> See *Access to the Law: the structure and format of legislation* Law Reform Commission of Victoria, May 1990, p 9-10.
  - <sup>9</sup> *Beyond Readability: How to Write and Design Understandable Life Insurance Policies* Dr Janice C. Redish, Director of the Document Design Center, American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC, prepared for the Committee on Consumer Affairs, American Council of Life Insurance [no year.] page 7.
  - <sup>10</sup> Thomas Murawski makes the same point in "Excerpts from *Writing Readable Regulations*" in *Clarity* 42, September 1998, p 50 at 53.
  - <sup>11</sup> See for example, *Legislation Manual: Structure and Style* Law Commission (NZ) Report 35, 1996, page 35; and Bryan A Garner *Advanced Legal Drafting* 1994, The Aarhus School of Business, Denmark, August 23-24, 1994.
  - <sup>12</sup> See *Better Writing for Lawyers* Timothy Perrin, The Law Society of Upper Canada, 1990, p 89-104.
  - <sup>13</sup> Garrison Keilor 'Don: The True Story of a Young Person' in *Happy to be Here*, Faber & Faber Limited, paperback edition 1993, p25 at 38.
-