

Write to Govern. How to write effective senior management reports and board papers.

by Mary Morel

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Reviewed by: Julie Garland McLellan*

The trouble with books about writing is that they are usually written by writers for writers. This book is written by a businesswoman specifically for executives, consultants and salespeople who need to inform or influence the board. It is easy to read and understand yet conveys the latest thinking on how information is received and processed. It also gives the traditional rules for good writing without any jargon and redresses one of the great lacks in modern school curricula: a solid foundation of grammatical rules.

I have read many board reports. They are often well written and carefully edited by teams of managers; they are sometimes haphazardly flung together by a harassed CEO responding to rapid change in the environment. All, without exception, would have been better if the writers had read this book first.

Six of the eleven chapters consider the ‘pre-writing’ stage. That is probably the correct distribution of effort for any board report. Too many writers start writing straight away. They should heed the advice of Mark Twain ‘*The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say*’.

The section on editing is packed with good advice. Too many report writers don’t plan to create enough time for thorough editing. It detracts from their work. Where Mary’s work stands out from the crowd is in her precise focus on what is important. That is the result of rigorous, probably painful, editing. This book has taken months to write, rewrite, hone to precision and polish.

I once walked through an exhibition of Picasso’s sketches for ‘La Guernica’. It filled room after room at Madrid’s Prado museum. Finally, upon turning a corner, I saw the painting. I had seen it many times before but this time it struck me with all its savage beauty, because I had seen what went into making the composition, how each element had been worked and reworked. Picasso spared millions of viewers from his painstaking gathering and development of ideas. But without that preparation the masterpiece would not have had the impact that it had, and still has. This book is a similar masterpiece.

Simple models make structuring a report easy. Mary uses the boardroom context so the information is always pertinent. There is no superfluous ‘padding’; it’s all good, useful, relevant, practical and ready to use. She understands the constraints of board templates and organisation style guides and provides strategies and tactics for writing well within these constraints.

Christopher Hampton said ‘*Asking a working writer what he thinks about critics is like asking a lamp-post what it thinks about dogs*’. If Mary were a lamp-post directors would sit at her feet and howl their praises.

This book will improve the lives of directors by reducing and refining the morass of paper they must wade through before, during and after each meeting. It would also assist aspiring directors to craft a better cover letter for resumés. The section on ‘What you need to know about the board to write for them’ is a comprehensive yet succinct summary of the board’s role that would benefit any individual dealing with a board for the first time.

I have already lent my copy to several people. Salesmen and senior executives have thanked me for it. It is a book I know I shall recommend often. I recommend it to you now.

* Julie Garland McLellan is a professional non-executive director, board and governance consultant and mentor. She is the author of “[Dilemmas, Dilemmas: practical case studies for company directors](#)”, “[The Director’s Dilemma](#)”, “[All Above Board: Great Governance for the Government Sector](#)” and numerous articles on corporate strategy and governance.