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Brevity in Communication and the Policy Decision Making Process

by Carl Zulauf and Charles Meier

Senior level managers in both the public and private sectors are confronted by a dilemma: they must make an increasing number of decisions, sift through the largest amount of information ever available upon which to base those decisions, and do it all within the limits of a restricted work day. The result is that managers have less time to devote to identifying, analyzing, and making decisions on individual issues. Figures one and two illustrate the scope of this dilemma. Figure 1, which shows the annual number of pages in the *Federal Register,* provides a rough guide to the increase in the number of issues on which decisions must be made. Figure 2, which represents the number of new titles acquired each year by the Library of Congress, illustrates the growth in information available for use in making decisions.

One solution to the dilemma confronting senior level decision makers is to hire more subordinates and delegate more decisions. However, some decisions must be made at the senior levels, and many others require supervision or guidance by senior management. Furthermore, more time must be spent keeping abreast of the ever-growing number of decisions made by subordinates. To contend with these aspects of senior level decision making and managerial supervision, a new style of writing has emerged. We were initially exposed to this style of writing while working on Capitol Hill and have labeled it decision-making writing. It is used extensively to help members of the U.S. Congress cope with demands on their time. Individuals who wish to be effective participants in the public or private policy making process need to understand the characteristics of good decision-making writing.

Decision-Making Writing

Decision-making writing contains elements of bullet writing and executive summaries. Similar to bullet writing, decision-making writing presents a collection of important ideas, observations, and facts. Each entry is limited to no more than three or four sentences. Unlike bullet writing, but similar to an executive summary, the entries are organized to produce a focused flow: identification of the issue, presentation of facts and analyses, enumeration of options, and justification of conclusions and recommendations. Unlike executive summaries, which tend to emphasize findings, decision-making writing presents all aspects of an issue in appropriate perspective. Done well, decision-making writing illuminates the complex threads which run from the description of the problem to the conclusions and recommendations and reads as a self-contained paper.

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The most important operational features of decision-making writing are:

- **Write only a single page:** turning the page is a barrier to reading.
- **Be concise:** if an idea, observation, or fact cannot be communicated in three or four sentences, it will probably cloud the decision-making process.
- **Beware of what is omitted:** critical assumptions and important caveats, upon which the policy recommendations or conclusions rest, need to be explicitly stated; otherwise, the paper may convey a message opposite to what is intended.

Implications

Mastery of decision-making writing will enhance the possibility of having an impact on private and public policy decisions. Large reports rarely do more than gather dust, but well-written concise reports lead to action.

Figure 1. Numbers of Pages Printed in the *Federal Register,* U.S., 1945-1988.

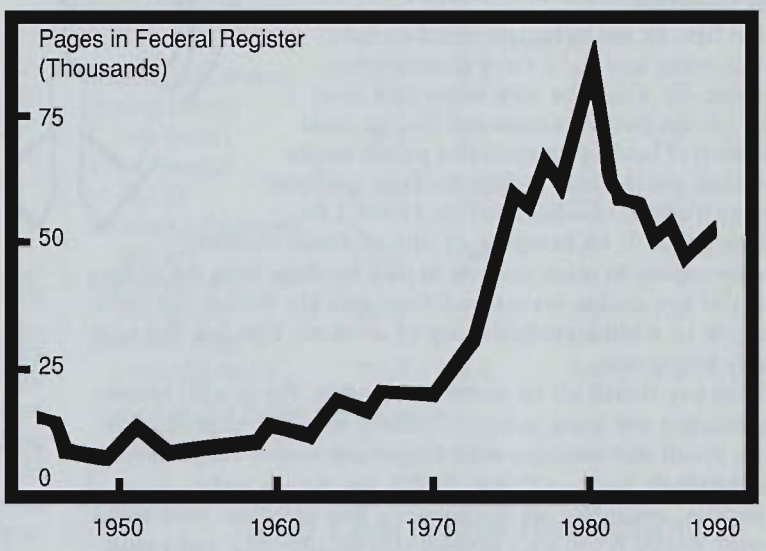
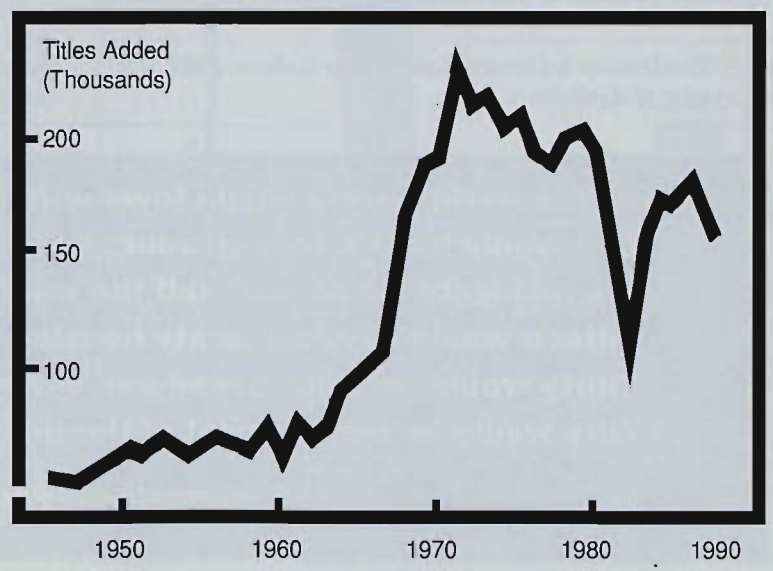


Figure 2. Acquisition of Titles by the Library of Congress, U.S., 1945-1988.



Example of Decision-Making Writing

To: Leaders of Farm Organizations
From: Carl Zulauf and Charles Meier

Subject: The Greenhouse Effect And The U.S. Farm Sector

Background Information

- The greenhouse effect is the general warming of the world caused by carbon dioxide, chloroflorocarbons, methane, nitrous oxide, and other gases which permit the sun's rays to enter the earth's atmosphere but prevent the reflected infrared radiation from escaping.
- Levels of greenhouse gases are expected to increase due to the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, use of man-made coolants, and organic matter breakdown.

Changes in U.S. Weather Patterns

- Current models of U.S. weather suggest that higher temperatures will result in less rain in the great plains and, to a lesser extent, the corn belt. In contrast, the climate in northern states will probably become more favorable for crops.
- The frequency of weather extremes, such as drought and hurricanes, will likely increase.
- However, wide variation exists around these forecasts since the factors that determine weather are not well understood.

Potential Effects on Production Capacity of the U.S. Farm Sector

- Increased temperatures and decreased moisture could reduce national yields of corn, soybeans, and wheat by 10-20 percent.
- Crop area in the northern states may expand somewhat.
- Higher temperatures will enhance the winter survivability of pests and diseases, thus reducing crop and livestock output.
- Frequency of weather induced yield losses will probably increase.

Economic Impacts on the U.S. Farm Sector

- Decreased yields will reduce supply, increasing crop prices and income.
- Need for farm prices and income support will decrease.
- Livestock income will be pressured by higher feed grain prices.
- Need for disaster relief programs will increase due to more frequent occurrence of extreme weather.
- Pesticide and livestock drug use will expand, thereby increasing the cost of production.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Farmers

- While global climatic models suggest some form of greenhouse effect is probable, its impact on the weather in general and the U.S. farm sector in particular is difficult to forecast.
- Farmers should support research on the greenhouse effect and development of heat, drought, and insect resistent crops as a precaution.
- Farmers should watch for increases in extreme weather conditions, which are consistent with most current forecasts of a greenhouse effect.

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