

Communications for dialogue & advocacy



Preparing written documents

Contents

1.	INTRODUCTION.....	3
2.	THE PRINCIPLES OF BETTER WRITING.....	4
3.	PREPARING A BUSINESS LETTER.....	9
4.	PREPARING A REPORT.....	11
5.	RECEIVING FEEDBACK ON YOUR WRITING.....	12
6.	WRITING EMAILS	13
7.	USING SMS TEXTS.....	15

This workbook has been written by Joanna Martin and edited by David Irwin

© Copyright 2020. This handbook is copyright. It may not be reproduced in any form for commercial gain, but may be freely copied for use by business membership organisations provided that the source is quoted.

Communications for advocacy

Preparing written documents

1. Introduction

Business member organisations (BMOs) engage in private public dialogue and advocate an improved business environment. A vital component of dialogue and advocacy is communications; indeed, arguably advocacy is all communications. Written communications is essential in driving and maintaining the image of your BMO as a professional organisation with valuable services to offer.

Digital technology makes doing business a lot simpler, but it is also causing some traditional ways of communication, like letter writing for example, to become almost obsolete. Without a doubt, the increase in the use of digital technology, places greater emphasis on your ability to communicate through writing.

We use written communication more frequently than ever before. Text messages, social media posts, e-mails, blog entries and commenting on other social media fora are all forms of communication that typically rely entirely on written words. For some, social networking, texting and e-mail have taken precedence over phone calls, except on very special occasions. And while an average Tweet or Facebook comment proves that not everyone takes syntax and style very seriously, a lot of people use your writing ability as an opportunity to assess you – and potentially judge you in a poor light if your written communication is poor.

This handbook targets BMO communication, public relations, press and marketing professionals in the organisation, and those responsible for boosting the visibility and credibility of their BMOs. It will help you to understand better how to approach your writing. It provides a step by step process to developing simple, clear and effective written documents, using plain English, including memos, letters, e-mails, SMS texts and business reports. By the end of the handbook you will be able to:

- Prepare memos, business letters and reports using plain and simple English;
- Write and respond to emails clearly and efficiently; and
- Engage better with your stakeholders when using SMS text and other social media applications

Since 1979, the Plain English Campaign has been arguing for simpler English in official documents: "The Plain English Campaign is an independent group fighting for plain English in public communication. We oppose gobbledygook, jargon and legalese." (See <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>). It has edited, rewritten and clarified over 22,000 documents. Remember to keep it plain and simple.

2. The principles of better writing

2.1 Organising your writing

Before we launch into the specifics (how to write a memo for example) let us explore some basic principles to better writing.

Good business writing is simple, clear, and succinct. By not calling attention to itself, good writing is 'effortless' to read, helping the reader focus on the idea you are trying to communicate rather than on the words that you are using to describe your concept.

The key to good business writing is being organised. You need to know the direction in which you are going before you begin your research and identify the key messages you need to convey.

Compose a list of the most important messages and any points or arguments you wish to make and use this content to create an outline. If your document has an overview section explaining your purpose for writing, write this first. Next, tackle the most important paragraphs, before filling out the details and any supplementary material.

2.2 Writing for clarity

When compiling a memo, letter, or report, keep in mind that your reader often does not have much time: senior managers and news editors, in particular, generally have tight schedules and too much to read. They need your written communication quickly and clearly to give them the details they need to know.

Ensure that your writing style is both precise and concise. Use simple, down-to-earth words, and avoid needless ones and wordy expressions. Simple words and expressions are more quickly understood and can reinforce your ideas. Be direct and avoid vague terms such as 'almost' and 'slightly'.

Make sure, too, that everything you write is grammatically correct – you do not want your busy reader to have to re-read your sentences to try to decipher their meaning.

Keep your paragraphs short; they are easier on the eye and more likely to get read. If your document must include numbers, use them judiciously – a paragraph filled with numbers can be difficult to read and follow. Use a few numbers selectively to make your point, and then put the rest in tables and graphics.

Make sure you answer the following questions throughout your writing task: does my writing flow in a logical way and have I given complex explanations in a step-by-step form? Have I broken down or simplified any technical terms? Have I said enough to answer questions and allay fears without giving too much detail? Have I used visuals to help explain complex facts?

On reading documents, "80 per cent of people will read the headline of a piece of text. 20 per cent will read the rest" (O'Rourke 2009, but originally from David Ogilvy in *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, 1963).

This means a great deal of time and energy should go into writing the summary, an opening paragraph of a press release or a heading of a success story.

Revising your written document and editing are critical to good writing. Putting some time between writing and editing will help you be more objective. Revise your writing with the intent to simplify, clarify, and trim excess words.

2.3 Making your writing come alive

To escape from excessively formal writing styles, try to make your writing more like your speaking, and then 'tidy it up'. Imagine your reader is in front of you and aim all the time for writing that is easy to understand. You will likely need to write a first draft for structural purposes, and then go back over your document. Make sure that your writing is lively and direct. Use active sentences and avoid the passive voice.

2.4 The right order

A poorly organised letter for example can leave the reader guessing the key messages right up until the end. This is different to storytelling where the plot gradually unfolds and all is revealed. It is likely the reader may not have the patience to get that far and throw it in the bin. Especially news editors, who do not have much time when reading your 'letter to the editor'. Your job is to make it easier for the reader, by explaining each point with an overview, followed by details.



To avoid any confusion, always give directions before reasons, requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before details, and solutions before problems. Try the approach used in newspaper articles. They start with the most important information and taper off to the least important. (O'Rourke, 2009)



2.5 Connect with the reader

Before you begin writing, consider the reader's expectations and what they want and need to gain or understand when reading your text.

Reach out to the reader by occasionally using questions. A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question mark. Rather than writing "Please advise as to whether the meeting is still scheduled for 21 June", simply ask: "Is the meeting still scheduled for 21 June?"

Make sure that you separate facts from opinions. The reader should never be in doubt about what you know to be true, and what you think may be the case. Always be clear and consistent to avoid misinterpretation of what you are saying.

2.6 Jargon free

Convoluted words and expressions make your writing appear inauthentic. Remember your reader may not know your industry jargon. This is the quickest way to alienate an audience so avoid it at all costs.

2.7 Shorter sentences

This will not guarantee understanding, but shorter sentences will prevent confusion that can easily occur in longer sentences. Read your writing out loud and break apart into two or more sentences any sentence you cannot finish in one breath.

2.8 Double check your work

Eliminate factual errors, typos, misspellings, bad grammar, and incorrect punctuation in your writing. Remember that if one small detail in a memo you have written is recognised to be incorrect, your entire line of thinking may be considered questionable.

2.9 Write with personal pronouns

Use “we”, “us”, and “our” when speaking for your organisation. Use “I”, “me”, and “my” when speaking about yourself.

2.10 Use the present tense

Attempt to write in the present as much as possible. This adds immediacy to your writing and makes it seem more alive. Be careful, however, not to change from the present to the past tense and back again, as this will make your writing confusing. Ideally select one tense and stick with it.

2.11 Use short transitions

Transitions are words and phrases that connect ideas and show how they are related. It is a good idea to use them in your written work for variety. As far as possible, strive to use shorter words. For example, use “but” more than “however”, and “more than” rather than “in addition to”. Do not be afraid to start a sentence with words like “but”, “so”, “yet”. Below is a list of words adapted from <https://m.eliteediting.com.au> that you can use in your written communication.

To repeat an idea just stated:

In other words	To repeat
That is	Again

To illustrate an idea:

For example	Presently
For instance	At the same time
In particular	Shortly
To illustrate	In the end

Temporarily

Thereafter

To restate an idea more precisely:

To be exact

More specifically

To be specific

More precisely

To be precise

To announce a contrast, a change in direction:

Yet

Instead of

However

On the contrary

Still

Conversely

Nevertheless

Notwithstanding

On the other hand

In spite of this

In contrast

To mark a new idea as an addition to what has been said:

Similarly

Furthermore

Also

Further

Too

Moreover

Besides

In addition

To show cause and effect:

As a result

Hence

For this reason

Consequently

Therefore

Accordingly

Conclusion:

In short

On the whole

To conclude

In summary

In brief

To sum up

Time:

At once

At last

In the interim

Meanwhile

At length

In the meantime

Immediately

2.12 Preparing a memo

Memo is short for memorandum, which in Latin means to recount.



A memo is normally used for communicating policies, procedures, or related official business within an organisation. It is often written from a one-to-all perspective (like mass communication), broadcasting a message to an audience,

rather than a one-on-one, interpersonal communication. It may also be used to update a team on activities for a given project or to inform a specific group within a company of an event, action, or observance. A memo's purpose is often to inform, but it can occasionally include an element of persuasion or a call to action. (Source: <https://writingcommons.org>)



2.13 The format

A heading, which is often in bold, indicates who sent it and who the intended recipients are. Date and subject lines come next, followed by the main body, a message.

"In a standard format, you might see an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. All these are ingredients in a memo, and each part has a clear purpose. The declaration at the beginning uses a declarative sentence to announce the main topic. The discussion elaborates or lists major points associated with the topic, and the conclusion serves as a summary." (Source: <https://writingcommons.org>)

Information in the subject line should be simple. If the memo is announcing time off work for a holiday, for example, the specific holiday should be named in the subject line. Use "Long Easter Weekend" rather than "holiday".

2.14 Consider your audience

Take your audience into consideration when preparing a memo. An acronym or abbreviation that is known to a majority of staff, may not be known by everyone, and if the memo is to be posted and distributed within the organisation, clear and concise information is paramount.

You can use a memo to announce something, a form of communication from management to employees, and you can also request feedback. The memo may detail policies or procedures and may also refer to an existing or new policy for example.

Memoranda are always direct with a clear purpose. They may contain facts and should be unbiased.

2.15 Sample memo

Below is an example of a general office memo.

MEMORANDUM

To: All staff
From: Kariuki Waweru
Date: 14 June, 2018
Subject: Inappropriate use of time on Google Doodle games

It has come to my attention that office staff have been spending too much time on the Google home page microgames. This memo is a reminder to use your work hours for work and to play after working hours.

According to a recent article, the estimated daily cost of people collectively playing these games, instead of working, is over KES 120 billion. If these estimates are applied to our 600 office employees, this results in a nearly KES 70,00 weekly loss.

This is a conservative estimate considering the extensive discussions that occur about beating the office's current high score. The extra cost quickly adds up.

Of course, we do not want you to view our organisation as a place of drudgery and draconian rules. I encourage a fun yet competitive environment and I recognise that we certainly will not be profitable if you are unhappy or dissatisfied with your jobs. This is just a reminder to be careful with your use of company time.

Kariuki Waweru

3. Preparing a business letter

Business letters are documents primarily intended to communicate externally but managers may also use them to communicate internally with staff. Staff may also write resignation letters to their managers.

BMOs will find themselves often writing a letter to the government requesting a meeting for example or clarification on a new regulation enacted. Readers need to be able to understand the content with little effort so they therefore need to be concise and clear.

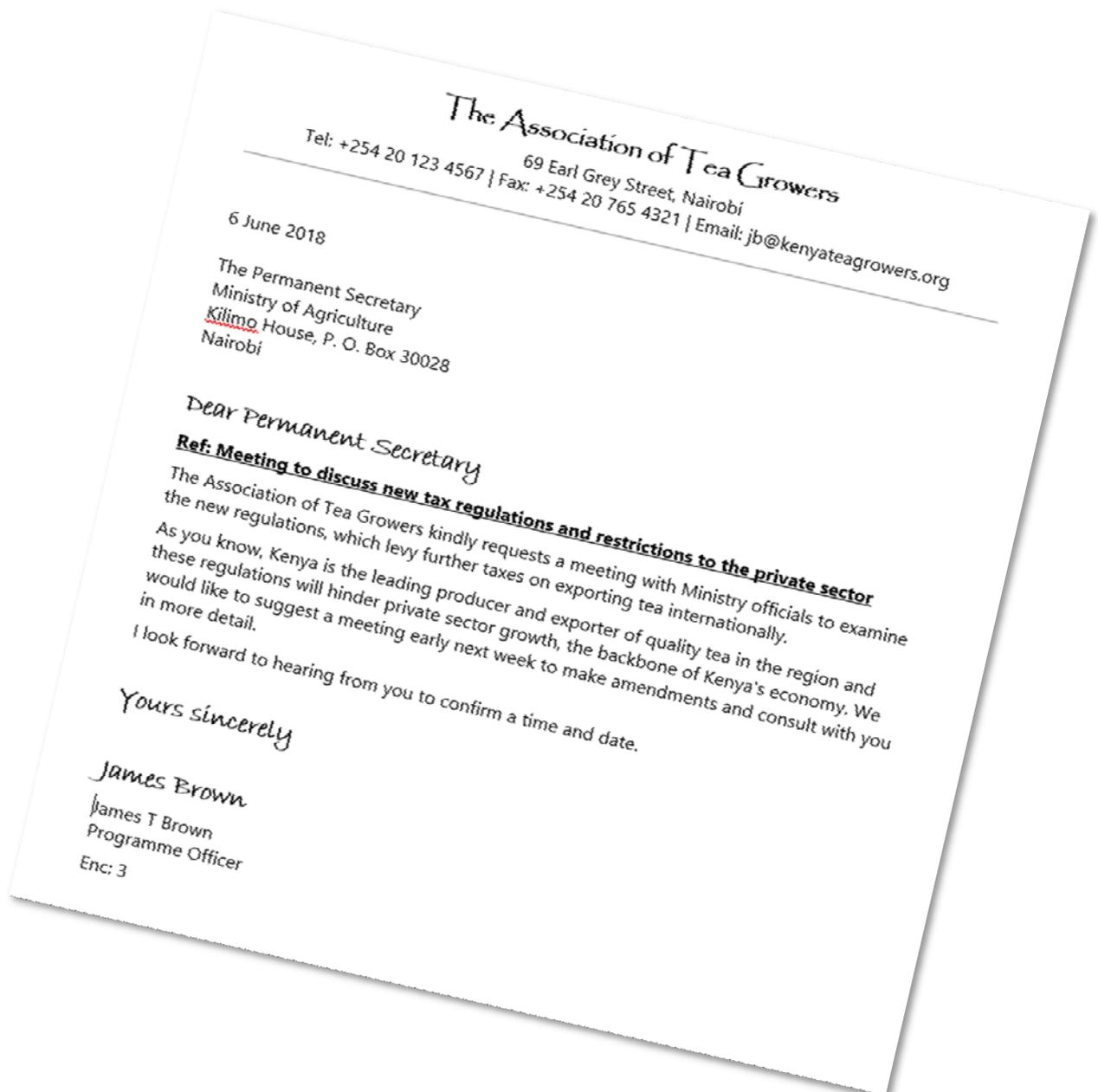
You need to be able to convince others that what you are writing is worthy of their attention. So, the letter should aim to be concise, formal to an extent, but not so formal that it feels outdated and alienates the reader, and finally in some sort of order: a beginning, middle and end for example.

Brevity is essential but avoid sounding inhuman. Your reader should also be able to take in enough information to comprehend what you are saying. Include each issue relevant to the subject, and explain the process, the outcome or decision

that has been made. Put yourself in your readers' shoes and ask, "Is this information sufficient or relevant?"

If you are responding to a letter, show genuine interest by being upbeat and positive in your correspondence, and replying within three working days.

Below is a sample business letter, with the main purpose of requesting a meeting. Note the Enc 3 at the end. This means three items are also enclosed with the letter. These items could be a brochure about your organisation, a policy brief and a recent press release for example. Perhaps even a colourful invitation about an up and coming event.



4. Preparing a report

4.1 An overview

Reports are longer and more detailed than most written documents. They express actions, describe projects and events, and document often complex information about current issues and topics.

They can sometimes take the reader on a journey about something that happened in the past, something that was introduced (the action taken) and future speculation.

They can be written by more than one person and for audiences with specialised needs and interests.

4.2 Planning your report

Before writing, ask yourself the following questions:

Who are you writing for? What do you want them to know? You will need to consider the depth of content, writing style and how to present your issues.

How will you format your report? Will the reader read chronologically or pick out parts of particular interest?

What will it look like? A bold typeface? Which font?

Note that business people are busy and may only read the executive summary so it should consolidate all information at a glance so that your recommendations also make sense.

You could even include a cover letter summarising what your report is about and why you have chosen to write about a particular issue.

A report can be structured as follows:

- Title page, abstract, table of contents, and list of figures and tables
- The main body of the report: summary, report's key messages, points, and recommendations
- The end: bibliography, appendices, glossary, and index

The structure of a report can be divided into sections. The list below can be used as a template when beginning to write (adapted from O'Rourke 2009)

Title page

A single page containing the full title of the report, the names of the authors, the date of issue, and the name of the organisation to which the report is submitted.

Table of contents

A list of all the headings within the report in the order of their appearance, along with a page number for each.

List of figures and tables

Reports with more than five figures or tables should include a page listing each one with its page number.

Foreword

An introductory statement usually written by an authority figure. It provides background information and places the report in the context of other works in the field.

Preface

This describes the purpose, background, or scope of the report.

Summary

A summary enables readers to scan the report's primary points. You probably do not need a summary if the entire report is no more than four pages. If you do write a summary, it should be a real summary and not just a few sentences repeated from lower down in the report. A good summary will be no more than a page or so in length.

Main text

This forms the main body of the report and explains your work and your findings.

Conclusion

This contains not only concluding remarks but also any recommended actions for readers.

Bibliography

A listing of all the sources consulted to prepare the report. It may also suggest additional reading and resources.

Appendices

Information that supplements the main report as evidence, such as lists, tables of figures, and charts and graphs.

Glossary

An alphabetical list of definitions of unusual terms used.

Index

The index is a list of topics with numbers.

5. Receiving feedback on your writing

It is always a good idea to get a colleague, family member or friend to look over your first draft of any written work before finalising it. Ask them if they clearly understand what has been written and can follow your argument.

Ask your reader to respond to the following questions. Their answers should show you that your argument makes sense:

- How is the subject matter explained?
- What are the key points of the argument?
- How did the writer back up each point made?
- What are the opposing point(s) and are they clear?
- What is the writer's conclusion?

6. Writing emails

Electronic mail, or email, is one of the most frequently used communication tools on the planet. Emails increase the speed and ease with which information can be shared by users across the world. "Although an essential business tool for many, the explosion in the use of email has led to 'email overload', as many people are unable to deal effectively with the volume of emails they receive." (Ramalingam, 2006)

So how do you keep on top of your in-box? And how do you make the most of this tool? If you are not online for any length of time, an automatic response message can be a good way of informing correspondents that their email will not be read immediately.

6.1 Before writing an email

Before you compose an email, consider if there is a more appropriate way of communicating. If email is the most appropriate, it is important to make the purpose of the email clear and ensure that you are sending it to the relevant people.

Ask yourself:

- Why do I need to send this email?
- State the purpose of the email concisely in the 'subject' field so that readers do not have to open the email to know what it is about.
- Use a layout that is easy to understand, including bullet points, one idea per paragraph, etc.
- Use simple language wherever possible.
- If there are many action points, summarise these at the end in a numbered list, showing who needs to take which actions by when.
- Who needs to receive this email? What actions (if any) do they need to take when reading this email?

Please note: If your organisation has a high volume of email correspondence, agree on guidelines and alternatives to the use of emails (such as staff notice boards in a shared office space, newsletters, etc.).

6.2 During an email

For all actions required, place recipients email addresses in the 'to' section at the top of the email; but if you are sending an email for someone's reference then you will need to place their email into the 'cc' (carbon copy) section. If you want

to copy a person in but do not want others to know about it then use the 'bcc' (blind carbon copy) section.

Ask yourself if you need to add any attachments to the email? Do all of the recipients need to read these? If there are multiple attachments, write a sentence about each attachment, which says who needs to read it and the order in which they should do so. Avoid sending attachments that your recipients will not have the software to open. Try not to send large attachments to those with a limited internet capacity either.

Use the 'priority' email option sparingly. If the information contained in the email is urgently required, make sure the 'subject' reflects the content of the email. If a response or immediate action needs to be taken then include 'response required by ...' or 'action required' in the subject field. If the email is for reference only, mark this either in the subject field or at the start of the email.

Judiciously use the 'read receipts' function: if you want to know if someone has read your email, simply ask them to confirm receipt.

Remember that an email is a vital way of staying in touch, conveying data and graphics, and managing the internal and external flow of information, needed to run an organisation.

6.3 Reducing time spent on emails

Do not be a slave to your in-box. Below are some tips on how to limit the time you spend on email adapted from Ramalingam (2006):

Escape the endless reply loop – silence in response to an email message may feel rude but is acceptable. If you wish to reassure someone that no reply is necessary, finish a message with "no reply needed," or a request with "Thanks in advance." Avoid asking any questions for which you do not really want or need answers.

Think twice about the "cc" box – if you copy in a large number of people to your emails and they all respond with a reply that needs an answer, you may create unnecessary traffic.

Only add attachments that cannot be circulated more effectively through other means: consider putting them on the internet and sending the URL by email, for example.

If there are multiple attachments, provide a sentence on each which says who needs to read it and which order they should read them.

Do not send attachments that your recipients will not have the software to open. Beware of sending large attachments to those with limited server capacity.

Avoid overusing the 'priority' email option. If the information contained in the email is urgently required, make sure the 'subject' reflects the content of the email.

If a response or immediate action needs to be taken then include 'response required by ...' or 'action required' in the subject field. If the email is for reference only, mark this either in the subject field or at the start of the email.

6.4 Good email habits

Do not check your email all the time, that is a waste of time. Look at your in-box in the morning, once in the afternoon, and again before going home for example. Aim to handle each message only once. If it is unimportant or irrelevant, delete it. If you spend more than three hours a week sorting through junk mail, you are being inefficient.

When responding to a message, decide if 'now' really is the right time? Do you have all the information that you need to respond now or later? Once you have responded, move the message out of your outbox and into a labelled and relevant folder.

7. Using SMS texts

Short Message Service (SMS) texts are a useful tool in the workplace. Social media platforms, including groups like WhatsApp are extremely quick and handy ways to communicate with select groups. Especially your members who are based in remote areas and may not always have access to a computer.

Short messages are an ideal medium for alerts, such as notifications of a national holiday, which depends on the sighting of the moon, Eid for example, or to quickly introduce new members of a team to the organisation.

Advantages of text communication include:

- Most people read them unlike monthly newsletters delivered by email!
- An inexpensive way to reach your members and stakeholders
- Almost instant delivery
- Concise – short messages are more likely to be read and absorbed
- Environmentally friendly – creates no paper waste

Text messages form a direct link with your recipient and are a great tool to communicate with other staff members in a productive way!

Further reading



- O'Rourke, J, (2009), DK Essential Managers: Effective Communication, New York: DK Publishing
- <https://m.eliteediting.com.au>
- Wright, Tony. (2010). *The Tragic Cost of Google Pac-Man – 4.82 million hours*. Retrieved May 26, 2010 See: iga.fyi/pacman
- Ramalingam, B, (2006) Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations. London: ODI
- <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>



This series of advocacy competence handbooks – divided into modules and units – is intended to support business member organisations (BMOs) to engage in public private dialogue and to advocate improvements to the business environment. You are free to use the units and other materials provided that the source is acknowledged.

Foundation Unit

0. Introduction to advocacy & dialogue

Module 1: The policy process

1.1 Understanding policy and regulation

1.2 Policy analysis

1.3 The process of formulating and reforming policy

Module 2: Policy positions

2.1 Identifying, understanding & framing issues

2.2 Preparing policy positions

2.3 Influence & argumentation

Module 3: Communications

3.1 Communications & public relations

3.2 Media relations & use of social media

3.3 Interview skills

Module 4: Written communications

4.1 Branding & house styles

4.2 Writing press releases

4.3 Preparing written documents

Module 5: Managing advocacy projects

5.1 Planning an advocacy project

5.2 Budgeting & financial management

5.3 Evaluation of advocacy

Module 6: Managing a BMO

6.1 Leadership, strategy & business planning

6.2 Governance and ethics

6.3 Members and member services

Module 7: Research

7. Research methods



The Business Advocacy Network is an initiative of Irwin Grayson Associates and can be found at businessadvocacy.net. IGA can be found at irwingrayson.com and contacted at david@irwin.org. You can follow David Irwin on twitter at [@drdaavidirwin](https://twitter.com/drdaavidirwin).
