

WRITING PAPERS FOR THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OR OTHER COMMITTEES

This paper is a guide for staff about the content, form and style of papers for the University's Board of Trustees. It can also be used as a guide for the preparation of committee papers generally.

1. Background about the Board

The starting point for writing a good paper is to understand the role and responsibilities of the Board itself and the path that proposals take in getting to the Board.

The Board of Trustees

The Board is the governing authority of the University. Its broad functions include:

- the development of broad policies and strategic plans with respect to the University;
- generally defining the University's educational profile;
- management of the University's resources and the monitoring of the University's performance;
- representation of the University as occasion requires;
- acting for and on behalf of the University in the exercise of the University's functions; and
- the control and management of the affairs and concerns of the University.

The Board comprises 18 members of whom 6 are internal to the University and 12 are external. The Board meets six times per year.

Writers of papers intended for the Board must be aware of this context. The Board needs papers that can be the basis for informed decision making. All Board members are dedicated and work hard for the University and its governance, but the majority of members are external and do not have the day to day experience and understanding of university business. Board papers must present proposals clearly, with all relevant facts and assessments, and in a format and style that is easy to read and understand. Bear in mind that in some cases Board members will be reading about an issue for the first time and will need background, history and context. Papers for the Board must be written for the Board and not simply be management papers re-formatted.

Papers being put to the Board must deal with matters relevant to the Board's role and appropriate for it to know or determine. Papers must be substantial in content (i.e. significant to the University) and where an issue is canvassed, clear advice and information about what is being done and/or recommended in order to deal with the matter is included. For example, a paper that outlines a new direction in government policy should contain information about how the University is affected and any action that the University may or should take in relation to it. Otherwise there is little point in reporting the policy to the Board.

General information about the Board, its members, the committees and the like is available via the “Governance” web page at:
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/board_of_trustees

The Path to the Board

The Board meets six times each year and most of the business of the Board comes to it via its Committees or the Vice-Chancellor and the University Executive. Writers need to find out and meet the dates and timelines for the committees or meetings that a particular proposal will follow prior to going to the Board. For example a proposal that has significant resource implications for the University will go from the University Executive to the Finance and Investment Committee and then on to the Board. The governance committee structure and calendar of meeting dates is published on the “Governance” web page.

The draft agenda for a Board meeting is approved five weeks prior to the meeting date and writers normally have approximately two to three weeks to draft their papers. New matters need to be signalled to the Board support staff as early as possible to ensure that they get on the agenda and have been through the appropriate review bodies.

For each Board meeting a due date is set for the submission of papers. This is normally two and a half weeks prior to the date of the meeting. This time frame is needed so that all papers can be reviewed for content and format, be collated and printed and, most importantly, posted to Board members at least a week before the meeting.

The Board also receives some papers and reports on a cyclical basis and writers of that material must ensure that they are aware of the time lines involved. For example the Board considers the end of year accounts in April (via the Audit and Risk Committee) and the budget for the following year in October (via the Finance and Investment Committee).

2. Format and Content of Papers

A standard template and consistency in style assists Board members who are faced with folders filled with dozens of papers. They soon learn how to read the papers and where to find the information they want.

The University has adopted a standard template for all Board papers. The template is very simple so that it can accommodate a range of purposes. Some papers provide information or briefings for the Board on particular issues, while others are specific proposals with recommendations. For each Board meeting a formatted word template is available to authors (contact: Jo Maguire, j.maguire@westernsydney.edu.au)

The template consists of the following sections:

- i. Purpose
- ii. Background
- iii. Discussion
- iv. Recommendation(s)
- v. Signatures
- vi. Appendices

i Purpose

This section should be no more than half a page and usually one or two sentences will suffice. It is meant to convey to Board members the reason that the paper is before the Board.

For example an approval to a new policy, the Purpose section might simply say: “to seek the Board’s approval to the XYZ policy dealing with ABC”.

ii Background

This section must provide the context for the Board’s consideration. Matters to be covered include:

- previous Board consideration of the issues;
- relevant external context that brings the issue before the Board (e.g. legislation, government policy directives, etc.);
- relevant UWS policies, delegations, strategic directions or precedents;
- the background and relevant history of the issues.

For papers seeking a decision on a recommendation this section should provide Board members with enough history and context to proceed with understanding and confidence to consider the issues under the next section. In essence it provides the framework within which a matter is analysed and determined.

This section should be relatively short (up to 1 page). If there is a need for more detail, for example in the form of reference documents such as policies, legislation or government statements, these should be included as appendices.

For papers that are for information, this section can be longer. Typically committee reports that provide a range of items for the information of Board members but do not contain recommendations or matters for consideration use this section.

Many papers to the Board take the form of reports on progress, periodic updates on ongoing matters, or provision of key data and statistics. Usually the detail of these matters is contained in formal attachments to a covering paper. For these papers it is essential that good understandable summary information is available that shows key trends and performance results and progress against benchmarks or targets. Visual presentation by way of diagrams, tables and the like, with appropriate use of colour should be used to assist the reader’s comprehension of the information being provided.

iii Discussion

This section provides the detailed argument in relation to any proposal before the Board. The content and length will vary considerably depending on the complexity of the topic, but the following matters should always be considered for inclusion:

- a clear and detailed statement of the proposal;
- the arguments and reasons behind any proposal;
- the objective and expected outcomes;

- the costs and benefits;
- the pros and cons;
- the realistic options that might be available;
- the views of relevant stakeholders or interested parties;
- the implications of any decision and/or the risk that might be involved;
- the alignment with strategic and budget frameworks.

There are no hard and fast rules as to how this section is to be organised. As with the whole paper, this section must be set out in a logical sequence and structure using appropriate headings and paragraphing. Where necessary appendices can be used to provide appropriate reference material (e.g. complex data).

The section should conclude with a summary statement if the topics are lengthy and complex.

iv Recommendation

Board decisions are made by resolution of the Board and are recorded formally in the minutes. This section needs to be kept simple and the recommendations precisely stated. There should be no ambiguity about what has been decided.

Vague constructions such as “the Board endorses the principles in this paper” should be avoided and whenever possible the full text of what is being approved or endorsed should be contained in the recommendation.

Generally the Board will note, approve or endorse a matter. Endorsement should be used sparingly and refers to situations where the Board’s broad concurrence to a particular course of action is being sought. For example the Board has from time to time given endorsement to the release of discussion papers prepared by University management. In effect this means that the Board has given its support to the broad directions of the paper but that specific approval of the particulars is still to be given.

v Signatures

All Board papers must be under the name of a committee chair, the Vice-Chancellor, or a Deputy Vice-Chancellor. This is usually the person who will speak to the paper at the Board meeting.

The author of the paper (if different) is acknowledged below the name of the person submitting the paper in the format: “prepared by ...”.

vi Appendices

Appendices need to be clearly labelled so that the reader knows what the document is without having to trace it back through the text. Where there are multiple appendices, an index of them should be included either at the bottom of the paper or as a coversheet to the appendices.

3. The Style of Board Papers

Board papers should be written in Plain English. A useful summary of the concept of Plain English is:

“Despite the name, Plain English is only partly about language. It also emphasises the importance of document design. Any document needs a clear layout, in sections or paragraphs that express the structure of the information, and with effective headings and subheadings to identify local content. Adequate white space between sections and in lists also makes information more accessible. Where language comes in, it’s broadly a matter of seeking simple,

everyday words whenever possible, and speaking more directly to the reader. Sentences need to be shorter and less intricate, with punctuation that ensures reliable reading. An average of 20 words is recommended, though individual sentences will of course vary around that. The most important principle of Plain English is to keep the reader in mind as you write. Think of yourself as communicating to someone across the table, and of how each sentence sounds. Your writer's 'ear' should react whenever sentences leave the reader gasping for breath."¹

There are some basic style rules that apply to University papers. These are:

- Avoid the use of personal pronouns – 'I', 'we', 'you' etc. Reference should be made to the position or body being referred to.
- Acronyms – apart from the most self evident acronyms that will be readily known by Board members, the standard practice of providing the full text and acronym in brackets in the first instance and thereafter the acronym, should be used.
- Personal names – generally the provision of names of individuals within papers should be accompanied by the relevant title – e.g. Dr, Professor, Ms, Mr etc.
- Font – Georgia 11 point is used for all text including headings in the body of the paper and 14 point for the paper title. A formatted template is available to writers for each Board meeting.
- Use the active voice (e.g. 'Academic Senate decided' rather than 'it was decided') and put statements in positive form as it makes the meaning clearer (e.g. 'it was possible' rather than 'it would not have been impossible').
- Use simple concrete language and fewer words – for example 'the reason why is that' can be replaced by 'because'.
- Stick to the same tense and keep it simple – avoid forms like 'it would have been' if 'it was' can be used.
- Use shorter sentences and avoid joining sentences together with ands and buts.

Appendix 1 to this paper provides a listing of plain English resources and style guides that writers can consult. Assistance with the preparation of Board papers is available from the support staff to the Board. Contact details are provided in appendix 2.

¹ The Cambridge Guide to English Usage, Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 425

APPENDIX 1

References

The Cambridge Guide to English Usage – Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Writing at Work – Neil James, Allen & Unwin, 2007

Style Manual – Sixth Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2002.

Guide to Better Business Writing - Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation 2005.

Plain English at Work – a guide to help organisations develop plain English documents (DEST, 2004).

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/Plain_English_at_work.htm

The Plain English Campaign.
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

APPENDIX 2

Board Support Staff

For any assistance with the development of Board papers contact can be made with the support staff to the Board.

Marian Alleyn (x7848) – Executive Assistant to the Chancellor
Jo Maguire (x7859) – Executive Officer to the Board
Sophie Buck (x7875) – Director Governance Services
Helen Fleming, Secretary to the Board

The annual Calendar of Board and other committee meeting dates can be downloaded at:
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/governance