(U) Writing for the Mass Audience: All's Well that Begins Well?

FROM: ████████████
the SIDtoday editor
Run Date: 01/10/2007

(U) This is the second in a series of informal essays on general writing (i.e. not SIGINT reporting) topics:

(U) Let's say that you are getting ready to write a message to a large audience here at NSA. Perhaps it is an email that you are sending to a large distribution, or an article to be posted on SID *today* or another publication. What special factors should you keep in mind?

(U) Writing is a lot like public speaking, in that you must tailor your comments to the intended audience. But beware -- there is one major difference between the two forums: when writing, you **don't** have a captive audience! If you are speaking in Friedman and you get off to a slow start (for a minute or two), it is unlikely that half of the audience will stand up en masse and stampede toward the exits. (That would be a VERY tough crowd!) But that's exactly what will happen if your written message's opening is a yawner.

(U) When people are sitting at their computers, they are being pulled in 20 different directions. Should they read that email from the boss? Check out what's on NSA Daily? Ignore both of those and start looking at traffic? In short, their time is valuable, and if it seems that what you have to say isn't of interest, they'll quickly turn their attention elsewhere.

(U) So, how to prove to the audience right away that reading your note is a good investment of their time and energy? Here's a rule: ***A good opening paragraph -- especially the first sentence -- is essential.*** It should be clear to the reader that what you have to say is either important or interesting - if it is neither of the above, you're sunk!

(U) Here are some common pitfalls to avoid:

1. Not Getting Right to the Point

(U) Don't start out with the background - start out with the "news." Let's say a message started out like this:

" *In 1996, project SUPERSPOOK was tasked with improving NSA's efforts against gizmo X. Phase 1 called for a feasibility study, and this was completed in 1998...*"

At this point, the article appears to be a historical retrospective, and most of the readers are thinking to themselves, "OK, I have never heard of project SUPERSPOOK, so it probably has no relevance to me at all..." It is a safe bet that much of the audience will stop reading right there. The final paragraph might have one heck of a conclusion, for example, "In summation, project SUPERSPOOK's recent breakthrough will revolutionize every aspect

of SIGINT and affect every employee," but almost no one would ever make it that far!

2. Too Many Trees, Not Enough Forest

(U) Another hazard is that the text may indeed tell the "news," but in such specific detail that the average reader has no idea of the overall significance:

" *In a breakthrough, processor XYZ has succeeded in intercepting the ABC signal off the XYZ communications network.* "

The significance of this might be something like: "A new SIGINT processor has -- for the first time ever -- collected signals associated with Zendian leadership."

3. Too Much, Too Soon

(U//FOUO) Another mistake is to try to deluge the reader with too many facts right off the mark. For example, some writers, perhaps thinking of the "who, what, where, when, why" formula, go into great detail at the onset about **who** was involved in whatever activity they are discussing. Here's an example:

" *The Very Fast Gizmo SIGINT Branch (VFGSB, S4123), part of the Out-of-My-League Technical Wizardry Division (OTWD, S412), in collaboration with the Unknown-to-Me SIGINT Operational Services Center (USOSC, S422), undertook a program..."*

Although the organizational names are relevant, for most readers this is not the most important information. They'd much rather know first **what happened** . Why should they go to the effort of learning the names and designators and corporate alignment of those organizations when they don't know yet how (or if) it affects them?

(U) Also, when one bombards the reader with a string of titles, it looks too much like a homework assignment! It is far better, in my opinion, to start out with an easy-to-read generic description of the parties involved ("Several SID offices...") and give the specific organizational details later in the text (or even in a footnote).

Conclusion

(U) I suggest the following as a good writing practice: After you finish writing some text, read the opening again -- trying to imagine how it appears to someone who is very busy and knows very little about the subject under discussion. Make it easy for them to digest and show them the significance right up front. If you are still in doubt, ask someone from another work area to read it and give feedback. With a great opener, you'll "captivate" your audience - and get your message across.

(U) See also the previous article in this series: [(U) Did He "Go" Into the Courthouse, or "Sneak" Into It?](#) .

"(U//FOUO) SIDtoday articles may not be republished or reposted outside NSANet without the consent of S0121 ([DL sid_comms](#))."