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TRAINING

# WRITING FOR MINISTERS

TOP TIPS





The relationships between civil servants and ministers is crucial to the effective working of government. Civil servants produce a number of written materials for ministers including briefings ahead of meetings or visits, advice in the form of submissions, lines to take, draft letters and PQs. These are all vital for the development and delivery of policies.

Producing written material that is fit for purpose enables ministers to make decisions quickly and easily in order to progress policy. This is a vital skill for all civil servants and it can easily be learnt. The Dods Writing for Ministers course teaches these skills and gives participants the opportunity to practice them. Participants are given practical advice and tips from their trainer who has worked closely with a number of Ministers.



# 1 Know what you want to achieve

Before you begin writing make sure you know why you are writing. What do you hope to achieve? What do you want from your Minister?

Consider whether writing to your Minister is the best way to achieve your goal. Would a face to face meeting be more constructive? Or a note to private office for them to discuss with the Minister?

# 2 Understand your audience

Think about what your Minister needs and wants from the work you are producing.

Get to know your Minister, find out their individual preferences. You can find this information on the private office page on your intranet or ask private office.

Ministers work very long days and going through their red box is the last thing they will do. It may be late at night and they will have 12-15 submissions as well as briefings, FOIs, ministerial correspondence and PQ responses to go through.

As a result, your Minister will want something easy to read and understand. Use plain English, short sentences, avoid jargon and think about presenting statistics in a visual manner to help them absorb vital information quickly and easily.



### 3 Order your information

In order to produce written work that is brief and concise, consider:

- which information your Minister *must* know
- which information they *should* know
- which information they *could* know

Only include information the Minister must know in the main body of your work. The information they should know can be summarised in a short sentence or included as an annexe, while the information they could know can be left off. It can be mentioned to private office or in a face to face meeting with the minister instead.

Consider suggesting a face to face meeting with the Minister if the information they need to know is very complex or if there is too much information to fit onto two pages of A4.

## 4 Briefings

Briefings should be used ahead of meetings or visits. They can also be used to provide information when a decision is not required from the Minister, for example when routine statistics are due to be published.

A briefing for a visit or meeting should inform the Minister of what they are doing, why they are doing it and what opposition they might face such as tricky questions that will be raised.

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## 5 Submissions

Submissions should be used when you require a decision from a Minister. A submission provides the Minister with all the evidence they need to make that decision and ensures you have a paper trail for that decision.

Submissions should have clear recommendations backed up by evidence.

The most important information the Minister needs in order to make a decision is evidence. Evidence for why you are making your recommendations. Provide all the evidence that both backs up your recommendation and ensures the minister also understands any potential downsides or risks.

*This article was written by Dods Associate Katharina Roelofs. Katharina has worked in Government Communications in three major Whitehall departments: the Department of Health, the Foreign Office and the Department for Education. She delivers the Dods 'Writing for Ministers' course and webinar.*

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