



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation - EuropeAid

Evaluation

IMPROVING THE READABILITY OF EVALUATION REPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this document is to provide hints and tips on how to improve the readability of evaluation reports. It is based on the experience of the Evaluation Unit and on best practices we have been able to identify. It does not claim to be an exhaustive guide on the matter.

Evaluation reports aim to provide an independent assessment to the Commission and to the wider public of the Commission's cooperation strategies and their implementation.

Through their findings, conclusions and recommendations, evaluators identify key lessons to improve the current and future strategies and programmes of the Commission.

The main vehicle for carrying these messages is the evaluation report.

In this document our intention is to suggest ways in which the message could be even more:

- ✓ Attractive
- ✓ Understood
- ✓ Memorised
- ✓ Engaging
- ✓ Acted Upon
- ✓ ... Customer-Oriented!

What do readers want ? Clear conclusions and recommendations, derived from a sound and robust analysis, based on facts and figures. We firmly believe that the impact of evaluation reports – i.e. the level of uptake of your recommendations – is significantly influenced by their ease of reading.

Moreover, calls for greater accountability from citizens and stakeholders in Europe and beneficiary countries make it even more important that your evaluation reports demonstrate clearly what EC interventions do and achieve.

Did you know?

In the financial area, several studies proved a close relationship between the readability of annual reports and corporate financial performance.

Following the same logic, we are confident that enhancing the readability of evaluation reports would have an impact on the level of uptake of the recommendations.

Three main areas for improvement can be identified:

1. Clarify the writing
2. Structure the report
3. Enhance the visual appeal

This note covers these three areas.

I. CLEAR WRITING

We have gathered tips on clear writing in three main areas, the so-called "**3 S**" of clear writing:

1. **Keep It Short:** Shorter documents, paragraphs and sentences tend to have more impact.
2. **Keep It Simple:** Simple language will not make you seem less learned or elegant and it will make you more credible.
3. **Keep It Structured:** The more complex your text is, the more structured it needs to be.

A. Keep It Short

Shorter documents, paragraphs, sentences ... and even words (!) tend to have more impact.

1. Paragraphs: Shorter paragraphs convey messages more efficiently than lengthy blocks of text. They should also flow logically from one another.
2. Sentences: As a general rule, they should not contain more than 20 words. Longer sentences tend to lose the reader's attention
3. Words: Use shorter, simpler words whenever possible (see also below)

Computer readability tests

MS Office[®] readability test and statistical tools should help you in checking the clarity of your text, number of words per paragraphs, etc.

B. Keep it Simple

Evaluation reports will be read by a large public. Remember, many readers are non-"EC experts" and non native English speakers.

Use shorter words: Whenever possible, try to replace 4-syllables words with shorter words. Shorter words are usually more well-known.

Shorten expressions: Many long expressions can be replaced by shorter ones, for instance:

Before	After
A certain number of	Some
The majority of	Most
Within the framework of	under
In this (not) the case	If (not)
Perform an assessment of	assess
Carry out an evaluation of	evaluate
Give consideration to	consider

Prefer verbs to nouns: Cut out excess nouns and use verbs instead, verb forms are livelier:

Nouns	Verbs
Lessons were identified in preparation of...	The EC identified lessons for preparing...
Consideration should be given to such a review.	Such a review should be considered.
It would be beneficial for the EC to review...	The EC could benefit from reviewing...

Beware of "false friends"

This is particularly the case between French and English, and certainly true for other languages. Below are a couple of examples:

French	English	Why is it wrong?	What's the correct word?
Actuellement	Actually	'actually' means 'really' / 'in fact'	Currently
Adéquate	Adequate	'adequate' means 'sufficient'	Suitable
Compléter	Complete	'complete' means 'finish'	Supplement
Éventuel	Eventual	'eventual' means 'ultimate'	Any
Sensible	Sensible	'sensible' means 'reasonable'	Sensitive

Avoid the negative form

Negative	Positive
It shouldn't overlook timely implementation in order not to lose a whole cropping season.	It requires timely implementation to save a whole cropping season.
'EC added value' is not entirely clear.	'EC added value' is unclear.

Avoid the passive form whenever possible: The active form also helps to identify the agent (promoter of the action) in the sentence.

Passive	Active
The programme XYZ was identified from the outset by the Commission as (...)	The Commission identified the programme XYZ from the outset as (...)
Consideration should be given to using existing EU tools such as (...)	(The EC should) Consider using existing EU tools such as (...)

Avoid idiomatic expressions

You may have heard something on the grapevine and that indeed rings a bell, but if you say it so, your reader can't make head or tail of it and you will end up being a voice in the wilderness. In other words, the knowledge of idiomatic expressions of non-native English speakers is usually well below the one of native speakers. Keep this in mind!

Make sure that the report is jargon-free

Before	After
High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process	Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.
Interventions which were selected for further assessment during the field phase visit to the country were subject to further definition in consultation with EUD and in consideration of logistics	We have selected the projects and programmes to be visited during the field mission together with the EUD, also taking into account practical aspects.

Be clear with your definitions and consistent in their formulation

When you use a technical term, check carefully its meaning. This applies certainly to words and expressions such as "allocation", "commitment", "disbursement", "EU funds", "EC management", "project" versus "programme", "partner country" versus "third country", etc.

Whenever you have opted for a term or expression, use it consistently throughout the report when you need to describe the same concept. Avoid synonyms! What you may regard as interesting variety may cause confusion: neither change 'clients', into 'beneficiaries' or 'programme participants'; nor change 'consultant' into 'change agent' or the 'facilitator'.

Be careful with acronyms and abbreviations

When you use an acronym or an abbreviation, make sure that it is included in the list of acronyms at the beginning of the report and never forget to write the expression in full the first time you use it. If an acronym only occurs once or twice in the document, write it out in full.

Lost in translation...

Translations often suffer from literal translation, poor use of English structure, and no proof reading !
Translations reach a wider audience, so the same level of quality should be applied !

C. Keep It Structured

Be focused: Structure your paragraphs

Every paragraph should focus on a single topic and be free-standing. It should follow a common structure: a short introductory sentence, (and/or title) followed by the development of the argument and finished by a short recap of what has been just said.

On The Good Use of Titles

(Intro) To further structure the information contained in free-standing paragraphs, you can use to-the-point titles. (Development) This allows the reader to immediately spot what the paragraph is about. (Conclusion) A good title really does add clarity!

Copy/pasting kills readability!

A bad habit is to copy/paste portions of long paragraphs to make shorter ones...

Avoid this practice – it leads to unstructured essays!

Synthesize your material to ensure well-structured and readable documents.

Make sense: Structure your sentences

- a) Name the agents/promoters of each action and put the actions in the order in which they occur

Before	After
Its decision on allocation of EU assistance will be taken subsequent to receipt of all project applications at the Award Committee's meeting	When all applicants have submitted their project applications (1), the Award Committee will meet (2) to decide (3) how much EU aid it will grant to each one (4).

- b) Don't bury important information in the middle of the sentence

Before	After
As for improving policy dialogue , the Commission outlined several proposals	The Commission outlined several proposals for improving policy dialogue .

- c) Try to give your sentences strong endings: that is the bit readers will remember!

Before	After
Complete institutional reform is advocated in the report in most cases.	In most cases, the report advocates complete institutional reform .

II. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORTS

A. Methodological guidelines and overall structure

The guidelines in the Manual of the Evaluation Methodology set out the main specifications for evaluation reports (*see box*).

Moreover, the overall structure should allow several levels of understanding. A reader who needs to quickly get the gist of the report must be able to do so whereas another who wants to get to the specifics of a given sub-topic needs to be provided with extensive information about it.

Structure of the report

In general, the report includes a 2 to 5 page executive summary, a 40 to 60 page main text, plus annexes:

- Executive summary
- Tables of contents, figures, acronyms
- Introduction
- Context of the cooperation
- Answers to evaluation questions
- Overall assessment
- Conclusions, lessons and recommendations
- Annexes

B. Executive summary

The executive summary is a tightly drafted and free-standing document which presents a synthesis of the main report. It is one of the most important sections of the report. It is in any case the part that will be read the most and is therefore the main vehicle for the evaluation's messages.

This implies that the greatest care must be taken when drafting it!

Special attention should be given to the clear presentation of the main conclusion and recommendations.

C. Introduction

The introduction describes the scope of the evaluation. The reader is provided with sufficient methodological explanation to gauge the credibility of the conclusions and acknowledge limitations or weaknesses, if there are any.

Keeping in mind the reader's agenda, we should find in the introduction answers to some of his potential questions, such as: Who cares? Why should I? Why is it important? What am I going to learn from this report? Etc.

D. Answers to evaluation questions

The main part of the report should provide the reader with a detailed analysis but not drown him in useless information. Extra information should be placed in annexes and be easily retrievable through hyperlinks from the report's main body.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Pay special attention to Conclusions and Recommendations. It will very much add to the reader's comfort if they are all clearly linked to each other (in both directions).

Both Conclusions and Recommendations need to be free-standing, prioritised and assembled in homogeneous "clusters".

Concerning recommendations, ensure that each of them includes: a priority level, a deadline and the service responsible for implementing it.



*"Annexes should not become "dustbins"
for unstructured information
taken out from the main report !"*

F. Annexes

Let's be clear: "Annexes should not become "dustbins" for unstructured information taken out from the main report !". Annexes are part of the report and the same quality level is required.

Links to the main report are crucial to underpin the report's credibility. The links between the reports' main body and the Annexes should be bi-directional – i.e. references in the report to the Annex but also in the Annex to the report.

III. VISUAL APPEAL

An attractive layout makes reading easier on the eye, and more enjoyable. Moreover the use of features such as boxes and figures may help to draw the reader's attention and facilitate the retention of information and ultimately the report's impact.

A. Use of bullet points

Bullet points are a good device for breaking up chunks of text, clarifying and structuring it.

Moreover, they "fascinate" the readers and keep their attention going.

They are particularly useful to present a consistent list of information points. Please find a few tips in the box.

B. Use of boxes

Boxes are useful tools to make your report more visually attractive and attract the reader's attention on specific issues or information.

Boxes can be used in many cases; generally they serve to "zoom" (i.e. specific technical information ...), "highlight" (i.e. synthesise, lessons learned, warning ...) or "illustrate" (i.e. Case study, examples ...)

Quick tips on bullet points

- Order the points : the most important being placed first
- Use a consistent style and structure :
 - ✓ Make bullet points consistent in structure: For example, make all of them sentences or fragments or questions.
 - ✓ Put bullets in parallel form: all items listed in a series begin with the same part of speech, are approximately the same length, and are given a similar format.
 - ✓ Start each bullet point with either a verb or a noun: a verb is more action oriented and is usually preferred
 - ✓ Use the same tense for each verb: the most common is the present tense with the past tense being the next most common
 - ✓ Capitalize each bullet point the same way: usually the first letter of the first word is capitalized and the rest of the words are in lower case unless it is a proper name
- Avoid the classic mistakes:
 - ✓ Do not make bullet points so long that they look like paragraphs: three lines is a reasonable maximum length
 - ✓ Check that there is no conflicting information in the bulleted lists

Please find below a few tips on how to use boxes to the best of their potential:

- Ensure the consistency of the box's content with the main text and make a cross-reference
- Use titles and mention your sources
- Use a consistent style:
 - ✓ Boxes must follow the same pattern throughout the report : same layout, font size etc
 - ✓ When boxes are used for different purposes, the use of "icons" may be appropriate

C. Use of short case studies

It is important for the general public and key stakeholders in Europe and beneficiary countries to understand how money is being spent and therefore to give visibility to the results being delivered through EU support.

A case study provides a **short illustration** of a project/programme focusing on the impacts/results achieved in the area of external cooperation and development by using **concrete examples and real people**.

The information is presented in a **simple, clear and consistent manner**, rendering it easy to grasp by the general public. It is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the topic. Don't forget to add a title and to use quotes and a picture. We recommend a length of **maximum 500 characters**. You will find an example in the box below.

Rural micro projects programme in the Solomon Islands

In the Solomon Islands, where more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas, the micro projects programme provides rural communities with greater access to social services and sources of income. In 2008, over 120 projects were completed covering e.g. the rehabilitation of village schools and clinics and the installation of more than 104 water and sanitation systems. For example, on Kolombangara Island, virgin coconut oil is being extracted by a women's group. The entire production is being used as biofuel for tractors. The programme was allocated €5.7 million for 2005 - 2008.



A trainer and farmers assess sweet potato plantings. Solomon Islands.

D. Use of figures and charts

Figures and charts are used to present facts and data in visual form.. With numerical data, they allow display of the relative sizes or quantities and facilitate the presentation of trends, comparisons, relationships, etc.

Figures and charts help the reader to understand data quickly and enhance the clarity of a report:

- By helping the reader to "see" what the report is talking about and understand complex data
- By making it simpler (but not simple) and synthesising information
- By improving the visual appeal of the report!

What is the recommended best practice regarding figures and charts?

- **Check the data:** Data are the foundation of charts and graphs. If the data is weak, the graph will also be weak.
- **Choose the right presentation for the right message:** There are many different figure and chart formats. The format should be consistent with the type of data and the message you want to convey
- **Ensure a clear message:** The information represented in the diagrams, tables, graphs, charts and maps should be discussed and explained. A good rule of thumb is to produce text and figures that can both stand alone; the text should be understandable without the figures, and vice-versa
- **Do not forget the key components:** title, encodings, explanations, axis labels, units, sources.
- **Save ink:** the simpler the better.