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LIMITING YOUR SCOPE

The **scope** of your message is the range of information you present, the overall length, and the level of detail—all of which need to correspond to your main idea. The length of some business messages has a preset limit, whether from a boss's instructions, the technology you're using, or a time frame (such as individual speaker slots during a seminar). However, even if you don't have a preset length, limit your scope to the minimum amount of information needed to convey your main idea.

Whatever the length of your message, limit the number of major supporting points to the most compelling and important ideas. Offering a long list of supporting points might feel as though you're being thorough, but your audience is likely to view such detail as rambling and mind-numbing. Instead, group your supporting points under major headings, such as finance, customers, competitors, employees, or whatever is appropriate for your subject. Look for ways to distill your supporting points so that you have a smaller number with greater impact.

The ideal length of a message depends on your topic, your audience members' familiarity with the material, their receptivity to your conclusions, and your credibility. You'll need fewer words to present routine information to a knowledgeable audience that already knows and respects you. You'll need more words to build a consensus about a complex and controversial subject, especially if the members of your audience are skeptical or hostile strangers.

Limit the scope of your message so that you can convey your main idea as briefly as possible.

CHOOSING BETWEEN DIRECT AND INDIRECT APPROACHES

After you've defined your main idea and supporting points, you're ready to decide on the sequence you will use to present your information. You have two basic options. When you know your audience will be receptive to your message, use the **direct approach**: Start with the main idea (such as a recommendation, conclusion, or request) and follow that with your supporting evidence.

When your audience will be skeptical about or even resistant to your message, you generally want to use the **indirect approach**: Start with the evidence first and build your case before presenting the main idea. Note that taking the indirect approach does not mean avoiding tough issues or talking around in circles. It simply means building up to your main idea in a logical or sensitive way.

To choose between these two alternatives, analyze your audience's likely reaction to your purpose and message, as shown in Figure 3.6 on the next page. Bear in mind, however, that Figure 3.6 presents only general guidelines; always consider the unique circumstances of each message and audience situation. The type of message also influences the choice of the direct or indirect approach. In the coming chapters, you'll get specific advice on choosing the best approach for a variety of communication challenges.

With the direct approach, you open with the main idea of your message and support it with reasoning, evidence, and examples.

With the indirect approach, you withhold the main idea until you have built up to it logically and persuasively with reasoning, evidence, and examples.

OUTLINING YOUR CONTENT

After you have chosen the direct or indirect approach, the next task is to determine the most logical and effective way to present your major points and supporting details. Get into the habit of creating outlines when you're preparing business messages. Even if you're just jotting down three or four key points, making an outline will help you organize your thoughts for faster writing. When you're preparing a longer, more complex message, an outline is indispensable because it helps you visualize the relationships among the various parts.

You're no doubt familiar with the basic outline formats that identify each point with a number or letter and that indent certain points to show which ones are of equal status. A good outline divides a topic into at least two parts, restricts each subdivision to one category, and ensures that each subdivision is separate and distinct (see Figure 3.7 on the next page).

Outlining can save you considerable time and effort in the composing and revising stages.



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