

GUIDELINES FOR LEGISLATIVE REPORTS

1. Immediately after the first paragraph of a legislative report (which customarily informs the Committee Chairman of the number and title of the bill reported on), include a brief paragraph summarizing the essentials of the report's position. For example, the body of a report on a bill to provide for a study of histoplasmosis and related diseases might be introduced by paragraph that reads as follows:

In summary, we oppose the bill because, as a scientific matter, the life processes underlying these diseases are not distinct from the life processes underlying many other diseases, and cannot therefore be effectively studied in isolation.

2. Try to keep the description of the bill in balance with the rest of the report. There is no sense, to take an extreme case, in spending an entire page to describe a bill merely in order to announce in a brief paragraph that the Department defers to agencies more directly affected.

3. So far as possible, a report should adopt a constructive and positive tone consistent with the Department's desire to develop a working partnership with the Congress in the development of legislation. For example, avoid needlessly dogmatic expressions of Department position. A recent report announced that "the problems are well recognized, but there are no clear, exploitable scientific leads to their solution that are not being supported." Perhaps this is true. But it would be less pretentious to say, instead, that we are seeking to exploit the leads known to us, and that we think it preferable to invest our limited resources in the exploitation of these known leads.

4. If the report opposes a bill to initiate or expand a program, the report should relate the Department's efforts to achieve the bill's objectives under current authority, or if we are not acting on the matter explain why and what are our future intentions. A report is unpersuasive if it limits itself merely to announcing that we already possess an authority that a bill would replicate. The bill's sponsor usually knows this. He has introduced the bill not out of ignorance, but in order to induce us to act.

CATALOG OF COMMON STYLE AND USAGE ERRORS IN BILL REPORTS

UndesirablePreferred [Underscoring for emphasis only]Style

A. The passive voice is to be avoided.

A. Avoid the passive voice. OR, use the active voice.

B. I informed the Committee in my testimony of ...

B. We informed the Committee in our testimony ... OR, the Department informed the Committee in its testimony ... [The reason for avoiding the first person is to enable an official other than the Secretary to sign the report.]

C. The bill is inconsistent with the statute, and would alter established policies.

C. The bill's alteration of established policies is undesirable because ... [In other words, it is no argument against a bill that it is contrary to current law. All bills in some degree are intended to be.]

D. Because the bill raises a number of complex issues, particularly in respect of the organizational structure that it would impose upon the Bureau, including that of the appropriate level of the Administrator within the Executive Schedule, it has been necessary in our review of its provisions to take into account the relationship between the Administrator and those officials of the Department who exercise comparable responsibility. We conclude that the bill would inappropriately elevate the Administrator over those of his colleagues who bear similar responsibility. For example,

...

D. The bill would inappropriately elevate the Administrator over those of his colleagues who bear similar responsibility. For example, ... [In other words, avoid "throat-clearing" passages as much as you can.]

CATALOG OF COMMON STYLE AND USAGE ERRORS IN BILL REPORTS

UndesirablePreferred [Underscoring for emphasis only]Agreement of number, gender, etc.

M. None of the agencies that responded to our inquiry advised that they had any objection.

M. None of the agencies that responded to our inquiry advised that it had any objection.

N. Everybody was asked to submit their response by September 30.

N. Everybody was asked to submit his response by September 30. [Not "his or her response" because in writing to the Congress we follow 1 U.S.C. 1, which provides that in determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, "words importing the masculine gender include the feminine as well".]

Capitalization, punctuation, citations

O. The Section would amend Title II.

O. The section would amend title II.

P. The program is Federally supported because of a Congressional mandate.

P. The program is federally supported because of a congressional mandate. [But, the Congress has mandated the program.]

Q. The bill would amend 18 U.S.C. Section 5039.

Q. The bill would amend 18 U.S.C. 5039.

R. The federal government imposes certain requirements upon the states.

R. The Federal Government imposes certain requirements upon the States. [Although this capitalization is contrary to common usage outside of government, it is imposed upon us by the GPO Style Manual.]