



Inside Oversight: Levin Center at Wayne Law Tutorials

SERIES 2 WRITING UP INVESTIGATIVE RESULTS

Tutorial: Drafting a Large Report

In this video, Levin Center experts offer tips and advice on how to draft a large report summarizing a Congressional investigation.

Instructors

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Transcript

Elise: Hi. I'm Elise Bean, and this is Zack Schram, and we're here to share with you some tips we've learned over the years on how to draft a large report summarizing a Congressional investigation. Both of us conducted oversight investigations for Senator Carl Levin on the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the U.S. Senate.

Zack: Over the years, our Subcommittee issued a number of large reports, from 50 to 750 pages long, detailing our investigative results. They typically contained an executive summary, formal findings of fact and recommendations, background information, and the facts we uncovered. Large reports are a great way to present a full picture of your investigation, influence policymakers, and advance reforms.

Elise: Large reports also take a lot of time and work. Our secret to producing them within a few months was using multiple individuals to write different

sections of the report at the same time, under an editor-in-chief who organized the chaos and ensured consistency across the report. In this segment, we'd like to offer you some tips on using that method to draft a large report.

Develop a detailed outline that tells a story

Zack: Tip Number One: When drafting a large report, start with a detailed outline that tells a story. Readers like stories, and if your report doesn't tell one, it won't be read or remembered. Try starting the outline with a single sentence that summarizes the main point made by the investigation. Then follow with 3 to 5 major sections that support the main point and, together, tell a story.

Elise: Altogether, the outline should be 3 to 10 pages long with enough detail to inform everyone who works on the report how the issues are organized and fit together. The details should aim at covering all key issues, while also preventing duplication. Since it is early in the writing process, the opening portions of the report – the executive summary, factual findings, and recommendations – can be left blank or sketched in very generally.

Zack: Once the outline is on paper, the editor-in-chief should circulate it to the entire investigative team, get feedback, and revise it until every key issue has a spot in the outline, and the outline has a logical narrative flow.

Assign sections and set deadlines

Elise: Tip Number Two: Assign major sections of the report to specific individuals and set deadlines for them to turn in a first draft. Direct everyone to begin work simultaneously. Set earlier deadlines for easier sections and later deadlines for more difficult ones. That will give the writers assigned to the harder sections more time to do the work, and ensure drafts of the easier sections get to the editor-in-chief sooner. If possible, assign the sections to the investigators who handled the relevant issues during the investigation and are familiar with the facts, documents, and interviews. Senior staffers in charge of major sections can assign subsections to more junior staffers and oversee their writing.

Ensure consistency

Zack: Tip Number Three: Take steps from day one to ensure the report will be written in a consistent way across the sections. Direct writers to use the same abbreviations, phrases, and terms that appear in the outline so everyone uses the same language. If someone comes up with better terminology later – which often happens – direct everyone to use the new phrasing. Circulate as soon as possible a sample citation sheet showing how footnotes should be formatted. Requiring

everyone to use the same footnote format will save countless hours later. Also, decide key stylistic issues, and require everyone to comply. Enforcing consistent terminology, style, and footnotes should be a major objective of the editor-in-chief when reviewing report sections.

Go heavy on facts

Elise: Tip Number Four is to instruct your writers to go heavy on the facts. That means beginning each section by detailing the facts uncovered in the investigation. A good approach is to go through the facts in chronological order, citing the available evidence, including documents, interviews, and data. In Levin reports, the majority of the text consisted of quoting documents in chronological order, with a minimal amount of explanation in between for context. Quoting documents and interviews ensures you stick closely to the facts and minimizes errors. It also facilitates quicker writing. We recommend that writers write up the facts first and, only afterward, write the summary that goes at the beginning of the section.

Go heavy on footnotes

Zack: Tip Number Five: Go heavy on the footnotes. Because multiple writers will write different parts of the report at the same time, footnotes are critical to keeping track of where each writer got their information. Footnotes also make it easier to check the accuracy of factual assertions and resolve factual disputes. They make it harder for opponents to attack the report, and increase the report's credibility with the media, policymakers, and the public. The Levin rule was to footnote virtually every sentence in a report, except for the executive summary and the summary paragraphs at the beginning and end of each section.

Identify and handle key factual issues

Elise: Tip Number Six: Identify and decide how to handle key factual issues. Every investigation and report has a small number of facts that are critical to its conclusions and implications. The editor-in-chief needs to identify those key factual issues and decide how to handle them. If the evidence is rock solid, the report should detail it. If the evidence is circumstantial, the report should describe it, note its limitations, and offer a conclusion. If the evidence is inconclusive, the report should say so. An investigation can't always resolve every factual question, and it doesn't have to – what the report needs to do is be clear about what the investigation found.

Write the executive summary, factual findings, and recommendations last

Zack: Tip Number Seven: Write the report's executive summary, factual findings, and recommendations last, after everything else is written. Writing a report forces

an investigative team to wrestle with the facts and reach conclusions about what happened. It is only after that process concludes that the factual findings and recommendations become clear. And it's only then, at the very end, that an accurate, concise executive summary can be written. Drafting the executive summary, findings and recommendations is the most important part of the report since, in most cases, those are the only parts read by most readers.

Build in time for revisions

Elise: Tip Number Eight: Build in time for revisions. Every large report undergoes a lot of change as investigative team members read each other's work, your boss weighs in, and other interested parties negotiate over the wording and content. Make sure you allocate time for the revision process.

Perform a final fact-checking review

Zack: Our final tip: Before the report goes public, perform one last fact-checking review. Multiple changes will have been made to the report by multiple writers. An essential, final exercise is to double check the facts in every section, by reviewing each sentence as well as the cited documents, interviews, data, and footnotes. It's time-consuming, hard, boring, and stressful, but a final fact-check is critical to ensuring your report can stand up to attack.

Elise: To help you get started on drafting a large report, the Levin Center has put together a sample outline that you can look over. We hope it's helpful.

For a large report template, see:

law.wayne.edu/largereportoutline

Drafting a Large Report

- 1. Outline a story.**
- 2. Assign sections for simultaneous drafting and set deadlines.**
- 3. Ensure consistency across the report.**
- 4. Go heavy on the facts.**
- 5. Go heavy on the footnotes.**
- 6. Identify and decide how to handle key factual issues.**
- 7. Write the executive summary, factual findings, and recommendations last.**

- 8. Build in time for revisions.**
- 9. Perform a final fact-check.**

Zack: Long reports take a lot of work, but they're worth it, because they provide an enduring, comprehensive source of information about your investigation. We hope these tips will help you set up an efficient process for writing reports that are accurate, readable, and useful.

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