About Writing Reports: a conversation[1]

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A few weeks ago, one of my younger researcher colleagues came in to the office. He had started to worry that he would not be able to get a job at a university, and he had come for some advice about doing consultancies. It is not unusual that younger colleagues come to me with such questions; in recent years the number of people with doctorates has increased far more than the demand, so it has become increasingly difficult for able young researchers to get a permanent job in academia. I began my own career as a consultant, and I have continued to do occasional consultancies since; so I have direct experience of the tension between the two worlds – and the challenge of trying to operate in both.

The conversation went roughly as follows.

Junior researcher (Jr.): I wonder if you could give me some advice. I heard that you have worked as a consultant, and been involved in writing reports, as well as being a researcher. I have realized that I cannot expect to get an academic job at the moment, so I am thinking of entering the world of report writing myself. But I only have experience as a researcher, and amateur journalist, so I could use some tips.

Senior researcher (Sr.): Yes, that's right. In fact I do occasionally think about the difference between the two worlds so I would be happy to have a chat about it.

Jr.: Right. Let's start with a very basic question. What's the difference between a report and an academic article or book?

Sr.: Well, the most obvious difference is that in the case of a report some body – a government department for example - asks you, and typically *pays* you, to write it. And that leads to two other important differences: a report is usually written by a group of people, not one individual; and the purpose is to advise some body what to do about something. This special nature of a report – that it is commissioned by somebody - is most evident in the fact that it is based on a *Terms of Reference*. This is a crucial, and very interesting, document.

Jr.: What's so special about it?

Sr.: In a sense, it tells the writers what to write; or rather it sets the frame – often very explicitly. Some Terms of Reference are so detailed and specific that they severely constrain

[1] Originally published in Norwegian as «Å Skrive Rapporter: En Dialog» in Kristian Bjørkdahl (ed.) *Rapporten: Sjanger og Styringsverktøy*. (The Report: Genre and Management Tool). Pax Forlag, 2018. Pages 88-106. Author's translation.

what is written and, in some cases, even how it is written. You may for example be given a so-called template which you have to follow.

Jr.: And what about the fact that a report is usually written by a group of people, not one individual. What does that imply? After all, an academic article may often be co-authored.

Sr.: Yes. But the difference with reports is that you do not – typically - choose your co-authors. I should maybe distinguish between a consultancy report – for example an evaluation of a project – and a report commissioned by a public body to advise on some policy issue. A consultancy report may involve a huge team; and even if they all come from the same firm they will almost certainly have different disciplinary backgrounds: economist, engineer, sociologist etc. Who has the final say about controversial issues is not always clear. It may be determined by the power or status of key individuals. But there is always a named Team Leader.

Jr.: I see. But even if the team members come from different disciplines don't they all share a common purpose, and – at least if they have worked together before – have some experience of dealing with their differences?

Sr.: Yes, that's true. But the differences can be pretty large. Years ago, I worked for an economic consultancy firm, and we were usually in a consortium with an engineering or urban planning firm as the lead consultant. So, in this case there were very considerable differences in disciplinary perspective, not just at the individual level, but between groups. What helps – with consultancy reports - is that you have a deadline that has to be met and you don't get paid unless you produce a report.

Jr.: That sounds pretty tough. Is it really like that?

Sr.: It certainly can be. And in my view this can be one of the great benefits, for academics, of doing consultancies: you have to deliver, no matter what. You can't keep polishing the latest version of your 'revise and resubmit' article for months on end. Working to a real deadline means that you learn the idea of 'good enough' rather than perfect. You get a sense of how to pace yourself in the process of writing in order to ensure that the thing gets done in time. Obviously there is a difference, and as an academic one should have high ambitions. But it is good experience for a young researcher to deal with the trade-off between achieving a perfect product and never producing anything at all.

Jr.: And what about writing a committee report: does the same pressure apply?

Sr.: Maybe not to quite the same extent. The pressure to deliver is generally there, but you might avoid the risk of not getting paid. But with a committee report you can be faced with a different challenge: that the members may be selected precisely on the basis that they are not expected to agree; they are chosen in order to represent diverging views and interests.

Jr.: That sounds like a big problem.

Sr.: It is indeed – both for the Chairperson and for the one who is given the task of crafting the agreed text. Because they may well not be the same person. As a young researcher you are more likely to be in the latter category: given the task of trying to formulate a consensus document without having the authority to press through your own wording. Not an easy task.

Jr.: So what happens if the members of the consultancy team, or the committee, disagree?

Sr.: In the case of a consultancy report it is usually clear who is the boss. He or she decides – even if this follows disagreement or perhaps quite strong conflict. Incidentally, this can be a problem if academic researchers are hired in to consultancy teams. They may not understand the rules of the game. As a result they may find that they are not invited to do another consultancy.

Jr.: Does this mean that academics just become hired hacks?

Sr.: It's not as simple as that. It depends on the nature and severity of the disagreement. I would say that a university researcher co-authoring a consultancy report would frequently find it necessary to compromise academic standards, even if only in some relatively minor way.

Jr.: But can't someone - academic or not - simply make it clear where they disagree?

Sr.: Certainly, during the preparation of the report. But the final document is the product of a team. In the case of a committee – but not a consultancy report in my experience - it may be permissible to produce a minority report on at least some issues. But this of course greatly weakens the force of the report. So the preferred alternative may well be to blur the issues which are controversial. In concluding statements from international meetings you often find what we call 'weasel words': the contradiction that undoubtedly exists between economic growth and concern for the environment is 'resolved' by recommending sustainable development or, more recently, 'green growth'[i]. And consultancy reports conclude with bland recommendations that call, for example, for 'a balanced policy' or 'appropriate levels of investment'.

Jr.: That sounds like a bit of a waste of time.

Sr.: Indeed it is; but it can be difficult to avoid – or even to spot. I remember that as a young consultant my first boss recommended me to use a simple litmus test for checking whether a recommendation in a report was of any value: you simply pose the opposite recommendation and ask whether anyone could seriously hold such a view. This turns out to be devastating. For example: who would seriously recommend 'inappropriate levels of investment' or 'an unintegrated approach'? I used this same advice in a talk I gave last year to young researchers about how to write policy briefs; and to illustrate the point I quoted from a recent example that fell into exactly this trap of making vacuous recommendations.

Immediately after my talk one of the young researchers came up to me in a very anxious state and said that I was quoting from a policy brief she herself had written. This was embarrassing, as you can imagine. She went on to say that she had herself felt that the recommendations were pretty meaningless but the project leader had insisted on including them. I appreciate her dilemma.

Jr.: OK. I can see that working as a team may be tricky when it comes to the normative part, the recommendations. But is it easier to agree on the rest of report?

Sr.: Not necessarily. Differences and conflicts can indeed arise with the analysis, and even the descriptive parts of the report. One way to reduce conflict and controversy - at least in the descriptive part of the report - is to make use of the passive voice. This tactic is often used by whoever is responsible for drafting the text, either in need of consensus within the group where none actually exists, or to reduce resistance to the report's findings. Shifting from the active to the passive voice allows the author to avoid naming names, and allocating blame (or perhaps glory) where this is in dispute.

Jr.: But 'How to do it' guides to good report writing - and even my word processing system - always recommend that one should use the active voice.

Sr.: Quite right. But for the distraught author seeking to avoid conflict the passive voice can be a godsend. And remember that, unlike a journal article, a report will usually not just be of 'academic' interest. It will have significance for the lives of at least some people, perhaps quite directly. The passive voice may be used not because the evidence for asserting a causal link is weak, but because you wish to avoid hurting the weak or antagonizing the strong. This is not, of course, a justification for avoiding all controversy. But in such a situation there may be a tendency to 'raise the bar' regarding evidence. In other words, the author is likely to impose especially demanding standards of evidence in support of conclusions which are going to meet strong opposition. And when it comes to recommendations, you may find it hard simply to write 'sack the boss'; preferring to give this message by word of mouth

Jr.: Does this point about handling disagreements apply to commission reports as much as evaluation reports?

Sr.: Here you find different situations. Commission reports are not always as unbiased as they pretend to be. Sometimes the Chairperson has very clear views and to a large extent imposes these on the other members; if they are not chosen because they have similar views, they may be chosen as people who are unlikely to put up much of a fight. This raises the very important question: Who actually writes the report? Who actually puts pen to paper (or rather finger to keyboard)? In some cases the secretary to the committee exercises considerable power.

Jr.: So who the actual author is may be unclear?

Sr.: Yes. Not only does someone have to finalise the report, someone has to start it. This is perhaps even more important. A document which is meant to summarise the discussions and conclusions reached in some international forum is often already half written before the meeting starts. In practice, especially in large, formal processes – for example under the aegis of the United Nations – an outline, or even a draft, may well exist before the committee even meets for the first time.

Jr.: Don't you find that a bit shocking?

Sr.: There may be no other way to get the job done. The problem is that the person commissioned to write it may be someone whose main qualification is a proven ability to write fluently and meet deadlines. But what about experience? I worry - and here speaks a cranky old man - that young consultants, maybe even from some management consultancy, are being given the task of drafting reports, instead of people with a serious knowledge of the issues. (I confess this is pretty hypocritical, since I began my own career as a consultant at the age of 23).

But even with the best of intentions, it is a major challenge to get a team to produce a written product. Imagine you are in charge of writing a report with even a small group of seven people – but spread across three continents (as I recently was). How should you organise the process of collective writing? Okay, you can start with a short, rough draft based on a brain-storming session where as little as possible is pre-determined. But what happens if (in practice when) some people fail to meet deadlines? And how important is it that there is a consistent style throughout – quite apart from the substance? And how to manage the writing in practical terms: do they each comment in parallel, or in sequence?

Jr.: Surely modern technology must help here.

Sr.: Not necessarily. They make redrafting too easy. As a consultant years ago I remember that our thousand-page report had to be produced on old-fashioned typewriters. If there were more than five mistakes per page the typist - working to a desperately tight deadline - had to start all over again. This acted as a disincentive to redrafting. The author had to get it right first time; and there was perhaps more willingness to come to agreement over minor issues. This also, incidentally, was the era before cut and paste. Today it is not uncommon to read a report about, say, Tanzania and suddenly find on page 123 a paragraph about Uganda – where someone did a cut-and-paste job rather too hastily.

Jr.: Okay, let's get back to the overall question of how to write a report, in ideal circumstances. What about the overall structure?

Sr.: As I said, I would distinguish between three parts of a report: description, analysis and recommendations. In an ideal report, the client (and it is worth noting the significance of the word: you don't exactly have a 'client' when you write an academic paper) the client and even other readers would find the description entirely accurate, the analysis logically rigorous and the recommendations – as a result - wholly compelling. In other words there is a seamless process, leading the reader from an empirically well-grounded presentation of facts – the evidence – through to the conclusion and recommendations. This is the apparent charm of so-called ‘evidence-based decision-making’.

Jr.: Sounds good. But what happens in practice?

Sr.: In my experience it is possible to achieve the first of these – regarding the descriptive part - to a large extent. Not that ‘the facts’ are incontrovertible, but that the client agrees with them – even if reluctantly. A wise consultant will check the factual basis of the report with the client at the draft stage and will correct any errors before finalizing the report. People other than the client may, of course, not necessarily agree with ‘the facts’, but – at least for a commercial consultancy firm - the client is the most important reader. And the writer can choose what to include and what to exclude - a crucially important issue which indicates the indeterminate nature of ‘truth’ in this context. Indeed, it is already at this stage that the ‘framing’ begins.

Jr.: What does this framing consist of – at this stage?

Sr.: Well, of course the selection of what information is relevant is crucial: what to include, what to omit. But also important is the amount of space devoted to an issue, and the order in which it is presented. As an author you can defend yourself against the criticism that you have omitted some crucial fact by simply pointing to a specific page, paragraph, or even footnote: “there, you see, I have indeed included this in the text”. The critic may be dissatisfied, but the criticism is very much blunted.

Jr.: And what about the order in which the facts are presented?

Sr.: This can also be significant, in various ways. Obviously the first page, and even the first paragraph, are crucial. Most readers will skim the report – with the beginning and end receiving most attention. And the style may matter as much as the content. You need to grab the reader’s attention here just as much as in an academic paper or a novel – maybe even more. On the other hand there may be ‘uninteresting’ facts - facts that don’t fit well into the overall case – which can safely be lost somewhere in the middle.

Jr.: Does everyone just skim-read?

Sr.: Skim-reading reports is certainly the norm; unless the report has very direct and potentially significant implications for your own person or department. Some years ago, when I was working as an adviser in the government, I was called to a meeting to discuss a report. I read it only rapidly, but sufficient, I thought, to allow me to participate in the discussion – which I did. To my great embarassment I realised, halfway through the meeting, that what I had in my hands was only every alternate page of the report – which presumably had been incorrectly copied in a Xerox machine. I was honest enough to admit my error to the others present. Then – to their shame – all the others discovered that they were in the same situation! We had all been confidently discussing the report without even noticing that every other page was missing. I fear this is not an unusual situation.

Jr.: This sounds pretty unsatisfactory.

Sr.: And what perhaps makes it worse is that the more senior the reader the more rapidly they skim. A Minister or top civil servant will delegate to someone more junior the task of reading a lengthy text and summarising or highlighting the key points. They may even outsource the task to another body! One department of a Ministry that shall be nameless found that they had commissioned so many reports that even their junior staff did not have time to read them. So they asked if we might be willing to read and summarise their content. Hence the importance of the Executive Summary. And even the summary of the summary.

Jr.: So these have to carefully crafted?

Sr.: Indeed. And the situation can sometimes be used strategically where politically sensitive material is involved. For example, the annual World Development Report of the World Bank has to be approved by the Executive Board, which can have a rather 'chilling' effect. After all, what can usefully written about the state of the world if it has to be approved by representatives of, effectively, over 190 countries? An analysis I made of one of the more controversial World Development Reports revealed that the Executive Summary was notably less radical than the full text; presumably the authors had reckoned that members of the Board would not go into too much detail.[ii] As the author of a report you know that the reader has a short attention span, and you need to ensure – as best you can – that this limited attention is applied to the bits of the report that matter.

Jr.: And so far you have only been talking about the descriptive part.

Sr.: That's right: the substance and the order of the descriptive text. The order also matters with regard to the link to the next part of the report. Ideally, the text will flow smoothly along, carrying the reader on to the second stage, the analysis.

Jr.: And it is presumably here, in the analysis stage, that the framing is especially important?

Sr.: Certainly, yes. But there is framing also in the descriptive part, although it is perhaps less obvious, and less easy to criticise. As I noted, someone who objects to the findings of the report will appear to be on weak ground for complaining that the facts that matter for them are allotted only one sentence instead of one page, or are lost somewhere in the middle of the chapter. But yes, it is in the analytical section that the most crucial framing occurs: how the information that has been obtained is put to use. This is where the crucial thinking gets done. I would argue that there is typically no 'right' way to analyse the information that is available (or, more precisely, that the author has chosen to make available to the reader). There may well be usual and unusual ways. And there may well be certain ways which are expected - by the client, or others. Here again the Terms of Reference are important. What approach is taken can be influenced by many factors: for example, the disciplines of the co-authors, their interests/biases, habits, expectations of the client -and maybe a desire to reach some specific recommendation.

Jr.: Are you saying that the recommendations may determine the analysis?

Sr.: Not in general, no. But in some cases there is a clear political agenda driving the commissioning of a report, especially by a committee. In the case of an evaluation report, considerable efforts are usually made to try and ensure that these are – or at least appear to be – genuinely independent. Ironically, this can lead to the Terms of Reference being so constricting that they do effectively limit what can be said. I was once, for example, engaged as Team Leader of a report which was called not an evaluation but a 'forward looking assessment': a clear message that we were not being asked to pass critical comment on what had been done in the past.

Jr.: And what about other kinds of report: can the recommendations determine the analysis, rather than the other way round?

Sr.: I would say that there is inevitably some link between what sort of analysis is undertaken and what sort of recommendations might follow - even in a genuinely objective process. I said earlier that in an ideal world, a report would present a complete and accurate description, followed by rigorous analysis, leading logically to a set of recommendations. This may be how the product is presented, but the process of preparing the report is of course iterative. You start thinking about the recommendations at quite an early stage. You can't help it; nor should you. But, ideally, you try not to let this constrain too much the information that you seek and the analysis that you apply.

Jr.: So it's not quite like going in with an open mind, like a true academic?

Sr.: Not necessarily, no. In some cases – and I am thinking here of a commission report that I was recently involved in – the group as a whole had a fairly clear, but controversial, message that they want to convey, on the basis of the evidence obtained. For us, this posed a challenge, for we were writing the report for a very varied audience. How best to persuade them? My advice was that we should distinguish between three groups of readers: first, those who would surely agree with us; second, those who would never agree with us, however compelling our text; and third, those who are undecided. I argued that the pragmatic approach was to concentrate on the third group. There is no point in wasting time on the second. And – as long as we did not actually antagonize them – we could ignore the first.

Jr.: Can you give me any examples of good reports – whatever that may mean?

Sr.: I suppose one criterion of a good report is that it is successful in its purpose, for example that it is widely read, authoritative, and results in some desired change. What you might call 'impact' and 'outcome' in the jargon of evaluation studies. Two reports that one could describe as 'iconic' immediately spring to mind. One is the Brundtland Report (formally the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development) and the report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) which even got the Nobel Prize! These are the ones that everyone wants to copy.

Jr.: What made them successful? Were they particularly well written?

Sr.: I guess their success was largely related to the zeitgeist: the world was ready for them. And there were very considerable resources expended on them. In the case of the Brundtland Report coining (or rather popularizing) the term 'sustainable development' was certainly important. In fact subsequent committees have sought desperately – and often in vain – for equally successful catch-phrases. But the quality of the writing is important; I would say that is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success.

Jr.: And are there examples of reports which aspired to the same level of ambition – but failed?

Sr.: I am sure there are very many – though these are, by definition, less easy to find. I was once involved – as adviser to the Norwegian commission member - in one of the many reports that attempted to repeat the success of the Brundtland Report: the World Commission for Culture and Development. Despite being led by a former UN Secretary General it attracted rather limited attention. One reason, interestingly enough, was that those working on the report could not decide between two very different meanings of the world 'culture'. One was that of the anthropologist – they invited Marshal Sahlins to write a background paper. The other was culture as museums, art galleries etc. In practice it was the second interpretation of culture that was adopted; perhaps not surprisingly: it is, after all, easier to agree and make recommendations for follow-up action with that sort of understanding of culture. To take another case, I do remember being marginally involved in the International Commission on Peace and Food which, as far as I could assess had even less impact – despite the fact that Amartya Sen was a member.

Jr.: Is that a selling point for global reports – having famous people on board?

Sr.: Absolutely. Amartya Sen is the first person that everyone wants for such a Commission: highly respected as both a moral and intellectual force. He must have had countless requests to sit on international commissions; and he has said yes to many of them. But it is interesting to note that this can damage his academic reputation: some of his colleagues in the economics profession have been critical of his work in recent years, despite his being awarded the Nobel Prize in economics. Getting too close to policy-makers, and the media, can have a negative side. I guess Amartya Sen is now being replaced – as the one that everybody wants on their commission - by Joseph Stiglitz, another Nobel Prize winning economist; a man who is viewed with increasing suspicion by conservatives for his critical views on neoliberal policies.

Jr.: Are there other ways in which a global report can make sure that it makes a difference – apart from getting famous people to write it?

Sr.: Yes, another way is to have even more people peripherally involved in the writing of it. This may seem to contradict what I said earlier, but here's how it works, at least with reports like the annual World Development Report of the World Bank and the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Suppose you are put in charge of the report for next year, together with a small team. You and many, but not all, of the team will typically come from the organisation itself: World Bank or UNDP. You can in addition engage others – academics and consultants – to write commissioned pieces for you. You may also invite others, maybe NGOs, to contribute and comment. You may even put an outline and subsequent draft of the report on the web and invite comments. So who, and how many, do you invite?

Jr.: And what is the answer?

Sr.: It seems to be: 'a very large number – preferably including very big names'. I recently took a look at the acknowledgements section of the latest Human Development Report (HDR) which I think is very interesting. Eight people who 'made special contributions' include Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, Rajendra Pachauri (former chair of the IPCC) and Joseph Stiglitz. So this is the 'famous people' syndrome again, except for the fact that – as the report clearly states – the views expressed 'are those of the authors alone'. This looks like the best of both worlds: you gain legitimacy by the fact that lots of authoritative people are associated with the report, without having to ensure that they agree with it. And the list of associated people goes on: papers commissioned from 23 people, an Advisory Panel including 20 named people, a statistical panel of 13 people, and comments received from consultations in eight cities around the world. The acknowledgements end with the words 'we are very grateful to Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz for their review and feedback on the report'. Can you believe it?

Jr.: And does this work? Do these reports make a difference?

Sr.: The short answer is yes, but more and more effort has to go into them each year; not just the product but the process – which very much includes what happens after it is produced, with press releases and presentations of the report in various capital cities of the world. This is another interesting point about high-profile reports, or those seeking to be high profile. They compete for attention: especially the UNDP's Human Development Report and the World Bank's World Development Report. In order to be newsworthy every report - and these two have been going for over 25 years - has to say something which will attract the interest of the media. The HDR is helped by the fact that it always has indicators: nice simple numbers about the performance of different countries that show how they rank in terms of wellbeing. But they also try hard to have a very few catchy conclusions: which is not so easy to do year after year.

Jr.: But what about the product? Do reports like these look the same?

Sr.: Pretty much, yes. Ironically the same person – a consultant in the United States called Bruce Ross-Larson – has over the years played a major part in editing both reports. But an analysis that I read recently compared reports by the two on the same topic – climate change – and found some interesting results.[iii] For example, HDR uses the word 'we' five times as often as the World Bank, and mentions future generations 19 times to the World Bank's zero. Yet despite their different tone, and even analysis, both end up with rather similar technocratic type proposals.

Jr.: This is very interesting. Have any other similar analyses been done?

Sr.: Well I know of one that made a very detailed analysis of World Bank Annual reports going back to the 1950s.[iv] The authors found that the use of the word 'management' increased more than fourfold (measured per million words). And the frequency of 'nominalizations', i.e abstract nouns derived from verbs (like 'cooperation' from 'to cooperate') is about 4% compared to a 'norm' of 1.3 % in academic prose. The annoying thing is that I find myself falling into the same trap. I try to correct for this by reading works by authors whose style I admire, but it is not easy.

Jr.: Are you free to choose your own style?

Sr.: I would like to believe so, but this can be very much shaped by the Terms of Reference and the expectations of the client. Even if they do not explicitly say so, they will usually expect you to adhere to a certain style which tends to encourage blandness. In a review that I recently undertook for a government agency I tried to make it more interesting by adopting, at least in places, a slightly journalistic narrative style, but this did not go down well. The client reminded me that I needed to answer the specific questions itemised in the Terms of Reference - which in practice made it difficult to use my text.

Jr.: So the client is pretty powerful. Would you advise people to sometimes turn down the opportunity of a consultancy?

Sr.: It all depends. Not least on how desperate you are for the money and/or the experience. If you have never done it before, the experience may be worth gaining – even if it is painful. It's not a bad idea to start with a shorter consultancy, in case you very soon find this is not for you. It may be a good idea to discuss with the client – or if you are to be part of a team, with the team leader – what you are letting yourself in for. I have certainly turned down a number of offers; but the situation is obviously different when one has a lot of experience.

Jr.: What sort of things are open for negotiation, apart from timing and fees?

Sr.: It may be possible to discuss and negotiate the Terms of Reference, at least if you are not in competition with others. Some years ago we, at the Centre, were invited to undertake a study on – to put it rather simply - what would happen when certain of the world's minerals ran out. This is an interesting issue, but we argued that in practice no minerals would run out, since before that point was reached the price would go up, alternatives would be found, etc. In other words we felt that the question was not well posed. In fact this is, in my experience, what often happens with researchers who are commissioned to write a report; they say 'but that is the wrong question'. They may well be right; but the client may not agree. Or they may agree but be unable to do anything about it since the process has already gone too far.

Jr.: So even if the Terms of Reference are unsatisfactory you may go ahead and do the work anyway.

Sr.: In practice, yes – if you are a consultant. A good example is almost the first major consultancy study I ever worked on, in Mali in 1973. I was a very junior member of our team, mainly of engineers, which was engaged to design a piped sewerage system for the capital, Bamako. Immediately we arrived it became obvious that this would be a misuse of money, since about the only ones served would be a luxury hotel and a few, mainly government, buildings. The client's representative on site agreed with our assessment, but it was too late to substantially alter our task. So we did what we were paid to do. This was the first of several rather disheartening experiences which – after a few years – turned me off that sort of consultancy, except where I was in a strong position to pick and choose.

Jr.: Which, as someone with very little experience, I guess I would not be.

Sr.: That depends. If you are full-time dependent on consultancies then your power to dictate terms is limited. But if you do it on a part-time basis then you have more freedom. The danger then can be that you spend more time on writing the report than you are paid for.

Jr.: It all sounds very commercial.

Sr.: It is – if you are working as a consultant; but that may not necessarily be the case. And even if it is not a question of money, it is a question of your time – which you do not want to waste. You should aim to write the best report you can in the time available.

Jr.: And does this give you satisfaction?

Sr.: Yes. Ideally, you take pride both in the quality of your workmanship and the fact that you did it within a tight deadline.

Jr.: And does it matter to you what difference your report makes?

Sr.: That's a good question. You know enough about bureaucracy to realise that reports don't necessarily make any difference at all. Maybe that's one reason why I choose to see my achievement as getting the report written rather than what should be the next step – that some action follows. I can point to a few instances where a report that I have been responsible for has undoubtedly had some effect; but also many where they have not.

Jr.: Isn't that a bit disheartening?

Sr.: Maybe no more than for an academic to find that their book has not been reviewed by anyone.

Jr.: That's a rather gloomy conclusion isn't it?

Sr.: Not necessarily. You can take pride in your work even if it attracts little notice – as long as you believe it is of high quality. And for me that is as true of a report as of an academic article. They may be two different worlds, but they have much in common when it comes to the craft of writing.

Jr.: I am not sure I am convinced. Can you be more specific?

Sr.: I can try. In both cases your aim is to attract the reader's interest, and to convey certain ideas and information in the most effective way. And the rules for doing this are rather similar whether you are writing a report or an article. Clarity in every sentence. Simplicity of language, despite complexity of argument. And the tone of your writing is important: assured but not arrogant. The power of the argument – and even the likelihood of a report being read past page one - can be greatly enhanced if the report is well written.

Jr.: So would you say there is an aesthetic aspect even in writing reports?

Sr.: Absolutely. And I believe a good academic training can help here. To give you a critical awareness of the overworked or even meaningless metaphor, the bland and empty statement: the sort of writing by numbers in which one word or expression automatically gives rise to another. Trained as an academic you may be shocked when you enter the world of bureaucracy. To operate effectively in that world you need to understand its unwritten logic and rules. And although you yourself will be subject to the same strictures, you should try to the extent possible to maintain the standards of good writing. It may be that you do that only for your own satisfaction. But it can happen that a report makes a difference in the world, and I am convinced that this is much more likely if the report concerned is well written.

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