



EU PPF
PODRŠKA EU U PRIPREMI PROJEKATA
Perspektiva Srbije za održivi razvoj

ppf.rs | europa.rs | mei.gov.rs | cfcu.gov.rs



REPUBLIKA SRBIJA
MINISTARSTVO ZA EVROPSKE INTEGRACIJE
MINISTARSTVO FINANSIJA
Sektor za ugovaranje i finansiranje programa
iz sredstava Evropske unije



Projekat finansira
Evropska unija

Written communication in the context of infrastructure projects



Written communication in the context of infrastructure projects

- Option analysis
- The importance of understanding communication context
- Main communication benchmarks of international financial institutions and the EU
- Good practice and common mistakes

Where there is discord, let me bring union. Where there is error, let me bring truth. Where there is doubt, let me bring faith. And where there is despair, let me bring hope.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Option analysis

Written and oral communication

Written communication

Traceable communication

Information contained in the communication can be reused

Oral communication did not bring forth desired results

The nature of the subject/consequences are more complex

The preparation of the reply requires more careful elaboration

The written reply is provided in the applicable procedure

The nature of the relationship with the information user requires written communication

Oral communication

An oral instruction, which is verifiable to a very limited extent, must always be subsequently confirmed in writing.

Fastest form of communication

Applicable in case of crisis situations

Requires the physical presence of all parties

Less complex questions/simpler answers

Option analysis

Official memos and email messages

Official memos

Official communication which forms the basis for action

More complex questions and structure

More extensive preparation

They go through an internal control system

The internal documentation management system is robust

Clear rules regarding saving and archiving

Email messages

Questionable applicability in some cases
(see disclaimers)

Usually simpler issues, more free form

Fast further distribution of information

Direct communication between multiple parties

Communication is usually not subject to internal control

Clear rules regarding saving and archiving

The importance of understanding communication context

Who is the immediate user of information?

The EU administration, the public, the complainant....

It is extremely important that the style and form of communication accommodate the specificity of the users themselves.

Who, given the context, could become a user of the information contained in the communication?

Auditors, judicial bodies, contracting parties, the public....

Depending on the communication content, it is important to take into account that the communication may become a so-called audit trail, and will possibly be used as evidence in the event of litigation.

History of communication with the other party

Is there a relationship of mutual trust between the different parties involved in the communication? When it comes to style and form of communication, have the standards already been established? NB: Maintain a professional distance, it is a prerequisite for objectivity. Insisting on direct and more intimate communication is a lure that is often used by experienced contractors in order to promote personal goals.

How well do the users of information know the matter you are writing about?

In any case, it is better to avoid technical jargon. Keep in mind that unless you can explain something simply and succinctly, you may not know the matter well enough yourself. The users must clearly understand what is expected of them, within which deadline, and what the possible consequences of delays/failure to act are. Let auditors be your starting point: the content of communication must also be clear to people participating in the control system, who are not necessarily lawyers, civil engineers, technologists or ICT specialists.

International financial Institutions and the EU: the main benchmarks for written communication

Short and simple

The average sentence must not exceed 15-20 words. Make sure that a single sentence expresses only one main idea.

Respect the rules of institutions relating to the expression of amounts, currencies and percentages

Before initiating communication, examine the guidelines of the institution you are about to communicate with (e.g. a billion in the UK differs from a billion in the United States, different institutions express numbers differently). After you identify which rules should be applied, inform other associates, and thus ensure consistent application.

Do not forget to integrate EU visibility items when you act as an end user of EU funds

Reports and related written documents fall under the obligation to demonstrate EU participation in project financing.

Precision and succinctness, clear identification of the subject/main messages

Abstract, jargon-saturated language is vague and can lead to open disapproval by the other party. The subject/main messages and your starting points must be clear. Remove ambiguous and ambivalent expressions from your communication.

Differences and similarities

The EU and international financial institutions' communication style is closer to modern open organizations than traditional state administration. Nevertheless, remember that some of the persons working at such organizations have worked in public administration in the past, which means that the setting of these organizations is still based on a hierarchical structure. Inquire about the preferences of your contact person regarding communication style and form of address.

Gender equality is high on the list of priorities

Especially during instructions preparation, it is important to emphasize that all genders are equal. NB: The public administration and local self-government bodies are obliged to evaluate and assess the impact on gender equality in all stages of drafting, adoption, and enforcement of legal acts, decisions or activities.

Be careful when using materials downloaded from the internet, as they may be copyrighted

If you have doubts about the nature of the material you use, ask for authorization or search for a “safer” option.

INSTRUCTION EXAMPLES:

European Commission: Commission Style Guide

https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2019-15/commission_style_guide-9-4-2019_0BA08B31-F19B-8185-AB735C0699FCED31_58565.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1ygfrnVgo15vug6Ue8ScNhi_rMUM2UUcBvb3DOeoGmJcoc6b9IIYPFWGs

World Bank: Editorial Style Guide

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/154921467999692668/pdf/104857-MAN-Editorial-Style-Guide-PUBLIC.pdf>

Good practice and common mistakes in written communication

The essence of correspondence is the exchange of information and arguments in order to fulfill the purpose of a specific process or a particular goal. Sometimes it is not only important to exchange arguments, but also to convince the other party of the approach you have suggested. Rhetoric can help.

Aristotel = narration + proof

Aristotle, expanded = introduction + narration + proof + conclusion

The duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will.

FRANCIS BACON

Rhetorica ad Herennium (Rhetoric: for Herrenius), the oldest known book about rhetoric from ancient Rome, recognizes the following steps in argumentation of one's viewpoints:

Exordium

The author uses relevant general facts, anecdotes, quotes or analogies to capture readers'/listeners' attention, and then connects them to a specific topic.

Narratio

The author succinctly presents the arguments, thesis, or points that are to be proven.

Divisio

Main points are outlined, or the debate is analyzed in order to clarify what needs to be discussed further.

Confirmatio

The arguments for the thesis the author supports are presented, as well as the supporting evidence.

Refutatio

Includes the presentation and refutation of the other party's arguments.

Conclusio

The summary of the argument, describing the urgency of the viewpoint and actions that could be taken.

GOOD PRACTICE

Determine your objective and articulate it clearly

Do you want the reader to do something for you or are you just forwarding information? Do you want your reader to reply or do you want them to take action? Your communication purpose should be specified. Avoid irrelevant information. Clarity is key.

The tone is important in writing too

Your tone can help make your writing more effective. Certain forms of communication, such as official memos and replies to complaints require a formal tone. As a rule, writing to someone you know well requires a less formal (I repeat: but not casual) tone.

Explain clearly what you expect from the other party

It is impossible to take on an obligation that you do not understand in the first place. Part of good practice is to explain what the benefits for the other party are if they act according to the request (motivate the action).

Simple language

Do not exaggerate with clichés, jargon, and expressions and do not try to impress with fancy words. Sentences and excerpts should be short and succinct.

Less is more when it comes to text length

Exclude words that do not contribute to the understanding of the message you want to convey.

Sentences in active form are more understandable

Long, complex sentences in passive form will slow the reader down (e.g. active sentence “I caught the ball”; passive form “The ball was caught by me”).

Active form will attract and keep the reader's attention.

Also use punctuation marks when you want to emphasize something

A full stop has the same purpose as a pause in speech. Remember: reading is associated with an artificially generated visual and auditive impression, you can almost see the action and hear the tone of voice. The pause allows us to take a short break and be concentrated when turning to the following message.

Font

The font type, size and style as well as page numbering can encourage or discourage, motivate or demotivate the party we address.

Paper

Even the choice of paper sends a message – shinier thicker paper of better quality creates the illusion of giving importance to the party we address. A matte lighter paper sends the opposite message. Using recycled paper can also make a certain impression on the recipient.

Disclaimer in email messages

Visually and textually generic disclaimers covering key risks associated with direct communication via email send a clear message about the integrity of your organization. Their absence sends an opposite message.

English is an official language – pay attention to orthography and typos

One common mistake is literal translation (“but it doesn’t sound English”). Before being sent, memos must go through additional control, including orthography.

Do not attack, cooperate

Business correspondence involves placing the interest of your employer/public interest above your personal interests. Never resort to informality in official correspondence, no matter how strongly you might be tempted in certain cases.

Use logos, sometimes even pathos

Logos refers to the presentation of a credible argument in a logical way. Pathos is a subtle and targeted attack on the other party's emotions.

Admit obvious mistakes – Concessio/Paramologia

When confronted with irrefutable evidence admit to a mistake, adding a minor element that will allow you a slight diversion: yes, we admit it, but....

Serve a sandwich

A notorious gambler, who never had time for a proper meal, Earl of Sandwich came up with a meal consisting of a piece of meat between two slices of bread. Between two arguments that are in your favor, you can insert those working against it, or vice versa.

Good knowledge of the matter (rules, procedures, and practice) is a prerequisite for giving a competent opinion

Every memo is an opportunity for you to refresh your knowledge – key argumentation is often extracted from the legislative and/or procedural framework which you are obliged to be acquainted with.

At the same time be an observant reader

An extremely important communication element (especially in the case of complaints) is the knowledge of, acceptance, and effective use of facts from previous correspondence. Refer to previous correspondence, whenever you have the opportunity.

Quality control

Each memo must undergo control before being sent (e.g. direct supervisor's control). If possible, the control should also be carried out via email in the case of more important correspondence.

Avoid expressions that sound accusatory and condemning

Do not repeat all details of the problem and do not overemphasise them

A casual reference will suffice. Focus on the solution, not the mistake.

Avoid long explanations

Stick to the rules – who explains too much, does not explain anything.

Your tone should be friendly and understandable

Never base your argumentation on unverified information or media announcements

Do not blame anyone, focus on the problem and the solution

Do not admit careless writing or take on any form of legal responsibility before your superiors and legal department give you the green light.

Taking the blame may be productive in some cases, but be careful – you are acting on behalf of the administration which is generally conservative and not at all prone to admit omissions. Also, the responsibility may be made personal – yours.

Consult with your superiors / legal department whenever you face borderline cases

For example, a request for further information could lead to violations of confidentiality provisions, communication indicating potential irregularities/fraud, etc.

Deadlines

Strictly comply with legally / procedurally defined deadlines. Keep the appropriate audit trail confirming the deadline was met.

Start preparing the reply as soon as possible

Procrastination turns every memo into an apology writing.

Be cautious when handling the information that has been made available to you

As a rule, financial and personal data, technical knowledge, etc. are considered confidential. Only provide the other party with information that can undoubtedly be provided.

Handling of attachments

Provisions regarding personal data confidentiality and storage and business secrets apply to the attached documents as well. Do not stack the attachments, by doing so you increase the chance of omission, and you could make the other party nervous (“They're burying us in documentation”)

Names, academic titles, job titles, and addresses should be double-checked.

By stating inaccurate data, you can easily offend someone at the very beginning and not even be aware of it.

Avoid expressions that escalate the situation (“ridiculous”, “rude”, “brainless”).

If you really must use the passive form

In general, use active sentences, if you must/wish to use passive form, consider using its “mild” form. Instead of writing, “You've done this”, say: “This was done”.

Avoid abbreviations and jargon

Avoid jargon as well as the abbreviations commonly used in informal email messages or phone messages (LOL, FYI, BTW...). Write out the full term, followed by the abbreviation in brackets (hereinafter: abbreviation) before you start using that abbreviation in the rest of the text.

Always use positive formulation when preparing instructions

Do not give instructions in a negative form, formulate them positively instead. Whenever you notice “no”, “never” and “shouldn't” in your instructions, rephrase the sentence to ensure a unanimous interpretation. Multiple negations in a single sentence turn a sentence into an equation.

Do not use expressions such as “simple” and “obvious”.

The named expressions most commonly lead to something completely opposite, and the other party might interpret them as your way of telling them that their knowledge of the issue is inferior.

Accompanying documentation

Any document to be signed (e.g. contract or contract addendum) must be accompanied by a memo containing clear instructions (e.g. signature position, number of originals, delivery method, etc.).

Draw conclusions based on evidence

Avoid putting on paper what you cannot prove.

Positive “no”

If you must say no, express regret that you must do so.

Structure more complex memos

If you need to answer several questions, divide the memo into units of meaning that will enable you to navigate through the document easily or refer to individual parts.

Create and update suggestions

You will gradually notice certain standard patterns in your memos, parts that have stood the test of time particularly well. Save yourself some time and copy.

USEFUL PHRASES IN ENGLISH

Thank you for bringing to our attention...

We regret the difficulties you had.

I'm writing to you for advice concerning....

Your idea is excellent and we may regret not going that route, but let's try something else first.

Important notice of change in terms, effective 1 January 2020.

We appreciate your calling our attention to...

Much to our regret....

We have thoroughly investigated this issue and concluded that...

We've taken steps to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

We would like to meet with you to discuss....

We are happy to be able to clarify this matter for you.

The lack of facts is proof of a cover-up.

SAM LEITH

The degree of noncompliance with what is agreed in a business venture has a tendency to increase in direct proportion to the amount of money included.

ROBERT J. RINGER

EU SUPPORT IN PROJECT PREPARATION

All documents, information, materials, and photographs can be downloaded from the official EU PPF projects website

www.ppf.rs

Questions and assistance

Borislav Bogunović

Senior NKE – Training expert

+385 (0)91 3001390

borislav.bogunovic@trialogue.hr

www.ppf.rs

Thank you for your attention!