The BLUF Writing Method

BLUF stands for Bottom Line Up Front. It comes from the United States Army, whose writing rules ask writers to put the main point at the beginning of a message. The idea is simple: busy readers should know in the first lines what we need or what we have decided. The details come afterwards, for those who need them. Today many companies use BLUF for emails, reports and short updates.

1. Start with the Bottom Line

The first rule is to open with the most important point: a request, a decision, a conclusion or a recommendation. Many of us write in the order in which things happened, so the main point arrives at the very end. With BLUF, the first one or two sentences tell the reader what we need and by when. A good test is whether the reader could act after reading only the first lines.

Example: A neighbour writes to the building group about a broken lift. Following the first rule, the message starts with the bottom line: the lift is out of order until Thursday, so everyone should use the stairs. The story of how it broke can come later.

At work: Jana, a project coordinator, needs her manager to approve two extra days of testing. She starts with the bottom line: the team needs approval for two more testing days by Friday. Her manager reads the first line and says yes within minutes.

2. Write a Clear Subject Line

The second rule applies the same idea to the subject line, which is the first thing the reader sees. A vague subject, such as Update or Quick question, tells the reader almost nothing. A clear subject line names the topic and what is needed. Some teams also start it with a keyword such as Action, Decision or Info, so the reader knows at once what kind of message it is.

Example: A sports club sends a message to parents with the subject News. With a clear subject line, it becomes: Training moves to Tuesday this week. Parents see the change without even opening the message.

At work: Jana writes a clear subject line: Decision needed by Friday, two extra testing days. Her manager sees what is needed straight from the inbox.

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3. Add Only the Key Background

After the bottom line comes the background, but only what the reader needs. Here the writer answers the simple questions: who, what, where, when and why. Short paragraphs help the reader find each fact quickly. Anything that is nice to know but not needed can go into an attachment or be left out.

Example: After the bottom line, the neighbour adds only the key background: a technician comes on Wednesday, and the new part arrives on Thursday. Nothing more is needed.

At work: Under her request, Jana adds the key background in three short lines: what the tests found, why two more days are needed, and what happens if nothing changes. Her manager has all the facts on one screen.

4. Keep It Short and Active

The last rule is about style. The Army rules ask for writing that is concise and to the point, and they prefer the active voice. In the active voice, we say who does what: the team will finish the report, rather than the report will be finished. Short sentences and plain words make a message faster to read.

Example: A note on the fridge says that the plants should be watered. Written short and active, it becomes: the children water the plants on Monday. Now everyone knows who does what.

At work: Before sending, Jana keeps her email short and active. She changes the tests will be repeated into our team will repeat the tests on Monday and Tuesday. The email is now eight lines long, and the decision comes the same day.

Conclusion

In summary, the BLUF writing method has four rules: start with the bottom line, write a clear subject line, add only the key background, and keep it short and active. It respects the reader's time, because the main point arrives first. It also makes our own thinking clearer, because we must decide what the message really is before we write it. Before the next email, one question can guide us: what does the reader need to know first?

Sources

- Department of the Army (2020). Army Regulation 25-50: Preparing and Managing Correspondence (the Army writing standard: main point at the beginning, active voice).
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