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Message Conferences: A Guide to Improving Product Quality and Timeliness

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Preface

Producing the highest quality product in time to meet the users' needs is GAO's goal on each assignment. The commitment to quality and timely reporting governs all of GAO's work.

One initiative to improve the quality and the timeliness of its products involves holding a message conference to reach agreement on the product's message, content, and presentation. To be of optimum use and help the message development, these conferences have to be appropriately planned and it is imperative that the right GAO staff attend. Agreement should be reached on the message and sufficiently documented so that division-level managers can buy in. If these steps are done effectively, the final processing of a product should be speeded up and a minimum of surprises should be encountered.

This publication provides guidance on planning, conducting, and documenting these important meetings. Whether the meetings are scheduled for a few hours, a few days, or a week, several concepts presented here should make the process run more smoothly and the overall conference be more successful. This publication draws on and replaces the information in the May 1986 Guide to Conducting Report Conferences.

We would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by division and regional staff who provided helpful hints for conducting message

conferences. We encourage others to provide suggestions for enhancing these conferences. These should be sent to the Office of Policy for consideration in a future edition.

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Abbreviations

DMTAG	Design and Methodology Technical Assistance Group
GAO	General Accounting Office
GSA	General Services Administration
TAG	Technical Assistance Group

How Does GAO Develop the Message?

Throughout an assignment, GAO encourages early consideration of the potential message. During job design, managers and staff agree on the assignment objectives, scope, and methodology. They decide what evidence to gather to support these and again focus on the potential message. During data collection/analysis, team members ensure that objectives are being met, assess the evidence being gathered, and consider the continued appropriateness of the potential message as well as alternative messages. At each succeeding step, staff should become more certain about what they will be able to communicate.

From the early stages of an assignment, the potential message should be identified and should be reconsidered as the assignment progresses and as factual data is developed. The message conference provides the opportunity for key assignment staff to share final views on the evidence and finalize the message and to reach agreement.

To be successful, a message conference should

- be properly planned,
- be attended by the right GAO staff,
- enable participants to reach reasonable agreement on the product and the message GAO will convey, and
- achieve a meeting of the minds among key assignment staff and a buy-in from managers responsible for the product.

Why Should Message Conferences Be Held?

GAO uses the message conference to improve product quality and timeliness. It improves coordination and communication during product development and processing by

- informing those who will review and approve the product of the subject and related issues;

- ensuring that the requester's questions have been adequately answered;
- surfacing and resolving differences or weaknesses in the product message;
- determining the adequacy and the sufficiency of support for findings, conclusions, and/or recommendations;
- identifying whether additional data collection and/or analysis is needed to fully support GAO's position;
- clarifying for the team the decisions made;
- enabling staff to participate in discussions about how their work will be used in preparing the product;
- allowing line managers to assess the level of difficulty of the writing task and to assign additional staff to help draft the product, if appropriate; and
- ensuring that people in participating units are working with the same message and presentation in mind.

When a message conference is not held, a line manager is likely to wait until he or she reviews the draft product to make decisions about its content. Such a practice may waste drafting time and effort. During a message conference, decisions on a product's content can be made before the assignment team invests time and effort in producing a first draft.

While agreement on what GAO wants to communicate—the message—can be reached in various ways, bringing appropriate division, office, and regional managers together with the assignment staff and technical advisers in a carefully structured message conference is an effective approach.

Who Should Attend a Message Conference?

A message conference is a key meeting of staff knowledgeable about the assignment, the issue, or other technical skills who, together, contribute to producing a quality GAO product. These key staff include the issue area director; the assistant director; regional management; the evaluator-in-charge; assist staff; and other specialists—Design and Methodology Technical Assistance Group/Technical Assistance Group (DMTAG/TAG) representatives, writer-editors/reports analysts, attorneys, investigators, or other technical advisers.

How Structured Should the Conference Be?

While many similarities exist in the different assignments GAO undertakes, each assignment has unique characteristics. The interrelationships of these characteristics should be considered when deciding how formal a message conference should be.

No checksheet could ever be developed to fully address all the assignment considerations that may affect the decision to hold a formal conference. Staff and managers, however, should assess current assignments in light of the potential benefits to be achieved. The following items, while not exhaustive, should be considered.

- Size and complexity: Has the assignment involved a large number of resources and/or participating units? Were new or unique methodologies employed to assess the issues? Is the product's message likely to be complex and multifaceted?
- Sensitivity of the issues: Will the message evoke possible disagreements with GAO's findings, conclusions, or recommendations? Are there political sensitivities that require special attention before the product is issued? Will the message be contrary to the views of the requester or other congressional leaders? Was possible fraudulent or criminal activity uncovered during the assignment?
- Newness of the issue or extent of familiarity with it on the part of assignment staff: Are the issues being addressed for the first time, or is this a follow-on assignment? Is this the first time a particular region or office has participated in assignments for this issue area? How experienced with the issue are the staff?

- Extent of supervision and quality of communication: Was the issue area director actively involved in the assignment since it began? Did the evaluator-in-charge and/or the assistant director frequently visit participating units and review the evidence being collected? What was the quality of the communications between participating units?
- Current environment: Is the issue evolving and/or is it subject to last-minute influences? Is the issue subject to legislative revisions or controversial congressional debate before the product will be issued or the assignment complete? Will other congressional actions—budget reductions, new legislation, etc.—for other programs affect the message?
- Consistency of the evidence: Have all participating units been developing similar evidence, and are the findings generally consistent among the units?

Once these factors are considered, staff can decide whether holding a formal message conference or whether an alternate forum would better facilitate reaching message agreement. The following chapters provide guidance for determining the degree of formality needed for a message conference and address

- planning the conference (see ch. 2),
- conducting the conference (see ch. 3),
- documenting the results of the conference (see ch. 4),
- alternatives for formal meetings (see ch. 5), and
- checklists to accomplish these tasks (see apps. I to VI).

Planning the Message Conference

Introduction

Planning for the message conference is critical to its success. A message conference brings together diverse individuals and personalities and generally represents a short time frame to accomplish a major objective. Since GAO assignments differ, each conference needs to be tailored to meet the objectives of the assignment, the parties involved, and the ultimate user.

This chapter focuses on the preconference activities that will better achieve the purpose of the conference. This preparation can be done by the evaluator-in-charge alone or in conjunction with other team members. Preparation includes

- making meeting arrangements,
- analyzing the work results, and
- developing and distributing preconference materials.

A preconference planning checksheet is included as appendix I and the General Government Division's Conference Planning Guide (GAO/GGD-91-126) provides additional suggestions for planning a message conference. An excerpt dealing with conference facilities, supplies, and services is included as appendix II.

What Should Be Considered in Planning a Message Conference?

GAO's assignment management system requires that staff establish target dates for meeting critical decision points, including message agreement. Achieving the message agreement date generally flows from a message conference. But, in some cases, especially when there is a need for additional data collection/analysis, the dates of the message conference and message agreement could be separated by weeks or by months.

Therefore, after a decision is made to hold a message conference, the "who," "when," and "where" questions arise and must be addressed. While these factors are highly interdependent, the planner (generally the evaluator-in-charge) needs to consider the

- timing of the conference,
- expected participants,
- length and location of the conference, and
- anticipated product(s).

Because assistant directors generally have extensive experience attending message conferences and broader knowledge of the issue area, they should play a key role in helping the evaluator-in-charge and staff plan and prepare for the conference. Such help should include discussion of the proposed message before the conference and guidance on what materials would be most useful to participants before and at the conference and what approach to conducting the conference might be most effective. This also should include deciding on the key roles—facilitator and recorder—various participants may take.

Appropriate Timing

Generally, the appropriate time to hold the conference is near the end of fieldwork and before staff have been released from the assignment. It is important that sufficient time be allowed and staff be available after the conference to followup on points raised at the meeting. In any event, a conference should not be scheduled until the team has analyzed sufficient data to formulate, with some confidence, the assignment's findings, supporting evidence, conclusions, and recommendations and is ready to have them approved by the assistant director and the issue area director (and other top managers, as appropriate).

The tendency to hold this meeting prematurely and base the discussion on expected rather than actual findings misses the point of the conference and represents a potential threat to its utility. Conversely, holding the conference too late in the assignment may have negative consequences because staff may have already been released or the draft may have been written without the input from participants.

Experience indicates that before extensive, detailed writing has taken place, staff are more open to new ideas and the conference is more valuable to them if they are not committed to one way of presenting the message.

Right People Present

Staff who are most familiar with the work, staff who are responsible for preparing the product, and managers who will approve the contents should attend. Essential participants include

- the evaluator-in-charge or the project manager,
- the key assignment team and technical assistance staff,
- the assistant director, and
- the issue area director.

To the extent possible, the issue area director should attend all or part of the conference because of the valuable insight to the overall message that he or she can contribute because of his or her broad perspective of the issue presented. Additionally, the issue area director can effectively assess the implications of previous, current, or anticipated assignments for the current product, and he or she generally has had significant dealings with the user. Discussions about these dealings may be a valuable contribution to conference deliberations.

The degree to which the issue area director will participate will significantly affect how the conference will be structured and the anticipated product. For example, if the issue area director attends the entire conference, agreements can be reached and the anticipated product can be easily approved. On the other hand, if the issue area director can attend only a wrap-up session or cannot attend at all, participants need to concentrate on how to summarize the key points on which the issue area director's concurrence is important.

It is critical that the issue area director agree with decisions made at the conference concerning the product's message and presentation in order to reduce the drafting and review time. If the issue area director cannot attend, he or she should be informed of the agreements reached on the planned message before substantial time has been spent drafting the product. One option is to use electronic communications to transmit the agreements reached. This may enable the issue area director to review and concur on the agreements before the conference reaches closure.

Attendance of staff responsible for preparing the product will help ensure that agreements reached are reflected in the product and can speed the writing process. Frequently, having division or regional writer-editors/reports analysts and/or the division report reviewer in attendance facilitates agreement on the presentation issues and reduces these types of questions during the review process.

In many cases, it is important that other people who have had key roles in the assignment or who are expected to have a key role in reviewing the product also participate in part or all of the conference. These include

- the regional manager, the assistant regional manager, or the regional management representative from the lead region;
- subject area experts (inside or outside GAO); and
- representatives from divisions and offices with whom the product must be coordinated.

The circumstances under which the division or office head or the director for planning and reporting attend a conference should be determined on a case-by-case basis; for example, major GAO assignments or groups of large-scale, multiregional reviews on controversial issues could suggest that division management participation is warranted.

Length and Location

Several factors contribute to the decision regarding the length and the geographical location of the conference. For example, on a multiregional assignment, consideration of travel costs and time may play a vital role in deciding where to hold the conference. If significantly more persons from headquarters may be attending, holding the meeting in Washington may be more desirable so that more people can attend. Conversely, if more regional staff than headquarters staff will be participating, holding the conference in the key regional office may be more appropriate. Other considerations involve the need for access to the workpapers, the place(s) where the papers are located, and availability of needed equipment.

Once the geographical location has been determined, the planner should consider where to meet and where the fewest interruptions would occur. For example, meetings at headquarters audit sites provide the opportunity for several interruptions to take "critical" telephone calls or the necessity to attend other meetings. When participants are not fully concentrating on the goals and the objectives of the conference, the levels of agreement may be minimal.

On the other hand, if a location is too inconvenient, some participants—possibly critical technical participants and representatives from other GAO units—may choose not to attend. Therefore, the planner needs to consider all the ramifications of attendance when determining location.

Determining conference length also is critical. Depending on the size, the complexity, or the sensitivity of the assignment and the staff's experience levels and anticipated output, the planner can determine whether the objectives can be achieved in a matter of hours, days, or an entire week.

In some cases, especially when product segments will be drafted, it may be advantageous to have all the participants attend for several days to agree on the message and preliminary presentation and then have a few critical participants remain for the last several days.

Anticipated Products

The planner also needs to consider the anticipated conference product(s). That is, depending on whether preliminary message agreement has essentially been determined, whether fieldwork is substantially over and who will participate, the planner can determine whether the conference output will include one or more of the following:

- a briefing of the issue area director and very preliminary outlines of the product's format and content;
- an agreed-upon product outline, with charge paragraphs and topic sentences;
- a draft executive summary or "Results in Brief" module; or
- drafts of segments or chapters.

Once the anticipated product is determined, overall conference length can better be determined.

What Should Be Distributed Before the Conference?

A few steps taken before the conference can help to ensure that the participants are prepared. Under most circumstances, preliminary discussions among key staff (including regional staff, the assistant director, and the evaluator-in-charge) confirm the product objectives; establish what can and should be discussed at the conference; and test the evidence to make sure it will support the findings, the conclusions, and the recommendations. Sample discussions might include the following:

- Have findings discussed at earlier meetings changed?
- Do the findings respond to the objectives?
- Have the objectives, the scope, or the timing previously agreed on with the requester changed? If so, have they been discussed with the requester and documented in contact memorandums or confirmation letters?
- Have recent legislative or political changes affected the job results or will they affect them?
- Does the evidence for each finding's elements meet the standards of sufficiency, competence, and relevance?
- Is there a theme that ties the findings together?
- Is there a need to perform additional work to better support and/or link the findings?

Conference preparation generally should result in

- a statement of the assignment and reporting objectives,
- a summary of the scope and the methodology,
- a summary of the answers to or conclusions on the objectives, and
- a list of findings with key supporting evidence.

In some cases, the planner may request that each participating unit prepare a preliminary message design form (see app. III) for each key finding resulting from that unit's work. While not all elements of the form may be completed before the conference, leaving some elements blank provides an opportunity to assess the finding in light of the evidence obtained. These forms can be distributed before the meeting or brought to the meeting for discussion. In other instances, developing preliminary executive summaries or the "Results in Brief" module may be appropriate.

Certain items definitely should be provided before the conference to better ensure that all the participants have a general working knowledge of the assignment and the focus of the conference. These include

- meeting particulars–date, time, location, and length;
- summary assignment objectives;
- summary of the scope and the methodology;
- copies of the congressional request, pertinent correspondence, and congressional contact memorandums;
- a conference agenda; and
- preliminary expectations for the conference.

These items, in addition to any message design forms or preliminary executive summaries, serve as a basis for initial conference discussions and decisions.

Conducting the Message Conference

Introduction

While differing views exist on how to conduct a message conference, the following elements generally contribute to a successful conference:

- communicating expectations;
- setting a positive tone;
- assigning key roles;
- allowing full discussion of the product's message, presentational issues, and supporting evidence;
- preparing conference output; and
- determining what else needs to be done to reach message agreement.

Documenting the results of the conference is a critical element in the overall achievement of the objectives and is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

How Should the Conference Be Conducted?

Early decisions should be reached by the evaluator-in-charge, the assistant director, and the issue area director as to the expectations for the conference, the manner in which the conference should be conducted, and the roles each of these leaders should play.

Communicating Expectations

The assistant director or the issue area director should quickly establish the expectations for the meeting and fully explain that the conference is intended to

- encourage thorough discussion of the assignment objectives, the findings, the supporting evidence, potential conclusions and recommendations, and areas requiring additional followup;
- reach agreement on the product message, the format, the presentation sequence, and the addressee; and
- develop conference products, including an expanded outline, an executive summary, or some other

briefing-type product(s) to facilitate the writing process.

Setting a Positive Tone

The issue area director, the assistant director, and the evaluator-in-charge should emphasize that the message conference is a working session during which participants are expected to discuss the results of the work and decide on the best way to communicate it in a GAO product. For the conference to work best, participants must understand that everyone is a team member trying to assess the assignment results and work out the best way of presenting them.

Since the purpose of the conference is to surface and resolve as many issues as possible, it should not be viewed as merely a review of prepared materials. It is important that all those attending systematically discuss issues and facts in a congenial fashion. The discussion should be a team exercise in a non-threatening environment with everyone present participating.

The key to creating this positive atmosphere is for each participant to come to the conference with an open mind and a willingness to reach consensus on the product's message. This is not to say that participants should not enter the conference with a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish—this is what gives the conference much of its focus and direction. Instruments such as message design forms and outlines give staff an idea of what the product will look like on paper. The key, however, is to treat these ideas as starting points that will be refined to more effectively and adequately present the message.

Selecting a Facilitator and a Recorder

In some instances, either the assistant director or the issue area director acts as the facilitator and then the evaluator-in-charge can focus on presenting the evidence and soliciting input from the other team members. In other instances, the evaluator-in-charge or the reports analyst may lead the discussion. In still other situations, a third party, more highly trained in group dynamics, can be used as the conference facilitator.

The facilitator ensures that the roles of all participants are understood and, throughout the conference, maintains the focus of the discussion, elicits comments, and ensures that important points are thoroughly discussed and carried to their logical conclusions. The facilitator greatly contributes to the meeting by

- encouraging everyone to participate (especially silent participants);
- protecting individuals and their ideas from attack;
- rephrasing incomplete ideas;
- cutting off long-winded speakers; and
- summarizing, checking for agreement, striving for closure, and moving on to the next issue for discussion.

Although an agenda should be developed and the facilitator should try to keep to it, significant flexibility is needed to ensure that discussions of the findings are not curtailed to meet a prearranged timetable. Conversely, discussions need not be protracted merely because the agenda allocated additional time.

Someone also should be selected as a recorder. Often, the recorder merely takes notes and reviews them with the group at the end of the conference. A more productive method is for the recorder to capture the meeting on flip charts, which are visible to participants and tend to minimize repetition of ideas.

Other ways in which the recorder can contribute to the meeting are

- facilitating brainstorming,
- facilitating accuracy, and
- enhancing a sense of accomplishment.

Before the meeting ends, the recorder should review the notes with the group to be sure important points have not been omitted or misunderstood. It is usually helpful to have someone type the agreements reached or other items of importance before the conference ends.

What Needs to Be Considered at the Conference?

Sufficient time should be scheduled to permit discussion of all pertinent issues. To achieve the conference's objectives, participants need to reach agreement on

- the overall message,
- the adequacy of supporting evidence,
- the product type and format,
- any other reporting issues, and
- assignment tasks still to be completed.

Overall Message

The overall message is the bottom line of a GAO product and should be stated concisely to capture the significance of the work. Such a clear message helps the reader understand the importance of the findings and the implications of GAO's work.

The message takes the assignment objective and the findings developed and establishes "what this means" for users. It sets the tone of GAO's work and enables participants to agree on "what should be recommended" on the basis of the findings.

Participants should consider the message as it has evolved throughout the assignment and decide "what we should say" and "how we should say it" given the findings and the evidence. Appendix IV summarizes the key points in developing the message and the product.

In-Depth Discussion of Findings and Support

A detailed discussion of the evidence is important to assessing the assignment's issues, prioritizing the findings, and determining the product's main message. Participants should analyze each major finding in depth to ensure that the evidence meets the standards of evidence and contributes to the overall message.

Depending on the assignment's objectives, discussion of the findings may include identifying and questioning the sources of criteria, condition, cause, and effect. This critical discussion can identify gaps that require additional work or, alternatively, findings or evidence not pertinent to the product's message that can be eliminated. This also helps the writer(s) prioritize the issues and organize the presentation of facts.

Discussions are frequently enhanced during the preparation of the conference outputs—draft executive summaries or outlines—discussed below. Additionally, appendix V provides some helpful questions to use in assessing the assignment's results and developing the message.

Product Type and Format

Once the overall message has been determined and the findings have been discussed in depth, participants can determine the best product type to communicate this message. They should consider who the user is and what product type will best meet the user's need in the required time frame. Additionally, staff should consider whether the message includes

- broad or complex issues requiring a greater degree of descriptive information;
- sensitive or controversial matters;
- a limited scope in terms of issue(s) addressed, descriptive information required, or assignment effort expended; and/or
- a specified time requirement for product issuance.

In making these decisions, participants may choose among GAO's various product types—chapter reports, letter reports, briefing documents, testimony, or correspondence.

Other Reporting Considerations

Before finalizing any decisions on the product type, participants should consider other reporting issues that may affect the final preparation of the product. These include the following:

- Will written agency comments be requested and how long will the agency have to reply?
- Who is the intended audience and what knowledge does it have about the subject matter?
- When and with whom will GAO discuss the issues to be reported to get the views of responsible officials?
- With whom will the ultimate product need to be coordinated and who will review it?
- Will an interim product be necessary to meet required time frames?
- Who will be drafting the final product and where will it be referenced?
- Who will the addressee be and who will sign the product?
- What is the anticipated length of the product?
- Will estimated distribution be limited or widespread?
- When will these tasks be accomplished?

How Should Conference Products Be Developed?

Ideally, the conference will be sufficiently successful if it results in producing draft materials reflecting the participants' agreements on message, content, and format. When the issue area director participates in the conference and agrees with the results, actual product preparation may begin.

Even when final agreement may not have been reached, drafting executive summaries, the "Results in Brief" module, and/or product outlines greatly facilitates the approval process and development of the final product.

Developing an Executive Summary

Developing the standard modules of an executive summary is effective in reaching agreement on the message. This approach has been successful even if the final product is a letter report.

When an executive summary is to be developed during the meeting, participants begin by discussing the purpose of the review and, specifically, the principal questions to be answered or points to be made in the product. The assignment team may, as part of advance preparation, write on a flip chart or on transparent view graphs what it believes are the key reporting objectives.

After reaching agreement on objectives, the participants can discuss and agree on the product's main message ("Results in Brief")—their bottom-line response to the objectives—and the evidence supporting this response ("Principal Findings" or "GAO's Analysis"). This discussion should encompass all findings and conclusions the team wishes to communicate. The findings can then be grouped according to major issues, and participants can decide which are the most significant.

Once these agreements have been reached, the participants can begin to develop and critique the recommendations. Participants should closely examine the link between the recommendations and the stated causes of the problems. Often it is especially helpful to actually write the recommendations before adjourning the conference because this eliminates confusion later in the product preparation stage as the team is writing to agreed-upon wording for the recommendations.

Finally, participants should decide what background information is needed to understand the reporting objectives and message. The background should include program-specific information to help put the message in its proper context.

Developing an Outline

Another useful technique for focusing the conference's discussions and for reaching agreement on the message is to prepare and revise an outline. The length and the detail of the outline will vary, depending on the complexity of the message. The more detailed the outline is, including headings, subheadings, charge paragraphs and topic sentences, the less chance there is of misinterpreting the product's main message.

A detailed outline serves as a "skeleton" of the product. The charge paragraphs embody the product's message and its scope, order, and tone.

In developing expanded outlines, participants should also consider what tables, graphs, charts, or maps could best present or supplement the information to be presented. GAO uses a variety of readily available software to automatically produce charts, maps, and presentation materials in the standardized format. Therefore, preliminary graphics could be developed and considered in addition to any text prepared.

If participants develop the outline to this extent, the writer essentially just needs to fill in the supporting details to complete the draft.

Using Tools for Organizing Products

Staff experienced with conducting or participating in message conferences use various tools to help organize the product format and content and speed the review process. These tools, while not available at every GAO location, should be helpful in displaying information that several participants can work with simultaneously. These tools are as follows:

- Data projection panels, or PC viewers, are devices connected to a computer and mounted on an overhead projector. They allow computer output to be projected onto a screen or a wall so that a number of participants can view the information simultaneously.
- Xerox conference copiers are large, specially treated boards that recorders can write on and, with a touch of a button, produce a letter-sized hard-copy version of the material noted. The board can be erased to easily permit revision before copies are produced.
- Waxers are devices that apply a waxy coating to letter-sized paper and permit that paper to be attached to walls, as post-its are attached to paper. Thus, main topics and supporting evidence easily can be rearranged until the flow of the outline is acceptable to the participants.
- Post-its, on a smaller scale, can be used as a preliminary means of organizing key thoughts or phrases in developing the outline. These greatly facilitate brainstorming sessions during which key information needs to be recorded, grouped, and frequently rearranged.
- "Storyboarding" products that estimate the number of paragraphs or sentences needed for each section can be a key aid in moving from the outline to the draft. This exercise helps to reduce the risk that a draft will become significantly longer than anticipated.

- Outlining software may facilitate formatting and revising of proposed outlines and can easily be printed for all to review.
- Editing software may facilitate the concurrent review and revision of drafts when participants are not collocated.

As technology evolves, more tools will be available for use in message conferences and other key meetings. Staff should consider all alternatives when planning conferences and determine what mechanisms may be most beneficial.

Using Tools for Reviewing Conference Products

To assess the potential effectiveness of the conference output, participants should perform a preliminary review of the product and revise it as appropriate. The Training Institute's courses entitled "Report Writing and Message Development" and "Managing Writing" offer suggestions for implementing structured reading techniques that emphasize that good, clear thinking gives rise to good, clear writing, not vice versa.

These techniques suggest using advance organizers—headings and topic sentences—as guidelines for reading a text and reviewing in stages rather than all at once. In this way, reviewers can get a clear picture of the problems that need to be addressed. In general, using structured reading techniques to review outlines involves the following:

- Examining the advance organizers (titles, captions, and charge paragraphs): Do they convey the message?
- Reading the topic sentences in conjunction with other advance organizers. Do they allow the reader to follow the message? Do the topic sentences develop the ideas stated by the captions?
- Examining clusters of paragraphs or sections to see whether they provide a unified content: Does each

paragraph in the cluster continue the development of the main idea?

Review of conference products to determine the overall logic and presentation of the proposed final product will greatly facilitate the approval process by the issue area director.

What Else Needs to Be Done to Reach Message Agreement?

Before reaching closure on the message conference, participants need to discuss whether message agreement, in the assignment management sense, was reached or whether additional data collection/analysis work needs to be performed. In some cases, the conference may surface gaps that require further work. When these gaps surface, participants should agree on what needs to be done to support the agreed-upon message and what the estimated time is for completion.

Depending on the extent of additional work to be undertaken and the length of time it will take, a second conference may be needed. In some cases, other arrangements, such as a followup telephone call to discuss the results of the additional work, may be sufficient to reach closure on message agreement.

Final areas requiring decisions relate to assigning roles for the actual drafting and referencing of the product, as well as a reevaluation of whether estimated time frames will be adequate.

Other Resource Materials

The following sources of information may contribute to conducting a more successful message conference:

- Training Institute course, "Meeting Effectively Every Time" (formerly "Running Effective Meetings").
- Training Institute course, "Report Writing and Message Development."

- Training Institute course, “Executive Summary Workshop.”
- Training Institute course, “Managing Writing.”
- Office of Information Management and Communications (formerly Office of Publishing and Communications) publication, Writing Guidelines.

Documenting the Message Conference

Introduction

Reaching message agreement indicates that parties responsible for preparing and/or reviewing the final product, including the issue area director, agree on the product's message, content, and format. Maintaining a record of these agreements is critical to ensuring that all participants have a similar understanding of the decisions reached and acknowledge what needs to be done before product issuance.

Additionally, GAO requires that copies of the message conference summary be kept in the master product folder, which provides a clear record of the review process and contains key documents related to actions taken on an assignment.

This chapter focuses on

- documenting the results of the message conference and
- distributing copies of the documentation to appropriate parties.

How Should Message Conferences Be Documented?

As with the planning for and the actual conducting of a message conference, no required format exists for documenting the results of the meeting. Flexibility in format is necessary to ensure that the type of documentation prepared meets the needs of the internal user(s) and requirements of the assignment.

Including Sufficient Information

When the issue area director was unable to attend, it is important to include in the documentation sufficient information for him or her to understand and approve decisions reached. At times, this document may even substitute for a formal briefing of the issue area director.

As a minimum, documentation should include

- a list of attendees,
- a summary of the agreements reached on message soundness and presentation,
- a list of estimated dates for product preparation and processing,
- the names of those assigned drafting and processing responsibilities,
- a discussion of other matters that were agreed to or that could affect product issuance, and
- a discussion of any unresolved issues and who is responsible for resolving them.

Obtaining Review and Approval

To ensure that key parties to the development and issuance of the product are aware of the conference results, the evaluator-in-charge, the assistant director, the regional manager (if appropriate), and the issue area director should review and approve the conference documentation.

The person preparing the document may prepare a Message Agreement Checksheet (GAO Form 288) (see app. VI for a copy) or a detailed written memorandum or may use a division/office-specific format that meets the intended purpose. Whatever method is used, copies of any conference output—draft executive summary and/or outline--should be included as attachments.

Who Should Receive Conference Documentation?

Because the conference documentation provides critical information relating to the agreements reached and the steps still to be taken, it is important that each participant receive a copy. Because future decisions must be made concerning the product, the primary recipient, whether at the conference or not, should be the issue area director.

Other nonattending parties who need to know about the product should receive a copy, including

- key technical individuals, such as DMTAG/TAG staff, writer-editors/reports analysts, economic analysts, investigators, and Office of the General Counsel attorneys, and
- representatives of other GAO divisions and regional management who will be reviewing the final product and have a responsibility for or interest in the subject matter.

When the subject matter is especially sensitive or controversial or has far-reaching implications for GAO or for the agency reviewed, the issue area director may determine that a copy of the message conference documentation should be provided to the director of planning and reporting and, in some cases, the division/office head.

When deciding who should receive a copy of the documentation, it is important to consider all those involved in the assignment to date, as well as those who may become involved before the product is issued. To ensure that everyone agrees with the message, the content, and presentation, it is far better to provide copies to many individuals and obtain their input at this point rather than to wait for the product review phase.

Alternatives to Group Meetings

Introduction

While a message conference is a valuable quality assurance tool for reaching key agreements and should be considered for each assignment, some assignments may accomplish the same goals through less formal mechanisms.

While divisions or offices may specify particular types of assignments that require formal conferences or may require them for all assignments, this chapter describes some alternatives to holding face-to-face meetings that staff may want to consider in deciding whether to hold a message conference. These alternatives may also be considered as a means for followup meetings resulting from agreements reached at a message conference rather than holding a second conference.

Alternatives to Face-to-Face Meetings

Depending on the circumstances of the assignment, staff may or may not have a formal message conference yet believe that it is important to communicate with staff at participating locations. The following information discusses some alternatives for achieving these objectives.

Conference Calls

One of the oldest alternatives is a conference call, which permits parties at several locations to communicate simultaneously. The equipment can be placed in a conference room that permits more than one party at each location to hear the conversation. This alternative requires scheduling because of connection requirements and allowing for time zone differences.

Fax Machines

Hard copies of documents can be almost instantaneously transmitted to one or more locations through telephone lines. This option allows immediate review of a document, and parties can discuss their options over the telephone.

Electronic Communications

When parties from two locations require simultaneous access to a draft or preliminary documents to review and revise, using telecommunications software (such as Crosstalk) permits each party to view the document on a screen and see what changes are being made by the other party. Adjoining telephone lines enable parties to discuss the material being reviewed.

Editing software also enables parties from numerous locations to view and revise a draft product and then electronically transmit it to one or more locations. This option enables the parties to view suggestions made by others and to assess the revisions.

GAO is experimenting with local area networks to provide shared access to centralized data, and such networks could enhance electronic communications within GAO.

Video Conferencing

Another GAO experiment involves the use of video conferencing in lieu of face-to-face meetings. Video conferencing employs various technologies to enable participants at separate locations to communicate with each other visually and orally and to transmit graphics and computer data using peripheral equipment. This option, like conference calls, permits a larger number of staff to participate, since the equipment is set up in special rooms and travel expenses are not involved.

The Future

As technology evolves, more alternatives to face-to-face meetings will emerge. While some of the interpersonal characteristics found in meetings may be lacking, the new advances in technology should help to further improve the timeliness of producing quality products—one of GAO's highest goals.

Preconference Checksheet

Plan Conference or Alternative

Should a formal message conference be held?

____ Was the assignment conducted in one location or many? Was there a large expenditure of staff-days?

____ Was the assignment broad or narrow? Was new methodology used? How experienced are staff with the subject matter?

____ Is the subject sensitive and/or controversial?

____ Has sufficient work has been completed on the assignment to make product decisions?

Make Meeting Arrangements

Who should attend?

____ Issue area director or member of the issue area team (associate director or assistant director dedicated to the overview of the issue area).

____ Regional manager and/or the assistant regional manager for planning and reporting.

____ Assistant director in charge of the assignment.

____ Evaluator-in-charge and/or the project director.

____ Key assignment staff.

____ DMTAG/TAG and/or economic analysis group representative(s).

____ Writer-editors/reports analysts.

____ Division report reviewer.

____ Office of the General Counsel attorney.

____ Investigators.

____ Other technical assistants.

____ Representatives from other divisions.

What is the best timing for the majority of expected participants?

Where should the meeting take place? How long should it last? Consider the following:

____ Ease of attendance and travel costs and schedules.

____ Availability of facilities and equipment.

____ Need for access to workpapers.

____ Implication of anticipated conference products: outlines or begin product preparation.

What will the anticipated product(s) be?

____ Briefing material for the issue area director.

____ Draft executive summary, "Results in Brief" module, and/or expanded outline.

____ First drafts of several chapters.

Discuss Preliminary Work Results

What are the views of participating units and key participants?

____ Have findings discussed at earlier meetings changed?

____ Do the findings respond to the objectives?

____ Have the objectives changed from those stated in the request letter?

____ Have recent legislative or political changes affected the job results or will such future changes do this?

____ Have allegations or evidence of fraud or other improper or illegal activities arisen?

____ Does the evidence for each finding's elements meet the standards of sufficiency, competence, and relevance?

____ Is there a theme that ties the findings together?

____ Is there a need to perform additional work to better support and/or link the findings?

____ Should message design forms for each potential finding be prepared?

Distribute Materials

What materials will give the participants a better understanding of the assignment and the goals for the conference?

____ Meeting particulars: date, time, location, and length.

____ Summary assignment objectives.

____ Summary of the scope and the methodology.

____ Copies of the congressional request, pertinent correspondence, and congressional contact memorandums.

____ Conference agenda.

____ Preliminary expectations for the conference.

Excerpt From Conference Planning Guide

Conference Facilities, Supplies, and Services[1]

Facilities

A meeting room that is large enough for everyone to be comfortable in and furnished to encourage free-flowing conversation is important. Key the facility to the number of participants and observers desired and vice versa. Do not invite more people than can comfortably fit in the room.

Determine Facility Availability

Appropriate conference facilities may be obtained from any of the following sources:

- GAO,
- the Congress,
- executive agencies, and
- commercial facilities.

GAO Facilities

The following options are available for obtaining conference rooms within GAO:

- Division and office conference rooms are available through normal procedures. This involves reserving the room by signing a sign-up book for each room. Be sure to allow yourself an extra half hour before and after the meeting so that you will be able to set up the room and clean up afterwards.
- Conference rooms are also available elsewhere in the GAO Building. GAO Order 0660.1 lists the various

[1]This appendix is an excerpt from the General Government Division's Conference Planning Guide (GAO/GGD-91-126), October 1991.

conference rooms available in the building, their seating capacity, and how they may be reserved.

- Conferences that may involve the discussion of very sensitive or classified information should be discussed with the Office of Security and Safety well in advance. There are limited conference facilities available that are cleared for the discussion of classified information.
- Rooms in the Training Institute and the Management Development Center are also available. Arrangements for these facilities can be made through the Training Institute. The Training Institute generally accepts reservations no earlier than 1 month in advance of the conference date. Rooms at the Training Institute and the Management Development Center, however, are often fully booked, making their availability for conferences problematic.
- Other GAO conference rooms are available at audit sites and regional offices.
- GAO is also developing new opportunities in the area of video teleconferencing, which opens more possibilities for bringing people together. Video teleconferencing centers are available in the GAO Headquarters Building and the Seattle Regional Office, with additional centers under consideration at other locations.

Congressional Facilities

Generally, the use of Committee meeting rooms can be arranged through the Committee staffs. We have found that Committees will usually make these rooms available if they are not being used for Committee business. However, we should be careful, if planning to use these rooms, to not portray an image that GAO is closely tied to the interests of the Committee. In addition, it is advisable to schedule a backup room in case of a last-minute requirement for the room by a Congressman or a Committee.

Executive Agency Facilities

Conference rooms can also be arranged in other government agencies. Again, there is the need to be sensitive about the implications of using a conference room at an agency being audited by GAO.

The General Services Administration (GSA) manages a program called The Living Buildings Program in which conference facilities and auditoriums are available in various government facilities for a fee. These are usually attractive, historical facilities, e.g., the Lee-Custis Mansion in Arlington or the foyers at the Department of Agriculture or the National Academy of Sciences. One of these facilities is the Departmental Auditorium on Constitution Avenue, which has conference rooms immediately off the main auditorium. A permit is required for use of facilities under this program. For further information, contact The Living Buildings Program coordinator at GSA on 202/472-1948.

Commercial Facilities

It is GAO policy that meetings and conferences should generally be held in GAO facilities or at other facilities that can be obtained at no cost to GAO. Exceptions to this policy can be made by an Assistant Comptroller General and must be reported to the Director, General Services and Controller (see GAO Order 0660.2). If an exception is granted, there are, of course, conference facilities available at various hotels that can be reserved. It is important to note the need to submit procurement requests if you plan to use hotels for conferences. If the government is spending more than $2,500, facilities will be selected on a competitive basis. In such cases, the Office of Acquisition Management should be contacted so that it can assist with the procurement process. Note that when commercial facilities are used, the sales staff who book space may not be the same staff who worked on the details of the meeting. It is imperative to meet with the hotel's events coordinator in order to coordinate and work out all the details. Sales staff sometimes forget to let the hotel event coordinators know what commitments have been made, so the burden falls upon GAO personnel to make sure that all of GAO's requirements are understood and accommodated.

Supplies and Equipment

Check the conference room at least a half hour before the meeting to be certain that facilities are adequately prepared or will be by meeting time.

Determine Need for Supplies and Equipment

Make sure that there are sufficient tables and chairs for your purposes and that these are, or will be, arranged in a suitable fashion. Do not forget coat racks if they will be needed. A Requisition For Facilities Services (GAO Form 40) can be issued requesting help from the Office of Property Management to prepare the room for the conference.

In some cases, it is advisable to prepare name badges and/or tent cards to be placed in front of the participants who will be sitting at the table(s). Other things to consider are paper, pencils, water, and cups. The Office of Information Management and Communications offers some sources for making name badges and tent cards for participants, as well as other services.

Pay attention to audiovisual equipment. Check with all meeting participants to see what their needs are regarding audiovisual equipment and see to it that it is in the room and in operating condition prior to the meeting. It is also a good idea to have reserves of items, such as extension cords, light bulbs for overhead or slide projectors, etc. Equipment can be reserved from the Video Communications Branch. If the briefing room is being used, be sure to reserve the room a day or 2 before the conference and contact the Visual Communications staff for training on the use of the briefing room's electrical and audiovisual equipment. In addition to equipment, the Office of Information Management and Communications can also provide support through the preparation of slides or printed materials. Furthermore, it can also provide assistance in procurement and leasing of computers or other electronic or telecommunications equipment if needed.

Special attention is required when using audiovisual equipment in situations where the conference is being held at a hotel because most hotels charge for the use of such equipment. If costs will be incurred for using audiovisual equipment, a procurement request should be prepared justifying its need.

Prior to the meeting, identify the nearest telephone that meeting participants may use and inform them of that at the start of the meeting. Also, assign someone who will be able to receive telephone calls and bring messages to the conference room. Put this latter information and the telephone number in the invitation package.

Message Design Form

Product:______________ Job Code:______

Purpose of Product:

Issue:

Major Findings (Complete for applicable elements):

Criteria:

Condition:

Cause:

Effect:

Conclusion(s):

Recommendation(s):

Primary Audience(s):

Secondary Audience(s):

Recommendations to:

Developing the Message and the Product

Issue	Focus	Concern	Emphasis
What must we say?	Objectives	Do results address objectives/ answer questions?	Logic of methodology
What can we say?	Support	What points can we make from our data?	Logic of evidence (individual points)
What should we say?	Significance of findings	What message should we develop from our individual findings?	Logic of argument (conclusions and recommenda-tions)
How can we say it?	Type of product and presentation	What presentation type and sequence will facilitate understand-ing our message?	Logic of presentation (format, sequence, and tone)

Questions Helpful to Assessing Assignment Results and Developing the Message

Reporting and Assignment Objectives

- Are there differences in the reporting and assignment objectives?
- Do they make sense?
- Are they measurable and do they allow reader focus?
- Are the objectives biased? Are unstated assumptions implicit in them?
- Are the objectives linked to the request or, if not, has any change been reconciled?
- What expectations do the objectives set? What elements of a finding would a reader expect to see?

Scope and Methodology

- Is there a clear statement of what work was done to achieve the objectives?
- Are there limitations to the work that should be recognized in reporting the findings?
- If the methodology is complex, should the product be reviewed by a technical specialist?

Findings

Have all the elements necessary to meet job objectives been adequately developed?[1]

Criteria

- What state of affairs is desired or required? (Criteria are compared with condition to demonstrate a deficiency or an achievement.)
- Are the criteria stated fairly, explicitly, and completely?
- Is the source identified (laws, regulations, procedures, etc.)?

[1]Depending on the assignment's scope and objectives and on the evidence gathered, an audit finding may include one or more of the following elements: criteria, condition, cause, and effect. Other types of jobs—for example, program evaluations or economic forecasts—may have different elements.

- Do we need Office of the General Counsels' assistance in identifying laws, regulations, or congressional intent?
- Is the applicability of criteria self-evident or is it explained?
- Are alternatives to these criteria dealt with and explained?
- Do the criteria make sense? Are they consistent with sound management principles?

Condition

- What is the actual state of affairs?
- Is the condition clearly stated and shown to exist through convincing evidence?
- Is the extent of the condition accurately stated?
- If gaps exist, are they so significant as to give a seriously incomplete picture? (This could affect conclusions and recommendations.)

Cause

- What factors are responsible for the differences between condition and criteria?
- Are these factors clearly stated?
- Is there a reasonable and persuasive argument for why these factors contributed to the difference as opposed to others?
- How convincing is the evidence supporting these causes?
- Does our presentation of these causes recognize the role of judgment?
- Does our explanation of causes provide the basis for recommendations?
- Are these causes attributable to internal management control weaknesses?

Effect

- What is the significance of a difference between condition and criteria? What are the consequences of the difference? What would be the impact of an intervention (a policy, a program, a procedure, or an action)?
- Is the effect stated clearly; concisely; and, where possible, in concrete terms?
- Is the effect distinguished from the condition?
- Is there a clear, logical link between condition, criteria, and cause?
- Is the significance of the effect demonstrated through credible evidence?

Evidence

- What type of evidence has been gathered: testimonial, observational, documentary, or analytical?
- How convincing is it? Will it withstand the most likely opposing views?
- Is corroborating evidence needed?
- Have the sources of the evidence been identified?
- Were the data used to develop the evidence the most current available?
- Is the evidence valid, complete, and relevant (is there a logical relationship between the evidence and the audit issues)?

Conclusions

- Do the conclusions clearly and logically flow from the findings?
- Do they overstate or understate the findings?
- Do they recognize the limits of the findings and the scope of work?
- Are the conclusions placed in the context of real-world constraints?
- Do the conclusions provide balance and perspective?

Recommendations

- Are the recommendations directed to the appropriate person?
- Is what needs to be done clear?
- Is there a clear, logical link to problems and the causes?
- Are the recommendations feasible, practical, and workable?
- Will the recommendations have any adverse effects?
- Have alternatives been considered and dealt with?

Agency Comments

- Have the findings been discussed with agency officials?
- What is the most likely reaction to the message? If sharp disagreements are expected, will GAO be able to overcome opposing views?
- How will the agency comments be handled in the product, both those that agree and those that do not agree with GAO's positions?

Message Agreement Checksheet (GAO Form 288)

United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Message Agreement Check Sheet

Job Title

Job Code

Attendees/Units

Attendees/Units

The following are critical factors that should be addressed at the message conference.

Message Soundness (Check (x) whether agreement has been reached. See attached document for content of message.)

☐ 1. Work addresses and product will answer original assignment questions/objectives.

☐ 2. Appropriate elements of finding needed to address each assignment question have been identified.

☐ 3. Evidence developed supports conclusions reached.

☐ 4. Recommendations proposed are linked to the problems and causes and are feasible, practical, and workable.

☐ 5. Proposed product title and message have been agreed to and are reflected in the draft executive summary, product outline, or or other document attached.

Message Presentation (Check (x) if agreement was reached on product type and structure.)

☐ 6. Product type selected is appropriate for type and length of message and time requirements.

☐ Chapter report ☐ Briefing report ☐ Testimony

☐ Letter report ☐ Fact sheet ☐ Other

☐ 7. Graphics or other visuals to enhance message have been discussed, appropriateness considered, and agreed to formats are shown or described on document attached.

☐ 8. Proposed order of material in product has been agreed to and is shown below or on document attached.

Production Preparation and Processing

9. List the current action dates (if applicable) for the following:

Action	Date	Action	Date
a. Submit completed first draft to assistant director.		g. Obtain oral comments from agency.	
b. Complete referencing of first draft.		h. Notify requester of status and proposed message.	
c. Submit draft to issue area director.		i. Submit draft to issue area director incorporating agency comments and referenced changes.	
d. Provide draft to other GAO units for comment.		j. Issue final product.	
e. Complete referencing of changes to draft.			
f. Submit draft to agency for comment.			

OPR:OP

GAO Form 288 (3/91)

10. List people responsible for drafting and processing product and segments or tasks assigned.

11. Describe other matters agreed to.

12. Describe unresolved issues or other matters that could affect product issuance.

13. Evaluator-in-Charge	14. Date
15. Assistant Director	16. Date
17. Regional Manager (If applicable)	18. Date
19. Issue Area Director	20. Date

21. Additional Comments (optional)

GAO Form 288 (3/91)

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