

CHAPTER 1

OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE

INTRODUCTION

1 This chapter deals with the arrangements for handling the written work of the Department of Energy. It describes procedures which should normally be followed in the conduct of business but does not preclude the use of special arrangements within divisions where the nature of their work makes this necessary.

STYLE

2 Much of the business of a Government Department is conducted in writing and it is therefore important that civil servants should be able to express themselves clearly on paper. The ability to write clear and simple prose is not easily cultivated, but there are some hints which should be helpful.

3 It is a good practice, when writing at length, to list, and then to arrange in logical order, all the points that are to be included. If you know exactly what you want to say, it will generally be much easier to select suitable words that will both express your thoughts clearly and be readily understood by the reader.

4 Sir Ernest Gowers's book "The Complete Plain Words" deals with the use of the English Language by officials and contains much sound advice. Three useful rules which Gowers suggests are:-

"Use no more words than are necessary to express your meaning, for if you use more you are likely to obscure it and to tire your reader. In particular do not use superfluous adjectives and adverbs and do not use roundabout phrases where single words will suffice.

Use familiar words rather than the far-fetched, if they express your meaning equally well; for the familiar are more likely to be readily understood.

Use words with a precise meaning rather than those that are vague, for they will obviously serve better to make your meaning clear; and in particular prefer concrete words to abstract, for they are more likely to have a precise meaning".

INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE

5 The first action on an incoming paper after it has been placed on the relevant registered file (instructions on how to file papers are given in Chapter 2) and, where appropriate, acknowledged (see paragraphs 6-7) is to note the points on which answers are required. Next, any earlier papers in the registered file should be read through so far as is necessary to illuminate any points in the incoming paper which were not immediately apparent. The incoming paper should then be studied again, and an answer prepared. Finally, consideration should be given to the advisability of copying all or part of the correspondence to any other branch of the Department having an interest in the subject matter (see paragraphs 31 and 32).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

6 The following items must be acknowledged immediately by the first recipient (ie the person or branch receiving the document, either direct or from the registry):

- 1 registered mail and mail containing valuable documents (eg securities, deeds); and
- 2 classified material which is accompanied by a form of receipt.

7 Letters from other Government Departments need not be acknowledged unless they are urgent or particularly important, or for some other reason it seems desirable to send either an acknowledgement or an interim reply. In general all other letters coming into the Department should be acknowledged on receipt. When an officer receives a letter which has not been acknowledged, it is his responsibility to send an acknowledgement at once if the circumstances require it. Acknowledgement cards are available for this purpose, but these should only be used when letters are acknowledged within two days of arrival; after this time, an interim reply or short letter will be appropriate.

8 The officer sending the acknowledgement should note the correspondence to show that this has been done.

INTERIM REPLY

9 When it is clear that a full reply to the letter will be delayed, it may be advisable to send an interim reply even if an acknowledgement has already been sent. Action on the original letter must not be delayed simply because an interim reply has been despatched.

MINUTES

10 Correspondence within the Department is normally conducted in the form of minutes. A minute, which should be laid out in the manner described in paragraphs 12-15, is a written message conveying information or instructions, or seeking advice, or suggesting the line of action to be taken.

11 Minutes are used to conduct business between branches and sections of the Department in the following ways:

- 1 as part of the relevant registered file; or
- 2 placed on a temporary jacket, (see Chapter 2); or
- 3 by themselves (known as loose minutes).

The method best suited to the requirement should be adopted. If only one branch is to be consulted, a minute written in manuscript on the file will usually be appropriate. If several branches are to be consulted, replies will normally be received more quickly if loose minutes are sent to each branch, instead of circulating the file to each in turn (see paragraph 16 below). A loose minute or a minute on a temporary jacket

may also be used when the appropriate file cannot conveniently be released. But in all cases the appropriate registered file must contain a complete record in original or copy.

LAYOUT OF MINUTES

12 Minutes should be written on official minute sheets, and bear the reference number of the relevant registered file. Minutes on files should be numbered consecutively.

13 A minute should begin with the official title of the addressee (or addressees). When a minute is sent for the attention of a specific officer who cannot be adequately identified in this way, then the officer's name should be added immediately following the short title of his branch or section. Paragraphs should be numbered.

14 Minutes must end with the full signature of the sender, undertyped (or in the case of manuscript minutes, written) in capitals and with an address block against the left hand margin at the foot of the minute. This block should show the originator's official title, his branch or section, his building and telephone extension and the date.

15 Officers of the rank of Under Secretary (or equivalent) and above may initial their minutes. But they should also further identify themselves by means of their name undertyped in capitals, their appointment and a telephone extension for enquiries.

POINTS ABOUT MINUTES

16 When loose minutes are used, the relevant file number should be quoted, and a copy of the minute retained by the originating branch on the file. Recipients should retain the original minute on their own registered file (see also Chapter 2) and should normally reply to loose minutes quoting the originator's and their own reference.

17 It is not normally desirable to burden the staff of one branch with the detailed internal discussion of another, and where advice is sought on a registered file, the minute conveying the required information should be the only one written on the file by the replying unit. Internal discussion leading up to this reply should not be conducted on the registered file belonging to another division but on an internal related file in which copies of the original minute and the reply will also be held. Where it is necessary to pass the file containing internal discussion to another division or branch, the final minute should contain a summary of the relevant preceding discussion in addition to the information which the minute seeks to convey, to save the recipient of the file the need to read a great deal of the irrelevant matter.

SUBMISSIONS

18 When matters for decision are referred to senior officers, they require an exposition of the problem, the relevant facts (including any rules etc that are applicable) and often something of the past history. The submission should end wherever possible by recommending the line of action to be taken. It is ideal that, if the senior officer agrees the course of action proposed, he has only to endorse the minute.

A suggested convenient order of paragraphs in a submission of this type is:

- 1 a statement of the problem;
- 2 the past history;
- 3 the facts;
- 4 if necessary, arguments for and against possible courses of action; and
- 5 the recommended action.

If a long exposition is called for it is usually preferable to set this out in a note and submit it with a short minute describing the action which is recommended together with a draft letter or paper if one is required. It is advisable to include in the submission reference to other documents or other registered files which provide evidence for important statements which can be referred to if necessary.

BRIEFS

19 A brief is a document submitted to a Minister or a senior officer to prepare him for a conversation, a meeting or a visit which he is to make. Briefs should normally take the following form:

- 1 an introductory statement setting out the intention of the brief;
- 2 the facts and general information;
- 3 a summary of the main points which the senior officer will require to note.

20 The amount of detail required will depend on the extent to which the senior officer who is to use the brief is familiar with the subject; the aim should be to keep it as concise as possible. Where it is possible that a considerable amount of supplementary information may be required by the senior officer, this should take the form of clearly numbered enclosures which are noted in the main brief and to which reference can be made at will. (See Chapter 4 for detailed instructions on the preparation of briefs for Ministers).

OTHER FORMS OF CORRESPONDENCE

21 Other forms of correspondence used in the Department are:-

- 1 Directed letters
- 2 Semi-official public letters
- 3 Semi-official letters
- 4 Memoranda

22 Directed letters are more rarely used today than in the past. They begin "Sir, I am directed by the Secretary of State, etc" and end "I am Sir, your

obedient servant". They should be signed by an Assistant Secretary (or equivalent) or above. Directed letters are still used where the formality of the occasion, or the importance of the subject matter, (for example, when an important decision has to be conveyed, or one which may be challenged in the courts, or Parliament), calls for something weightier than a personal letter from an official. A directed letter received from another Government Department should normally be answered in the same vein.

23 Semi-official public letters are the normal means of correspondence with outside bodies or commercial concerns. They begin "Dear Sir/Madam", etc and conclude "Yours faithfully".

24 The semi-official letter, which is the normal means of correspondence with members of the staff of other Government Departments or with private individuals and concerns, differs only in that the letter is personally addressed to "Dear Mr Jones" and "Dear Jones" as appropriate and concluded "Yours sincerely".

25 Printed memorandum forms can be used for external correspondence on minor matters. They are designed to save time and are frequently completed in manuscript.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

26 Letters to members of the public are pronouncements not only of this Department but of the Government as a whole; they must, therefore, contain no indication of inter-Departmental differences. The views conveyed in letters to the public should be expressed as the views of the Department, not of individuals.

27 All letters should be answered promptly. When this is not possible an interim acknowledgement should be sent. Decisions, especially when they are unfavourable, should be conveyed as humanely and sympathetically as possible, without the use of formal bureaucratic language. Wherever possible, members of the public should be addressed by name, and not in some impersonal way.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEALING WITH PAPERS

28 Officers responsible for papers sent to other divisions for comment are to ensure that they are hastened when necessary. If work on a particular case is likely to be long delayed, the officer responsible for the case should inform his superior. Action on files should not be delayed unduly while earlier papers are being traced.

29 Senior officers who notice unnecessary delay or serious errors in procedure should call them to notice, orally or by separate note, but not by minutes on the papers concerned.

COPIES

30 When the matter is urgent and directly concerns a number of branches they should be provided with copies of all relevant documents with a view to speeding consideration of the issue.

31 With all incoming correspondence the officer responsible for initiating action should consider whether any other branch in the Department has a sufficiently close interest in the subject matter to be sent a copy of the document in question. Similarly an officer writing a minute should consider whether to send loose copies for information to other divisions or branches whose work may be affected by it.

32 Copies should only be distributed to those branches or persons who really need them. In the case of classified information, care must be taken to restrict acquaintance to those officers with a "need to know" and "authority to know".

ABBREVIATIONS

33 Abbreviations should not normally be used in external correspondence from the Department of Energy. For correspondence within the Department, however, it is the policy to reduce the punctuation of official short titles and abbreviations to the minimum consistent with clarity. In general, where a series of initial letters are used, they should be run together instead of being separated by stops or spaces.

POINTS ABOUT CORRESPONDENCE

34 Third parties should not normally be referred to without their surnames; and if they are serving in another Government Department or Establishment the name of the Department or Establishment should normally be added in brackets after their surname the first time it appears. Christian names, forenames and nicknames should not be used in documents of importance.

35 All letters should bear the number of the appropriate registered file and should quote the sender's branch, telephone extension, and the reference number of the letter under reply.

Letters should also normally have a short subject heading, and the sender's full name should be typed under his signature on the original letter. Where a letter is addressed to more than one addressee the copy to each addressee should be signed.

36 Copies of letters should be sent to other divisions on the same basis as minutes (paragraph 31). It will sometimes also be necessary to send copies of letters to officers in other Departments. A copy of every letter despatched should be placed on the appropriate file.

37 In addressing a limited company the prefix "Messrs" is unnecessary since the registered name is a correct and sufficient title (eg Hunter, Brown & Co Ltd). Such letters are normally addressed to "The Secretary" If a letter is sent to a particular official, the Company's name should always appear in the address. The prefix "Messrs" should always be used when addressing letters to firms which are not limited companies (eg Messrs James Hunter & Sons). (See Chapter 3 for further instructions on addressing correspondence).