

Selecting the Best Format for a Project Charter

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In a fair world, format, language, and style would be meaningless in business. The merits of the business case would drive everything. Proposals would be approved based on the quality of the ideas in them. Senior managers would grant authority to the most deserving and effective project managers.

The business world is not fair, and format, language, and style are critical to your success.

Driven by Goals

The project charter has a few goals. These goals should drive the format, language and style of the charter, just as these goals drive the content:

- Grant authority to the project manager
- Give a high-level view of what the project includes and excludes
- Define the resources that the project manager has authority over

Most project charters also include some overview of the business case for the project. Many list organizational goals that the project will help meet, or objectives that the project will advance.

A well-written charter will achieve these core goals, letting any reader quickly see who is in charge and what they are in charge of.

The format might seem unimportant, but the format does matter. Good structure and language will give a charter clarity and power. A good charter typically features:

- A statement of purpose
- Clear, consistent writing style
- A format that mixes easy-to-scan facts with good stories and narrative
- Effective use of bullets and lists
- Critical, relevant information

This writing style adds impact to a project charter, and will also help most project documents, business memos, or professional e-mails.

Statement of Purpose

A great charter opens with an action-oriented, short summary of the purpose of the project. Senior executives might never read past that first sentence. That first sentence should convey the weight and importance of the project.

One of the best formats for the first sentence is a “statement of purpose”. There are many ways to create a statement of purpose, and business books on leadership, management, missions, visions, and other topics offer many alternatives. One of the most effective formats for a project is the following:

- Action verb

- Business result to be achieved
- Time and budget constraints

For instance, a project to close a branch office might involve work for many departments: facilities, information technology, telecommunications, human resources, legal, and others. A full description of the work and goals involved would take many pages. A statement of purpose captures the most critical business deliverable of the branch closure: “Reduce long-term real estate costs by 10% within six months for a first-year cost of less than \$150,000.”

Action and change appear in every statement of purpose:

- Train 20 staff members to interview effectively within the next two months for less than \$25,000
- Certify the company in XYZ regulatory compliance system within 18 months for approximately \$2 MM
- Increase market share 5% within one year using one full-time marketing campaign manager

It may be difficult to decide which objective to focus on in the statement of purpose, particularly for large, multi-year projects. Working with project sponsors to identify that single, leading objective will ensure that the sponsors' key goals are well-understood by the project team. Writing a strong statement of purpose is not an academic exercise. It adds focus to the project, and allows the project manager to act as a more effective leader.

Adding the words, “The project manager will lead a team to...” in front of a statement of purpose can clarify the accountability and authority of the project manager. Organizations struggling to understand the role of the project manager can benefit from starting every project charter in this format:

John Smith will lead a cross-departmental team to reduce long-term real estate costs by 10% within six months for a first-year cost of less than \$150,000.

Writing Style

Most schools teach an academic style of writing. Business demands an entirely different style of writing. Grammar and spelling still count in business, but a great charter will break some academic writing rules.

Simpler and Shorter is Always Better

In school, teachers require that a writing assignment be at least a certain number of words or pages. Long, complex sentences are better. Flowery, descriptive words add to the word count and show a strong vocabulary.

A project charter is not the place to show off vocabulary or to add any unnecessary words. A great charter is full of short sentences. If a word is not needed, delete it. Even better, if a sentence or paragraph is not needed, delete it. Focus on action and results. Few descriptive words are needed, and simple action words will be enough.

The best way to understand simplicity is to watch the editing process, step by step. Start with an unedited paragraph from a business proposal:

The product will exceed all of our customer's expectations. Among its competitors, it will achieve a 20% higher torque rating, while reducing energy consumption by 5%. Moreover, as the salespeople have requested, it will fill in a key niche in our engine offerings.

A project charter needs to sell the project and explain its importance. Senior managers want to read clear, specific statements, not vague promises. Empty marketing language does not help. The next edit removes some of those empty phrases:

The new product will achieve a 20% higher torque rating than competitors, while reducing energy consumption by 5%. Moreover, as the salespeople have requested, it will fill in a niche in our engine offerings.

Substitute smaller words wherever possible. Break ideas down to simple, clear, short sentences:

The engine will have 20% more torque than its closest competitor. It will reduce energy consumption by 5%. It will fill in a niche in our engine offerings.

Now, fill in some more background information, to make vague claims very concrete:

The engine will have 20% more torque than its closest competitor. It will reduce energy consumption by 5%. Salespeople report that we have no strong product for a light-weight engine. This engine will fill that niche.

This paragraph is clear and specific. Senior executives can clearly grasp the competitive reasons to approve the project.

Smaller words and shorter sentences help people understand. Academic writing is often written to a high-school or college level. Clear business writing can and should be written more like a newspaper or magazine, at a seventh- to ninth-grade level.

Some people fear “talking down” to their audience. They worry about insulting the reader by writing simply. Actually, writing simply is the ultimate complement to a reader. It shows that the author respects the time and attention that the reader must spend to understand the document. Simpler, shorter language helps a reader more quickly read and understand complex material.

Throw Out the Thesaurus

A thesaurus is a great tool for some situations. It gives new ways to say the same thing, or ways to find just the right word to capture an idea. Students often use the thesaurus to avoid using the same word over and over again. For project charters, reaching for a thesaurus is almost always a mistake.

A charter is focused on clear, consistent communication. In the example above, the word “engine” can and should be repeated many times in the same document. A thesaurus might suggest many appropriate alternatives:

- motor
- machine
- drive

These words can be used in place of “engine,” and using a few different words in the document might seem like a good way to add some variety.

Using several different words to describe the same thing often causes problems in a business document. People wonder if the author is writing about the same thing each time, or if they are writing about something new. Picking one word and using it consistently for a single product or service makes it clear that there is only one product or service. Writing about the “engine,” “motor” and “machine” in the same document leads to questions: “What is the difference between the engine, motor, and machine? They all seem the same! I thought we were just creating one product here.”

Using similar, different action verbs causes similar problems. Projects often involve doing the same thing many times, with different teams or in different situations. Use the same word each time, and the reader knows it is the same action. Use a different word each time, and the user must wonder. For example, a project might involve “gathering requirements” from one group, “documenting needs” from another, and “preparing change requests” for a third group. If the work being performed is the same each time, pick a simple word or phrase, like “writing down what they need,” and repeat it the same way each and every time. The main goal of a charter is to be clear. It does not need to demonstrate the author's vocabulary.

Pick the best word and use it throughout. A thesaurus is only useful if you see a long word in your document and you are struggling to find a shorter, simpler one.

Jargon

Sometimes a project involves complex, technical issues that are very specific to one industry. Often the industry has standard words or jargon to describe these complex issues. Using jargon is fine in a charter, so long as the audience will generally know the words and understand them the same way.

For instance, in insurance, it is better to write the word “underwriter” rather than the long phrase “the person who reviews the risks on an insurance policy and decides whether or not to offer insurance to this customer, and what price to offer the insurance at.” For a project proposal in an insurance company, all staff will typically know what an “underwriter” is.

Some jargon might need a little additional explanation. Acronyms should be spelled out the first time they are used, and then abbreviated later. There is a risk that one acronym could have multiple meanings. “DNR” could mean “do not resuscitate” in a hospital or “did not receive” in a data communication. Spelling out the acronym the first time helps everyone reading the document: “did not receive (DNR).” After the first time, use the acronym by itself: “The project will reduce DNR errors.”

If the charter needs to use a piece of jargon that most people will not know, the charter should include a brief explanation of the issue. Wherever possible, though, the charter should focus instead on business issues that do not require jargon.

Start Strong, Lead with the Best

Starting the charter with a statement of purpose is useful for many reasons. Making it the first sentence in the charter ensures that the strongest, most critical argument for the project is at the top. Many senior executives will scan the document. They will skip the middle and end of the document. The best material needs to appear at the top. This style will engage more readers, drawing them in to read further down the page. This style will also communicate the most critical points, even if the reader stops after the first few sentences.

This style of writing is sometimes called the “inverted pyramid” and is used by journalists. A great

news story will have most of the information in the title, then the most interesting material in the lead paragraph. Each paragraph that follows is less and less important. The last paragraph contains minor details or background information. The style is called “inverted pyramid” because the most important parts (the big story) are on top. The unimportant items (the small stories) are at the bottom.

Schools usually do not teach this writing style. They teach the academic style of “introduction-body-conclusion.” This style assumes that the reader will start at the beginning and read the whole document in order. Critical conclusions might not appear until the end. The body develops and reinforces each point, building to these conclusions.

For readers who scan, for readers who are interrupted, the inverted pyramid style is far more effective. It allows them to read the start of the document and still get the critical points. A business audience is short on time, like a magazine or newspaper reader. They need information quickly. Starting with the best, strongest points first helps them get that information as quickly as possible.

Decide: Today, Tomorrow or Yesterday?

People who live with plans and new ideas often talk about their ideas as if they already exist. They switch between talking about what a product or project “will do” and what it “does”. They may even talk about future project events as if they have already happened. Human beings have verbal and non-verbal cues to help sort out these issues when someone speaks about an idea or project. Written documents, though, are very confusing if words quickly shift from the future to the past.

There is no single right or wrong way to handle this. The key is to pick a method and to be consistent.

Decide if the charter is going to be written for today. In that case, any information about the new project or product should be written in the future. Information about the competition or constraints might be written in present tense, but most of the document will be written in future tense: “the project will do ...,” “the team will need...,” and “the product will provide...”

Some people write their charter as if they were living in the future. They consistently write about the product or project in the present tense, as if the project were already started or even completed. Using the present tense makes the project very concrete and uses fewer words: “the project does....,” “the team needs...,” and “the product provides...” In this writing style, information about the current situation or competition should probably be written in the past tense: “Before the new product was developed, the company had no small, energy-efficient engine.”

Either approach can work well. Try both and see which is more comfortable. Some senior managers will strongly like or dislike one of these styles. Decide which approach works best for the organization.

Above all, avoid complex verb forms. A charter that includes any of the following phrases can cause confusion:

- will have been doing
- will have done
- was doing before
- was doing after

Keep the language simple. Readers understand more quickly if it is simple. Think creatively, and find a way to express the same idea using fewer words. Often a simple chronology helps. Replace, “First we will do this, and then we will have done that,” with “In October, we will do this. In November, we will

do that.”

Scan Facts

Writing the charter well is a key step, but so is its page layout. To help determine the best layout, separate the material in the charter into two categories: facts and narrative. The stories are your narrative. The discrete, stand-alone pieces of information are facts. They each demand different treatment on the page.

Decision makers want to quickly scan and digest facts. Someone quickly reading a proposal will skip over sections, focusing on numbers and keywords. If the charter is a long page full of paragraphs, those numbers and keywords may appear meaningless and disjointed. A well-written charter will take advantage of the scanning habits of its readers. Make the facts jump out, so that the reader scans the numbers and key facts that are most important.

Key facts deserve plenty of space around them. With good layout, there is no need to increase font size or use a bold font face. The key information will jump out.

Using Tables

Tables are an enormously helpful tool. Facts can be hidden in a paragraph:

“This project will cost \$400,000 in the first year, but the second to fifth year returns will be \$100K, \$200K, \$300K, and \$350K for a breakeven result in the middle of year four and a five-year profit of \$550,000.”

Put the same information into a table:

Year	Yearly Profit/Loss	Cumulative
1	-\$400,000	-\$400,000
2	\$100,000	-\$300,000
3	\$200,000	-\$100,000
4	\$300,000	\$200,000
5	\$350,000	\$550,000

Tables are easier to read. The rows and columns can show a lot of numerical information in a small space. The reader can review the numbers and see trends. If there is a critical number that needs special emphasis, the text right before or after the table can explain it.

Using White Space

Notice that white space surrounds the table above. The white space draws the reader's eyes directly to the table. Even someone quickly scanning the document will probably stop to review the table.

A charter is not like a technical document. With dense, technical documents, white space is minimized to reduce page count. In a charter, allow white space around key information. The charter should not be comprehensive and complete. Even with white space, it should be a short document.

Allow extra paragraph spacing and extra margins around critical information. It will help people scan

to find those critical facts.

Headings and Page Layout

Often a project charter will have several headings or sections, such as

- Overview
- Objectives
- Risks

There are enormous benefits if the organization creates a list of standard headings. Standards for their order and formatting can also be helpful. A consistent template helps the reader. Readers know what to expect in a charter, and they know where to find it. Having the headings and material formatted consistently lets them scan the documents much more quickly and efficiently.

Each heading should have plenty of white space. A reader looking for project objectives should be able to easily scan the page, find the “Objectives” heading, and get their answers.

Ordering the Information

Authors often want to order the headings in a way that makes sense to them. Authors often write each section in the order that they collect the information.

Instead, order the information for the reader.

The most critical sections go first, with the least important sections at the end. Ideally the first side of the first page will capture all the essential information about the project.

Talk to critical decision makers about what they need to know. Put that information first. Many stakeholders, such as team members and the project manager, will read the whole charter from front to back. The order of information is not critical for this audience. Focus on the most rushed readers' needs, and answer their critical questions at the top of the form.

For companies that standardize on a common charter format, it is important to leave space for ideas or issues that do not fit elsewhere. Projects are creative efforts, and might not follow a strict format. A final section for “Other Comments” gives project managers and sponsors a place to note unique information about the project.

Bullets and Lists

Bullets and numbered lists draw people's eye and attention. Good business writing uses bullets and lists often. Bullets and lists can make dry, repetitive information faster to read and easier to refer to. Bullets and lists are easy to scan.

Bullets and lists are also easy to move into new documents. Communication plans, assumption lists, risk registers, and many other critical project control documents may have their start in the project charter. If the information is easy to transfer to a new format, the documents are already started when the charter is done.

Writing a good bulleted or numbered list requires some thought. Many business authors write poor lists. These are some principles for writing a good list. Each item in the list should:

- Be a sentence or a sentence fragment
- Be about the same length and have similar importance
- Start with the same type of word as the others in the list (verb, noun, etc.)
- Use the same verb form if it is a verb
- Not all start with exactly the same word

Keeping Items Short

The list should contain short, related items. If one item is much longer than the other, separate it into two or add details to the others.

Some authors produce bulleted lists where each bullet includes several sentences. These “bullets” are serving as paragraph markers, and are unnecessary. Generally, keep each bullet to one sentence or a sentence fragment in length. Bullets should be at most two sentences long. Longer items are difficult to scan, making the list less useful.

Take advantage of the compact form of lists. Where possible, reword the list to eliminate repetitive words. For instance, start with the following bulleted list:

- Each item should be A
- Each item should do B

After editing, the list becomes:

Each item should:

- Be A
- Do B

Repeating “Not”

The one word that should always be repeated is any form of the word “not”. It is too easy to miss the single use of the word “not” at the top of a list, and misunderstand the whole list. Avoid writing:

Each item should not:

- Be A
- Do B

In this case it is better to use extra words, so that your reader sees that each and every bullet is a “not”:

Each item should:

- Not be A
- Not do B

It is too easy for people to miss that one key word, and think that the list means exactly the opposite of its intended meaning.

Balancing the List

Lists are also easier to understand if they are “balanced”. A balanced list will start with the same type of word, either a noun or a verb. With verb-based lists, the verbs should all use the same form (gerund, past tense, future tense, and so on). An unbalanced list is hard to read:

Project Objectives:

- Improved product
- Producing more revenue
- Eliminated key problem

The first item is a noun, the second is a gerund (“-ing” verb) and the second is a past-tense verb. Replace them all with nouns, and the list is easier to read and grammatically balanced:

Project Objectives:

- Improved product
- More revenue
- Elimination of key problems

Now all the items are nouns, so it is easier to read. Even better would be to make the last item match the others by using a concrete noun, like “Problem-free product.” List items sound stronger and are easier to read when they match grammatically, in length, and in style.

Simple Lists

Some authors like multi-level, nested bullets and lists. These complex outlines can be useful in technical documentation, but are usually unnecessary in a short charter. Generally it is best to keep the lists simple and easy to understand.

If each item must be done in a certain order, or if you need to refer to each one by number, use a numbered list instead of bullets. Do not overuse numbered lists, but use them where they help organize the material. For instance:

The project has three major benefits:

1. A
2. B
3. C

First, A will allow...

The Importance of Stories

Not all information can be scanned. Project charters need explanations and stories, not just facts. Include full, standard paragraphs in the charter. A person quickly scanning the document might miss these paragraphs at first. They will be drawn to the tables and lists around them. Once the reader starts the paragraph, though, he or she will probably slow down and read it in order. Stories need time, and some explanations must be followed from the beginning to end. Paragraphs of text are the perfect

vehicle for these stories and explanations.

Some authors might take an explanation and attempt to turn it into bullets, hoping to catch the attention of a senior executive.

The paragraph:

Regulations have increased pressure on the Operations Department. Current computer systems were designed ten years ago, and are expensive to maintain. The new computer system will address all outstanding regulatory issues, and be much less expensive to maintain.

Translated to bullets:

Current Challenges:

- Regulations increasing Operations Department pressure
- Current computer system designed ten years ago
- Current computer system expensive to maintain

New computer system will

- Address outstanding regulatory issues
- Be less expensive to maintain

It is possible to get the sense of the argument from the bullets, but the narrative is clearer and easier to follow. It is hard to draw complete arguments from bullets. Paragraphs help the human mind group and organize ideas. Lists work best with related points that can be understood separately, one-by-one.

Because paragraphs are often skipped over by the reader who scans, some unethical project managers might try to hide key facts or problems there. Putting important facts in a small paragraph at the end of a charter is irresponsible. The goal of the charter is to communicate goals and ideas at the formative stages of the project. Hiding information at the early stages is especially harmful. Use tables, bullets, lists, and paragraphs to promote understanding, not to hide problems.

What to Include?

Know Your Audience

Charters do not need to be long or complex to achieve their core goal of granting authority to the project manager. Other project documents, such as scope statements, Work Breakdown Structures, and project schedules, must be complete and detailed. The project charter does not face this burden. It is produced very early, when project details are unknown. It is often the document that gives the project manager permission and authority to go collect those details.

The best way to determine what information belongs in a project charter is to do a stakeholder analysis. Make a list of everyone involved in authorizing new projects. Ask them some key questions about the information they need to:

- Authorize a new project
- Select a project manager for that project

- Give a project manager the authority to start the project

Explore what useful information they got in the past, and what information they wished they had received. Find out how to make this process happen smoothly. Just asking questions about what to include increases the chances that the proposal will be approved. Senior executives will favor a document prepared by someone who respects their time and opinions.

Talk to project managers, to see what information they need. The project charter must guide their work and to establish their authority with others. Order the information so that the most critical data appears at the top of page one.

A Standard Template

Stakeholder analysis is useful for any project. When an organization turns that work into a standard template or form, the organization saves each project manager from having to repeat the analysis for every project.

To create a template or procedure for an organization, review these questions for the decision makers and project managers on several projects. Some will have common requirements, while other projects might have unique needs. Deciding whether to standardize on the simplest or the most complex form is a decision for senior managers in the organization. Because each project is unique, any standard form should feature an area for free-form comments.

It is important not to overload the charter document with too much required information and too many categories. The project is at a very early stage. The template must be simple, so the team can fill it out early. The readers include busy executives who do not have time to review a long document.

People may avoid using the document if it contains too much structure and too many requirements. Worse, the team might invest time and money into early planning work, before the project has been properly authorized. By keeping the charter simple, it ensures that it can be approved quickly and actually read by the target audience.

Recording Approvals

Because the charter provides authority, it is essential to include some form of approval or sign-off on the document. Record who approved the charter and when. Approvals can be captured many ways, and the correct way depends on the organization's culture and legal issues. Some options include:

- Physical signature
- E-mail confirmation (“I approve”)
- Name or signature stamp
- Electronic signature (“I agree” button on a form)
- Meeting minutes

Paper or Electronic

As of 2007, charters are often prepared with an electronic form-filling or word-processing tool, but paper versions of these documents remain critical. Paper is easier to scan and read, and many senior decision-makers will insist on having a paper copy to review and discuss. Until senior managers

regularly use electronic versions of all project documents, project charters will need to have both an electronic and paper form.

Some companies have moved their project management forms, schedules, and other data to electronic computer systems. If possible, the project charter should be included in those systems. Some systems can fully manage all the information in it and transfer key data to other project forms, while others might only store a scanned image of the document.

It is hard to make electronic versions of the charter easy to read. Computer screens are more difficult to read than paper, and it is easy for key text to be hidden behind scroll bars. Anyone implementing an electronic version of the project charter must carefully test with senior decision makers. Ensure that the whole document is easily visible to them. Avoid hiding data behind scroll bars and roll-up controls (plus/minus buttons, expanding trees, or “twist-ties”).

At the current time, I would recommend anyone automating the project approval process to include a printed, paper form of the charter that shows the entire proposal in a couple of pages. The format should mimic what someone might produce with a word processor. The paper form and in-person project approvals will probably remain critical for many years in most organizations.