

How to write a report as a group

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This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences operating 20+ citizens' juries in Australia where we have refined our approach to report writing.

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** newDemocracy is an independent, non-partisan research and development organisation. We aim to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote complementary alternatives which will restore trust in public decision making. These R&D notes are discoveries and reflections that we are documenting in order to share what we learn and stimulate further research and development.*

How to write a report as a group

What is the question?

How do you take a group of randomly-selected everyday people who have found common ground on solutions to a problem and translate this into a coherent report that empowers the government to act confidently on their recommendations, but in such a way that the organisers are minimally involved, resulting in greater transparency and citizen ownership of the final product?

What is the usual answer, and why is it inadequate?

When a government typically consults on an issue, the views of citizens are documented by a consultancy or compiled in an engagement report written internally. These reports summarise and document the feedback received throughout community engagement, but they do it in the words of their authors and not of the everyday people they hear from.

The problem in this approach lies in the refrain that governments pay consultants to write the results they would like. Whether it is true or not, the lack of trust in the process means that community engagement loses part of its legitimacy in the process of taking primary source material and translating it into summary reports.

What alternative is there, and why is it better?

To solve this, governments can do their best to be open and transparent about the way source material from community engagement is reflected in summary reports and ultimately the decisions they make.

The best approach to this is to allow groups of everyday citizens, chosen through a Civic Lottery, to find common ground solutions and present their findings to government in their own words.

This breaks down the distrust in any speculation that the work of everyday people has been carefully edited or 'cherry picked' in any way. It also communicates clearly the role that everyday people played in offering recommendations to government.

How can 30+ everyday people write a report together that they all agree on?

The immediate challenge here is to translate the common ground that has been found by a group of randomly-selected everyday people into a *coherent* report that they all agree with.

Report writing isn't exactly collaboratively writing a single report. It's the process of agreeing to a short-list of what a group wants to say to government (in the form of recommendations), then with agreement reached on that, to document the evidence and reasoning that led them there.

The art of this begins before participants put any 'pen to paper' or fingers to a shared electronic document. As a facilitator, it is important to present to the group a narrative of how the participants will move from learning to exploring to finding solutions and finally to agreement. This also means that each of the tasks and exercises throughout the process should fit together cohesively to help the participants make use of their early work in their final report writing.

It is important to get the timing of when to go from ideation into a written report. Getting the balance of board general thinking first, moving to high level themes, drafting into rough text and testing viewpoints all prime the groups readiness to go to the google doc. Don't go there too early.

The best tools for this are templates. Encouraging participants to keep their writing succinct and clear early on will prevent the group from having to spend time cutting content and instead allows them to focus on what exactly they want to say.

Recommendation Template

Remember to focus on the clarity of your intent. Clear expression and precise language are important.

Recommendation One to two sentence explanation of the recommendation.
Rationale Justification of <i>why</i> you are making this recommendation. What problems does it address? How does it do this?
Evidence What sources or information does this recommendation rely on?

An example of a recommendation template.

Templates such as the one above help the participants frame their thinking in a way that builds from learning about an issue, deducing what the specific problems are that they need to solve, brainstorming solutions, supporting their ideas with evidence and finding common ground around a set of recommendations. Less is more with a template, fewer words will avoid suggesting content that might, unintentionally, influence their work. If each template can constructively take work through each stage without producing excess words and diluting clear writing, then it will make the task of producing a final report much easier.

What should be in a report?

Participants may choose to include whatever they would like in a report, it is their own piece of work after all. However, we advise that there are two *musts*:

1. An explanation of the process. The introduction should help explain the context of how these recommendations were arrived at. This might include how many people were in the group, how many days they met for, who they heard from, what sources they considered and any principles or themes that were core to the set of recommendations they arrived at. The aim here is to explain to the lay reader exactly who wrote this report and why.
2. A set of recommendations. Recommendations should be clear and precise in their wording. Long recommendations that seek to explain the history of a problem or

waffle on about motivations for solving a problem can run the risk of confusing or distracting from the intended outcome. The ultimate goal with the recommendation is to state what it is that participants would like the government to do, explain what problem it would solve and back this up with supporting evidence that demonstrates that a range of sources have been considered.

How to do the writing

In terms of the actual exercise of writing up a report in collaboration, newDemocracy recommends making use of the Google Docs service that allows groups to work on the same document in parallel. This allows small groups of participants to work independently on laptops while writing into the same shared document. This parallel process saves *a lot* of time that would otherwise be spent trying to stitch different recommendations together one at a time.

It is important to rotate writing groups. People shouldn't become proprietorial over a given recommendation, particularly because this often happens when there is a strong advocate (or group of advocates) for a recommendation. Participants are writing to reflect the entire room – everyone owns the report that emerges.

Remember, it is important that participants are the only people writing this document. The moment that someone from an agency or even the facilitation team takes control of writing the actual report, the document loses the integrity it gets from being an unedited piece of citizen writing. To this point, grammatical blemishes can often add to the charm.

Setting up a Google Doc with the same template that participants have been writing their draft recommendations in allows everyone to neatly transcribe their work into the same file. This fast process then lets the group spend more time on finding common ground, agreeing on clear and specific wording and ultimately producing a less rushed product.

A final walk through before presenting to the convening authority

Once a group has found common ground, and written their draft recommendations, as well as cleaned up any editing they identified through their small groups, all participants should also have the chance for a final walkthrough of the entire report, cover to cover, as a whole group. This ensures that every single individual in the process accepts the legitimacy of the process.

We use a measure of 80% supermajority support as a guideline for what goes in a report. Recommendations are often consensus – but a metric like this makes it clear what is in and out of the final report. At this final stage, the support for a recommendation can be measured in a yes/no exercise. Voting and editing practices should be agreed beforehand but they should be strict to limit nit-picking and maintain consistency and fairness. We often ask, “*can you live with this in the report?*”

Sometimes, recommendations won't make the threshold for inclusion, but a significant portion of the group feels that their inclusion as a *minority report* would add value to the final report. These minority reports should make clear that the recommendations did not reach the required threshold to be included in the final report. Importantly, minority reports aren't all the reports that didn't make the cut. They should be limited to recommendations with strong support from more than a few participants.

Ultimately, the aim of the final recommendation report is that it accurately reflects the room. It documents the recommendations that found group support and any minority reports that the group felt were necessary to include (despite not reaching the required threshold for common ground).

This report should then be handed directly to the convening authority with participants given the opportunity for any closing remarks and an opportunity to answer any questions that the convening authority may have.

Finally...

newDemocracy has been involved with many deliberative forums with randomly-selected citizens (See, [Our Work](#)). Therefore, we have confidence in the method outlined above. These diverse groups have only failed to deliver clear reports in the group's own words on two occasions.

The common factor between these two examples was time.

The [South Australian Community Panel for South-east Drainage](#) used three full weekends and couldn't afford to run over time (flying people in across a large area in conjunction with time pressures related to farm work). The South Australian Nuclear Fuel Cycle Citizens' Jury has a number of issues that resulted in time and common ground pressures (See, [Learnings from South Australia Nuclear](#)).

In summary, the trade-off for a report that is really owned by everyday people is that it requires a significant time investment. Skimping on time can undermine the whole activity. Sometimes this might mean scheduling an additional meeting which can be scheduled at the start—an 'only-if-necessary' meeting. Otherwise skilled facilitation is needed, with close monitoring of progress throughout.

The goal is the production of a report that citizens feel confident is their own having had sufficient time for deliberation and decision making. This means that they can justify their recommendations based on solid evidence. Participants are always willing to defend their own shared conclusions if these elements prevail.