

HOW TO WRITE QUESTION PERIOD NOTES

THE PURPOSE

This purpose of this note is to present public sector writing practices for Question Period (QP) Notes. They are sometimes called QP Cards or QP Questions and Answers (Q&As). The focus is on both style and context. Although style and technique are important when writing for public sector audiences, it is an appreciation of the context that will distinguish you as a writer of superior QP Q&As.

THE CONTEXT

A specified period is set aside each day in federal and provincial Houses of Commons during which Members of the Government can be asked oral questions by members of the Opposition and other parties. Officials prepare Q&As for the Minister's use during Question Period.

QP is a fundamental part of Parliament's responsibility to hold Ministers accountable for their actions and those of their officials. As it televised, however, it often appears to be more of an event to surprise and embarrass the government of the day. The play is to the press gallery and TV cameras. The environment is political and highly-charged.

In preparing Q&As, the writer must be sensitive to the environment in which the product will be used. This is a televised political event. The clips you see on the evening news are often from that day's QP. Political sensitivity is required in producing Q&As.

If you are uncertain as to the context and process, **watch a few sessions of QP**, imagine yourself standing in the Minister's shoes, rising to answer an oral question. Remember:

- **Q&As are basically a prompt** for a fast action television event which takes place in **political territory** with virtually **no margin for error**, without considerable cost.
- Write as though **you were standing in the Minister's shoes** – what would you need and want as you rise to respond to a question. Writing with “political sensitivity” will improve the quality and utility of the product to your client.
- **Timeliness is a critical factor** – well written, but late, does not well serve your client. Less information is better than missing the QP deadline.
- Operate from the assumption that **your first draft will undoubtedly be too long, verbose and bureaucratic**. Avoid all three by rigorously editing & revising.

STYLE & STRUCTURE

The Q&A template generally has five sections which must be completed.

Subject:

- Two or three words naming or identifying the topic or subject of the card. It is not an identification of the issue or the problem related to the subject.

Issue:

- One or two lines describing the issue from the perspective the Minister is likely to be questioned on the subject.

What's New:

- One or two lines explaining why this is an issue for Question Period today. This section responds to the question “why do I have this Q&A today, what is happening on the file right now”.

Suggested Response:

- Maximum of three bullets which provide the key “themes” or “messages” in a concise, “punchy” style. Consider them “prompts” to enable the Minister to expand on the specific messages(s) appropriate to the situation or question.
- The suggested response must be very clear and readable in a few seconds.
- You may provide another two or three “**Supplementary Response**” bullets if additional points are necessary. These points would presumably be used to respond to a second (or supplementary”) question on the same issue.

Background:

- Assume that the Minister may only have time to read the first few paragraphs of the background section. Place yourself in the Minister’s shoes, what would you want to know?
- Lead with the current situation, most recent developments or the update if it makes sense to do so (rather than chronological ordering of events culminating in issue of the day).
- **Do not provide any information or facts you are uncertain of.** Be cautious. If you are unsure of a fact, do not include it.

EXAMPLE OF A QUESTION PERIOD NOTE

To view, download or print a pdf template and example, click on the link [Example of a QP Q&A](#).

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