

# Reporting to Your Publics

## ① Tips on Annual and Other Reports ②

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA • AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Agricultural Extension is a great story. Let's tell it.



You'd be surprised how many people in Minnesota know little or nothing about the fine work their Agricultural, Home, and 4-H Extension Agents are doing. They ought to know. We ought to tell them. Here's help. Suggestions based on your needs.

The county annual report, skillfully put together and placed in the right hands, gives you a mighty positive way to tell of Extension's accomplishments. Up where it counts.

There's a great story in Agricultural Extension--your story. Tell it. Get an early start. Make a plan. Carry it out. And good luck.

### THE PURPOSE . . .

#### Tell Your Story Effectively

The purpose of your county annual report is to tell the people you serve about the year's accomplishments of the Agricultural Extension Service.

These people will not learn much about your work unless your report is so well prepared it invites them to read. You compete against many other demands for the time and attention you hope to receive.

Tell your story with reasonable brevity and an overtone of pride in what you and your associates have done to merit cooperation and continued confidence. It was good work, wasn't it?

The main reason for preparing an annual report is to tell what has been accomplished. Who is secondary, although mention of staff members and co-operators in copy and picture captions is desirable of course.

### STRIVE FOR . . .

- An early start
- Brief reports from each staff member
- Full impact in the first few pages
- Reasonable brevity
- Friendly presentation
- Pride in achievement
- Comfort in reading
- Recognition of those who helped you
- Carefully selected illustrations
- Well summarized facts
- Originality
- Action verbs in titles
- Breezy subheads
- Short paragraphs
- Short sentences
- Plain talk

### WHAT IS NEEDED . . .

#### An Invitation to Read

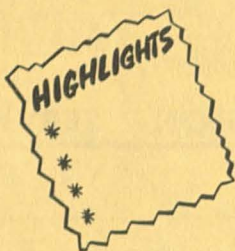
A summary, giving at first glance the highlights of the year's achievements, in the front of the report. The summary could well be the first item seen as it is opened. If it is carefully prepared, this will challenge the reader to continue. But don't call it a summary. Keep it informal. "Highlights of 1957," "Extension Achievements," "In Brief--What Was Done," "The University of Minnesota in 'Jones' County" --or perhaps you can think of a better title.

Statistics--a few important numerical facts to point up your work and amplify your summary statements. From your statistical report such items as the following may be included (totals):

- Farm and home calls.
- Cooperative field tests and demonstrations.
- Meetings held and attended by Agricultural Agents, Home Agents, and 4-H Club leaders.

Boys and girls enrolled in 4-H clubs.  
 Number of 4-H projects.  
 Number of volunteer leaders.  
 Informational articles released.  
 Radio and TV broadcasts.  
 Bulletins and circulars distributed.  
 People calling in person or by telephone.

This material may be boxed and used somewhere near the front of the report or to break a page where you have no other illustration.



A few statistics can be converted into dramatic work statements like:  
 "Agents in 'Jones' County served 17,865 people in 1957."

Report only such major items as will show the scope of your work and be of interest to your constituents.

Graphs sometimes tell a story more effectively than figures. But tables often contain too many unimportant breakdowns. Avoid confusing detail.

Short reports--Write a series of brief, interesting reports on the varied activities of the county Extension staff, the composite adding up to a well rounded summary of the achievements of the past year. One of the best annual reports has no article more than one page in length; on several pages there are two articles. Well chosen pictures help tell your story, reduce wordage.

No set formula is suggested. Incorporate any touches of originality which your judgment and good taste recommend for making the report more interesting, easier to read and understand.

Emphasize what has been accomplished by the Agricultural Extension Service program. Give full credit to those who have helped you.

When possible, tell the financial advantage accruing to the farmers of your county because Extension projects were carried out. Why does a farmer farm? Also stress the educational impact and carryover. Home improvement. Citizenship. Community development. Character building. Take a positive attitude on the benefits derived from the work of the county Extension staff.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS MAKE OR BREAK...

#### Catch Your Reader Quickly



If the first four or five pages of your annual report are so interesting and convincing that they capture attention, the chances are greatly improved that the reader won't run away.

Ask yourself. "What would be the reaction if I

presented a copy of my annual report to a congressman or to a key farmer or public official in my county? Or to Sam Jones on Route 1.

"Is it interesting and valuable enough for each of them to want to spend his time on it?"

"If it came in the mail to me, would I read it? Do the first several pages excite my interest, give me reasons to keep on reading."

Mimeographing must be sharp, clear, and comfortable to read. Otherwise, the purpose is defeated.

Your report must compete successfully for attention against all other material in the mails, plus radio and TV, as well as business and personal interests. Not to mention fatigue and bifocals.

To begin a report with a list of names of the staff, explanation of the cooperative financing arrangement, or other routine matters has a chilling effect. Such copy "for the record" could be condensed and used on either the inside cover or "buried" in the back part of the report--or omitted.

Place the most interesting and newsworthy items in the front of the report. Display a set of highlights of the year's achievements or outstanding events on the first pages. Use a friendly or even a light title. Use action verbs. Make your reader anxious to continue reading.

### STYLE OF WRITING...

#### Keep it Simple

Don't fret too much about style. Make your report simple, friendly, factual. Write it in everyday English, as if you were explaining the subject to one of your friends across the line fence.

Avoid being "technical." Go as lightly as possible on professional lingo. Use technical terms only when they are commonly used by farmers--a very good rule.

Beginning a paragraph or a sentence with words unfamiliar to the reader discourages him. For example, "Rhizoctonia solani is a fungus that..." Better say it: "The seedling disease of cotton known as 'sore shin' is caused by a fungus (Rhizoctonia solani)."

Avoid the objectionable "dictator" approach: "Growers must use judgment in..." Nobody likes to be told. Much better: "Growers have learned that..." or "The experience of many farmers shows..."

Break up long paragraphs. Short ones are easier to read.

Use short sentences. In one county annual report, one sentence 19 lines long was found, in another, 10 lines. Wordiness discourages reading.

Be specific. Don't say: "A few alfalfa trials were conducted." A more measurable statement is: "In seven alfalfa trials, phosphate increased per acre yields by 1,500 pounds."

Shun academic verbiage: "specific objectives," "basic interest," and the like. Speak to your reader in his language.

Avoid innocuous words such as "good." Say what you mean. And be positive. The passive or negative approach does not encourage reading.

Watch for repetition of common words.

Make use of the talents to be found in the secretarial staff: rewriting, illustrating, good taste in makeup. They might like to have a part in the venture.

### HOW LONG A REPORT?...

#### Make it Brief

Bulk is an important ingredient in a ration for dairy cows but not in an annual report. In counties where there are many Extension Service staff members, it would be impractical to report all their activities in any detail. That's an advantage.



You are dealing with busy, intelligent readers who have no time to pan for the nuggets in your report. Give them the highlights-- the most valuable and newsworthy items selected from the achievements of your staff and those who cooperate with them.

Prune out the dead wood. If a story can be told in 200 words, don't use 400. (Brevity accounts for the enormous success of Reader's Digest. People read it.) No county annual report we have seen is too short. Some of them could be cut severely with no loss in context. If the reading time is more than 30 minutes, the booklet is too long. Readership is lost, and so are your efforts.

### MAKE A PLAN...

#### Report As You Go

If well organized and planned in advance, the preparation of a commendable annual report is not a formidable task.

Recognizing that annual reports are as inevitable as income taxes, plan for them. As projects are completed or as progress reports are made, prepare, as a matter of routine, a short statement for your annual report and obtain at the time such illustrations as may be required. Accumulate the copy and photos in an appropriate file. Yes, it is being done.

If each staff member will write one to three short reports about the work done (most valuable to the community, work in which he takes greatest pride, or achievements which display his program to best advantage), this will ordinarily pro-

vide all the copy you need. And should make light work of producing a satisfactory publication.

You may wish to feature one phase of your work this year, another next season--if you fear you may not have enough variety in your copy in the long run. But strive for a well rounded product.

If there are budget problems, it may be well to make provisions for next year's report as soon as possible.

The report need not be elaborate. But it must be briefly stated, factual, interesting, and comfortably easy to read.

In gaining readership, you have one advantage: you and the people for whom the report is written are generally interested in the same things, agriculturally speaking.

Begin early. Hedge against unavoidable production delays.

### PLAN PAGES...

#### For Interest

In some reports much space is wasted through lack of planning. In others the copy is badly crowded and reading is difficult.

One annual report has five pages of single-spaced lines without a break. Who would read it?

A 6" to 7" line of single-spaced standard typewriter type is not comfortable to read. If you must use full-length type lines on a standard mimeograph sheet, use larger-than-average type.

Better still, make up the pages in two single-spaced columns of about 3" width, using sub-heads (or sideheads) and short paragraphs.

Use enough white space to set off the heads and subheads.

Put action into your titles and subtitles. Verbs make them move.

Instead of "Dairying," put it "Trend is Toward More and Better Cows per Herd"--that's what the first paragraph states in one report.

"Water Quality" is not a very inviting title, but "What We Are Learning About Water Quality" asks you to share it and arouses your interest because you might be missing something.

Good titles from annual reports:

More Silage on the Menu  
Fresh Paint--A Good Investment  
New Crops Add to County Wealth  
More Feed From Range and Pasture  
Can I Grow Strawberries?  
County Winners Tell 4-H Story  
Home Sewing Cuts Costs  
Down Where the Roots Grow

The front cover can be used not only to package or decorate, but also for a summary of summary--to start off your story quickly.

### SELECT PICTURES...

#### Make Them Work For You

A few superior pictures are better than many of mediocre quality.

Use a picture to tell a story. If it doesn't do that, don't use it. Never use a second-class print.



Use captions to amplify the story told by the picture --to sell it. Don't leave anyone in doubt as to the meaning. That is a very common fault in county annual reports. Tell what, who, and perhaps why too. If there is a particular point that you want the reader to see, tell him to look at it.

Use pictures that show action. Photos of AES personnel seated behind desks are undesirable. Also the "rogues' gallery." Pictures of agents taken in relation to the work they are doing give a better impression and identify them with their special fields.

Simple "posterish" pictures are best. Study the next ten billboards you see. The "pawn-shop-window" picture (everything in it) is objectionable.

Numerous photos have been taken behind audiences--at field demonstrations, for example. All they show is a collection of backs. Fine for herefords, but not for people.

Especially desirable are pictures of farm people and 4-H Club members about their work (avoid poses), livestock and poultry, farm-built machinery or equipment, plot pictures (before and after), new or unusual uses of farm machinery, gadgets.

For annual reports select pictures carefully and use as many of the best ones as the need for illustration requires and/or the budget will permit.

But bear in mind that attractive pages can be designed without illustration if heads and subheads have punch and the text is worthwhile. Page format can be varied.

Many of the current mimeographed circulars and reports will suggest page makeup ideas. Art work (homemade) can be excellent or awfully bad. Don't overdo it. Follow the same rule for pictures --if it isn't first class, don't use it.

### USE NAMES...

#### Make Friends, Influence People

Whenever it can be done to advantage, mention

the names of farm people working with you in Extension Service programs, especially those of co-operators in field trials and other active projects. An annual report states: "Seven farms cooperated in a field test." Why not give the names of those who helped.

One county director says the use of names in reports and news items helps immeasurably in gaining the attention of people who otherwise might not have called on the Agricultural Extension Service. If names are well distributed geographically, it will give a better impression of the expanse of your work.



Discrimination is necessary, of course. Some people because of their prominence, may get into print frequently, arousing jealousy of others, rarely mentioned, who may be equally good cooperators. You will know best who's who and what's what. But the principle is sound: Use names wherever it is to advantage.

### JOB'S FINISHED...

#### Now Sell Your Report

Your annual report has been compiled, edited, proofread, and published. But the job is only half finished.

The product has to be sold. That's why newspapers and magazines have costly circulation departments. You want people to read your annual report and to be favorably influenced thereby. So -- --

Present a copy of your report, in person, to members of the county board of supervisors, or commissioners, to your congressman, and to other important elected officials. Point out that they have helped make your achievements possible. If your congressman or other key people cannot be reached in person, write a personal letter, together with salient points in or attached as a fact sheet. Invite their comments.

Our job is selling. That is a primary Extension function. Hence the name. But it isn't so much the ideas we have to sell that count. It's the ideas that people will "buy" from us. We have a product of exceptional merit to sell--useful information for rural people about agriculture, home economics, and youth education.

By demonstration and various other means we sell information that will assist farmers in growing crops of improved quality, greater tonnage per acre or at reduced unit costs, valuable teaching for home and youth activities. All this is the product of the combined efforts of the staff of the University of Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station, the Agricultural Extension Service, and a host of cooperating farm people. People are very important in carrying out your program. Give them full credit. "Remember, if you sell the effective job you have done as an Extension worker in a lively report, you won't have to worry about selling Extension."

"WE TAKE PRIDE IN SENDING YOU OUR ANNUAL REPORT..."

Who should receive your annual report? Elected officials, other key people of the county's farm-business community and those who cooperate with you. The following list is merely suggestive--there may be others who should be included:

Elected officials: County--supervisors or commissioners, Extension Committee, other key officials. State--Senator. U. S.--Congressman representing your area.

Key farmers and farm women, 4-H Club Council officials.

Managers and field men of marketing organizations.

Radio-TV editors, newspaper editors.

County, Federal, and state agencies according to local requirements.

Leading businessmen (bankers; implement, feed, chemical supply, fertilizer, and lumber dealers; others best known to you).

Vocational Agriculture teachers.

County Farm Organization officers.

Service clubs having rural-urban programs.

Chambers of Commerce.

Rural women's groups.

High School Superintendents.

This publication is an adaptation of a similar one developed and used in California and Nebraska. Dwight Rutherford of the California Extension Service staff is the original author.