BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

WRITING BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. The background paper is a multi-purpose communications instrument to transmit ideas or concepts from one office to another. It is an excellent way to express ideas on specific topics and to describe conditions that require a particular staff action. This background paper outlines the basic function and format of a background paper.

2. The primary function of the background paper is to present the background (chronological, problem-solution, etc.) underlying an issue or subject, but it also has other purposes. The background paper has been used to summarize important content into a single, short document or to prepare officials for a speaking engagement by providing them with historical, technical, or statistical background data. There are many other uses as well but all good background papers share some common format attributes for organization, style, and presentation.

3. The organization of a good background paper is no different than that of a point paper, talking paper, or bullet background paper. All these papers open with a purpose that leads to an outline of the main points and ends with a summary, conclusion, or recommendation. The first paragraph of the background paper provides the reader with a clear statement of purpose and an outline or "road map" for the paper. This is followed by the discussion (cohesive, single-idea paragraphs) which leads the reader logically to the conclusion.

4. The style of writing should be professional and in the third person, although writing in first person, active voice will sometimes be more appropriate. Even though the background paper is written in paragraphs, the concise, telegraphic style of the talking paper or bullet background paper is sometimes used (while following the rules of grammar and punctuation for complete sentences and paragraphs). By intent, the background paper is more narrative in style and form; if a shorter format (e.g. bullet background paper or talking paper) will suffice, use it!

5. The format of the background paper varies to meet the needs of both the author and intended readers. By design, the background paper is intended for stand-alone use and it is usually several pages in length (and may include references and attachments). However, brevity is still valued; make the paper as short or as long as necessary to answer the mail, complete the task, or cover the topic adequately. Paragraphs may use bullets; however, the number and letter format of this example is common in many organizations. Of note, the numbering and lettering of paragraphs in this example is identical to the format used for the Official Memorandum. Some additional general guidelines for formatting your background paper are as follows:

a. Title: The title for the background paper resembles the title for other Air Force papers. The first title line, "BACKGROUND PAPER," is centered one (1) inch from the top of the first page. The second line, the word "ON," is centered below the first line with one black line between them. The third line is the title line that conveys the topic of the background paper and is centered below the second line with one blank line between them. If the third line is long, it wraps to be centered under the third line with no blank lines between them. Manual line breaks may be used to format long titles for readability or appearance (e.g. to visually balance the lines).

b. Margins: All pages use a one (1) inch margin all around

c. Line spacing, and text wrapping: Single-space within paragraphs and double-space between paragraphs; wrap all paragraphs to align flush with the left margin.

d. Identification line: Format the identification line in accordance with the guidance for the identification line for a point paper, placing the identification line only on the first page, one (1) inch from the bottom, flush left. Alternatively, the identification line may be placed in the footer, one half (1/2) inch from the bottom, flush left.

e. Page numbering: Place the page number for page 2 onwards at the top of the page, one-half (1/2) inch from the top and flush with the right margin. This is a change from previous guidance for background papers; however this is the same location for page numbering as used for the Official Memorandum and reduces the unique format requirements for different documents.

f. For classified content, refer to DOD 5200.1-R to prepare classified papers. To add classification banner markings (including FOUO), click on the header or footer, and in the "Header & Footer Tools" tab, select the Header / Footer dropdown menus on the left side. Use the pre-generated headers and footers – note that the first page is different from the second page onward, and so the second page header and footer must be applied separately.

g. Letterhead: While USAF letterhead is not required for Background Papers, it is available as a premade header in this template

6. The key to an effective background paper, like any well-written document, is to get to the point quickly, cover all aspects of the issue in sufficient detail to meet your objectives, and close the paper with a sense of finality.