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Advanced Composition

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Intelligence Analysis Reports: A How-to Writing Guide

Abstract

This research looks at several sources to ascertain the components of a strong intelligence analysis report. It analyzes the structure of intelligence reports, general rules of writing in the discipline, and good components and common errors of current intelligence reports. Upon examination, it becomes apparent that these reports must be customer-focused, clear, concise, and organized. These same qualities can be applied to everyday high school writing assignments and as such, many of the guidelines for an intelligence analysis report can aid writing tutors in their guidance of peers. This research will help train tutors and students interested in a career in the Intelligence Community.

Introduction

Intelligence collection and analysis fuel the world-changing decisions of policymakers on a daily basis. The leaders of countries, their advising staff, military leaders, and government agencies all rely on timely, accurate reports in order to decide the fate of a military unit, a country's armed forces, or a country itself. These policymakers need global, national, and local events explained in a manner that examines all implications and possible outcomes of a scenario. It is the Intelligence Community's (IC) job to collect, analyze, and report these events to the policymakers. In order to serve the country most effectively, an intelligence analysis report must

be customer-focused, addressing the customer's needs and answering their question(s) in a clear, concise, and organized manner.

There are different requirements for the various types of intelligence analysis report writing, which range from current intelligence reports to research aids. Most analysts are assigned current intelligence reports, presented as written and oral reports designed to keep policymakers up-to-date on important world events ("Major Products" 23). These reports keep policymakers and other important members of the Intelligence Community informed by providing them with "the first indications of significant new developments" ("Major Products" 23). Such reports can be published/presented daily, such as the President of the United States' President's Daily Brief (PDB), or less frequently in the form of weeklies, periodicals, and other publications. The information in these reports is often time-sensitive and important to a policymaker's future decision or action. In order to create the best product for the policymaker, writers must learn to focus on the customer's needs and respond to those needs in an organized, clear, and concise report.

Before writing

First and foremost, an analyst needs a development or event that gives them the opportunity to write ("Analytic Thinking" 5). They must analyze an event (whether present, imminent, or predicted) significant enough to matter to their audience: policymakers, decision makers, and other customers; it must show a "significant departure from the norm that warrants the attention of your consumers" ("Analytic Thinking" 5). Once they have chosen the event, the analyst should understand the important factors by asking themselves a series of questions. An analyst should always find himself asking questions, seeing as "the intelligence process or cycle

beings with questions- the answer to which inevitably lead to more questions" ("The Intelligence Process"). The questioning process should identify: what is new about the event; what is being done differently and why it is happening; who are the key figures and what are their goals, concerns, and motivations; what factors may lead to success or failure and the prospects of each; how this impacts the U.S. and other countries; the impacts for leading figures and their possible next steps; and what alternative scenarios could occur as a result and what are their impacts ("Analytic Thinking" 7).

After these questions, the analyst must condition themselves to have a consumer-centric mindset (and analysis) by addressing a question of even greater importance: What is the customer asking for and what question do they need answered ("Analytic Thinking" 7)? The specific question may not be clear. The customer may ask for a report on the chemical weapons attack in Syria. It is the analyst's job to ascertain the policymaker's true need (i.e. the Syrian Government's involvement or noninvolvement in the chemical weapons attack in Syria) and then develop that generic topic into a question that they will then strive to answer. The derived question is rarely simple or easily answered and the analyst should never look for the easy way out. According to Medina, ideal analysts "specialize in complex analysis of the most difficult problems. They [should] focus on the policymaker's hardest questions" (Medina 26). Analysts should attempt to tackle the most challenging questions, as these are often the policymakers' most important questions. The analyst's job is to take a difficult and complex situation and turn it into a comprehensible and simple.

Structure

Policymakers are often pressed for time, so an intelligence analysis report should present the main point(s) first. Structurally, the report should begin with a clear, descriptive title

(Welch). The title should present the topic of the report, the subject of which is frequently written as a noun-phrase followed by a brief elaboration on the nature of the report (Welch). For example, an analysis report on SARS might be titled "SARS: Lessons From the First Epidemic of the 21st Century" (Welch). In this case, SARS is the noun-phrase. The title does not need a noun-phrase if it provides a quick but specific statement articulating the contents of the report. For example, Appendix A is titled "U.S. Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," and offers an explanation rather than a noun-phrase (Kelley).

Following the title, the report should again emphasize the main point by stating the purpose. This should be written as "Purpose." followed by an explanation beginning with "to explain," "to tell how," or similar phrases (Welch; Petersen). The purpose may be omitted if made clear in the title. Next, a BLUF follows or replaces the purpose (Welch). BLUF, "an abbreviation for 'Bottom Line Up Front,'" is a term frequently seen in US military writing and indicates a paragraph "detailing the conclusions and recommendations" of the following analysis ("BLUF (Communication)"). It "differs from an abstract or executive summary in that it doesn't necessarily summarize the arguments or evidence included" ("BLUF (Communication)"). Rather, it provides the main points and arguments.

Assuming that the BLUF thoroughly introduces the report, analysts should then follow with supporting paragraphs. The paragraphs should explain the analyst's thinking and their reasoning for their surmised argument or conclusion (Welch). It should follow the structure of first presenting what is known, and then relating the analyst's conclusions, much like the structure of a literary analysis essay. However, unlike most English class essays, these should be "short, organized paragraphs under clear, logical headings" (Welch). Paragraphs will be brief,

typically not exceeding six typed lines. In addition, paragraphs must remain focused, and the main points and ideas should stand out clearly throughout every paragraph.

Finally, the analyst concludes in three parts, beginning with an executive summary that clarifies and restates their key points (Welch; Goel). This should be similar to a conclusion, but must remain focused on the key message rather than summarizing their report. The second part is dedicated to a discussion section, including gaps in intelligence as well as the "potential for denial and deception" (Goel). Thirdly, the analyst includes his ending comments and his citations (Welch). Refer to Appendix B for a template of an alternate but similar intelligence analysis report template. Sources of information listed at the end of the report should be listed by intelligence document number. Sources may also be integrated directly into a sentence, "i.e. According to The Economist, the prime minister will oppose the legislation." (Welch). For more information on citations, including those that are not cited by intelligence document number, see Appendix A.

General Rules for Intelligence Writing

It is possible for this structure to change slightly depending on the customer's needs and wants. The general rules of intelligence writing, however, remain the same. The "Analytic Thinking and Presentation for Intelligence Producers: Analysis Training Handbook" lists a few general rules to which analysts should adhere. One, "determine the big picture" and the overall implications of an event or development, rather than only providing the immediate effects ("Analytic Thinking" 23). Two, put conclusions first to ensure that customers see and understand the main points ("Analytic Thinking" 23). Three, keep the report simple by organizing logically ("Analytic Thinking" 23). Four, "understand different formats" and be able to adjust to the reader's needs ("Analytic Thinking" 23). Five, keep language simple and easy to understand

while, six, being "specific and concise" and seven, striving for clarity of thought ("Analytic Thinking" 23). This ensures that the customer is not guessing at the analyst's meaning. It should stand out to them in simple terms that they can understand, even in a rush. Eight, use the active voice ("Analytic Thinking" 23). This will help keep paragraphs and sentences short and concise. Finally, analysts must know the reader's needs and adjust the report accordingly ("Analytic Thinking" 23).

Another essential key of intelligence writing is brevity. Short sentences (generally no longer than 14-20 words), short paragraphs, and breaks in long sections of text "will lead to a punchier, easier to read report. Your reader will find it easier to digest. Less is more" (Davies). Analysts can break up bodies of text and avoid long paragraphs by using bullet points, lists, graphics, subparagraphs and subtitles, and gisting. Gisting is providing the gist, essence, general idea, or summary of information ("Analytic Thinking" 6).

Furthermore, intelligence writing must strive for clarity of thought in conjunction with succinctness of speech, separation speculation from fact, remaining unbiased and unemotional, and having facts that supports its argument ("Analytic Thinking" 23). The IC Analytic Standards to judge intelligence analysis as of June 21, 2007 included objectivity, independence of political considerations, timeliness, the consideration of all available sources of intelligence, and exhibiting proper standards of analytic tradecraft (Goel). According to these standards, one must describe their sources in a manner that identifies the quality and reliability of each, make their certainty or uncertainty in an analytic judgement clear, separate their conclusions from fact, "[incorporate] alternative analysis where appropriate," indicate the relevance to the country's national security, "[use] logical argumentation, identify inconsistencies or changes from earlier reports, and make accurate judgements and assessments" (Goel). Analysts strive to master these

qualities and apply them to their work. Such qualities are exemplified in "an unclassified summary of the U.S. Intelligence Community's analysis" of a chemical weapons attack, excerpted below (see appendix C for the full report):

> **U.S. Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013**
>
> The United States Government assesses with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013. We further assess that the regime used a nerve agent in the attack. These all-source assessments are based on human, signals, and geospatial intelligence as well as a significant body of open source reporting…
>
> Background:
>
> The Syrian regime maintains a stockpile of numerous chemical agents, including mustard, sarin, and VX and has thousands of munitions that can be used to deliver chemical warfare agents...
>
> We assess with high confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year, including in the Damascus suburbs. This assessment is based on multiple streams of information including reporting of Syrian officials planning and executing chemical weapons attacks and laboratory analysis of physiological samples obtained from a number of individuals, which revealed exposure to sarin. We assess that the opposition has not used chemical weapons.

> The Syrian regime has the types of munitions that we assess were used to carry out the attack on August 21, and has the ability to strike simultaneously in multiple locations. We have seen no indication that the opposition has carried out a large-scale, coordinated rocket and artillery attack like the one that occurred on August 21.
>
> We assess that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons over the last year primarily to gain the upper hand or break a stalemate in areas where it has struggled to seize and hold strategically valuable territory. In this regard, we continue to judge that the Syrian regime views chemical weapons as one of many tools in its arsenal, including air power and ballistic missiles, which they indiscriminately use against the opposition. (Goel)

This sample of intelligence writing displays several qualities of a strong intelligence analysis report. Firstly, the excerpt begins with a title that clearly describes the main idea of the report. Its sentence and paragraph length is fitting for the report. The author breaks up paragraphs by including subtitles and clearly separates fact from conclusion (or assessment). It then uses facts to justify its assessments and constantly refers to its overall argument and main idea. Overall, it is clear and concise with no unnecessary words or descriptors, and is unemotional and unbiased.

Common Errors

Amateur analysts often make the mistake of summarizing the event without providing any actual analysis or conclusion. This fatal flaw renders analysts irrelevant. Policymakers have access to numerous sources of both information and intelligence. With today's technology, they can learn about events almost as fast as the IC, and as a result the IC cannot provide any worth in the basic summary of an event or development. Their worth lies in their analysis and unique

insights into the deeper meaning of the event. As Peterson states, "intelligence analysis starts when we stop reporting on events and start explaining them." Therefore, analysts must always provide their customers with explanation and insight supported by facts, rather than just a summary of facts.

Another common error is the misuse of graphics (Petersen). They should only be used to aid the customer's understanding, not to fill up blank space. All models used should be appropriate for the information and should help answer the customer's overall question.

Analysts also tend to forget to give a clear basis for their judgements. In order to give their conclusions validity, they must remember to constantly justify analytical claims with facts (Petersen). Statements such as "may," "likely to," and "could" often require a "because" statement after them.

Finally, analysts must provide the reader with a big picture (Petersen). They must not follow just one train of thought, but must step back and look for other possibilities (Petersen). Analysts typically need to be familiar with the history and the culture of the analyzed area (from an insider's point of view) to accomplish this.

Training, Tutor Applications, and Conclusion

Prospective analysts are able to train to write intelligence analysis reports as more and more colleges adopt programs specifically designed to prepare students for a career in the IC. James Madison University offers an Intelligence Analysis degree, Mercyhurst College offers a degree in Intelligence Studies, and Bellevue University offers a Security and Intelligence degree. Those wishing to fine-tune their writing abilities are often able to attend training classes through their employer. Some intelligence writing training programs include the Law Enforcement

Intelligence Unit's the Foundations of Intelligence Analysis Training Program and the CIA's Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis, as well as others offered within IC agencies.

There is little to no direct high school training for learning how to write intelligence analysis reports. However, writing skills found in several common high school disciplines can be applied to intelligence writing. Science classes can help train students to write clearly, concisely, and logically while answering a specific question. English essays condition students to constantly reference their thesis or message throughout the paper. This teaches writers to make their main point stand out throughout their report as they introduce information and develop their argument. Furthermore, IB English classes teach students to look at a culture as an insider might, a key skill for intelligence analysts.

Just as an intelligence analysis report needs to be clear, concise, and organized, so do many high school writing assignments. Annandale High School's Atoms Writing Center (AWC) tutors can apply these same principles to to their tutoring sessions. Students in every discipline struggle with consistently arguing their thesis throughout their paper. Tutors can work with them to make sure every paragraph has a main idea that clearly stands out and connects to their central argument. They can also help students revise their papers to keep sentences and paragraphs short, focused, and to the point; eliminating extraneous verbs and descriptors can help make papers (especially scientific papers) more concise. In the same way that intelligence analysis reports are customer-focused, school papers should adhere to the rubric guidelines and instructions of the teacher. Where an analyst is answering a customer's question about an event or development, high school students must carefully and fully answer their given prompt. Tutors can draw parallels such as these and use this guide for writing intelligence analysis reports to aid their tutoring of regular high school writing assignments.

Works Cited

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Goel, Ashok K., et al. "Introspective Self-Explanations for Report Generation in Intelligence Analysis." *Discovery Park at Purdue University*: n. pag. *Discovery Park at Purdue University*. Web. 2 Jan. 2014. <http://www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/vaccine/assets/pdfs/publications/pdf/Introspective%20Self-Explanations.pdf>.

"The Intelligence Process." *A Consumer's Guide to Intelligence*: 1-5. Print. This article outlines the different types of finished intelligence: Current Intelligence, Estimative Intelligence, Warning Intelligence, Research Intelligence, and Scientific and Technical Intelligence. While each type has own specific style requirements, they follow the same general guidelines. For my project, I have chosen to most closely follow the Current Intelligence category which "addresses day-to-day events" and includes background to the topic, possible consequences, and warns of potentially dangerous situations.

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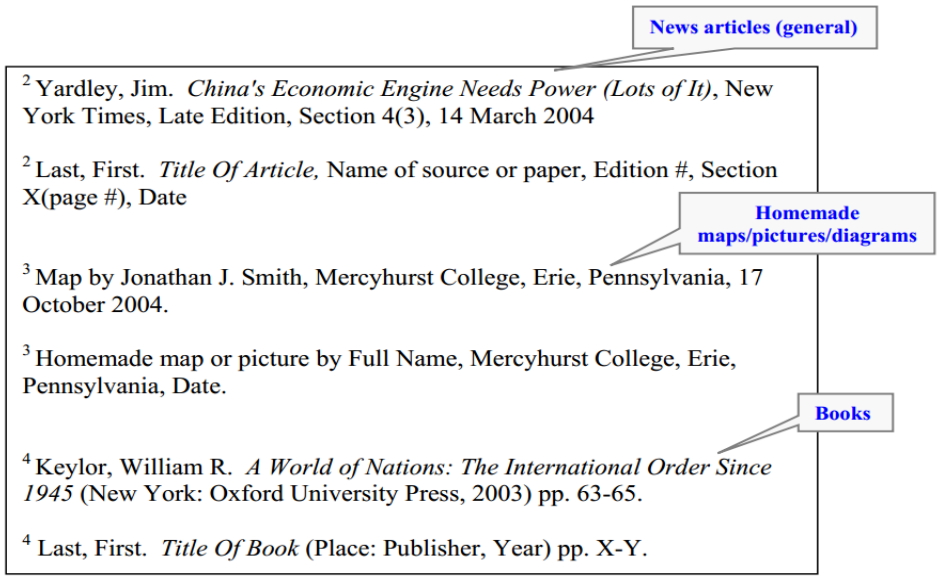
Welch, Bill, ed. "The Analyst's Style Manual." *National Criminal Intelligence Resource Center*. U.S. Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d. Web. 24 Nov. 2013. <https://www.ncirc.gov/documents%5Cpublic%5CAnalysts_Style_Manual.pdf>.

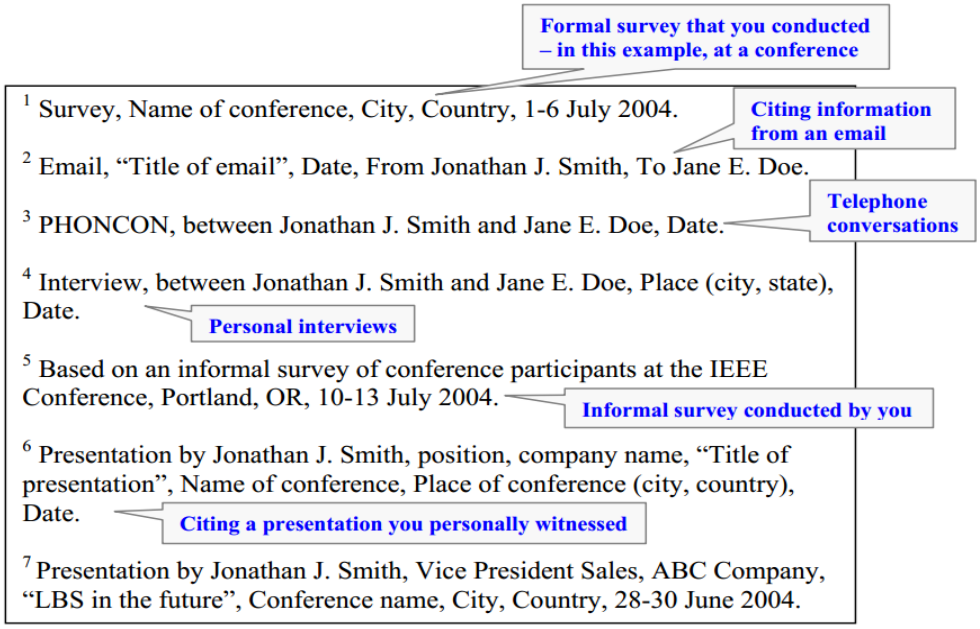
Appendices
Appendix A

Welch, Bill, ed. "The Analyst's Style Manual." *National Criminal Intelligence Resource Center*. U.S. Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d. Web. 24 Nov. 2013. <https://www.ncirc.gov/documents%5Cpublic%5CAnalysts_Style_Manual.pdf>.

B. Citing General News, Homemade Graphics, And Books:



D. Other, Less-Common Sourcing:



Appendix B

Goel, Ashok K., et al. "Introspective Self-Explanations for Report Generation in Intelligence Analysis." *Discovery Park at Purdue University*: n. pag. *Discovery Park at Purdue University*. Web. 2 Jan. 2014. <http://www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/vaccine/assets/pdfs/publications/pdf/Introspective%20Self-Explanations.pdf>.

"Task Description:

Outline:

Executive Summary:

Discussion (include: 1. Intelligence gaps and 2. Potential for Denial and Deception)

Assessment

End Notes/Citations

Appendix:

Hypotheses Investigated/ Key questions

Key Assumptions:

Key pieces of evidence

Confidence in assessment on a scale of 1-10

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

not at all confident very confident

Figure 1: A Template for Intelligent Reports"

Appendix C

Kelley, Michael. "Military & Defense More: Syria Key Parts of the Declassified US Report on the Chemical Weapons Attack in Syria." *Business Insider*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Jan. 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-intelligence-report-on-last-weeks-chemical-weapons-attack-in-syria-2013-8>.

"U.S. Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013

The United States Government assesses with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013. We further assess that the regime used a nerve agent in the attack. These all-source assessments are based on human, signals, and geospatial intelligence as well as a significant body of open source reporting.

Our classified assessments have been shared with the U.S. Congress and key international partners. To protect sources and methods, we cannot publicly release all available intelligence – but what follows is an unclassified summary of the U.S. Intelligence Community's analysis of what took place.

Syrian Government Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21

A large body of independent sources indicates that a chemical weapons attack took place in the Damascus suburbs on August 21. In addition to U.S. intelligence information, there are accounts from international and Syrian medical personnel; videos; witness accounts; thousands of social media reports from at least 12 different locations in the Damascus area; journalist accounts; and reports from highly credible nongovernmental organizations.

A preliminary U.S. government assessment determined that 1,429 people were killed in the chemical weapons attack, including at least 426 children, though this assessment will certainly evolve as we obtain more information. We assess with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out the chemical weapons attack against opposition elements in the Damascus suburbs on August 21.

We assess that the scenario in which the opposition executed the attack on August 21 is highly unlikely. The body of information used to make this assessment includes intelligence pertaining to the regime's preparations for this attack and its means of delivery, multiple streams of intelligence about the attack itself and its effect, our post-attack observations, and the differences between the capabilities of the regime and the opposition. Our high confidence assessment is the strongest position that the U.S. Intelligence Community can take short of confirmation. We will continue to seek additional information to close gaps in our understanding of what took place.

Background:

The Syrian regime maintains a stockpile of numerous chemical agents, including mustard, sarin, and VX and has thousands of munitions that can be used to deliver chemical warfare agents.

Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is the ultimate decision maker for the chemical weapons program and members of the program are carefully vetted to ensure security and loyalty. The Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) – which is subordinate to the Syrian Ministry of Defense – manages Syria's chemical weapons program.

We assess with high confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year, including in the Damascus suburbs. This assessment is based on multiple streams of information including reporting of Syrian officials planning and executing chemical weapons attacks and laboratory analysis of physiological samples obtained from a number of individuals, which revealed exposure to sarin. We assess that the opposition has not used chemical weapons.

The Syrian regime has the types of munitions that we assess were used to carry out the attack on August 21, and has the ability to strike simultaneously in multiple locations. We have seen no indication that the opposition has carried out a large-scale, coordinated rocket and artillery attack like the one that occurred on August 21.

We assess that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons over the last year primarily to gain the upper hand or break a stalemate in areas where it has struggled to seize and hold strategically valuable territory. In this regard, we continue to judge that the Syrian regime views chemical

weapons as one of many tools in its arsenal, including air power and ballistic missiles, which they indiscriminately use against the opposition.

The Syrian regime has initiated an effort to rid the Damascus suburbs of opposition forces using the area as a base to stage attacks against regime targets in the capital. The regime has failed to clear dozens of Damascus neighborhoods of opposition elements, including neighborhoods targeted on August 21, despite employing nearly all of its conventional weapons systems. We assess that the regime's frustration with its inability to secure large portions of Damascus may have contributed to its decision to use chemical weapons on August 21.

Preparation:

We have intelligence that leads us to assess that Syrian chemical weapons personnel – including personnel assessed to be associated with the SSRC – were preparing chemical munitions prior to the attack. In the three days prior to the attack, we collected streams of human, signals and geospatial intelligence that reveal regime activities that we assess were associated with preparations for a chemical weapons attack.

Syrian chemical weapons personnel were operating in the Damascus suburb of 'Adra from Sunday, August 18 until early in the morning on Wednesday, August 21 near an area that the regime uses to mix chemical weapons, including sarin. On August 21, a Syrian regime element prepared for a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus area, including through the utilization

of gas masks. Our intelligence sources in the Damascus area did not detect any indications in the days prior to the attack that opposition affiliates were planning to use chemical weapons.

The Attack:

Multiple streams of intelligence indicate that the regime executed a rocket and artillery attack against the Damascus suburbs in the early hours of August 21. Satellite detections corroborate that attacks from a regime-controlled area struck neighborhoods where the chemical attacks reportedly occurred – including Kafr Batna, Jawbar, ‘Ayn Tarma, Darayya, and Mu’addamiyah. This includes the detection of rocket launches from regime controlled territory early in the morning, approximately 90 minutes before the first report of a chemical attack appeared in social media. The lack of flight activity or missile launches also leads us to conclude that the regime used rockets in the attack.

Local social media reports of a chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs began at 2:30 a.m. local time on August 21. Within the next four hours there were thousands of social media reports on this attack from at least 12 different locations in the Damascus area. Multiple accounts described chemical-filled rockets impacting opposition-controlled areas.

Three hospitals in the Damascus area received approximately 3,600 patients displaying symptoms consistent with nerve agent exposure in less than three hours on the morning of August 21, according to a highly credible international humanitarian organization. The reported symptoms, and the epidemiological pattern of events – characterized by the massive influx of patients in a short period of time, the origin of the patients, and the contamination of medical

and first aid workers – were consistent with mass exposure to a nerve agent. We also received reports from international and Syrian medical personnel on the ground.

We have identified one hundred videos attributed to the attack, many of which show large numbers of bodies exhibiting physical signs consistent with, but not unique to, nerve agent exposure. The reported symptoms of victims included unconsciousness, foaming from the nose and mouth, constricted pupils, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing. Several of the videos show what appear to be numerous fatalities with no visible injuries, which is consistent with death from chemical weapons, and inconsistent with death from small-arms, high-explosive munitions or blister agents. At least 12 locations are portrayed in the publicly available videos, and a sampling of those videos confirmed that some were shot at the general times and locations described in the footage.

We assess the Syrian opposition does not have the capability to fabricate all of the videos, physical symptoms verified by medical personnel and NGOs, and other information associated with this chemical attack.

We have a body of information, including past Syrian practice, that leads us to conclude that regime officials were witting of and directed the attack on August 21. We intercepted communications involving a senior official intimately familiar with the offensive who confirmed that chemical weapons were used by the regime on August 21 and was concerned with the U.N. inspectors obtaining evidence. On the afternoon of August 21, we have intelligence that Syrian chemical weapons personnel were directed to cease operations. At the same time, the regime

intensified the artillery barrage targeting many of the neighborhoods where chemical attacks occurred. In the 24 hour period after the attack, we detected indications of artillery and rocket fire at a rate approximately four times higher than the ten preceding days. We continued to see indications of sustained shelling in the neighborhoods up until the morning of August 26.

To conclude, there is a substantial body of information that implicates the Syrian government's responsibility in the chemical weapons attack that took place on August 21.
As indicated, there is additional intelligence that remains classified because of sources and methods concerns that is being provided to Congress and international partners."