
Memoranda Writing

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This note introduces memo writing to students training for careers in public service. It focuses on memos rather than research papers or essays because memos pervade the daily life of any public servant.

A memorandum is a relatively short, written document. Memos address specific people or groups for the purpose of recording an agreement, transmitting information, making a case, or enabling action. Brevity is essential because most decision makers have little time and must assimilate the contents of your memo quickly. Long memos don't get read.

Think of a memo as a precision tool. Tools may be beautiful things in themselves, but we measure their value by how well they perform a task. In practical terms, every aspect of a memo—its prose - its prose style, organization, appearance on the page and content—should have a direct, relationship to its purpose. Long flowery introductions, technical jargon, casual chit-chat, or showy vocabulary all distract from a memo's essential purpose: to inform or to enable action.

This note deals with four topics: identifying your audience or principal; getting yourself engaged in writing, using language, and organizing the final product with a note on email communications.

Know Your Audience or Principal

Specific people read memos. Knowing the audience of your memo is of primary importance in memo writing. Ask yourself three questions when considering your audience: who are they, what do they need to know, and how should you present it to them.

Who is the audience of your memo? Memos are directed at decision makers. Usually you write a memo for an individual or group to help them make a decision. To influence decision makers, you must give considerable thought to who they are. You have a duty to provide them with timely, accurate, and comprehensive analysis.

What do they need to know? To meet the obligations of memo writing, you should ask: what type of information they need to make a good decision.

- Start writing your memo by considering the **position of your reader and their responsibilities, constraints, and pressures**. You should keep in mind how much knowledge they already have and judge your information based upon their level of expertise.
- Decide **how much and what type of information** they need to make a good decision. Four aspects should be kept in mind in considering this:
 1. Your audience relies on you for **accurate and relevant information**. This reliance places strong obligations upon you to choose information well and present decision makers with all sides of the issues. Unless you are designated as an advocate or identify yourself as such, you must strive for an unbiased presentation of the information. Individuals are often tempted to push their own agenda without regard to the requirements of a good decision by the principal. This is legitimate when so identified in the memo. All memos however, should do justice to complex issues and to your principals. They are making the decision, not you.
 2. Provide the **bad news as well as the good**. Your principals should be alerted to the dangers, problems and implications of decisions as well as the advantages. Although

memoranda drive people toward decisions, you may have the unhappy but vital duty of telling them they need more information to make a good decision. Often memos can only be summaries of arguments and reports, like the tip of an iceberg. The author should have supporting arguments and information to provide to the principals when needed or requested.

3. **In recommending a course of action, clearly lie out the reasons, plus give honest and realistic alternatives.** Anticipate questions, address them honestly and compare to other options. It is your job to anticipate needs and support the decision maker.

How should you present the information to them? You should present any information with economy and clarity. Effectively writing a memo is a task that requires special emphasis on clear formatting and accessible writing. Be cognizant of the need to access information quickly with judicious use of headings and bullets.

How to get engaged in serious writing

Writing is difficult, frustrating work. Writing is a craft. It entails a set of specific, teachable skills, and results in a tangible product. The harder you work and the more determined you are to master the skills, the better you will become. Like any craft, it requires practice. When sitting down to write your memo, two steps will aid in the process of engaging you in writing: developing a system for writing, and remembering to get help when necessary.

- Because writing is difficult, you need **an explicit system** for getting started and finished. Most memo writing is done under pressure. Under these conditions people can get stalled, confused and side-tracked by psychological stress. Having a deliberate system gives you the self-discipline to plunge ahead in the face of this stress. In the absence of a system, you will find that you spend large amounts of time trying to figure out what you are doing. Some people start with an outline and produce progressively finer drafts until they have a finished product. Some people "dump" everything in their head on a given subject and then start culling and sorting until they produce a coherent piece. Others begin with a few simple statements or assertions and then frame an argument around them. Experiment with a variety of methods until you find one that suits your temperament.
- If you are having genuine difficulty and find that you don't know what to do, **get help**. Writing workshops are plentiful. Get together with a group of students for the express purpose of talking about writing problems. Get suggestions from your professors. Do not retreat from the problem. You will need to write well in every job you have.

Using the Language

Remember that your written work presents you to others. Your use of language will shape their assessment of you. Sloppy phrasing, bad grammar and incorrect spelling, for example, demonstrate unreflective thought. Respecting yourself, your ideas and your principal should motivate you to master this essential means of communication. Your writing should focus on five important aspects: simplicity, sentence structure, clarity, clear action and responsibility, and proofreading.

Simplicity is the mark of good writing. Complex sentence structure and organization is a sure sign of confusion or hidden agendas. A well-written memo will be so simple and straightforward in language and structure that it will leap off the page. However, do not make the mistake of equating simplicity with ease of production. The harder you work, the simpler the prose gets: the more you shirk, the muddier it will be. Consider the following example:

Whether it is true or not, and there are strong indications that it is not, the allegation by the County of substandard performance against the contractor is premature and certainly serves no useful purpose.

This person tried to write in a "conversational" tone. Conversational language tends to be more complicated, elliptical and indeterminate than good written prose. Written prose has to be edited to be good. Novice writers often respond to tough editing by complaining, "You've taken all the creative words out of my writing. Now it looks like something anybody could have written." In fact, tough editing does exactly the opposite. It makes your writing very distinctive. Remember, the message carries the mark of your individual creativity.

Sentence structure is essential to clear communication. First, get the basic elements of the sentence straight: subject, verb, and object. Who is the major actor? To whom is the action directed? What action is being performed? What is the writer's purpose in describing the relationship between actors and actions?

The county has accused the contractor of poor performance. This accusation is premature and possibly untrue.

County, accuse, contractor - these are the elements. By stressing them, we cut the number of words roughly in half, from 37 to 16. We specified the nature of the action (accuse); we exchanged bureaucratic fuzzi words (allegation, substandard) for simple ones (accuse, poor); and we allowed the writer to express some uncertainty about the conclusions (possibly). The reader captured the spirit of the writer's message much more effectively. These are the simplest writing techniques. Strip sentences to their elements and make those elements drive your sentences. Subject first, then verb, then object. Apply the techniques to this example:

With respect to problems of interim financing, and in consideration of the fact that short-term interest rates are prohibitive, the decision was made by the Finance Committee that the project should not be pursued beyond stage three of the design process until appropriate long-term financing can be secured through established capital market sources.¹

Clarity in word choice marks good writing. Clarity means three things: (a) choosing the right word; (b) preferring simple words or combinations to complex ones; and (c) avoiding technical jargon, except when essential.

- **Choosing the right word** is more difficult than it appears. When you begin writing something, certain stock phrases and terms roll out of your head onto the paper. These phrases and terms are cues to what you want to say, but often they do not convey what you actually mean. To communicate clearly, sort through alternative ways of saying what you mean. Get something on paper. Then, use your vocabulary, the dictionary, or a thesaurus, and deliberately substitute simpler words for complicated and ambiguous ones. Give special attention to verbs and active voice.
- Language in memos often becomes littered with **complex phrases** that have mushy meanings, because often people get caught in a cycle of bureaucratese. Take the following example:

Current fiscal management techniques and control practices are keyed to the fiscal-year budgeting processes of the government cycle. They result in inefficient resource utilization because administrators increase expenditures toward the end of

¹ The Finance Committee decided that interest rates for short-term loans were too high. Therefore, the project should not progress beyond stage three until lenders agree to long-term financing. (From 53 words to 28)

annual budget cycles in order to assure zero-balance results and reporting, rather than maximum efficiency in resource utilization.

This example is littered with many quasi-technical terms: "fiscal management techniques," "resource utilization," and "budget cycles." These are common in bureaucracy but don't communicate much. In a more active direct form it reads:

Administrators tend to spend more at the end of the fiscal year because they will lose the money they do not spend. Typically, they are not allowed to carry money forward into the following year. This results in expenditures that often are not the best use of public money.

"Fiscal year" has been left in because it is a technical term that has important meaning. Beyond that, all the quasi-technical terms were removed and replaced with simpler words.

Certain complex and mushy words creep into the language of public servants and become standard usage. Because bureaucrats use these words routinely, the public begins to think that bureaucrats are evasive. They are probably neither - just insufficiently critical of their own language. Here is a list of some standard bureaucratic words and their English equivalents.

Bureaucratic

facilitate
indicate
impact
concept

English

help/assist
say/show
effect/affect
idea

Another recent trend has been turning nouns into verbs. The trend started in computer circles where people "interface" with each other and "multiport" data. Today public officials "outsource" contracts and "task" people to perform jobs. Such jargon separates public officials from citizens and creates a mystifying and unnecessary code to hide bureaucrats from accountability.

Another common practice is turning nouns and verbs into adjectives and running them together as strange compound words. These words often sound very important, but mean almost nothing. The following words capture recent bureaucratese:

Nouns into Adjectives

program initiation
programmatically decision making
problem areas

Verbs into Adjectives

diagnostic review
decisional alternative
elimination criteria

For each of these compounds, someone took a noun (program, definition, problem, etc.) or a verb (diagnose, circumvent, decide) and stuck it in front of a noun, giving it the function of an adjective. You can make adverbs the same way: programmatically initiated, diagnostically reviewed, etc. This clumping creates unwieldy, often unintelligible prose

The skill required to avoid this kind of clumping is simple. First, learn the difference between nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Second, do not use compounds when a simple construction will suffice. Look at a number of alternative ways of saying something and choose the simplest way, rather than jamming words together because they sound authoritative and bureaucratic. Principals need lucidity, not jargon.

- **Technical jargon** becomes a barrier to clear communication. When someone says, "The purpose of our new thrust is to facilitate a more credible interface between clients and service deliverers and to indicate to top management how they ought to prioritize agency functions according to standard management concepts," you know they are not writing for real human

beings. Fellow citizens will have a difficult time deciphering the jargon. Automatically translate the words into English for you and others.

- As trustees of the common good, public officials have a special obligation to write in **language that acknowledges and includes** all members of the community. A civic language should include the entire population. This requires that we avoid language which limits the citizenry to certain groups and implicitly excludes the rest of the population. On a more positive level it obligates us to search for language that respects and acknowledges all individuals.
- **Inclusive language**, however, does not mean we must resort to awful English. Only muddled good intentions create those bureaucratic monstrosities: s/he, or his/her. In this case, inclusive language involves using plural pronouns, using both pronouns connected by "or" (he or she) or alternating the pronouns by section or example. The English language is evolving in the attempt to develop a more inclusive public vocabulary. Public servants should take the lead in this effort without reducing the language to trendy or bureaucratic neologisms.

Clearly assigning action and responsibility characterize skilled writing. Bureaucrats notoriously use language that obscures responsibility. Organizational life seems to add this tendency to make no one responsible. The typical methods for obscuring the responsibility are through the use of the passive voice or the imperial "we".

- The classic device to hide responsibility is the passive voice, where the subject drives the object. It diffuses your analysis and backs into major points. Remember that the strength of the English language resides in verbs. Use strong, active verbs. A good editor tries to eliminate as many copulatives (there... is, are, was, were) and weak verbs as possible. Verbs carry action and significance. Good verbs and active voice eliminate the need for mindless space fillers such as "in order to," "with respect to," or "in consideration of."
- Every public servant should understand the distinction between active and passive voice. In active construction, the verb clearly acts on a specific person or thing. For example: boy *takes* apple. In passive construction, no particular person or thing takes action - apple *is taken*. Consider the following real examples:

It is recommended that specific operational details of the tools addressed in this report and any others to be used in implementation of amended policies be clearly stated. (The construction obscures the responsibility for specifying recommendations and details. Who specifies?)

If it is decided that some therapeutic programs within existing institutions are required, the personnel needed to run those programs must be fully informed as to the nature of the programs and their roles in them. (This is a triumph in passive construction. Not only does it fail to say who decides, it also fails to say who informs.)

Once you understand the difference between active and passive voice, you understand exactly what questions to ask about ambiguities in responsibility and action. Beware of the temptation to use passive construction to conceal action or responsibility.

- Another bureaucratic device for concealing responsibility is the **imperial "we"**:

We have always argued that rapid transit is the best long-run solution to urban transportation problems, given finite energy resources. In the short run, though, we are faced with the immediate problem of how to accommodate the city to the automobile.

Notice how the writer uses the first "we" to communicate what they think and then uses the second "we" to implicate you in a point of view. You are supposed to miss the distinction and find yourself seduced into agreement. If you understand the imperial we, however, you will ask yourself immediately who "we" is. Once you ask that question, the whole charade collapses.

To clearly assign action and responsibility, specify who is supposed to be doing what; then structure the sentence to reflect that. Who or what (subject) did what (verb) to whom or what (object)?

Be sure to proofread your work. Remember not to rely solely on spell check either. Many words can be spelled in more than one way, preventing the spell check software from finding the error. Common examples are "principle" and "principal", or "complement" and "compliment". Each of these is spelled correctly, and spell check will not alert you if you have used the incorrect one. For example, if you write the following sentence, spell check would consider it to be correct:

The principle of the school gave Julie a complement about her paper.

This sentence utilizes the incorrect form of the words, but spell check did not alert us as we wrote them. Proof your work thoroughly and do not rely solely on the spelling and grammar check of your software.

Organization and Argument

A good memo has a clear structure. In it a set of well defined, logically connected statements lead to a clear conclusion. This is the "argument." If you do not have an argument, you do not have a memo. In addition, a good memo has a clear format that calls the reader's attention to important steps in the argument. After the first reading, the reader should be able to return to key points without re-reading the whole document. In other words:

Tell me what you are going to say (topic sentence or paragraph); say it (body of memo); tell me what you said (conclusion).

The three principle skills of organization and argument are: (1) get the important things up front, (2) make the transition from one step of the argument to another clear, and (3) using a clear format in your presentation.

Putting the important things up front is a common skill in journalism. It is called the "inverted pyramid" style of writing. Write the first paragraph, or "lead," as though your story could be chopped off at any point after it. This puts a premium on specifying the problem, setting up the decision that follows from it, and presenting the important evidence quickly and succinctly. It also means that a reader can look at your memo and immediately know what you're doing.

Making the transition from one step of the argument to the next clearly means that you never pass from one subject to another without clearly identifying the new subject. "Blocking" is a term commonly applied to this practice. Tightly worded conclusions and clear headings alert the reader that you are changing subjects and moving to the next phase of your argument. Each major subdivision should have a new topic heading to help the principal know where you are going and find the points fast, if needed.

A clear format is essential to writing a solid memo. This requires simplification. Your useful guides are: **define, order, connect, and conclude.**

- **Definition** of your word choice need not be cumbersome. If there is any doubt about the meaning of your words, just say "x means y." This practice will save you a lot of grief and misunderstanding.

- **Ordering** identifies the logical relationship of the topics you want to discuss and devising a clear set of headings. The skill resembles writing headlines for the newspaper, only with fewer words. The format provides the road map to the memo and signals the content importance. Typically a memo might lie out problem definition criteria, options and recommendations. The entire format from spacing to headings conveys information easily to your principal. The judicious use of subheadings, bullets and bold can all help clarify the ordering.
- **Connecting and concluding** give your reader clear messages about what you have said. The major message of this memo, for example, is clarity - about the process of writing, the use of language, the assignment of responsibility, and the structure of the argument and format.

Conclusion

Remember your obligations to yourself, your principal and the information you are presenting. A memo communicates. Good communication strives for accuracy, clarity and honesty. It means taking your audience seriously and letting their needs discipline your presentation. The quality of presentation reflects the quality of your own mind and preparation. Poorly conceived, badly written, imperfectly edited, even misspelled memos do an injustice to all concerned. They also undermine your credibility as an advisor.

Good writing takes time and practice. No one gets it right in the first draft. That's why in this memo we have laid out some precise features to focus on in writing your memos. You must know your audience, what they need to know and present it to them in a clear fashion. To do this you should develop a system of writing and be willing to search for help if necessary. In your writing, focus on five important aspects: simplicity, sentence structure, clarity, clearly assigning action and responsibility, and proofreading your work. Finally organize your memo well, by putting the important arguments up front, using clear transitions, and allowing your format to help the information flow smoothly.

Most decision makers have little time; they value clarity, conciseness and accuracy. They appreciate clear formats that enable them to find summaries and needed information quickly during a discussion. Above all, they respond to well-crafted memos that account for their needs and help them make and defend a good decision.

Notes on E-mail Memos

Today, people use email and the internet for day-to-day communication in both the private and public sectors. While this paper refers to the need to write memos clearly and succinctly due to the little amount of time your principal has to read them, e-mail correspondence is more rushed, necessitating even greater brevity and clarity. Many organizations now use email communications instead of traditional memos as decision-making tools.

Not only is e-mail communication often rushed, but also its clarity is complicated by variations in e-mail software and hardware platforms. When composing memos for e-mail remember and think about the following:

E-mail is an "official" form of communication in a workplace. "Official" means that e-mail messages are legal business documents. Beware of writing anything that you would not write in a paper document for distribution. E-mail messages are now regularly subpoenaed in courts and most public organizations are subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Many public figures like Oliver North and Bill Gates find themselves trapped by public revelations of inappropriate e-mail.

Think before you type! Many argue that e-mail should be a spontaneous, free flowing form of communication, even dispensing with traditional grammar and capitalization. However, because of the potential legal ramifications, do not get pulled into E-mail Wars by responding immediately to negative messages you receive. If the message's intent or meaning is unclear, wait before responding. E-mail is faceless and interpreting the intent and feelings of senders can be very difficult. Think through your concerns or anger and compose your response in a professional manner. Better yet, consider talking to the sender in person to assure that neither party further misinterprets written words or intentions.

Be clear, concise, and use formatting tools and spacing to increase legibility. What you write in an e-mail should be just as clear and contain the same level of professionalism as any written document you produce. If your inter-office e-mail software allows it, use bullets, italics and bold text to help your readers find what they need quickly. However, be aware that when sending messages to people outside your workplace, many of your special formatting features may not appear on their screens the way you see them.

Utilizing traditional grammar, capitalization and line breaks (space between paragraphs and lines) contrary to long, continuous paragraphs, make your messages easier to read on a computer screen than large blocks of undifferentiated text. The easier and more visually accessible your message is to read, the more likely it is to get read in its entirety!

Beware!!! Most e-mail programs do not check spelling and grammar! Always check your spelling, sentence structure and read carefully for typographical errors before hitting the "Send" button! Grammar is a discipline that invites reflection and should not be abandoned in e-mail communication. E-mails need to be proofed, sometimes off a written copy, to avoid the embarrassment of spelling someone's name wrong or sending a wrong phone number or address to multiple recipients. Remember your emails will often be turned into hard copy or sent to many others and they represent you and your ideas.

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