

TO: NYU WAGNER STUDENTS
FROM: NYU WAGNER WRITING TUTORS
SUBJECT: MEMO ABOUT WRITING POLICY MEMOS
DATE: FALL 2016

The purpose of this memo is to provide NYU Wagner students with the basic guidelines for crafting smart, concise memos. A memo is intended to provide an intelligent non-expert with a brief synthesis of a large amount of complex information. It should be short, scannable and get straight to the point. As a format, a memo can be flexed to suit a wide range of purposes. You may even find that various schools, organizations and people (including professors) will have their own unique set of requirements. This memo delivers the key common characteristics of strong memos regardless of their individual purpose, content, structure or style.

Keep the purpose and audience of the memo in mind at all times. A memo is never a be-all, end-all document. It is just one piece in a longer conversation about an issue, the options associated with it, the research behind it, possible actions to be taken, etc. Your job—as the expert and author of the memo—is not to transfer *all* your knowledge in one document, but rather to do the research and the analysis and then to provide the main takeaways. Understanding that your audience is usually an intelligent non-expert with a certain set of responsibilities and specific knowledge needs will help keep your memo concise and focused. Concentrating on the specific purpose of the memo will help inform the content and structure. Examples of memo purposes include:

- Informing (see also longer-format Policy Briefs¹)
- Recommending one multi-faceted solution or a series of options
- Proposing an evaluation or action plan
- Providing key findings from an analysis or evaluation

Construct a strong problem statement in your introductory paragraph. You can keep your introductory paragraph short and to-the-point by breaking it down into four key components:

1. Describe the purpose of your memo
2. Describe the general situation at hand
3. Describe the complications or challenges specific to the issue or project at hand
4. Present your main/overarching conclusion, finding or point

¹ Some people use “policy briefs” and “policy memos” interchangeably. Briefs, however, typically focus on providing background information on an issue by breaking it down into short discussions of: overview of issue; size, scope and trend of issue; contributing factors; potential outcomes. Longer briefs may also delve into an assessment of existing or proposed solutions or weigh the options at hand and provide an action-oriented recommendation.

This construction delivers the major background points that frame your memo without getting too deep into the specifics (which you will deliver in the body). It will also help you avoid redundancy.

Break the body of your memo into potentially stand-alone topics. Doing so serves three purposes: 1) it presents the information in an easy-to-scan format, allowing readers to go directly to the section they care about most; 2) it helps build your argument according to the logic that most makes sense for the situation, purpose and ideas at hand; and 3) it makes it easy for your end user to cut and paste the sections they find most useful or pertinent to the next document in the chain of the larger policy discussion. This does mean you need to put a lot of forethought and planning into the organization of your memo. Each topic typically includes:

- **Bolded headline that reflects main point, conclusion or recommendation**
- Text explaining *why* this idea, this conclusion or this recommendation, including (but not limited to)
 - What data supports this point?
 - What are benefits? What are the costs, obstacles, opposition?
- Text explaining *how* to implement this idea or use this information, possibly including
 - What are the mechanisms to be used?
 - What is the feasibility? What are the timeline, scope?

Write the whole of the memo with a clear, concise and authoritative voice. Clarity trumps all else; if your audience can't understand the information you are providing, your memo has failed. You want to use concrete words, terms and phrases, but avoid jargon an intelligent non-expert might not be familiar with. Otherwise, construct an authoritative voice using the following devices:

- Avoid passive constructions; it is okay to use the first person if it helps assign responsibility for an action
- Cut out introductory and transitional phrases
- Use the command voice
- Keep your ideas evidence-based and action-oriented

Use your final paragraph as a chance to move the conversation forward. You've already presented all your conclusions in the body of the memo. A summary of your points would be redundant and would belie the whole purpose of the memo format. If you include a final paragraph, use it to present (or tease) a general picture of what you see as next steps, such as areas of further study, actions for a later time frame, possible evaluations, etc.

For more information about and help with writing policy memos, please contact the Wagner Writing Tutors at wagner.writingtutors@nyu.edu or review the resources available at <http://wagner.nyu.edu/students/services/tutoring> .