

Memorandum

To: Wagner Students
From: The Writing Tutors
Date: August 19, 2010
Re: Memo-Writing Guidelines

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide you with some guidelines for writing effective memos. Writing a professional memo is very different from writing a research paper. Although the details may vary somewhat depending on the memo's purpose and intended audience, these general guidelines should serve you well in virtually any context.

Begin by stating the purpose of your memo. The first sentence should identify the problem you are trying to solve or remind the reader of your assigned task. Effective ways to begin the first sentence include: "The purpose of this memo is..." or "In response to your request, this memo provides recommendations on..."

Summarize your conclusions in the introductory paragraph. A memo is not a mystery novel, nor is it a joke—do not wait until the end to deliver the punch-line! Since your reader may be too busy to read the entire memo, you must get your main point across immediately. Journalists refer to this style of writing as an "inverted pyramid"—the most important information appears at the top and is followed by less important details, so that the reader can leave the story at any time and still understand the main point.

State the basis for your conclusions in the introductory paragraph. Briefly summarize the considerations you took into account or the methodologies you used to arrive at your conclusions. For example, you might explain that your recommendations are "based on analysis of leading theories on education policy as well as empirical evidence on student performance in charter schools."

Begin each subsequent paragraph with a thesis statement. If you would like to be especially clear, write the thesis statement in **bold text**. The reader should be able to understand the entire outline of your argument by simply scanning the thesis statement of each paragraph. Ideally, the thesis statement should be concise enough to fit on a single line, or at most two lines. It should be action-oriented and written in an authoritative voice. An example of an effective thesis statement is: "Investing now in infrastructure improvements is desirable for both economic and political reasons."

Support the thesis statement in the body of the paragraph. Supporting information might include more detailed arguments, statistics, citations, and so forth. After writing each paragraph, read it over carefully, asking yourself if every part of that paragraph supports the argument in the first sentence; if not, it does not belong there.

Be concise. Flowery language has no place in a professional memo. If you find that a paragraph is taking up half a page or more, it is either not worded concisely enough or it contains multiple ideas that should be split into separate paragraphs. A typical single-spaced memo has five or more paragraphs per page, as this one does. (Professional memos are typically single-spaced, but if your professor asks for a double-spaced memo, be sure to follow instructions!)

Know your audience. As you write your memo, keep asking yourself what the reader already knows and what additional information they need from you in order to make an informed decision. For example, if you are writing a memo to President Obama about the upcoming expiration of the Bush tax cuts, you can safely assume that he is already familiar with the tax cuts and that a lengthy description is unnecessary.

Avoid jargon. Use plain language that an intelligent nonspecialist can understand. When using technical language is unavoidable, provide a brief definition. For example, you might say “some health-reform advocates support the creation of a *public option*—a government-run health insurance agency that would compete with private health insurance companies.”

Stay objective. To keep your arguments as objective and unemotional as possible, avoid referring to yourself in the first person (“I believe”, “I think”, “I feel”, etc.) unless absolutely necessary, and if you are the sole author of your memo, *definitely* avoid the imperial “we”!

Use active verbs. The passive voice obscures responsibility for making and acting on recommendations, and often makes writing unnecessarily wordy. Instead of saying “it is recommended that a reduction in U.S. military forces in Afghanistan be taken under consideration,” simply say “consider reducing U.S. military forces in Afghanistan.” (See the earlier point about using an authoritative tone.)

Anticipate counterarguments. Presumably your recommendation is not the only potential course of action, so explain why it is preferable to the alternatives. Do not pretend that your recommendation is perfect; acknowledge its imperfections but explain why the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. For example, you might begin a paragraph with: “Opponents argue that a cap-and-trade policy will not reduce carbon emissions significantly; however...”

Provide “road signs” as needed. It may be useful to provide brief headers for each of the memo’s main sections, especially if your memo is more than two pages long. A memo on housing policy, for example, might include the header *Options for Funding Low-Income Housing Initiatives*.

Cite your sources. As with any written assignment, you must not claim credit for other people’s original ideas. If your professor provides instructions on how to format citations, follow their instructions. Otherwise, it is typically acceptable to cite sources within the text of a professional memo. For example, you might say “... as reported in the Congressional Budget Office’s 2010 *Budget and Economic Outlook*.” Alternatively, if you have a large number of sources, you may put citations in footnotes or endnotes. Never include a “bibliography” or list of references at the end of a professional memo, however.

Number your pages. Providing page numbers makes it easier for the reader to refer to the text when responding to your memo with questions and comments.

End with a concluding paragraph. Never end a memo abruptly after making a new argument. Finish with a concluding paragraph that briefly summarizes your major points and discusses their significance and implications. You may wish to add a final sentence offering to answer questions or to meet with the reader in person; however, this does not make sense in all contexts (for example, you would not propose a personal meeting with President Obama).

We are here to help you! Please visit us during our office hours to discuss any remaining questions you may have about writing memos, as well as research papers and other written assignments. We look forward to working with you this year. Thank you for your attention.