

Assignment #1
WRITING DIAGNOSTIC, DUE MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 12th

An “action memo” to the new head of Rebuild Los Angeles

An action or decision memo *recommends* action(s), *based* on analysis. Informational or options memos simply analyze a situation and/or outline action options—but not recommendations. We will discuss these and other types of professional writing in the Professional Communications Workshop (Part Two) on Friday, September 16th.

The setting and your role. It’s Los Angeles, late 1993. You’ve been working for the past few weeks as a Special Assistant to Linda Griego, the new President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Rebuild LA. RLA has weathered some turbulent politics of late, with elected officials sharply criticizing former CEO Peter Ueberroth in a packed meeting at City Hall. In response and frustration, Ueberroth told the elected officials “You don’t *get* it ... pretty soon you should get it”—a comment that was, shall we say, not well received by most City officials or by the public, once the press got hold of it. You’re helping Griego to redirect RLA’s work and rebuild its damaged credibility, and your “portfolio” of responsibilities is broad and still evolving. Griego has publicly announced the *intention* to invest much more of RLA’s time, energy, and funds in the needs of businesses—most of them small firms—directly affected by the riots last year. Staff will be cut, and “outreach” efforts spun off (reduced and/or handed off to another organization), but no one knows exactly what that means yet. Griego has spent the first few weeks gathering information, not committing—prematurely, in her view—to specifics.

The task. After a long day discussing neighborhood economic development plans with city staff and local nonprofit groups—and then sitting in rush-hour traffic!—you get back to the office to find this note from Griego, who couldn’t reach you by phone. Apparently, she had to fly cross-country, a few hours ago, on a family matter:

Hope the meetings went well today. Now that you’ve been at this a few weeks, I could use some analysis from you by time I get back to LA. As you know, I’ve promised that RLA will stop “chasing” big companies and their investments, at least as its main line of work, and instead will focus on the businesses affected by the riots. But we also need a strategy for leveraging the new work to restore a positive reputation with City Hall, community leaders, and others. We’re too visible an organization to simply become a dedicated business assistance program that drifts quietly into the background. So I need you to help me decide how I should focus this organization for the next six months? Don’t laundry list programs for me. I need advice on how to define our strategy publicly (what to say, what to emphasize, and to whom—which stakeholders),

also on how to best deploy the talented staff and other assets we have for maximum impact. Get me a 500-word memo, with your analysis and recommendations, by 10AM Monday, and we'll discuss it further from there. Thanks - LG

1. **Write a 500-word memo that responds to Griego's request, and upload it to the MIT server by 10AM, Monday, September 12th, in the "Homework" section, under "September 12 – Session Two."**
2. **How your writing will be assessed:** Before you write, read the next page ("guidelines").
3. **Formatting.** Double-space your memo, and use one-inch margins and a 12-point font. Most busy decision-makers don't like to read "micro-print" crowded onto the page, and they often like to scribble their thoughts in the margins. While most professional memos are single-spaced, the double-spacing will leave us more room to make comments.
4. **A memo is a brief communication *from you to someone else*, not an impersonal statement or report.** Use a memo format:

Date: September 12, 2005

To: Linda Griego, CEO

From: [Your name], 11.201 Gateway (Fall 2005)

Subject: Recommendations you requested (RLA Strategy)

5. **Include a summary paragraph as your first paragraph.** It should summarize your recommendations and the basis for them (your analysis). That's right: You give your conclusions *first*, not last (as you might in an academic paper), and then the body of the memo develops the arguments to support the summary. Include the summary in the first paragraph, but make it the last thing you write.
6. **Avoid rehashing the case background.** Just give the reader enough on your assumptions and premises that your arguments will make sense. Draw only on the video case and our discussion of it. No one expects you to do additional research in order to learn more about the events.
7. **Details, details: Be sure to spell check, word count, and proofread your work before submitting.** It is a professional product, not a note for your own use or a casual message to a colleague. Being careless about content or format sends the wrong signal to the person who requested your writing. If you find you "need" an extra 25-50 words to make your points, then you've written too much. Go back and condense your key ideas and cut the non-essentials. Never submit a memo that's too long, late, or off point in its content.

Guidelines for scoring: Graduate writing skills

Your first written assignment will not be graded, but you will receive a score to help us assess your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. That is, the score will be for teaching use and your use, not a part of your course grade.

1. The memo will receive a score, 1-6 (6 is highest).
2. Use of the passive voice is acceptable in social science and technical writing, so long as it does not interfere with, intrude upon, or obscure the meaning of the passage. The active voice tends to read better and be more engaging.
3. This is a test of writing. The content will likely add to the strength of the essay but will not be graded.

4-6 Point essays are considered upper-half

A six point essay will be characterized by the following:

- Excellent organization of ideas
- Clarity and conciseness
- Be virtually error-free in grammar and usage

A five point essay will:

- Display the features of a 6-point essay, but be slightly weaker in clarity, concision, and organization.

A four point essay will be characterized by the following:

- Basic competence in grammar and usage
- Lacks the structural and organizational sophistication of a 5 or 6 point essay

1-3 Point essays are considered lower-half

A three point essay will be characterized by the following:

- Overly formulaic organization or lacking organization
- Problems with grammar and usage
- Vague and wordy construction (excessive use of passive voice, excessive nominalization)

A two point essay will compound the problems of a three point essay, and display:

- Consistent flaws in syntax, diction, grammar, or spelling
- Significant flaws in organization and a lack of overall coherence;
- Usage of terms without prior definition

A one point essay will compound the weaknesses of a two point essay.