Writing Memos

- The context of professional writing
- Why write memos?
- How to write them?
- How to make them better?
The Context

- **The workplace or field:**
  - Time is precious.
  - Information has substantive as well as political implications.

- **The decision-maker as reader:**
  - Busy and distracted (attention “spread thin”), not necessarily patient while you get to the point.
  - Info needs are varied, unpredictable, fluid.
  - Sometimes offers fuzzy instructions.
Academic vs. professional writing

Differences (when writing concisely)

- The academic reader often demands nuance and relevance to established lines of thinking, while the professional reader wants the “so what’s” for their decisionmaking emphasized (relevance to their actions).
- An academic assignment assumes a small and benevolent audience, but professional documents can be “leaked,” end up in the hands of unintended readers.

Similarities

- Strong essays and strong memos both start with your main ideas, but essays usually build toward conclusion and synthesis. The memo’s conclusions are usually right up top.
- In both, persuasive argument = clear viewpoint + evidence
- In both, addressing counter-arguments tends to strengthen your case.
Top mistakes in memos

- **Content:** off point or off task (major substantive omissions, given the request); impolitic (risks political costs if leaked); inappropriate assumptions as to background knowledge; no evidence.

- **Organization:** important info “buried,” no summary up top, format confusing, not “skim-able.” Sentences long and dense, headings an after-thought.

- **Style:** language too academic, too “preachy,” or too casual; sentences long and/or dense.
Why write memos?

- Professional communication
  - Efficient
  - Persuasive
  - Focused

- Two types of memos:
  - Informational (provide analytic background)
  - Decision or “action” (analyze issues and also recommend actions)
Consider Your Message in Context
Use a Clear Structure

Summary: Summarize the entire memo highlights major points to consider

Background: State the context

Body: Prove it, analyze it, address counter arguments

Conclusion: Outline Next Steps or Next Questions
Action Memos: Recommend Decisions

Summary: Summarize the entire memo
State the recommendation(s)

Background: Provide the context

Body: Prove it/Analyze it, perhaps with pros/cons by option

Conclusion: Outline next steps, don’t merely restate recommendation(s)
Informational Memos: Feed into Decisions

Summary: Summarize the entire memo
Outline Options or Considerations

Background: Provide the context

Body: Prove it/Analyze it

Conclusion: Next steps, follow-on questions
Writing and improving (Steps)

- Analyze your task/assignment
- Create a coherent message - Summary
- Construct Issues/Arguments – Body
- Develop/Include evidence - Body
- Revise – check tone
- Edit -- Goal: lean, readable prose
Analyze the Task

- What does the task/assignment ask for?
- Can you identify:
  - the topic
  - the scope
- Can you identify key words such as:
  - Summarize
  - Analyze
  - Compare
  - Recommend
Sample Assignment + Response

Task: Offer analysis and recommendations to Linda Griego, new head of Rebuild L.A., in a decision memo, on where to focus the organization in her first six months as Chair. She instructs:

- Don’t “laundry list programs for me”
- Advise me on how to “define our strategy publicly” (to whom, how)
- And how to “best deploy our staff and other assets”
- “We need to restore our reputation with City Hall, community leaders, others … but how?”
Topic, Scope, Keywords

- **Audience:** Griego
- **Define task:** Recommend
- **Scope:** Next 6 months
- **Key words:**
  - Some analysis
  - Focus
  - Avoid listing
  - Advise
  - Define
  - Deploy talented staff
  - Define our strategy
  - What should I focus on?
  - What should I emphasize?
  - Analysis and Recommendations
Create a Coherent Message

- Frame your message
  - Example:

  RLA needs to focus on two key areas of concern: 
  (1) Recreate RLA’s image (how LA views our role in the rebuilding process), and
  (2) Reorganize internal operations
Flesh Out Your Message

- Restore RLA’s image
  - Emphasize – Small business
  - Include – x, y, z organizations
  - Say that we are …

- Reorganize Internal operations
  - Create a smaller, more hands-on board
  - Shift public affairs emphasis: From getting publicity for RLA to building partnerships, shared ownership.
Construct a Coherent Argument

- State your argument in one sentence

Example: In order to recreate RLA’s image and reorganize our internal structure in the next 6 months, RLA should focus on X, Y and Z.
Develop Evidence

- Make the points obvious
  - Use simple language
  - Find and use concrete, compelling evidence
  - Ask yourself “so what?”
- Start with the most important points
- Chunk information into manageable pieces
- Move between generalizations and examples
Revise for Clarity

- Do you answer the question?
- Do you have a message?
- Do you have appropriate evidence and examples?
- Is each example sufficient evidence?
- Are counter arguments considered?
Revise for Clarity

- Delete “empty” introductory sentences
  - Example: Very important lessons can be learned from the Rebuild L.A. model.

- Avoid argument via restatement
  - Example: The primary weaknesses of the RLA were X, Y and Z. X, Y, and Z, were problematic because they didn’t take into account community needs. These needs made the RLA weak.
Edit for lean, readable prose

Avoid:

- Stock phrases and clichés:
  - “In today’s society” “too little, too late”
- Clunky constructions
  - “The reason is because…”
- Vague phrases
  - “Our choice of planning models may require further thought”
- Slang/acronyms
  - “let’s work on QT to create a sweet plan”
## Avoid Clunky Constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant are the number of poor people.</td>
<td>The number of poor people is significant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reason why the planning process failed is because it did not have a strong outreach program.</td>
<td>The planning process failed because it did not have a strong outreach program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Simplify, Simplify, Simplify

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Assistance</td>
<td>☐ Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Endeavor</td>
<td>☐ Try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Terminate</td>
<td>☐ End</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ For the reason that</td>
<td>☐ Because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ In the event that</td>
<td>☐ If</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Perform the editing function</td>
<td>☐ edit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avoid the “naked this”

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<tr>
<td>Engineers often view community involvement as an afterthought. This can cause long-term problems in the planning process.</td>
<td>Engineers often view community involvement as an afterthought. This shortsightedness can cause long-term problems in the planning process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Be Careful about Sentence Subjects

- Clad in a yellow bikini, he watched her walk down the beach. (So … *he* was in the bikini?)
- After falling from a platform, a construction worker picked up the wrench. (So … the *worker* fell and then picked it up?)
- By using market research, the dog food was packaged in pouches instead of cans. (So … *dog food* does market research now? The food is that smart?)
Stress Active, not Passive Voice

- The weaknesses were not documented. *(Passive)*

- Mistakes were made. *(Passive)*

- I think that this design is problematic. I think they could have improved the system by…. *(Active – overuse of personal pronouns)*

- The planners did not document the weaknesses. *(Active)*

- I made a mistake. *(Active)*

- The planners could have improved the design. by… *(Active)*