Effective Professional Writing: The Memo

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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 decision-making 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary:</td>
<td>Summarize the entire memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>State the recommendation(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background:</td>
<td>Provide the context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body:</td>
<td>Prove it/Analyze it, perhaps with pros/cons by option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion:</td>
<td><strong>Outline next steps, don’t merely restate recommendation(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

Weak
Significant are the number of poor people.

The reason why the planning process failed is because it did not have a strong outreach program.

Better
The number of poor people is significant.

The planning process failed because it did not have a strong outreach program.
Simplify, Simplify, Simplify

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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<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)*