

WAC Writing Guides: THE BUSINESS MEMO

The memorandum, usually called a memo, is a common form of internal communication in business and academia. Memos have many purposes, including informing employees, giving directions, outlining procedures, requesting data, supplying responses, and confirming decisions. But essentially there are **three basic reasons to write a memo**:

- To persuade to action (we should do this)
- To issue a directive (do this)
- To provide a report (here's what was done, or here's what we found out)

Every good memo includes:

- A clear statement of purpose, stated upfront: I am writing because . . .
- Information about what the reader needs to know: The facts are . . .
- Statement of any action requested, ordered, or undertaken: I will, or I propose that you . . .

GENERAL POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Audience:** Write for your audience and give them what they need: What is their education, background, company status? What do they need to know to understand and act upon your memo?
- **Informative subject line:** Be upfront as to what the memo is about.
- **Length:** A memo is usually no more than one page long.
- **Coherent:** Keep the memo structure simple and logical. The memo should focus on communicating about one problem or issue, and each paragraph in the memo should focus on one idea.
- **Concise:** Check for needless words. Keep the memo to one page or less, and use attachments or separate summaries for additional information.
- **Common language:** Use accessible language, favoring clear, direct, simple words over the showy and fancy. Be specific, not general; concrete, not abstract.
- **Factual Tone:** Use a neutral or positive tone where applicable; avoid emotionally-charged words. Strive for a professional, 'business-like' voice.
- **Formatting:** Follow standard guidelines for hard-copy memos.
 - Use an easy-to-read 12-point font.
 - Margins should be 1 inch all around (some memos use 1.25 inch margins), left justified.
 - Leave a 1.5 inch margin at the top (unless using letterhead), and type the word MEMORANDUM, bolded and centered on the first line. Double-space to begin the memo.
 - Paragraphs are block-style (first line not indented) and single spaced.
 - Don't use an opening salutation or a complementary close.
 - Don't sign a memo at the bottom. Add your initials beside your name in the heading. This indicates that you have read and approved the memo.

STANDARD MEMO FORMAT: Heading, Opening, Body, and Closing

1. HEADING: The heading follows this general format (**double-spaced**):

To: (readers' names and job titles)

From: (your name and job title, and your hand-written initials next to your name)

Date: (complete, current date)

Subject: (what the memo is about, the main idea of the memo summarized)

The subject line serves a similar function as a title to an essay: it should tell your reader what you're writing about in clear terms and in few words. For example, "Clothes" could mean anything from ties

and jackets are required in the workplace to the institution of casual Friday. If the subject line reads, "Office Party Dress Code," the subject is clear.

2. OPENING: The opening segment of the memo makes the purpose of the memo clear. The first sentence or two functions much like the thesis statement of an essay, stating the main point and purpose of the memo, and what you want the readers to know or act upon. The opening should be brief, the length of a short paragraph. Use language and key words that alert reader to your subject and purpose. For example, "In response to your request for suggestions about X, I propose...." Or, "After investigating X, I suggest that the company do Z....".

3. BODY: The body of the memo, like the body of an essay, develops the main point stated in the opening. It includes information about the event, circumstance, or problem being addressed. It also provides justification for actions or policies undertaken, requested, or recommended.

Organize material in the body logically, usually in two to four short units of information. You might present your information in order of importance (most to least important) or by enumerating items (first, second, third).

Use graphic devices to highlight important points and make the information easy to scan:

- bulleted lists
- numbered lists
- tables and columns
- headings
- **bolded** or UPPERCASE text
- white space

Putting important points or details into lists rather than paragraphs draws the readers' attention to the section and helps the audience remember the information better.

Any paragraph within the body of the memo should be short, no more than eight or so printed lines, and it should **focus on a single idea** expressed in a **main sentence**. This main sentence may appear at or near the beginning of the paragraph, to state the main idea upfront; or it may appear in the middle of the paragraph, as a pivot point; or at the end, as the conclusion toward which every idea in the paragraph leads. **Supporting sentences** present information that illustrates, explains, or otherwise strengthens the main idea.

When you include supporting information from a source, use language cues that tell your reader you are referring to source information: e.g. "According to my investigations," or "Market research completed by the Orion firm has found that. . .". This is called using a signal phrase to introduce your supporting evidence and attribute it to its source.

3a. SUMMARY (OPTIONAL SEGMENT): If your memo is longer than one page, you may include a summary that recaps your key points and recommendations. Short memos do not require a summary, just a Closing (see below).

4. CLOSING: The closing segment should be a brief, courteous ending to your memo. It usually presents information about actions taken or requested, relevant dates and deadlines. If no action is requested, it may offer instead a simple closing thought. Examples: "I would be glad to meet with you about this on . . ." ; "Thank you for your attention to this matter." ; "Please review this information and respond to me by . . .".

ATTACHMENTS: If you attach any documents, lists, graphs, tables, etc. to your memo, add a notation at the end of the memo about what is attached, placed below the closing. Any attached materials should also be referred to in the body of the memo.

Sources and resources: Guffey, Mary Ellen, *Business Communication: Process and Product* 6th ed.
The OWL at Purdue: Memo Writing: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/590/01/>
Love to Know: Business and Finance:
http://business.lovetoknow.com/wiki/Category:Business_Communications

[UPDATED 9-27-2011]

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM, LOYOLA UNIVERSITY, BOBET 100, 865-2297