

Dr. Chad Raymond

Memos

Definition

Memos provide analysis and/or recommendations on a single topic, and they are written for a specific audience (often just one person). Memos are written so that their readers can efficiently access fact-based information to make informed decisions. Memos should, therefore, be concise, well-organized, and professional in tone, while still including the most relevant content.

An effective memo will do its job if the reader comprehends the main points after reading only the executive summary and the first sentence of each section. To ensure that your memo gets the intended results, pay close attention to the following: (1) content, (2) structure, (3) organization, (4) word choice, and (5) clarity.

Content

Content is the most important determinant of a good memo. Keep in mind:

- Include only the information that is most relevant to your recommendation or analysis. Do not include long-winded historical summaries or vague introductions.
- Use logic and facts to support your points and/or to refute opposing points. When citing sources, be accurate.
- Present opinions as opinions and NOT as facts. Support all opinions with evidence.
- Avoid logical fallacies such as appeals to authority, slippery slope arguments, hasty generalizations, and faulty causation.

Structure

1. Header

Memos begin with a header of "To:", "From:", "Date:", and "RE:" (short for "regarding"). For example:

To: Timothy Geithner, Secretary of the Treasury [*memo writer's audience*]
From: Michelle Jeon, Director of African Affairs, Department of State [*writer's name and title*]
Date: 2/20/2020
RE: Nigerian Petroleum Exports [*topic of memo*]

The header specifies the memo's author, the author's audience, and the most critical message of the memo.

2. Executive Summary

The executive summary quickly tells the reader what the rest of the memo will explain. It is located just below the header and is often just a single sentence. Example:

To ensure continued access to Nigerian petroleum exports, the U.S. government should provide Nigeria with financial assistance for the modernization of its oil production facilities.

3. Subheadings and Sections

The rest of the memo will have several sections elaborating on the points indicated in the executive summary. Each section will be prefaced with a subheading consisting of a short phrase. A subheading should summarize the section that follows it so the reader will immediately understand the most important information that the section contains. For example:

U.S dependence on Nigerian oil

A section is a paragraph consisting of concise sentences that communicate information about the topic indicated by the subheading.

Organization

In a memo, more important information always comes before less important information. Subheadings and sections are in order of importance in relation to the executive summary, with the most important placed first. Within each section, the first sentence is the most important and the remaining sentences provide details that support the first sentence. This method of organization is the opposite of that for most academic papers:

<u>Academic Paper</u>	<u>Memo</u>
1. Least important	1. Most important
2. Somewhat important	2. Somewhat important
3. Most important	3. Least important

Word Choice

Word choice is essential for making a memo clear and concise. Replace vague and complicated words with more concrete, specific terms. For example, replace:

"facilitate" with "help"
"indicate" with "show"
"concept" with "idea"

Clarity

Memos must be clear and direct so that readers can understand the main points quickly. If the memo writer has focused on building strong content that is well organized, and if the writing exhibits well-chosen language, then the result is a clear argument. While academic papers focus more on gradually building a solid argument, a memo delivers the important facts in order of importance as concisely as possible. Let's consider this subheading and section as an example:

New Economic Policy Toward China

The President and his new trade team's immediate focus should be to get China to increase the value of the Yuan. Correcting the value of the Yuan will ultimately increase U.S. exports by making Chinese-made products more expensive and increase worldwide demand for U.S. products. This increased demand will in turn generate a higher employment rate within the U.S.

In this example, the author gets right to the point. The first sentence provides a recommendation. The second sentence provides a rationale for the recommendation. The third sentence adds to that rationale. The reader will expect that the author will provide further support for her recommendation in subsequent sections of the memo.