

Writing Memos

Memos are an important form of written communication within companies. Memos are forms of *internal communication* and are sent to other people within the same organization. If you wanted to write to someone at a different company, you would use a letter instead.

Remember, both format and content are important when composing a memo, so pay attention to details.

It is especially important to understand *how people read memos*. Unlike books or magazines, people don't start at the beginning of a memo and read through to the end. A reader skims headings and subject lines then make decisions about what parts are important to him/her. Think of it this way: a busy professional does not have time to read every word of every paper that comes in. He/she decides what documents are important to read by looking at the subject line and headings. Therefore, writers need to understand how to put together a document that will help a reader find the necessary information as quickly as possible.

Parts of a Memo

Headers

The first part of a memo is the **header**. The header gives information about the author, the intended recipient, the subject, the date, and the names of other people who may see the memo (cc). Many companies insert a smaller version of the letterhead at the top of the page.



Figure 1: Sample Memo Header

Notice how the information in the heading is evenly aligned, making it easier to read. The subject is simple and to the point. This is not the place for detail. Remember the reader; the heading must showcase the important information. There is not a set order for the parts of the header; just consider what is best for the reader. Also, most senders will initial the memo to verify its authenticity and to take responsibility for the content. This is much like signing your name at the end of a letter.

If the memo is longer than one page, a different heading is needed for the additional pages. Placed in the page header, it usually includes the name of the sender, the date and the page number. (Refer to *Markel 345*).

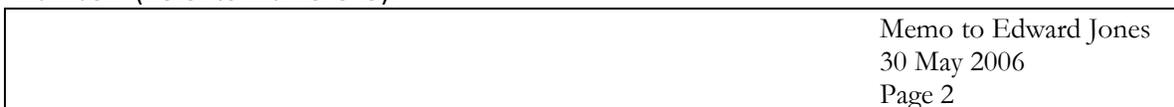


Figure 2: Header for Additional Pages

Summaries

Long memos (those longer than one page) often have a short summary following the introductory paragraph. The summary is an effective tool for helping the reader decide how much of the memo to read. Summaries are especially useful if the memo contains complicated subject matter. Keep the summary in proportion to the rest of the document; the summary for a two-page memo would be considerably shorter than the summary for a twenty-page proposal.

Subject Headings

Headings break up the memo into separate sections and identify for the reader the content of the memo. Without them, the memo would just be boring, difficult pages of text. Each time there is a new subject, identify it with a new heading. Headings also help readers understand the information by reinforcing the ideas in that section. Keep headings simple and use a font style that is different from the rest of the text.

The purpose of this memo is to present the results of the XJ3 testing trials.
Summary In general, I was impressed with the performance of the XJ3. It excelled in all areas of testing . . .
Product Testing The development team ran twelve different test trials of the XJ3 engineering system. Tests included . . .
Results All testing results indicated superior performance. The XJ3 system functions at 97% efficiency levels and is expected to last at least 10 years . . .
Action Items The marketing team needs to begin preliminary market research. Mary and the accounting team will require 30 days to rework the revenue input system.

Figure 3: Sample Body of Memo

Style

When it comes to style, remember that you are not writing for an English class. You want to communicate in a clear, precise fashion. Don't try to confuse your reader in an effort to sound knowledgeable. Simplicity is key.

Avoid . . .	Do . . .
Difficult words or phrasing.	Use simple, clear language.
Unnecessary details.	Include the important information.
Complicated sentences.	Write exactly what you mean.
Cramming everything into a single paragraph.	Use headings and break up paragraphs.
Relying on Spell Check to catch mistakes.	Proofread your document.
Refusing to ask for help.	Consult a style manual for help.

Source:

Markel, Mike. *Technical Communication*. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 345, 352-53.

MEMORANDUM

To: English Students
From: A. Teacher *A.T.*
Subject: Writing Memos
Date: 5 June 2006

You will be using memo format often when corresponding with coworkers or professors. I am providing this memo both as a set of instructions and as a sample document. Below you will find information on format and content requirements for memo writing. Please follow these guidelines and see Chapter 14 in *Technical Communication* by Mike Markel for more information.

Spacing

Follow the spacing shown in this memo. Be sure to single space items within paragraphs and double space between paragraphs. Paragraphs should not be so long that they are difficult to read.

Introductory Paragraph

Memos serve as records of important communications. Because recipients might not always recall the occasion or significance of your correspondences, you should include an introductory paragraph that establishes a context by stating the following:

- the subject and purpose of the memo (what prompted you to write it);
- any necessary context details (dates, names, assignment numbers, etc.);
- a preview of the contents (not a summary—just tell the reader what to expect).

Notice that I did these things in my introductory paragraph above. Also notice that there is no formal salutation (“Dear Students”) like there would be in a letter.

Style and Tone

In your correspondence, use a professional but conversational style. Slang would be inappropriate, as would overly stiff, formal prose. Choose a courteous, accommodating tone, much as you would in conversation with a professor in his/her office.

With other audiences, you will need to make choices about style and tone based upon your relationship with them and your perceptions of their needs and expectations.

Closing

Some memos (e.g., this one) need no concluding comments such as you might write for more formal, argumentative papers. Many memos, however, require some kind of response or indicate a future action. In those cases, conclude by providing an opportunity for response. (For example, “I will come by your office on Tuesday at 4:00 p.m. to discuss my paper with you.”) Make your closing statement substantial and meaningful. Avoid clichés—if you’ve seen it written many times before, your reader probably has, too.

Initials

Memo format does not include a signature block. You should, however, write your initials (in pen) beside your name in the heading. Notice that I did so at the top of this page.