How to Write A Business Memo

The business memo is a standard form of written communication in academics, government, and industry. The memo is a formal method of written communication with a well-established format and style. An introduction to the standards for format and style is provided below.

Memo Format

Heading

Memos generally begin with a header section that identifies the purpose of the correspondence, to whom the memo has been sent, when it was written, and who wrote it. The heading is generally formatted as follows:

To: Name and Title of recipient From: Name and Title of memo's author cc: Names and positions of any other recipients of the memo Date: Month weekday and year Re: Brief statement (10 words or less) summarizing subject of memo

Body of Business Memo

A well written memo begins with a clear and succinct purpose statement. The purpose statement usually begins with words such as "I am writing to inform you..." or "The purpose of this memo is to summarize..." Usually the author of the memo is writing not merely to inform but in order to make a formal request of some kind. Consequently, the nature of the request is also usually stated at the beginning of the memo as well. If the purpose of the memo is to provide a progress report on a project, the author is likely soliciting formal feedback from the supervisor concerning the advisor's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the progress made to date. So, a typical purpose statement for this memo might be: "I am writing to summarize my progress on Project XYZ to date and to request your feedback concerning my performance on this project."

Once the purpose of the memo has been established the remainder of the memo should be a succinct summary of the facts relevant to the purpose of the memo. A good way to begin is by providing the reader with any necessary background information including dates if these are relevant, summarize the current work or situation and its significance, summarize the problems, if any, and finally outline the request (if relevant). If your memo is one in a series of memos, it is a good idea

to indicate this and to briefly summarize any relevant information the reader may need to recall from those earlier memos.

If the purpose of the memo is to summarize one's progress on a project then a good organizational strategy would be to begin with an overview of the project, its goals and objectives, summarize the work done to date, discuss any problems that might have occurred as well as any solutions or strategies you intend to investigate, and then outline a realistic schedule for any remaining work on the project.

Closing Paragraph

Memos are generally written as a request for action on the part of the reader. In general, your memo should end with a (re-)statement of your specific request.

If your memo is longer than one page in length:

Use Headings. If you are writing a lengthy memo (> 1 page) summarizing a lot of information then it is a good idea to structure your document using headings. This will make it easier for the reader to understand and follow your discussion. Use bulleted or numbered lists. Lists are easier to scan than paragraphs. Use bulleted lists if the information is of similar importance. Use numbered lists whenever one point is more important than another point (relative hierarchy). Use figures or tables. Trends are easiest to visualize when data are represented graphically.

Stylistic Elements

Memos are generally regarded as a formal method of communication. First impressions count here. A well written memo tells the reader not only about your technical skills but also much about your organizational and communications skills.

"More" is not better in a memo - keep it short and to the point. One page is an ideal length.

Succinct, clear prose is valued in a business memo. Use short sentences. Keep your paragraphs short.

Be sure to proof your work for correct grammar, spelling, typos, etc. before submitting your memo.

Be sure that your memo is readable. As a general rule it is a good idea to use a Helvetica, Arial, or Times Roman font and a font size of 10-point or 12-point.

If you are writing a memo that might elicit strong emotions in the reader, be careful not to use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS (reads as if you are shouting) or excessive punctuation!!!! as both of these actions are likely to enhance the likelihood that your reader will react negatively to your statements.