

Effective Professional Writing: Preparing for the Memo Assignment

If planning is knowledge in action, communication is arguably the core currency. Our alumni frequently rank oral and written communication skills as among the most professionally valuable skills they learned in school—or wish they had worked harder to acquire early in their careers.

Contrary to popular belief, these skills are often *not* acquired well on the job. Many organizations practice—and as such “teach”—substandard writing, for example: writing that is minimally adequate but not truly effective. Meanwhile, the strongest writers in the organization are often too busy to stop and lead workshops, let alone assign memo-writing exercises and provide feedback. School is the place to master the fundamentals or go well beyond them, gain practice, and make mistakes, i.e. where the risks and costs of mistakes for your career are trivial rather than in the world of work, where the costs can be significant.

Our posted slides and these guidelines all focus on the demands of professional writing generally and on the memo, as an invaluable form, specifically. Allow about 60-90 minutes to do the reading portion, explained below.

What is a memo?

Memos are relatively brief professional documents, generally written to decision-makers—whether public, private, or nongovernmental. “Brief” typically means 250 to 1500 words, but many effective memos are on the short end of that range.

Effective memos are designed to *help those decision-makers think more clearly and/or act* rather than approach a topic more generally or offer mere opinion. The two major types of memos are: a decision or “action” memo (focused on a case and the ethics material); and an informational memo. **We recommend you adopt the latter form for your 11.401 memo assignment, and simply addressing the memo to the 11.401 faculty is fine. But if you wish to posit a hypothetical decision-maker (as your reader) and/or prep your memo as a decision memo, that’s ok too.**

On the course website, the materials include a slide show, brief items *about* memo writing, plus sample memos. Some of the “how to” content of this material may be familiar to you from work experience. If so, consider this a quick refresher to ensure that we all begin with similar assumptions about what’s expected. If you have done little or no professional memo writing until now, give this material close attention.

How to prepare

Read the material posted on the course website, and consider the following (on your own or together with a few classmates):

1. Using the criteria outlined in the guides to memo writing, rank the sample memos in terms of their overall effectiveness and readability. Try to focus on style and organization of argument rather than substance. Which one is the most effective and which the least? Why?
2. Pick one of the less effective policy memos, and outline some concrete improvements.
3. Preview your task: Even though we haven't covered all of the case material at issue in your decision memo assignment, read the assignment instructions. They include a decisionmaker, a context, and a task.

Beyond the slides, the reading material is in several parts:

A. Guidelines on memo writing:

- Winston Churchill on brevity (World War II memo)
- Guidelines for writing informational memos
- Checklist for writing action (decision) memos
- More advice on organization: Bob Behn on how to direct the reader's attention

B. Sample policy memos, U.S. government:

- Neustadt to President-elect John F. Kennedy on reorganization powers (1960);
- Lynn to Secretary Morton on Central Utah water project (1973);
- President Carter to the Director of NSF on tropical forests (1979);
- Kleiman to White House domestic policy staff on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) taking over the Drug Enforcement Agency (1993)

Beyond the guidance here ...

On concise and clear written English, Strunk and White's ***The Elements of Style*** is an excellent addition to your professional bookshelf. It's now available free on-line in addition to the classic hardcopy book-form. The book's central message:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his/her

sentences short, or that s/he avoid all detail ... but that *every word tell* (emphasis added).

By contrast, much ineffective writing in the professions is labeled "bureaucratese" or "**plannerese**"—writing laden with cumbersome ideas, sentence constructions, and jargon. Strive to avoid that.

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