



HWI

Howe Writing Initiative
at the Farmer School of Business

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To: All FSB Students
From: The Howe Writing Initiative
Subj: Writing Memos Effectively and Efficiently

The memo is the basic mode of business communication, so familiarity with this genre is essential. Consider the following tips when writing memos.

Audience and Rhetorical Situation

Know your audience—the person or group in the “To” line at the top of the memo, not necessarily your professor. Focus on what the audience needs to know and on what the audience has asked you to supply, *not* on everything you have done or learned.

Organize the memo according to purpose and audience, and write so that your reader can quickly grasp the main points. Communicate “need to know” information and eliminate “nice to know” information.

Form and Format

All memos have a general heading—the section at the top of the document that tells when the memo was written, who the memo is to and from, and what the memo is about. The format is the same whether the memo is sent as an email or as a hard copy. Remember to strategically use the “Subject” or “Re:” (i.e. “Regarding”) line. This line tells the reader what the memo is about and provides the first glimpse of your content—make it count!

If you’re covering a lot of information, consider using headers to group and organize your content so your audience can skim the document quickly. Foreground your topic, findings, or conclusions in the first paragraph/sentence. Though a formal introduction is not necessary, it may be useful to include an overview paragraph—as we did, for example, at the beginning of this memo.

The body should be made up of short, focused paragraphs and should be single-spaced. Do not indent paragraphs; separate them with a line. Use bulleted lists where appropriate:

- To set off a group of related information.
- To make prose easier to read.
- To draw attention to particular points.

Use consistent grammatical structure when writing bulleted lists. In the above list, for example, each point begins with a verb in the infinitive form (*to set, to make, to draw*).

Style

Use professional prose: clear, straightforward, specific language that is easy to follow and understand. Take out throw-away words (*this, that, very, just, the*), and use strong verbs (eliminate *be, am, is, are, was, were, been*) whenever possible. Eliminate passive voice.

As with any writing, you should proofread carefully.

Form and Format

- Think about genre. What form of writing is most appropriate for the rhetorical situation? An email? A memo? A report?
- Foreground your topic, theme, claim, overriding conclusion in the first paragraph/sentence. Though you will need to provide some context for the reader, a formal introduction is not necessary. Do not save the best for last.
- Use headings to group, organize, and quickly communicate. Take your cue from the project assignment or instructions. If your boss asks you to write a report detailing the history, ramifications, and potential changes of a trend, include headings titled "History," "Ramifications," and "Potential Changes."
- If writing a memo or email, strategically use the "Subject" or "Re:" line—particularly important in the era of e-mail when a person may base his/her decision to read on that one line.
- A narrative of your research process is an inefficient way to communicate your findings. The document should present a developed idea, not a record of how your idea developed.
- Break up long paragraphs; the shorter the better. Consider bullet points.

Style

- Use clear and precise wording to avoid misinterpretation or confusion.
- Make sure connections are readily apparent. Although smooth flow isn't imperative, your audience should quickly see how the points you raise relate to the topic at hand.
- Front load sentences by putting new information first, followed by a connection to the previous information you have given.
- Eliminate as many throw away words as possible (*this, that, very, the*).
- Use strong verbs (eliminate *is, are, was, were, being, am*). Edit to revise passive voice.
- Consider your tone. Provide the reader with the information he or she needs, but don't be condescending. Also, be wary of the use of "we" or "I." Is it appropriate for the subject, audience, and rhetorical situation?
- Proofread carefully. Misspelled words and simple grammar mistakes are simply unacceptable and will damage your credibility in the eyes of your reader.