

To: Bren writing students
From: Bren Writing Center
Date: October 10, 2006
Subject: How to write an effective memo

The purpose of a memo is to convey information in an accessible, concise format. For example, an environmental scientist might use a memo to outline her latest findings to a policy maker, while a consultant might write one to relay his recommendations to a client. On the surface, these assignments sound simple, but in reality translating technical information to a lay audience can be a difficult task—and one that requires a unique skill set.

The goal of *this* memo is to familiarize you with a memo's look and feel and to arm you with some useful strategies as you undertake your first writing assignments at Bren. The document that follows is divided into four sections: 1) format, 2) audience, 3) other helpful hints, and 4) some final thoughts. In addition, we have attached a brief list of Web-based memo-writing resources.

1. FORMAT

Imagine you're a state senator. An important vote on climate change is coming up and you want to familiarize yourself with the issues—fast. You ask an environmental expert to write you a two-page memo. How would you want it to look? Chances are, you would ask for a document that is short and easy to skim. To achieve these goals, the following memo-writing conventions have evolved over time:

- **Start with a header** Identify the recipient, the writer, the date, and the subject up top (as we've done above). Each workplace has its own header style—for example, some offices prefer that you use “Re:” instead of “Subject:”—so ask around to find out which format to follow. If you don't know the preferred style, browse the links at the end of this paper to pick one you like best.
- **Add a useful introduction** Generally, the first two paragraphs of a memo discuss the purpose of a memo, summarize its key points, and outline the document's contents.
- **Use visual cues** Identify a new section or subsection with bold, uppercase, or italicized heads. This approach will allow your reader to find relevant text quickly.
- **Break up your paragraphs** Avoid large blocks of text. The more lines there are in a paragraph, the harder it will be to scan quickly.
- **Break out your lists** Convert important lists into numbered or bulleted formats when possible.
- **Emphasize important points** Don't be afraid to underline or italicize important points. Remember, *your goal is to serve the reader*.

2. AUDIENCE

In the immortal words of Jim Salzman, the first question you should ask yourself when you sit down to write a memo is “What's in and what's out?” Which information should you include? Which should you highlight? What conclusions or suggestions do you wish

to express? And how should you present these items? The answers will largely depend on your audience. A few things to keep in mind:

- **Answer the big question** Ask yourself why your reader requested the memo in the first place. Then tailor the document so it fulfills that purpose.
- **Stick to the essentials** Think about what your audience needs to know, then cut out any information that isn't included on the list.
- **Define specialized terms** Unless your intended reader is a climatologist, always define words like "albedo" and "ablation" in the text.
- **Avoid jargon** Just because you and your colleagues use the word "problematize" around the office doesn't mean Senator Schmoe will know what it means. Plain English always works best.

3. OTHER HELPFUL TIPS

Here are some final hints that you should keep in mind no matter what kind of paper you're writing:

- **Write clearly** A memo is not the place to show off your vocabulary. Again, the purpose of the memo *is to convey information understandably and accessibly*.
- **Write concisely** Avoid long, complex sentences in favor of short, simple ones. Nothing slows a reader down like wordy text packed with awkward clauses.
- **Use action verbs** Language is always more powerful when you use active, rather than passive, verbs. For example, say "agricultural runoff worsens eutrophication" instead of "eutrophication is worsened by agricultural runoff."
- **Cite everything** Your reader may not need to know every twist and turn your analysis has taken, but she should be able to replicate it if she wants to. Tell her where to look.

4. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Hopefully, you've learned a little about writing memos and a lot about making a document reader friendly. The main take-away message here is not that you should use more bullet points or upper-case heads but that you should write a memo that will meet the express needs of your reader. Remember, if you want more tips on writing an effective memo, flip to Appendix A for a list of additional resources. Happy writing!

APPENDIX A—ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Engineering Communication Centre @ The University of Toronto
<http://www.ecf.utoronto.ca/%7Ewriting/handbook-memo.html>

Mississippi State University
<http://www.msu.edu/~zuidema2/TWmemo.pdf#search=%22how%20to%20write%20a%20memo%22>

Penn State Department of Geography
<http://www.geog.psu.edu/courses/geog100/MemowritingIntro.html>

Purdue University Online Writing Lab
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_memo.html

University of Washington
<http://courses.washington.edu/affhsg/pdf/memoonmemos.pdf#search=%22memo%20writing%22>