

How to Write Better Memos

Company executives and those in other company divisions get to know you through your memos. Write them right.

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Memos—interoffice, intershop, interdepartmental—are the most important medium of in-house communication. This article suggests ways to help you sharpen your memos so that they will more effectively inform, instruct, and sometimes persuade your coworkers.

Memos are informal, versatile, free-wheeling. In-house they go up, down or sideways.* They can even go to customers, suppliers, and other interested outsiders. They can run to ten pages or more, but are mostly one to three pages. (Short memos are preferable. Typed single-space and with double-space between paragraphs, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address easily fits on one page, and the Declaration of Independence on two pages.) They can be issued on a one-shot basis or in a series, on a schedule or anytime at all. They can cover major or minor subjects.

Primary functions of memos encompass, but are not limited to:

- Informing people of a problem or situation.
- Nailing down responsibility for action, and a deadline for it.
- Establishing a file record of decisions, agreements and policies.

Secondary functions include:

- Serving as a basis for formal reports.
- Helping to bring new personnel up-to-date.
- Replacing personal contact with people you cannot get along with. For example, the Shubert brothers, tyrannical titans of the American theatre for 40 years, often refused to talk to each other. They communicated by memo.

• Handling people who ignore your oral directions. Concerning the State Dept., historian Arthur Schlesinger quoted JFK as follows: "I have discovered finally that the best way to deal with State is to send over memos. They can forget phone conversations, but a memorandum is something which, by their system, has to be answered."

Memos can be used to squelch unjustified time-consuming requests. When someone makes what you consider to be an unwarranted demand or request, tell

him to put it in a memo—just for the record. This tactic can save you much time.

Organization of the Memo

Memos and letters are almost identical twins. They differ in the following ways: Memos normally remain in-house, memos don't usually need to "hook" the reader's interest, and memos covering a current situation can skip a background treatment.

Overall organization of a memo should ensure that it answer three basic questions concerning its subject:

1. What are the facts?
2. What do they mean?
3. What do we do now?

To supply the answers, a memo needs some or all of the following elements: summary, conclusions and recommendations, introduction, statement of problem, proposed solution, and discussion. Incidentally, these elements make excellent headings to break up the text and guide the readers.

In my opinion, every memo longer than a page should open with a summary, preferably a short paragraph. Thus, recipients can decide in seconds whether they want to read the entire memo.

Two reasons dictate placing the summary at the very beginning. There, of all places, you have the reader's undivided attention. Second, readers want to know, quickly, the meaning or significance of the memo.

Obviously, a summary cannot provide all the facts (Question 1, above) but it should capsule their meaning, and highlight a course of action.

When conclusions and recommendations are not applicable, forget them. When they are, however, you can insert them either right after the abstract or at the end of the memo. Here's one way to decide: If you expect readers to be neutral or favorable toward your conclusions and recommendations, put them up front. If you expect a negative reaction, put them at the end. Then, conceivably, your statement of the problem and your discussion of it may swing readers around to your side by the time they reach the end.

The introduction should give just enough informa-

* We will return to this sentence later.

tion for the readers to be able to understand the statement of the problem and its discussion.

Literary Qualities

A good memo need not be a Pulitzer Prize winner, but it does need to be clear, brief, relevant. LBJ got along poorly with his science adviser, Donald Hornig, because Hornig's memos, according to a White House staffer, "were terribly long and complicated. The President couldn't read through a page or two and understand what Don wanted him to do, so he'd send it out to us and ask us what it was all about. Then we'd put a short cover-memo on top of it and send it back in. The President got mad as hell at long memos that didn't make any sense."

Clarity is paramount. Returning to the asterisked sentence in the second paragraph of the introduction, I could have said: "Memoranda are endowed with the capability of internal perpendicular and lateral deployment." Sheer unadulterated claptrap.

To sum up, be understandable and brief, but not brusque, and get to the point.

Another vitally important trait is a personal, human approach. Remember that your memos reach members of your own organization; that's a common bond worth exploiting. Your memos should provide them with the pertinent information they need (no more and no less) and in the language they understand. Feel free to use people's names, and personal pronouns and adjectives: you-your, we-our, I-mine. Get people into the act; it's they who do the work.

Lastly, a well-written memo should reflect diplomacy or political savvy. More than once, Hornig's memos lighted the fuse of LBJ's temper. One memo, regarded as criticizing James E. Webb (then the head of NASA), LBJ's friend, infuriated the President.

Another example of a politically naive memo made headlines in England three years ago. A hospital superintendent wrote a memo to his staff, recommending that aged and chronically ill patients should not be resuscitated after heart failure. Public reaction exploded so overwhelmingly against the superintendent that shock waves even shook Prime Minister Wilson's cabinet. Result? The Health Ministry torpedoed the recommendation.

Two other courses of action would have been more tactful for the superintendent: make the recommendation orally to his staff or, if he insisted on a memo, stamp it "private" and distribute it accordingly.

Literary style is a nebulous subject, difficult to pin down. Yet if you develop a clear, taut way of writing, you may end up in the same happy predicament as Lawrence of Arabia. He wrote "a violent memorandum" on a British-Arab problem, a memo whose "acidity and force" so impressed the commanding general that he wired it to London. Lawrence noted in his "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" that, "My popularity with the military staff in Egypt, due to the sudden help I had lent . . . was novel and rather amusing.

They began to be polite to me, and to say that I was observant, with a pungent style. . . ."

Format of the Memo

Except for minor variations, the format to be used is standard. The memo dispenses with the addresses, salutations, and complimentary closes used in letters. Although format is a minor matter, it does rate some remarks.

To and From Lines—Names and departments are enough.

Subject—Capture its essence in ten words or less. Any subject that drones on for three or four lines may confuse or irritate readers.

Distribution—Send the memo only to people involved or interested in the subject matter. If they number less than say, ten, list them alphabetically on page 1; if more than ten, put them at the end.

Text—Use applicable headings listed after the three questions under "Organization."

Paragraphs—If numbering or lettering them helps in any way, do it.

Line Spacing—Single space within paragraphs, and double space between.

Underlines and Capitals—Used sparingly, they emphasize important points.

Number of Pages—Some companies impose a one-page limit, but it's an impractical restriction because some subjects just won't fit on one page. As a result, the half-baked memo requires a second or third memo to beef it up.

Figures and Tables—Use them; they'll enhance the impact of your memos.

Conclusion

Two cautions are appropriate. First, avoid writing memos that baffle people, like the one that Henry Luce once sent to an editor of *Time*. "There are only 30,000,000 sheep in the U.S.A.—same as 100 years ago. What does this prove? Answer???"

Second, avoid memo-itis," the tendency to dash off memos at the drop of a pen, especially to the boss. In his book, "With Kennedy," Pierre Salinger observed that "a constant stream of memoranda" from Professor Arthur Schlesinger caused JFK to be "impatient with their length and frequency."

Meet the Author

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