

Definition of Genre

Policy memos are not like other academic papers. Their main purpose is to provide analysis and/or recommendations regarding a certain issue, and they are written for a specific, often limited, audience. Because of the need for quick, accurate information in the policy world, policy memos are written so that readers can efficiently access fact-based information in order to make an informed decision. Memos should, therefore, try to inform the audience in a concise, organized, and professional manner, while still including the most relevant content.

Writing criteria for policy memos

An effective memo will do its job if the reader comprehends the main points after one quick read or even after reading just the first sentence of each section. To ensure that the memo gets the intended results, pay close attention to the following: (1) content, (2) structure, (3) organization, (4) word choice, and (5) clarity.

Content

Content, of course, is the most important determinant of a good policy memo. Weak or illogical ideas, no matter how well-presented, do no one any good. Therefore, a memo should provide both accurate and relevant information, while also acknowledging the limitations of certain recommendations or analysis. Any recommendations should include honest and realistic alternatives. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Present the most relevant information and state your main ideas and any recommendations clearly.
- Make sure to present opinions as opinions and NOT as facts. Opinions presented should also be substantiated.
- Use logic and facts to support each of your main points and/or to refute opposing points. When citing facts in-text, be accurate.
- Avoid logical fallacies such as appeals to authority, slippery slope arguments, hasty generalizations, and faulty causation.

Structure

1. Header

Structure, simply put, means how a memo looks. Most memos take the general form of an email, and the first page has “To:,” “From:,” “Date:,” and a title that starts with “RE:.” Consider the following example (with bolding used to identify the parts):

To: Timothy Geithner, Secretary of Treasury (**Writer’s Audience**)
From: Michelle (Min Eun) Jeon, Policy Advisor (**Writer’s name and title**)
Date: 2/20/2012 (**Date**)
RE: Overcoming the Obstacle: House Speaker John Boehner (**Title/Main Idea**)

The header as formatted above comes at the beginning of a memo. With the header, the reader will know to whom the writer is writing, what authority the writer has to address the audience, and the most critical message of the memo.

2. Executive Summary

Below the header, a memo generally includes an executive summary, a single paragraph that summarizes the entire memo. After reading the memo just once, the reader can understand what the rest of the memo will explain. The executive summary can stand alone and allow the reader to look at the first paragraph and identify the main points of the rest of the memo.

Sample of an executive summary:

Secretary Geithner's China currency bill depends on House Speaker John Boehner's support since the Speaker chooses which bill to debate in the House of Representatives. Mr. Boehner will only debate the bill after pressure from his financial supporters, security and investment corporations and their lobbyists; and his electoral constituents, Ohio State citizens and the Republican Party.

A few things become obvious after reading this example. First of all, the audience, Secretary Geithner, will understand that he will get a certain bill passed only through pressuring House Speaker John Boehner. Also, Secretary Geithner will be able to predict that the rest of the memo will elaborate on Mr. Boehner's "financial supporters, security and investment corporations and their lobbyists; and his electoral constituents, the Ohio State citizens and the Republican party," the people who will have the most influence on Mr. Boehner. We can assume that the writer will provide statistics on why such groups hold the most power over Mr. Boehner's decision making process as well as a logical recommendation on how to get these groups to pressure Mr. Boehner. *If the reader finds the main point to be very direct and clear in an executive summary, then the writer will have done his or her job well.*

3. Subheading

The rest of the paper will have several sections elaborating on the points indicated in the executive summary. Those sections will start with a subheading, usually in bold-font to make the title eye-catching for the reader. *A subheading should generally be a summary of the section, so the reader will not necessarily have to read the rest of the section to understand the most important information the section contains.*

Example: **Speaker Boehner: Greatest challenge for the currency bill**

Example: **Mr. Boehner's pro-business interests**

Organization

Memo writers should employ a common skill in journalism, called the "inverted pyramid style of writing." This means memos should *place the most important information at the top and have the less significant details follow in order of importance.*

In an academic paper, you would mix up the order, usually having the most important point come last. But in a memo, the most important fact should always come first. To visualize, this is what it would generally look like:

Academic Paper

2
3 (least important)
1 (most important)

Memorandum

1 (most important)
2
3 (least important)

Such prioritization should always occur in every section of the memo, from the general large structure to small sub-sections.

Word Choice

Word choice plays a critical role in making a memo clear and concise. Consider eliminating vague theoretical words and replacing them with more concrete, specific terms. Here are a few examples:

Vague
facilitate
indicate
concept

More Concrete
help/assist
say/show
idea

Clarity

Policy memos must be clear and direct so that readers can understand the main points quickly. If the memo writer has focused on building strong content that is well organized, and if the writing exhibits well-chosen language, then the result is a clear argument.

One way to understand the type of clarity that is required in a policy memo is to compare a memo to a typical history paper. While academic papers focus more on gradually building a solid argument, a memo delivers the important facts in order of priority as concisely as possible. Let's consider the introduction of a history paper as an example.

A True Friendship?: James and the Nature of the Toussaint-Laveaux Relationship

In his groundbreaking book, *The Black Jacobins* (1963), C.L.R. James traces the history of the Haitian Revolution by analyzing the events as they occurred in light of happenings in France, particularly the French Revolution, abolition, and the rise of Napoleon. To accomplish this task, James focuses much attention on the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture and his relationship with the French government as represented by various white and mulatto leaders. As the reader follows Toussaint's life story, she learns that Toussaint trusted only one man in all his life: Governor-General Etienne Laveaux (James 161). Laveaux was a French nobleman under the old regime, and his life trajectory differed drastically from that of Toussaint. Based on a critical reading of Toussaint's letters to Laveaux, this brief essay explores the nature of the two leaders' relationship and the problem that James's interpretation of their friendship poses.

In this example, the author builds her argument by first presenting the topic and then providing background detail. She then ends her introduction with a sentence that explains what the essay will address. While this type of introduction would work for a history paper, it would not work well for a memo because it lacks a central claim and provides too much detail in the beginning. Instead, memos should lead with central claims in order to ensure clarity. Let's consider another example of a memo executive summary:

Demands for a Solid Economic Policy Towards China

The demand for a policy to resolve the undervalued Chinese Yuan (renminbi) is increasing since the US public attributes the US' economic problems to the depreciation of the Chinese currency. The President and his new trade unit's immediate focus should be to get China to appreciate its artificially undervalued Yuan. Correcting the value of the Yuan will ultimately increase both on-shore jobs and US exports.

In this example, the author gets right to the point. The context she provides is limited to the first sentence. She also presents a recommendation in the second sentence. The reader will expect that the author will provide further context and statistics to support this recommendation in other sections of the memo.

Other Points to Clarify

Because professors and Teaching Assistants (TAs) teaching public policy might have different expectations, clarify the following with each potential grader:

1. Should the titles of sections be in full sentences?
2. Should the paragraphs and sections be divided into several parts or is only a handful better?
3. Do I have to include an executive summary?
4. Is the usage of words such as "But" or "Because" or "However" discouraged?
5. Should I not write any lengthy sentences?

* ***Make sure you read the prompt carefully!*** The prompt will have a lot of the answers to the questions above, since the prompt will reflect the grading criteria. Bringing the prompt with you to the Writing Studio when you have an appointment will also help the tutors understand how to help you.

Good luck on memo writing!