
Writing Business Memos

WHAT IS A BUSINESS MEMO?

A business memo is a short document used to transmit information within an organization. Memos are characterized by being brief, direct, and easy to navigate. They are less formal than letters but should maintain a professional, succinct style. Often, the purpose of a business memo is twofold: to identify a problem and propose a solution. Other times, memos may provide or request factual information.

Business memos are designed to accommodate busy readers who want to find the information they need from the memo quickly and easily. In writing a business memo, you should structure your memo to accommodate three kinds of readers:

- Those who read only the executive summary
- Those who skim the entire memo for its key points and a few details they're interested in
- Those who read the entire document for the details that support its major claims or recommendations

Bear in mind that these readers may have different purposes in reading the memo. Often, readers need to make policy and action decisions based on the recommendations. Others may want to obtain specific information (evidence) needed to understand and justify policy and action decisions. Readers may also want to get a sense of your professional ability and judgment.

In determining the purpose and audience of your memo, ask yourself: Who is the intended recipient of this memo? What do I want the recipient to do after reading the memo? What information will the recipient be looking for in the memo? These kinds of questions will help guide your content, structure, and style choices.

HOW DO I WRITE AN EFFECTIVE BUSINESS MEMO?

As stated above, an effective business memo is brief, direct, and easy to navigate. The following five writing strategies help readers to navigate business memos easily and quickly:

- 1) **Present the main point first.** This may be the single most important guideline about the structure and content of memos. Readers should quickly grasp the content and significance of the memo. If readers have a question or problem, they want to know the answer or solution immediately—if readers want more information, they can continue reading. In other words, supporting details should *follow* the main point or conclusion, not precede it.
- 2) **Maintain a professional, succinct style.** The style of your writing should be appropriate to your audience: In this case, your audience is your boss, your coworkers, or both. So, your style should be professional, straightforward, cordial, and easy to read. To achieve such a style, use short, active sentences. Avoid jargon and pretentious language. Maintain a positive or neutral tone; avoid negative language if possible. In addition to making memos easier to read, a professional writing style also improves the writer's credibility.
- 3) **Create a very specific subject line to give the reader an immediate idea of the memo's (or message's) subject and purpose.** The subject line should orient the reader to the subject and purpose of the memo and provide a handy reference for filing and quick review. Suppose, for instance, that you were writing to request authorization and funding for a business trip. You'd avoid a general subject line

like "Publisher's Convention" or "Trip to AWP Conference" in favor of something more specific like "Request for funds: AWP conference." The last example would tell the reader the subject and what she was being asked to do about it.

- 4) **Provide a summary or overview of the main points, especially if the memo is more than one page.** Often referred to as an executive summary, the first paragraph of a long memo or message serves these functions:
- Presents the main request, recommendation or conclusion
 - Summarizes then previews the main facts, arguments and evidence
 - Forecasts the structure and order of information presented in the remainder of the memo
- Like the subject line, the executive summary provides a quick overview of the purpose and content of the memo. The reader uses it to guide both a quick first reading and subsequent rapid reviews.
- 5) **Use format features, such as headings, to signal structure and guide readers to the information they're seeking.** Headings provide an outline of the memo, enabling the reader to quickly see what the major topics or points are and where to find them in the memo. Make headings parallel with each other and as specific as possible. Other format features that signal structure and guide readers include short paragraphs and blocks of text, lists set off by indentations, numbers or bullets, or generous use of white space to guide the eye.

STANDARD MEMO HEADING

Though the format for a memo may vary from one organization to another, the standard heading consists of a series of clearly labeled lines that convey key information about the memo's contents and its distribution. The following are standard elements of a memo header:

Date:	The date on which the memo is distributed
To:	The person(s) to whom it is primarily addressed (sometimes with job title)
cc:	Name(s) of anyone else who receives a copy (sometimes with job title)
From:	Name of the writer, usually followed by his/her handwritten initials (sometimes with job title)
Subject: or Re:	Concise statement of the memo's topic