

Policy memos are not like other academic papers; they provide analysis of and/or recommendations on a certain issue, and they are written for a specific, often limited audience (although memo-writers must be mindful that their memos might be shared or leaked). Policy memos are written so that readers can quickly access factual information in order to make an informed decision. Memos should inform the audience in a concise, organized, and professional manner, while still including the most relevant content.

Writing Criteria for Policy Memos

A memo will do its job if the reader comprehends its main points after one quick scan or even after reading just the first sentence of each section. An effective memo writer pays close attention to the following: (1) content, (2) structure, (3) organization, (4) word choice, and (5) clarity.

Content

Content is the most important determinant of a good policy memo. A memo should answer the question that prompted it and should provide accurate and relevant information while also acknowledging the limitations of its recommendations or analysis. Here are some things to keep in mind regarding content:

- Clearly answer the question or prompt.
- Present the most relevant information and state your main ideas and recommendations clearly.
- Present opinions as opinions and NOT as facts. Opinions should also be substantiated.
- Use logic and facts to support main points and/or to refute opposing points. Cite facts accurately.
- Avoid logical fallacies such as appeals to authority, slippery slope arguments, hasty generalizations, and faulty causation.

Structure

1. Heading

Most memos take the general form of an email. The first page has “To;” “From;” “Date;” and a title that starts with “RE:” or “Subject:.” 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 or main idea**)

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

Introductory Paragraph

Below the header, a memo generally includes an introductory paragraph, sometimes called an executive summary, which summarizes the entire memo. After reading the introductory paragraph just once, the reader should be able to understand the main points of the rest of the memo. See the following sample:

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.

After reading this paragraph, the audience, Secretary Geithner, should understand what he needs to do (pressure House Speaker Boehner), how to do it (work with those who can exert pressure on Boehner) and what to look for in the rest of the memo (specific facts to help him do it well).

2. Subheadings

The rest of the paper will have several sections elaborating on the points indicated in the introductory paragraph. Those sections typically begin with a subheading, usually in bold-font to make the title eye-catching for the reader. Subheadings should summarize the section so readers can understand the most important information of a section without necessarily reading it.

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

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

Organization

Memo writers should employ the “inverted pyramid style of writing,” placing the most important information at the top, followed by less significant details in order of importance. Such prioritization should always occur in every section of the memo, from the overall structure to small sub-sections.

Word Choice

Word choice helps to make a memo clear and concise. Conciseness is especially important; because memos are meant to be read quickly; they should not include unnecessary words or embellished content such as epigraphs, jokes, excessive quotations, or unnecessary anecdotes. Consider eliminating vague theoretical words and replacing them with more concrete, specific terms. For example, swap “facilitate” (vague) for “help” or “assist” (concrete), “indicate” for “say” or “show,” and “concept” for “idea.”

Clarity

Policy memos must be clear and direct so that readers can understand the main points quickly; writers should focus on building strong content that is well organized and choosing their language carefully.

One way to understand the type of clarity that is required in a policy memo is to compare a memo to an academic paper in a related field, such as history. In a history paper, the author builds their argument by first presenting the topic and then providing background detail. They then end their introduction with a sentence explaining what the essay will address. This introduction would not work for a memo.

Memos should *lead* with central claims to ensure clarity. Consider this memo's introductory paragraph:

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, limiting context to the first sentence. She also presents a recommendation in the second sentence. The reader expects that the author will provide further context and statistics to support this recommendation in other sections later in the memo.

Other Points to Clarify

Because professors and teaching assistants might have different expectations, you may want to clarify the following with each potential reader:

1. Should the titles of sections be in full sentences?
2. Should the sections be subdivided into parts with different headings?
3. Should I include a background paragraph after the introductory paragraph?
4. Should I avoid all lengthy sentences?