

# MEMORANDUM (MEMOS)

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design  
Revised 06/26/2018

A common form of inter- or intra-departmental communication in business and academia is the memorandum (pl. memorandums or memoranda), usually called a memo. Memos are written by everyone from junior executives and engineers to CEOs. Hence, it is essential to master this basic communication form.

## **Memo Format**

Although memos are ordinarily formal, there has recently been a trend toward a more personal style. Careful writers are able to achieve this style without sacrificing clarity, grace, or precision. Unlike letters, which include inside addresses, salutations, and complimentary closings, memos have just two sections: the heading and the body. To simplify the communication process, many firms and organizations use templates with predesigned formats. If you need to construct a memo without a template, use the vertical format shown below:

Date: June 6, 2018

To: David Dunlop

From: Shawn Jackson

Subject: Language Requirement

Some people also use what is known as the horizontal format, where the “To” and “From” fields are flush with the left margin, while the “Date” and “Subject” fields are aligned with the right margin.

**Date:** Write the full name of the month or use its standard abbreviation (i.e., don’t use numerals).

**To:** If company policy and your relationship with the addressee allow, you may omit courtesy (Mrs., Ms., Mr.) or professional (Dr., Dean, etc.) titles. Generally, however, address people of higher rank by title. For most formal situations, use the addressee’s full name; for informal situations, first names or even nicknames may be appropriate. If the addressee’s name alone is not sufficient to ensure that the memo will reach its destination, put an identifying tag, such as a job or department title, directly after the addressee’s name (for example, To: John Hutchins, Payroll Office). If the memo is directed to several people, list their names alphabetically or in descending order of their position in the institutional hierarchy. If numerous names are required, you may use “To: See Below” and then place the addressees’ names at the end of the message.

If the group is too large to list all of its members individually, follow “To:” with an identifying classification, such as “Faculty and Staff” or “Process Engineers.” Do not use “To whom it may concern”; try to name at least a general addressee (“Faculty and Staff,” “Hiring Manager”).

**From:** Place your own name on this line, and do not use a courtesy title. If you believe that the reader may not know you, then use a job title or department name to identify yourself. If you choose to sign the memo to personalize it or to indicate authorization, write your initials above, below, or to the right of your typewritten name. Practices vary considerably in this respect, so it’s best to follow local preferences. A memo is always official even if it isn’t signed.

**Subject:** “Re:” (Latin for thing, affair, or concern) is occasionally used in place of “Subject:”, but many of today’s business people regard “Re” as obsolete. The statement of subject should be concise yet accurate, since it often determines where or how the memo will be filed.

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## Memo Content

Two words characterize a well-written memo: informative and concise. Make your memo informative by observing the same principles that govern any writing process, the most important of which are preparation and organization.

**Preparation:** Determine the exact objective; you should be able to state this objective in a single sentence. Know your reader(s), and determine whether or not you need to cover fundamental issues or define technical terms.

**Organization:** Keep things under control. Present your material coherently and decide on the pattern of organization that best suits your purpose. The two most common patterns of organization for business and technical memos are deduction (decreasing order of importance) and induction (increasing order of importance).

**Deduction:** Deduction, presenting ideas in decreasing order of importance, generally assumes that the reader is well acquainted with the topic under discussion. In writing a deductive memo, present your most salient point first (but don't simply repeat the "Subject" statement). This strategy spares readers needless loss of time wading through data they may already know. Place supporting facts in subsequent sentences for readers who may be unfamiliar with the subject. Place the background data last. Those who want or need to read this information to understand the message will take the time to do so; others may scan it or bypass it entirely. Most business memos use this pattern of organization.

**Induction:** Induction, presenting ideas in increasing order of importance, draws upon a different set of assumptions than deduction. The reasons to use induction vary, but they may include the following: you have to announce bad news or your reader(s) may not understand the main idea without significant prior preparation. In such cases, organize your thoughts by leading up to the most forceful idea, and present that idea at the end of the memo. Keep in mind that such memos often take longer to write.

## **Memo Style**

If writing a memo turns out to be more difficult than you anticipated, you may find that a quick outline will help you organize your thoughts. In composing such an outline, focus your attention on the main ideas rather than on introductions or transitions. Strive to be plain, direct, and concise while using a comfortable, natural style. Because memos are generally brief, the outline need only provide structure and proportion; nevertheless, it should not leave gaps in logic or omit important details. If necessary, you can develop your outline into a rough draft by expanding your notes into paragraphs. Write quickly, and pretend you are speaking to someone across the table.

In its final form, the memorandum should be clear and informative. Generally, your tone will be neutral or positive, but you may occasionally have to issue complaints or reprimands in memo form. Use caution in negative situations, and be aware of the effect of your correspondence. If you are spiteful, blunt, condescending, or too coldly formal, you can potentially alienate people. Ostentatious language, excessively technical jargon, or complicated syntax will make you sound pompous. Hence, try to be cordial, straightforward, and lucid, striving toward a relaxed and conversational style. If you project an image of consideration, you stand a much greater chance of being viewed as knowledgeable and competent in carrying out your professional responsibilities.

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