

Writing Professional Memos

A memo is a targeted message designed to draw attention to a specific problem and, if necessary, propose a solution and action steps. Readers read memos to do something: they will act on the information you present them. Memos are most often used in professional settings, such as a corporate office or a university campus; they provide readers new information, often information that readers will act on, like policy changes. Professional readers read to do. **A well-crafted memo will catch the reader's attention and convey all pertinent information since readers read to act.**

Audience Considerations

When writing a memo, define your audience just as you would for an essay: a targeted group of readers, distinguished by their background and knowledge, to whom you are writing an important message. A clearly defined target audience will help you narrow the scope of your memo, isolating the information your readers will need to act on or to make a decision with.

Be deliberate when choosing the recipients of your memo. The entire Human Resources team does not need to read about a new training development procedure. Since memos are often sent through email now, take care when adding all of the recipient email addresses. Consider using the Blind Carbon Copy (BCC) option in the message to preserve privacy within the team.

Tips to Consider While Writing a Memo

Here are some tips that will increase the readability and usability of your memo. Following these tips will ensure the memo is both purposeful and concise.

Create a Thesis Statement

Describe the purpose or reason for writing the memo in the first paragraph. Think of this as a potential thesis statement of an essay: include specific language directly stating the problem and the solution (action) that you are proposing. This statement guides the readers to do something and provides context for specific details described in later sections.

Sample Thesis Statement for a Memo

Next week, San José State University will effectively require all faculty members to wear shark costumes on Thursdays. This memo outlines costume specifications and directs faculty to local costume retailers.

Be Concise

“I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter.”

~ Blaise Pascal

In other words, less is more. Use as few words as possible to convey essential information. A few precise words and phrases will speed your readers to understand your meaning. **Remember: we write to communicate only the information essential to the audience's decision or action.**

Make It Skimmable

Structure your memos so that your readers can quickly skim through your writing; in other words, use structures that direct the eyes of your readers to the information they need.

- **Order all lists by rank.**
When creating a list, consider which items are the most important for your readers to remember and prioritize them.
- **Use bold font for subject lines.**
Bolding the words in your subject lines will draw your reader's eye and allow him or her to skim through the sections of your memo.
- **Limit lists to five to seven items.**
Readers can retain seven items in short-term memory. Lists of more than seven items should be subdivided.

Anticipate and Answer Questions

Before drafting your memo, define the specific action your readers will take based on the information you provide and consider all questions your audience might ask as they process that information into action. For example, if your department is implementing a new policy requiring employees to wear shark costumes on Thursdays, your audience might ask questions like those presented in the below list.

Sample Questions Your Audience Might Ask

- Why Thursdays and not Fridays?
- What species of sharks can we wear?
- Where can we acquire shark costumes?
- What happens if I wear a whale costume instead?

Make sure to include answers to the key questions in your memo. If necessary, direct your readers to resources for further information.

Articulate Next Steps

Any kind of informative memo should include action items: steps specific readers will do based on their reading. These steps can also serve to answer any of those questions that your audience might ask. For example, you might include the following action items in the memo about a policy change involving shark costumes.

Sample Action Items for a Memo

- During the next week, please pick the type of shark species you would like to wear from this list and email your choice to your HR representative.
- At the end of the month, you can pick your shark costumes up in the break room.

Check for Errors

Presentation matters. Just as you want to look professional at a company meeting, your writing also projects your professional image as a teammate or leader. How you present yourself to your colleagues is crucial to maintaining strong work relationships. **If your memo is incorrectly formatted or if it includes several errors, it reflects poorly on you.**

“Each good memo you write will help your reputation.” ~Sarah Lamb

Activity

Using the example in this handout—the policy about wearing shark costumes on Thursdays—write a memo to SJSU faculty that succinctly and effectively prepares them to don the required attire next week.

References

Redish, Janice C. “Reading to Learn to Do.” *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*. 32.4 (December 1989): 289-93. Print.