

What is a memo?

A memo, short for “memorandum,” is type of written communication used to address a large body of recipients. Memos are used in academic, business, legal, public policy, and other professional environments to pass on important information, propose new ideas or changes, persuade an audience, or provide a call to action. Memos are meant to be objective, formal messages that **directly** and **concisely** address their audience.

Writing your memo¹

Before writing your memo, there are two important questions you should ask. First, **who is the memo’s audience?** And second, **what is the memo's purpose?**

To create a concise and effective memo, you'll first have to consider who your audience is. Is it your boss, professor, coworkers, or someone else? Identifying who your memo will be distributed to is an effective way to consider the tone and formality and ensures that you prioritize their reaction to the document.

The other important thing to consider before writing your memo is its purpose. Whatever the memo's goal, including only the most necessary information in the most succinct manner is most important. People who read memos don't always have the time to read through the entire document, so making sure your memo is **skimmable** and **concise** is key.

Memo formatting suggested guidelines²

After determining your audience and the purpose of your memo, laying out the structure is the next step. As a rule, sources suggest following this formula:

- Header: 1/8 of the memo
- Opening, Context, and Task: 1/4 of the memo
- Discussion Segment: 1/2 of the memo
- Closing Segment, Necessary Attachments: 1/8 of the memo

While you do not have to follow this structure exactly, it's a good suggestion of how much space each section of the memo should take up on the page. Memos can range from 1-100+ pages depending on the subject, so it's important to check the requirements or view previous memos to scale yours accordingly.

Additionally, memos often include bullet points, different headers, and other stylistic pieces that contribute to the overall effect of the memo. Below are some suggested ways to utilize each of these components:

¹ Denise Nelson, P. D. (n.d.). *LibGuides: Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Writing a Policy Memo*.
<https://libguides.pointloma.edu/c.php?g=944338&p=6806962>

² *MemoonMemosSample.Pdf*, <https://www.kean.edu/~cpdonova/MemoonMemosSample>.

Section Headers

- These are necessary pieces of memos
- They help contextualize and frame each section and contribute to skimability
- Naming sections precisely will help with the overall flow of your memo
- For example, if your memo was about a new advertising campaign, one section could be labeled "Social Media Advertising" and another could be "Television Advertising"

Bullet Points

- These are acceptable to use in a memo but should be used sparingly to contribute to overall readability and skimmability
- Try using bullet points in only one section that would most benefit from them

Tables and Charts

- These are not common in the body of a memo but can be found in longer memos such as those in public policy
- Most often, these can be found in an Appendix section of a memo

Using topic sentences to guide the flow of information

One final way to make your memo skimmable is to focus on putting the most important information in your topic sentences. By putting your key points at the beginning of each section, your audience can skim the topic sentences and still understand the most important information in your memo.

In a memo, you can visualize this relationship as an inverted pyramid:

<i>Inverted Pyramid Structure</i>	<i>Comments</i>
The Lead	<i>The Lead</i> is the most important information in your memo, this is the topic sentence of each section. This explains the who, what, when, where, and how of your memo.
The Body	<i>The Body</i> is the other crucial info in the section. However, this should only expand on your topic sentence.
The Tail	<i>The Tail</i> is any extra info that may be needed to provide context for your memo. The least important information can go here.

For more information on topic sentences, see the [BLUE](#) (Topic Sentences) handout.

Sample Memo Format³	Comments
<p>Memorandum</p> <p>To: Carnegie Mellon University Student Body From: Communication Support Consultants Date: February 21, 2022 Subject: How to Write an Effective Memo⁴</p> <p>The purpose of this memorandum is to explain the guidelines and the most effective way to write a memo. Memos are different from emails or academic papers because they are more formal and concise than regular academic writing. The guidelines below will help you write excellent memos.</p>	<p>To: The person(s) to whom it is primarily addressed (sometimes with job title) From: Name of the writer, usually (sometimes with job title) Date: The date on which the memo is distributed Subject: or Re: Concise statement of the memo's topic</p>
<p>State the Purpose of Your Memo Up Top</p> <p>The first paragraph is where your most important information should go. Good ways to begin a memo are with a statement of rhetorical purpose such as "The purpose of this memorandum is..." or "In response to your request, this memo provides recommendations on..." The introduction is where the audience and purpose are established.</p>	<p>Suggested ways to section a memo are: Heading, Opening, Context, Task(s), Summary, Discussions, Closing, Attachments</p>
<p>Summarize Conclusions in the Introduction</p> <p>Don't make your reader wait until they reach the end of your memo to understand its purpose. Tell them up front exactly what the memo is about and what you suggest in the body of the memo. State the basis for your conclusions in the introduction with a brief overview of your methodologies and analysis. You can list recommendations in a bulleted list like this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Item 1 • Item 2 • Item 3 	<p>Precise and important information should be provided in the section headers.</p> <p>These should be bolded and may be integrated into the body portion of the section.</p>
<p>Concluding Your Memo</p> <p>Following the inverted pyramid rule, the contextual information should fall in the closing section of your memo. The conclusion should include a restatement of your primary topic with further conclusions that aren't imperative to understanding the overall meaning of the memo. Attachments are listed at the end separated by semi-colons.</p>	<p>Any attachments to your memo can be listed like this:</p> <p>Attachments: Attachment name A; Attachment name B; etc.</p>

³ Lab, Purdue Writing. "Parts of a Memo // Purdue Writing Lab." *Purdue Writing Lab*.
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/professional_technical_writing/memos/parts_of_a_memo.html.

⁴ *Writing Business Memos*. (n.d.). The Writing Center. <https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/writing-business-memos>

Carnegie Mellon University

Student Academic Success Center

Communication and Language Support