

Memos

Memos are one of most common types of business communication. Memos resemble letters in that they communicate information and are commonly used in the world of business writing. However, memos differ from letters in several important ways:

- * Memos are almost always used within an organization
- * Memos are usually unceremonious in style
- * Memos are normally used for non-sensitive communication (communication to which the reader will not have an emotional reaction)
- * Memos are short and to-the-point
- * Memos have a direct style
- * Memos do not have a salutation
- * Memos do not have a complimentary closing
- * Memos have a specific format that is very different from a business letter

Memo Format:

Memorandum
Date:
To:
From:
Subject:
<hr/>
Text of the memo

General Information About Memos:

Memos usually have one-inch margins on all four sides, and the writer's initials always appear next to the name at the top of the memo.

Below the word "Memo" or "Memorandum" is the date, the name of the person or persons to whom the memo is sent, the name of the writer or sender (with the writer's initials written-in by hand), followed by a very short description of the memo's topic. These four items are double-spaced and a solid line is frequently drawn below them, separating them from the memo's message.

Below the line is the memo's message area. The text in this area is single-spaced.

The text of the memo almost always begins with a bottom-line statement*. A bottom-line statement or message is a short, terse statement of the memo's purpose. All non-sensitive memos should begin with a bottom-line statement.

* Bottom-line messages or statements are short declarations, a sentence or two in length, of a memo's or letter's purpose--a "cut-to-the-chase." Almost all non-sensitive memos or letters (communications which will not cause an emotional reaction in the reader) should have a bottom-line statement at the very beginning. Bottom-lining benefits the reader by saving time. The reader does not have to wade through paragraphs of text to find out why you are writing to him/her and what you are talking about.

Bottom-line statements are recognizable by their ability to survive a "so-what"* test. After writing the first few sentences of a memo or letter, stop and ask, "so-what." If the answer to this question is not immediately clear, you have not written a bottom-line statement.

The following messages cannot survive the "so-what" test:

The quotations from Fir Tree Manufacturing arrived Thursday.

Sales staff are being trained in five competencies.

On December 13, 1997, Alice Trucker visited each of our divisions.

Here are the messages rewritten into bottom-line statements:

I am going to immediately order next quarter's stock from Fir Tree Manufacturing as their quotations arrived Thursday, and their prices are lower than Douglas Manufacturing's.

In accordance to your wishes, our sales staff are now being trained in the five competencies and should finish training in one month.

Alice Tucker reports that all of our divisions are on target and are in complete compliance after visiting them in December.

The body or message area of the memo is the "meat" of the memo. The text in this area should be concise, clear, and well-written. Organization is very important. If you have more than one topic or subject (or you have subtopics), you can use headings to make your message more readable and understandable. If you have a list of items within your memo, use bullets. Bullets, like headings, are frequently used in memos to make them easier to read. Avoid unnecessary topics or information--and don't repeat yourself.

Conclusions are good to use if you have several points to make and wish to summarize them or make a recommendation. Conclusions are also useful if you wish to make a request.

Notification of attachments is included at the very end of the memo, right above the bottom margin and against the left margin. Always identify your attachment in the following way-- Attachment: Exhibit I.

If a memo continues to a second page, do not use letterhead or repeat the Date:, To:, From:, Subject: information. On the second page, across the top, put the name of the person to whom the memo is sent flush with the left margin, the page number in the center, and the date at the right margin. Here is a sample:

Jason MacGruder	2	Donna Shaw
-----------------	---	------------

Some points to remember about good memo writing are as follows:

* Be kind to your reader--use headings and bullets as necessary to make the memo easy to read and key points stand out.

* Be concise--long sentences with complex construction do not belong in memos. Keep memos short and to-the-point.

* Come to the point first--always use a bottom-line statement at the very beginning of a non-sensitive memo.

* Remember memo format--never use a salutation or complementary closing with a memo.

* Identify your attachments--if your attachments become separated from the memo, your reader will know that they were supposed to be there and can ask for them.

* Be coherent--limit each paragraph to only one idea. Keep your sentences flowing smoothly, and keep them short.

* Use a business-like tone--use the first person (I or we); use short, simple words; be as informal as the situation allows; use concrete, specific words.

* Proofread your work--always read your work (or have someone else read it) before you sent it out.

* Identify your audience--identify the person or persons to whom you are writing. Think about what they know, who they are, what they want to see or hear, how they are situated. Clarify your audience's background, context, and environment. Never, never, never write without identifying your audience first.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

3.003 Principles of Engineering Practice
Spring 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.