

Turney's Tips: **Memo Writing**

Underlying assumptions:

A memo is usually an internal working paper written to share information and/or instructions among peers, most often those working for the same organization or those working together on a common project even though they represent different organizations. Because they're informal working papers, memos are rarely sent to outsiders, especially those you or your organization want to impress. A business letter is considered more formal, more serious, more forceful, and more impressive than a memo.

Because they're written to people who are involved in or at least familiar with your work, your organization, and the standard practices of your profession, memos use an informal style in which jargon, abbreviations, and short-form references to people and organizations are acceptable.

Most memos request specific information, respond to previous questions, share new information, or give instructions to do something. They may also be written to create a "*paper trail*" for future reference.

Note: In recent years and in many organizations, e-mail has increasingly taken the place of hard-copy memos. In fact, the basic format of e-mail is a direct adaptation of memo format. Consequently, many of the guidelines for writing e-mail and for memo writing are totally interchangeable.

Working tips:

- Keep the reader in mind as you write and make the memo as conversational as possible.
- Keep it short and focused. It's often more effective to write a series of short memos, with one topic per memo, rather than one long one. Procter & Gamble, e.g., considers one-page memos the norm.
- The topic should be evident in the subject line and be immediately addressed in the first paragraph.
- Present the main idea of your memo or make your request before spending time on an explanation. If background detail is necessary, state the key points first and then fill in the background.
- Explain references fully enough to avoid confusion. If your organization has many manuals or policies, don't vaguely refer to what "the manual says" or "the policy requires." Specify which manual or which specific policy you're referring to.
- Similarly, don't refer to previous conversations, letters or phone calls without specifying the date, topic and gist of that exchange. When you're using e-mail it's easy to provide this context and avoid confusion by pasting key parts of the previous message(s) in your reply. However, it's considered poor "netiquette" and a "waste of bandwidth" to include the entire previous message; delete any unnecessary or overly-detailed information, as well as any extraneous comments and formalities.

For additional information:

Raymond Lesikar, "Memorandums," **Basic Business Communication** (fourth edition).
Irwin: Homewood, Illinois; 1988; pp. 256-68.

Memo format and set-up suggestions:

If you work for an organization with pre-printed memo forms or a preferred format, use them. If not, the following format is among the most widely used, but there are lots of acceptable variations.

September 9, 2003
TO: Name of addressee
FROM: Michael L. Turney
RE: Guidelines for memo writing
 Text begins here, most often flush with the margin and not indented. The body of the memo is almost always single-spaced, but a blank line is left between paragraphs to insure their separation.

- Some people like to center the work MEMORANDUM at the top of the page.
- Some use a DATE: heading above the other headings or inserted between the FROM and RE lines.
- SUBJ: or SUBJECT: are often used as an alternative on the RE line.

Titles may be added on the same line and immediately after a person's name or on the next line, indented to align with the start of the person's name. The departments in which the TO and FROM people work may also be included on the line beneath their names.

Traditionally, the writer initials or signs first name only—Full signatures are almost never used.—after or over their name on the FROM line of the original memo. Additional copies are usually left unsigned.

Bottom notes, if needed, are added under the body of the memo and aligned with the left margin.

MLT:rjm
cc: D. Jones
Enclosure: LS-2 Operating Manual

- Initials and capitalization identify a secretary and the type of help provided in preparing the memo. If the initials MLT match the name on the FROM line, *MLT:rjm*, for instance, means MLT dictated a memo that rjm typed; *RJM/MLT* means RJM wrote it for MLT.
- *cc:* (meaning carbon copies) or *c:* (copies) followed by names identifies people whose names aren't listed in the TO line who are also being sent copies of the memo.
- *Enclosures:* or *Attachments:* are reminders meant to insure that the recipient gets everything promised in the body of the memo.