

Memorandum

DATE: January 31, 2004

TO: All Students, Northeastern University

FROM: Deanne Harper, Academic Specialist, Northeastern University

RE: Memo guidelines

CC: R. Whalen, Professor, Northeastern University

Welcome to the writing effectiveness component of this course. Our first discussion will focus on the conventions of memos since most of your homework assignments will be submitted in memo format. Memos represent a personalized kind of business communication, somewhat like letters though letters are more formal, external documents. This memo will serve as both an illustration of what your own memos should look like and a discussion of various guidelines you should follow in writing memos to clients or colleagues in a professional situation. Detailed below are criteria for memo design, organizational considerations, conventions of style, and visual aids.

Design Considerations

Memo design is important as it helps readers visually comprehend what they see. There are several visual concerns in any memo: caption, white space and font choice, headings, visual aids (discussed separately below).

Take note of the information provided in each line of the caption. You should always include the name of person(s) addressed by the memo, as well as title(s) and institutional affiliation(s); provide the same information for yourself. The subject line should provide specific information on the memo contents. List any person(s) who will receive a copy of this document on a line after the subject line. Since this is not a letter, the way you “sign off” on the memo contents is to write your initials next to your name.

Use a 10 or 12 point font keeping in mind that readability is essential. Margins should be 1 inch on all sides. Each paragraph begins at the left margin; double space between paragraphs to distinguish one from the next. As you prefer, you may leave the right margins ragged (as I have) or you may choose to justify them.

Brief headings may be used to distinguish areas of concern within the memo. The heading, should specifically inform readers of the contents of that section and thus help readers move easily among parts of your discussion.

Organization Concerns

The information provided in any memo should be carefully organized so that the structure supports the meaning intended. What this means is that you'll have to carefully consider the order in which you arrange material offered. After the captioned material at the top, there are three main parts to a memo: the introduction, the body sections/paragraphs, and the conclusion. These are discussed below.

An important concern in any document is that you orient your reader before proceeding with your detailed discussion of each of the parts or sections you present. The introductory paragraph should establish the context of the discussion and give the reader a "roadmap" or overview of what is to follow and how it is organized (see my introductory paragraph above). It is not necessary to label the introduction in a piece as short as this, though you may choose to do so in longer documents such as reports.

After the introduction, the main component of the memo is a series of body paragraphs, perhaps arranged into discrete sections identified with a heading (as discussed above). Each of these paragraphs should detail results or other requested information, and also explain the significance of the information provided as well as its relation to other areas of discussion, as appropriate.

The conclusion is important if for no other reason than that it signals to the reader that you have indeed come to the end of your comments. The two conventions of a conclusion are (1) a cordial close, reaffirming the personal nature of the communication, and (2) an offer to be of further assistance that includes, as a matter of courtesy, numbers or addresses to aid further contact. See my conclusion, below, for an example of this.

Style

Memos are personal but not chatty, so the tone and language you choose should reflect your technical and professional expertise but should not be overly formal. My own sentences are sufficiently formal with a professional tone. Sentences must be grammatically correct. Use different kinds of sentences: some short, some complex. You will always need to be aware of your audience as you write as this awareness helps you choose the appropriate language to use. Word choice issues include incorporation of strong and precise verbs, selective use of passive voice, correct placement and punctuation of modifying phrases, precise pronoun references. You should work to be as concise as possible and to avoid sexist or discriminatory language.

Visual Aids

Use visual aids whenever they will be useful to illustrate and/or clarify information. Visuals are labeled as figures (photographs, diagrams, drawings) or tables (which arrange and simplify presentation of numbers or variables). It is most important to remember to identify each visual by number in the order in which it appears in your text: the first figure is Figure 1. In addition to the numbering, however, each visual should be informatively titled. The visual should be placed as near to the discussion as possible and should be explicitly discussed in the text. A visual does not replace discussion: speak, at least briefly, of what the reader will find as s./he looks at the visual aid.

I hope this brief overview proves useful as you prepare Memos for this class. Should you have questions about this material that I cannot answer in class, please feel free to contact me in any of the following ways:

phone - 373-2493
email - d.harper@nUNET.neu.edu
office - 283 Ryder Hall

In addition, I have a website where I provide more specific information (and examples) of the various concerns discussed above (<http://www.dac.neu.edu/sgs/d.harper>). I look forward to working with you this term, and I wish you the best of luck with your work.