



Effective Professional Writing: The Memo

IFSM 201

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“To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points. I ask my colleagues and their staffs to see to it that their Reports are shorter.”

- WINSTON CHURCHILL, AUGUST 9, 1940
- SOURCE (A ONE PAGE READ): [CHURCHILL'S "BREVITY" MEMO](#)

Writing Memos

The context of professional writing

Why write memos?

How to write them?

How to make them better?

The Context

The **workplace** or **field**:

- Time is precious.
- Information has substantive as well as political implications.

The **decision-maker** as reader:

- Busy and distracted (attention “spread thin”), not necessarily patient while you get to the point.
- Info needs are varied, unpredictable, fluid.
- Decision-maker sometimes offers vague instructions.

Academic vs. professional writing

Differences (when writing concisely)

- The **academic reader** often demands nuance and relevance to established lines of thinking, while the **professional reader** wants the “so what’s” for their decision making emphasized (relevance to their actions).
- An **academic assignment** assumes a small and benevolent audience, but **professional documents** can be “leaked,” end up in the hands of unintended readers.

Similarities

- Strong essays and strong memos both start with your main ideas, but essays usually build toward conclusion and synthesis. *The memo’s conclusions are usually right up top.*
- In both, *persuasive argument = clear viewpoint + evidence*
- In both, addressing *counter-arguments* tends to strengthen your case.

Top mistakes in memos

Content:

- off point or off task (major substantive omissions, given the request);
- impolitic (risks political costs if leaked);
- inappropriate assumptions as to background knowledge;
- no evidence.

Organization:

- important info “buried,”
- no summary up top, format confusing, not “skim-able.”
- Sentences long and dense,
- headings an after-thought.

Style:

- language too academic, too “preachy,” or too casual;
- sentences long and/or dense.

Why write memos?

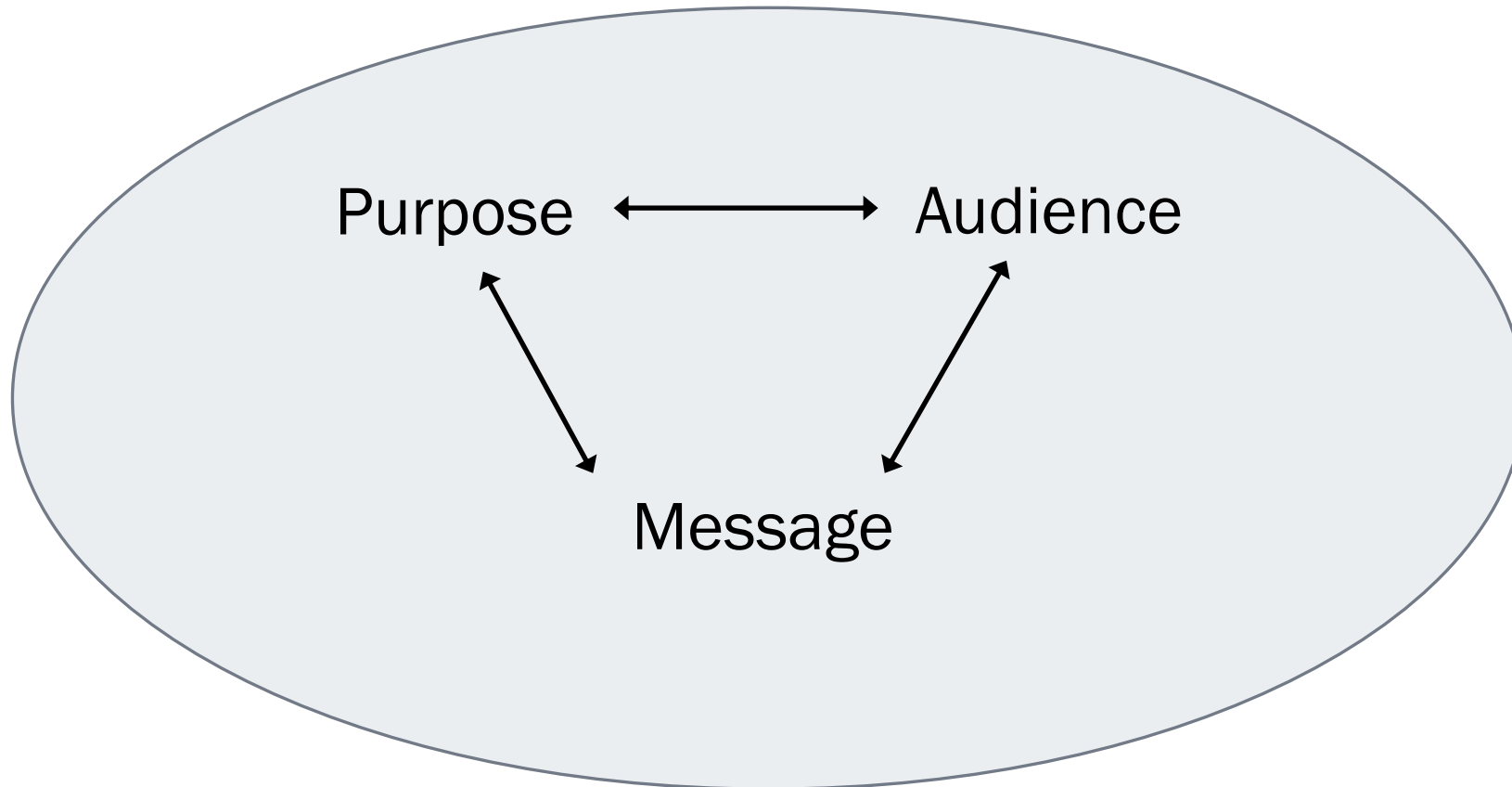
Professional communication

- Efficient
- Persuasive
- Focused

Two types of memos:

- Informational (provide analytic background)
- Decision or “action” (analyze issues and also recommend actions)

Consider Your Message in Context



Use a Clear Structure

Summary:

- Summarize the entire memo
- Highlight major points to consider

Background:

- State the context

Body:

- Prove it, analyze it, address counter arguments (if any)

Conclusion:

- Outline Next Steps or Next Questions

Action Memos: Recommend Decisions

Summary:

- Summarize the entire memo, clearly, but more importantly, concisely
- State the broad recommendation(s)
- If the decision-maker reads only this section/paragraph, will he/she know what the situation is/recommendation(s) is/are (without necessarily knowing specific action steps)

Background:

- Provide the context

Body:

- Prove it/Analyze it, perhaps with pros/cons by option (if there are multiple options)

Conclusion:

- Outline next steps, **don't merely restate recommendation(s)**

Tip: Construct a Clear, Concise, Coherent Argument

In your opening summary, you may use more than one sentence to describe overall goals or recommendations, however, as an exercise it typically helps to try to state your argument in one sentence. Expand on the sentence as needed as you construct your opening summary.

Examples:

- In order to recreate the organization's image and reorganize our internal structure in the next 6 months, we should focus on X, Y and Z.
- While the company is in compliance with State of California Privacy laws with respect to X, Y and Z, there are two areas that still need to be addressed to reach our goal of 100% compliance: A and B.