



Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Guidelines for Effective Informational Memos

Writing clear, informative memos is a critical to your career whether you are a policy maker, engineer, architect, consultant, or activist. Informative memos help lay the ground work for critical decisions that you and others will be making. Informative memos are not decision memos; they do not recommend a course of action. Instead, informative memos are directed to a decision maker and seek to:

- highlight options
- compare alternatives
- provide analysis

As such your ability to convey complex information simply is key. Also important is your forethought about the concerns of the decision maker and deciding how to address each concern.

Of course no writing is unbiased and while you will likely have an opinion about the best course of action, save these strong opinions for later. Instead, challenge yourself to carefully lay out each critical issue, idea or plan and analyze these using a carefully chosen structure (e.g., pros/cons, long term/short term). Think of an informational memo as a document that sets the stage, frames the issues, and provides the detailed analysis that feeds into the larger decision. When you know what your decision maker expects (audience) and you give her what she needs clearly and concisely (meeting expectations), you become part of the decision making team.

Okay, so here's the strategy:

1. Include a Summary Paragraph:

Similar to an action memo, here you need to summarize the contents of the memo. However, your decision maker doesn't want an action plan. She will create that (or have you create it later). Instead:

- State the issue (1 sentence)
- Summarize the analysis briefly (1-3 sentences)
- Outline the options (1-3 sentences)

2. Focus on the content of the memo:

The body of the memo is where the analysis goes. Here you want to explicitly tell the decision maker that she will need to make a decision about the issues that you will present one by one. For each issue you need to:

- Name and explain briefly each issue – most important issue goes first
- Provide the analysis at a level expected by the reader (don't include raw data, if she wants to focus on trends)
- Discuss options
- Use a sub heading to divide issues

3. Craft the Conclusion

Informational memos have conclusions that state what the next steps are, but don't draw conclusions or recommend any specific action. It is not about providing a distinct answer to a question but providing a variety of well-analyzed options.

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4. Don't underestimate the power of tone in writing

Get in the habit of thinking about who you are writing to and where the memo might end up (the press, a higher up, etc.) Everything you write these days and send electronically (even e-mail) should be carefully crafted, edited and then scanned for problems. Informative memos have a distinctively neutral tone. They don't seek to sell an idea, although your choices about what to present and how will often persuade a decision maker. In general tone should be:

- Diplomatic
- Acknowledge problem areas
- Advance options without arguing with existing policies
- Tactful, not patronizing or insistent

Practicing more than one style of memo writing will help you fine tune and develop your individual style.

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Fall 2015

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