

**To:** Comm Internship Students  
**From:** Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Internship Director  
**Date:** 19 January 2010  
**Subject:** How to Write Memos

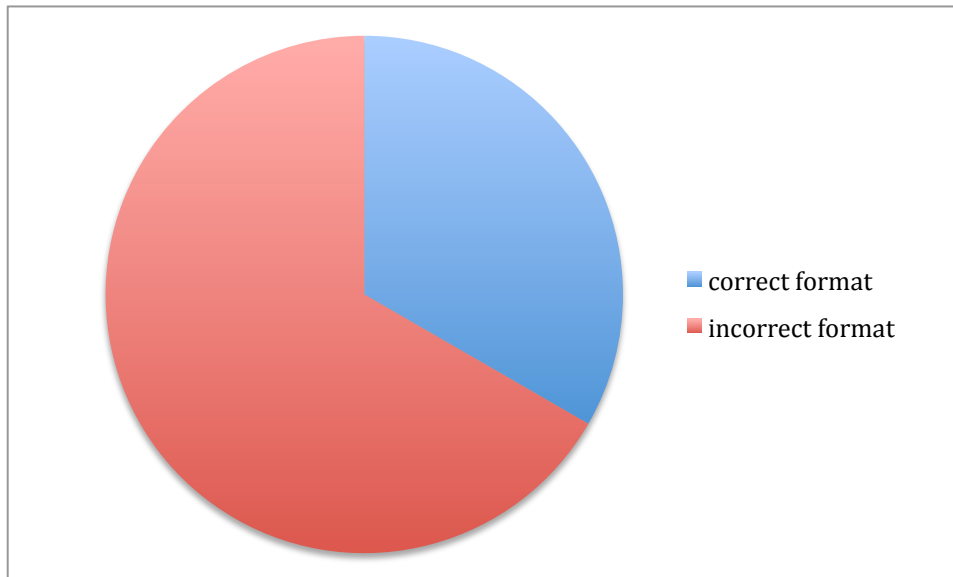
As is typical for memos, I'm going to use this first paragraph to set a context (cueing you in about why I'm writing you) and overview what the memo covers (to help you process the information as you read). The general memo format will be useful this semester in this class, but you'll also find yourself writing variations of the memo format throughout your professional career. The principles of good memos—which are covered below—are similar to the principles for other communications such as email. Refer back to this memo when it's time to write your mid-term and final reports.

### **What Goes at the Top of a Memo?**

After an initial "context-setting" paragraph, a memo is a pretty no-nonsense format: paragraphs of text and, in some cases, necessary charts, diagrams, or other illustrations. The header block (To:, From:, etc.) at the top is fairly standard but the order of items varies sometimes (usually with Date: and Subject: being reversed) or with Subject: replaced by Re: (which means "regarding").

Subject lines are especially important (both for memos and for email messages): What short phrase or title is going to alert your reader to the purpose of the memo? A subject line like, "Proposal" or "Feedback" doesn't help readers much; something like, "Proposal for New Printer Purchase in Main Office" or "Focus Group Feedback on TekMarx Ad Campaign".

If you include a figure or chart, be sure to discuss the chart in the main text and to include a figure number and title (see Figure 1 for an example of how to format a chart).



**Figure 1: Percentage of People Who Formatted Their Initial Memo Correctly**

If the memo contents can be organized into topical sections, it's a good idea to cue the reader by offering them simple headings in bold, initial caps. When you write headings, be sure to take the reader into account. Don't just simply name a section "Procedures" or "Format" but instead pose a question or state an action that makes sense from the reader's perspective. Avoid making the headings too long.

### **Where and Why Do You Write Memos?**

Memos are usually reserved for relatively short, semi-official, internal documents. Longer documents are usually structured as *reports* (with cover pages, tables of contents, etc.). External communications are typically either reports (if long) or *letters* (with address blocks, salutations, closures, etc.). In today's workplace, a memo is structured a lot like an email message, but a memo is slightly more formal in most cases just because it's in print. The language of memos tends to be more formal than email but less formal than letters—professional but not stuffy.

Most of the principles covered here also apply to semi-formal corporate/organizational email: The intro paragraph to set context, headings where necessary, etc. can all help make your email easier to read. Obviously, in some cases email will be very informal, but always consider your audience and purpose carefully: In some cases, you'll want to write an email that's structured a lot like a memo.

### **Aside from the Header Block, How are Memos Formatted?**

Memos have simpler formatting than letters or reports in most cases. They are nearly always single-spaced (double-spacing is format designed for gather comments on a draft; this is being quickly replaced by specialized commenting features in software). Although not a universal rule, they are also flush-left justified: paragraphs do not have first line indents but are instead separated by blank lines. Full justification is avoided because it can make text harder to read (readable full-justified text requires careful, manual tweaking to avoid word spacing issues).

Memos also differ from letters in that memos do not contain signature blocks in most cases—they just end.

### **Is This the Universal Memo Format?**

There is no universal memo format: Every organization and company has its own slightly different format. Some of them will always use official company stationary for memos. Some will lay the header block out differently. Some will use different fonts. Some might tend to use full-justification, even though it's a bonehead move. (Telling your boss that their full-justified memo is "a bonehead move because Johndan says so" isn't a wise rhetorical move.) The format I've covered here includes the most common, generic things, but when you enter into any new organization or company you should try to get some examples of existing documents to see what the local customs are.

### **Anything Else to Add?**

If your memo (or any print document) is more than a single page be sure to add a running header or footer with some informative (to the reader) text and a page number. Do **not** put this information on the first page since there's already enough on the first page of a memo that provides the same information. But when a reader is on page two or three it's sometimes useful to remind them who wrote the document. For example, if a manager (or professor) is reading a stack of twenty TPS reports, they may need some reminder about which faceless drone wrote the report.

### **Closing the Memo**

As mentioned above, you don't normally use a signature block at the end of a memo. In some case, you'll just end after you've covered all of the topics you need to cover. You can write a Conclusion section (that summarizes what you've just covered) but a memo is short enough that that's not usually crucial. However, if you expect the reader of the memo to take some concrete action, your final section might be a reminder of exactly what you need from them and when (e.g., "After you've had a chance to vet this information, call me to discuss our next step. You can reach me at x6488. Thanks.")