Short Report

A longish memo (say, two pages or more) might be called a "short, informal report"—and there's really not much difference between a long memo and a short informal report in terms of formatting. The term "report" may suggest more in-depth research. If a supervisor asks you to give her a "memo," that suggests she wants some information quickly and informally. Get it done now, by tomorrow. If she asks you for a "short report," that might suggest more detail, more research, more careful analysis.

The important thing to remember is that these terms—memo, report, informal report—and the genres they stand for can have flexible meanings from one workplace to another.

— J. Porter, P. Sullivan, J. Johnson Eilola,
Professional Writing Online, 2.0

Memo

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to English 427/527 students, Spring 2006 semester
from Kevin Eric DePew, Ph.D., Instructor
date February 28, 2006
re Strategies for writing a short report

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Like an essay, you want to begin a memo with an introduction that 1) explains the purpose of the document, and 2) forecasts what the reader will experience while reading the memo. Yet, unlike an essay, you want to briefly include your conclusion in this space so that your busy audience can quickly get the document's gist.

Therefore, as you can see, the purpose of this memo is to provide an example of a professional memo and give you strategies for drafting one. I will cover strategies for developing content and for designing the document. Finally, I will provide tips and warnings for developing memos in MS Word.

The purpose of a memo

Memos are usually interoffice or interdepartmental documents used for several purposes; they are used to...

- send information,
- state a plan of action,
- make a request,
- record what has been done or needs to be done.

A letter, unlike a memo, will be used to communicate with someone outside the office or department. Emails are beginning to be used to accomplish what memos have been used for. But some people still prefer hard copies to electronic documents.

Before or while drafting a memo, think about what you want to say. Understand that most audiences—especially those that receive twenty or more documents a day—are not going to read the entire memo in detail. Therefore, you want to be brief, but detailed. In other words, include the best examples or evidence that fulfills your intended purpose. Sometimes you will have to staple attachments to a memo that details your plan of action (e.g., a schedule), or justifies your request (e.g., a budget).

Also note that a memo can be very similar to an email in terms of audience. Although you may send a personal email to one person, that person could potentially send this email to audiences that you did not anticipate or intend to read your email. Memos, can also be duplicated and sent to audiences other than the person stated in the "to" line. Furthermore, at some institutions, these documents get archived, so consider how the document you write might also be useful to an audience five or ten years in the future. Because of these secondary audiences, you want to address the issue of the memo to the stated audience, but always consider how other audiences might read the text.

Designing a memo

The *header* ("to," "from," etc.) at the top of the page is standard. The introduction does not have a *heading* but other sections should have one (e.g., "The purpose of a memo"). This allows various audiences to skim to the specific information that s/he feels is most important. As a result, consider dividing your document into several sections with relevant headings, and even consider subheadings which divides larger sections into smaller more navigatable sections.

You should also use the block paragraph format that you see illustrated in this memo. Notice that the lines are single-spaced with a double space in between paragraphs. Also there is no indentation. Double-spacing allows your audience to comment on your paper. Since your memo is a "published work," single-spacing is more appropriate. Also the double-space in between paragraphs serves the same function as indentation; therefore to create block paragraphs with indentation can be redundant and unnecessary, but it is expected in some disciplines.

Bullets and numbered lists visually help your audience to quickly skim through material. Consider using these features when composing a list.

Templates and MS Word

Many institutions will have templates for memos. Always learn what these expectations are. When an institutional template does not exist, you can design your own. Some people tend to use Microsoft Word templates for memos. Note that the earlier templates (Word 97 or 98), are more generic than the recent templates (Word 2000 or 2001). Although some of the more recent templates look "cool," you do not want to distract the reader from the purpose of the memo with many irrelevant images. Furthermore, in some contexts, your audiences may question your knowledge of the technology if you rely on Microsoft's pre-designed templates. You can also design your own memo—like this one—just make sure you have all of the necessary components.