

MEMORANDUM

TO: Sciences Po Students

DATE: 24 January 2012

FROM: Thierry Senechal

SUBJECT: General Pointers on Memo-Writing

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Please see below general pointers on memo drafting.
2. You can influence people by good writing and sending clear symbolic signals. Early in your career, your writing may be your most important tool of influence. Each good memo you write may help your reputation, but bad writing can—and too often does—sabotage your career. If your ideas make sense on paper, you are more likely to be invited to explain them to larger audiences.
3. Good writing begins with good thinking: without good ideas, no amount of clever draftsmanship will redeem your memo. But poor writing easily renders useless your best thinking.
4. Good writing takes your good thinking and
 - persuades others it is right,
 - spurs them to take action,
 - and, not incidentally for your future, brings credit to the author.
5. Writing in a public policy setting usually differs in essential ways from academic or legal writing. Academic writing is aimed at increasing the understanding of a dedicated, careful reader, and tends to highlight the novelty, subtlety, and sophistication that academic culture rewards. Much legal writing creates a precise record in case it is needed in legal proceedings. But in a public policy setting, good writing is aimed at immediate effect. A policy memo is likely to be pressed into someone's hands as he/she hurries down a corridor, stuffed into a briefcase at the end of a long day, or skimmed while taking a phone call. A policy memo must get quickly to the essence of the matter. To do so, it must be vibrant and clear.
6. Different types of memos fit different needs. Some simply provide information or analysis in concise form, but others make a recommendation for decision. Most are a hybrid. Even if the recipient of your memo has a solid base knowledge of the underlying issues, your analysis and recommendations will still require highlighting key assumptions and policies, characterizing the players, framing options and vetting the pros and cons of each. Additionally, if you make a recommendation, be sure your memo offers a concrete guide to action specifying how the recommendation would be implemented (including the reader's own role).

MEMO-WRITING TIPS

7. Pay heed to these general pointers to good memo-writing; we shall pay heed to them as we evaluate your memos:

(i) Audience

- **Know your reader(s).** Take time to do some research on the reader(s). What does (s)he want or need from this memo? What does (s)he already know? How does her/his mind work? What other readers might this memo have besides the addressee?
- Keep in mind that the memo is for the **reader's benefit**, not to impress the reader with what you know, impress ancillary readers, or get on paper all your great ideas.
- Don't **make work for the reader**. Make it easy for the reader to get your main points.
- A good memo **gives a precise answer** to the busy reader's question, "Why am I reading this memo?" What is its purpose? What is it about? What does it say? The reader needs to know right from the start why this particular piece of paper demands her/his attention, and to be convinced it will meet her/his need.
- Aim directly at your **reader's level of familiarity** with the issue. Don't waste ink on obvious or well-known matters. Don't delve into inessential technicalities. Above all, don't force the reader to think like you; seek instead to enter into her/his mind.
- Be wary of the **unintended reader**: your memo might be forwarded to secondary readers or leaked to the press.

(ii) Structure

- Make your **main point in the first sentences**. In anything you write, your first sentence is your most important sentence. If your first sentence is boring, if your first sentence is incoherent, irrelevant, or informative, no one will read your second sentence. Don't bury your main point in the text, and don't save it for the end like a mystery story. In other words:
 - Don't waste your first sentence on boilerplate;
 - Don't waste your first sentence telling your readers things they already know; and
 - Do use your first sentence to convince your busy audience that the rest of your memo is a must read.
- Early in the memo, **provide a roadmap to the whole**, so the reader knows what is coming and in what order – i.e., what the overall logic of the memo is.
- In a 2-page memo, you can only make a **few main points**. Choose carefully.
- Make the **memo scannable** in case the reader has no time to read it carefully.

- Use formatting, **titles and subtitles, black space and white space, to advance your cause.** For example, titling your memo “Policy Issues” wastes an opportunity to signal the reader to your main conclusion about new initiatives. Likewise with subtitles: make them work for you. Don’t use uninformative subtitles like “Introduction” and “Closing.” These are as helpful to the reader as “beginning,” “middle,” and “end.”
- **Don’t go overboard on fancy fonts, bolding, and underlining.** Beyond a certain point they are confusing to the reader and a crutch for poor drafting. Do not use vacuous jargon.
- State the main idea of each paragraph within the **first sentence.**
- When you write a short memo, ask:
 - Does this sentence make sense? Does this paragraph make sense?
 - Does my entire memo possess a coherent, internal logic?
 - What are the flaws in my core idea? In my explanation of this idea? In the reasoning and evidence supporting this idea?
 - Who might dispute my ideas in this memo? On what basis? What part of the memo do I need to modify to anticipate and rebut this criticism?

(iii) Style

- Don’t just write your memo. **Design it.** Design your memo so that your reader(s) can quickly grasp your key message.
- Write for **Real People.** Do not use a bureaucratic style.
- Avoid the **impenetrable, intimidating page.** Don’t make any single page too overwhelming. Don’t make any paragraph too dense.
- Don’t be afraid to be **VIVID** and **BOLD.**
- Choose **short, tough words and sentences.** Never use two words where one will do. Recall the way Thomas Jefferson opened a letter to John Adams: “I apologize for the long letter. I had not enough time to write a shorter one.”
- Avoid passive voice.
- Choose the **plain English** word over its inflated Latinate equivalent (Latinisms typically end in “-ion” and “-ate.”).
- Use parallelism in all types of lists.
- Express key statistics in creative, meaningful ways.
- Getting the words right. This requires rewriting. And rewriting. And then more rewriting (Do not hesitate to get your memo reviewed by peers so that you test your ideas and writing).

(iv) Content

- Anticipate your reader's most pressing needs, and focus on what you know and (s)he does not.
- Specify your assumptions and justify them when necessary.
- Keep discussions of problems and their potential solutions close together.
- Anticipate questions and debate. If you are making a recommendation, state and rebut the counter-arguments.
- Evaluate your options by balancing out their costs and benefits.
- Balance recommendations with discussions of their feasibility.
- Consider political implications of your recommendations, whenever relevant.
- Whenever possible, provide your reader with fallback positions in case your preferred options are not attainable.
- Make sure issues of equal importance take up equivalent space: the more important, the more space, and vice versa.

Above all, think about what you want your reader to DO after reading your memo. Suppose (s)he understands and is persuaded by it. What's the next move? Have you given her/him what (s)he needs to take action on the basis of your memo?