



# Effective Professional Writing: The Memo

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# Writing Memos

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- The context of professional writing
- Why write memos?
- How to write them?
- How to make them better?



# The Context

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- **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.
  - Sometimes offers fuzzy instructions.



# Academic vs. professional writing

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## 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 decisionmaking 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

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- ❑ **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?

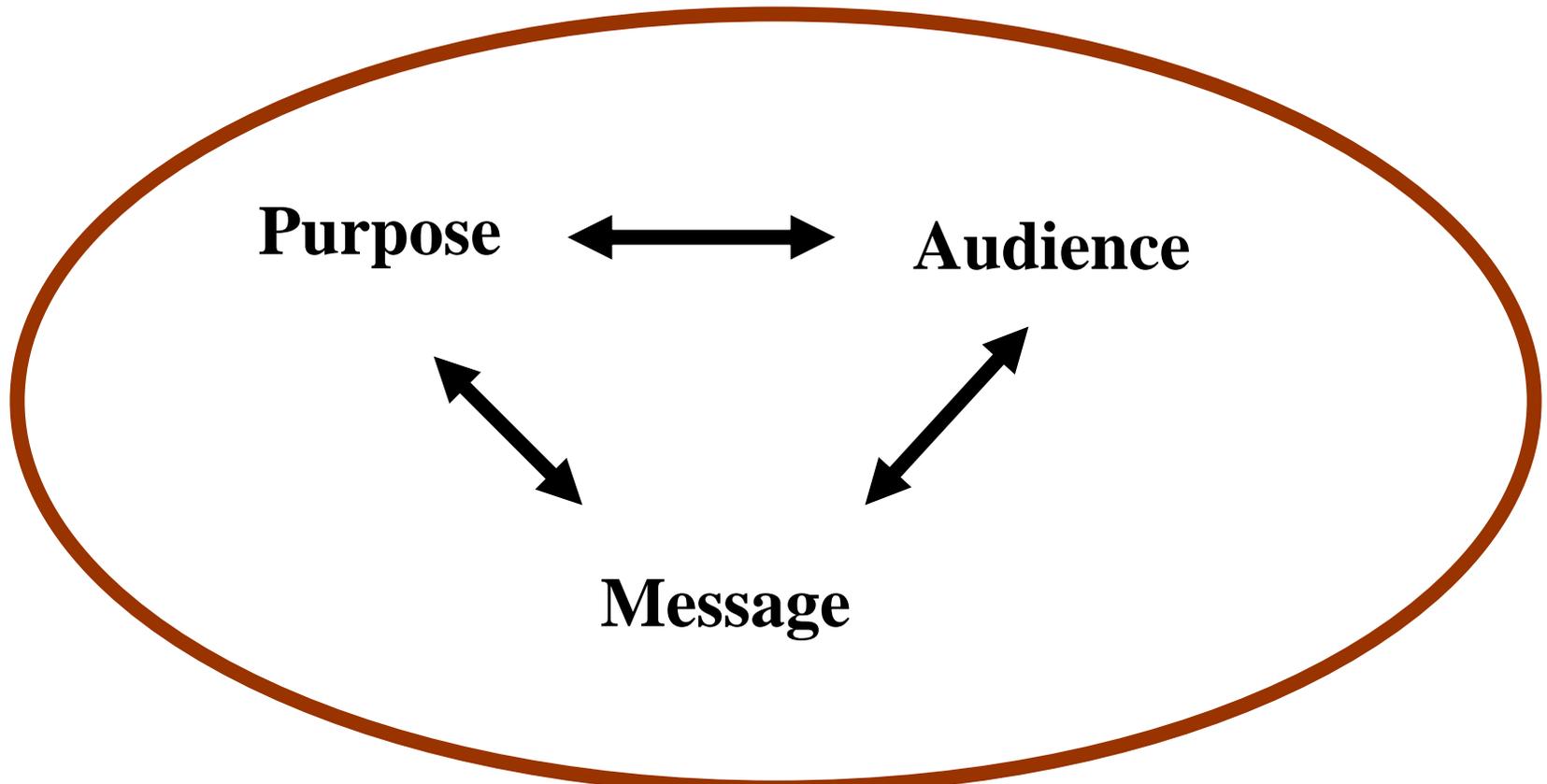
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- Professional communication
  - Efficient
  - Persuasive
  - Focused
- Two types of memos:
  - Informational (provide analytic background)
  - Decision or “action” (analyze issues and also recommend actions)



# Consider Your Message in Context

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# Use a Clear Structure

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Summary:	Summarize the entire memo highlights major points to consider
Background:	State the context
Body:	Prove it, analyze it, address counter arguments
Conclusion:	Outline Next Steps or Next Questions



# Action Memos: Recommend Decisions

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Summary: Summarize the entire memo  
**State the recommendation(s)**

Background: Provide the context

Body: Prove it/Analyze it, perhaps  
with pros/cons by option

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



# Informational Memos: Feed into Decisions

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Summary: Summarize the entire memo  
**Outline Options or Considerations**

Background: Provide the context

Body: Prove it/Analyze it

**Conclusion: Next steps, follow-on questions**



# Writing and improving (Steps)

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- Analyze your task/assignment
- Create a coherent message - Summary
- Construct Issues/Arguments – Body
- Develop/Include evidence - Body
- Revise – check tone
- Edit -- Goal: lean, readable prose



# Analyze the Task

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- What does the task/assignment ask for?
- Can you identify:
  - the topic
  - the scope
- Can you identify key words such as:
  - Summarize
  - Analyze
  - Compare
  - Recommend



# Sample Assignment + Response

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- Task: Offer analysis and recommendations to Linda Griego, new head of Rebuild L.A., in a decision memo, on where to focus the organization in her first six months as Chair. She instructs:
  - Don't "laundry list programs for me"
  - Advise me on how to "define our strategy publicly" (to whom, how)
  - And how to "best deploy our staff and other assets"
  - "We need to restore our reputation with City Hall, community leaders, others ... but how?"



# Topic, Scope, Keywords

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- **Audience:** Griego
- **Define task:** Recommend
- **Scope:** Next 6 months
- **Key words:**
  - **Some analysis**
  - **Focus**
  - **Avoid listing**
  - **Advise**
  - **Define**
  - **Deploy talented staff**
  - **Define our strategy**
  - **What should I focus on?**
  - **What should I emphasize?**
  - **Analysis and Recommendations**



# Create a Coherent Message

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- Frame your message
  - Example:

RLA needs to focus on two key areas of concern:

- (1) Recreate RLA's image (how LA views our role in the rebuilding process), and
- (2) Reorganize internal operations



# Flesh Out Your Message

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- Restore RLA's image
  - Emphasize – Small business
  - Include – x, y, z organizations
  - Say that we are ...
- Reorganize Internal operations
  - Create a smaller, more hands-on board
  - Shift public affairs emphasis: From getting publicity for RLA to building partnerships, shared ownership.



# Construct a Coherent Argument

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- State your argument in one sentence

Example: In order to recreate RLA's image and reorganize our internal structure in the next 6 months, RLA should focus on X, Y and Z.



# Develop Evidence

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- Make the points obvious
  - Use simple language
  - Find and use concrete, compelling evidence
  - Ask yourself “so what?”
- Start with the most important points
- Chunk information into manageable pieces
- Move between generalizations and examples



# Revise for Clarity

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- ❑ Do you answer the question?
- ❑ Do you have a message?
- ❑ Do you have appropriate evidence and examples?
- ❑ Is each example sufficient evidence?
- ❑ Are counter arguments considered?



# Revise for Clarity

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- Delete “empty” introductory sentences
  - Example: Very important lessons can be learned from the Rebuild L.A. model.

- Avoid argument via restatement

Example: The primary weaknesses of the RLA were X, Y and Z. X, Y, and Z, were problematic because they didn't take into account community needs. These needs made the RLA weak.



# Edit for lean, readable prose

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Avoid:

- Stock phrases and clichés:
  - “In today’s society” “too little, too late”
- Clunky constructions
  - “The reason is because...”
- Vague phrases
  - “Our choice of planning models may require further thought”
- Slang/acronyms
  - “let’s work on QT to create a sweet plan”



# Avoid Clunky Constructions

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## **Weak**

Significant are the number of poor people.

The reason why the planning process failed is because it did not have a strong outreach program.

## **Better**

The number of poor people is significant.

The planning process failed because it did not have a strong outreach program.



# Simplify, Simplify, Simplify

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## Weak



## Better

- Assistance
- Endeavor
- Terminate
- For the reason that
- In the event that
- Perform the editing function

- Help
- Try
- End
- Because
- If
- edit



# Avoid the “naked this”

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## **Weak**

Engineers often view community involvement as an afterthought. This can cause long-term problems in the planning process.

## **Better**

Engineers often view community involvement as an afterthought. This shortsightedness can cause long-term problems in the planning process.



# Be Careful about Sentence Subjects

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- ❑ Clad in a yellow bikini, he watched her walk down the beach. (So ... *he* was in the bikini?)
- ❑ After falling from a platform, a construction worker picked up the wrench. (So ... the *worker* fell and then picked it up?)
- ❑ By using market research, the dog food was packaged in pouches instead of cans. (So ... *dog food* does market research now? The food is that smart?)



# Stress Active, not Passive Voice

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- The weaknesses were not documented. (*Passive*)
- Mistakes were made. (*Passive*)
- I think that this design is problematic. I think they could have improved the system by.... (*Active – overuse of personal pronouns*)
- The planners did not document the weaknesses. (*Active*)
- I made a mistake. (*Active*)
- The planners could have improved the design. by...(Active)