

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING ACTION MEMORANDA

Structure

- Directly address your reader's needs in the opening lines.
- Cover background in just a few words and then go quickly into a summary of your recommendations.
- Break down your discussion into meaningful sections in a significant order, reflect that order very briefly in your opening paragraph, and then stick to it.
- Use subheads to summarize key points, like headlines, for easy skimming (in boldface or underlined).
- State the main idea of each paragraph within the first two sentences.
- The rest of the paragraph supports or qualifies the main idea with concrete data.
- Distill and group information into bullet points with appropriate headings.
- If using a conclusion, frame your recommendations in a broader context, rather than merely summarizing your main ideas.

Content

- Anticipate your reader's most pressing needs and focus on what you know and she or he doesn't.
- Specify your assumptions and justify them when necessary.
- Keep discussions of problems and their potential solutions close together and indicated as such.
- Find creative, meaningful ways to express key statistics.
- Evaluate your options by balancing out their costs and benefits.
- Briefly discuss alternatives or counterarguments whenever feasible.
- Balance recommendations with discussions of their evaluation and implementation

- Consider the 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.
- Consider closing with a discussion of "next steps"-- short- and long-term implementation.

Audience

- Give your reader a clear answer to his or her paramount concern: "Why am I reading this?"
- Recognize your intended reader's degree of prior knowledge: try not to over- or under-explain.
- Anticipate your reader's probable questions, concerns, and objections and answer them directly.
- Choose your words carefully: your memo may be forwarded to secondary readers.

Style

- Avoid such wordy introductions as "It is an important consideration to keep in mind that...." Instead, you just get right down to the point.
- Never use two words when one will do.
- Use the active voice whenever possible.
- Use parallelism in all types of lists.
- Choose the plain English word over its more inflated Latinate equivalent.
- Match vocabulary, word choice, and use of jargon to your reader's background and level of expertise.

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