

Guidelines for Memo Writing

(IR/PS Skills Development Center)

The best way to approach writing a memo is to think about who your audience is. Most likely, you are writing to a CEO or an executive who is extremely busy and only has 1 minute to read your memo and make a decision. He will probably read in the following order: header, executive summary, headings, (background), analysis, recommendation(s). If you lose his interest at any of the above stages, he will *stop* reading your memo. In other words, you can have the most brilliant policy recommendation, but if your executive summary is terrible, your recommendation will go unread.

As long as you are aware of your audience and purpose, the format of a memo is extremely flexible. As long as you convey the necessary information, memos can have bullet points, tables, figures, etc. Some professors do have a certain format in mind, however, so it is important to consult with your professor before writing, which you should do for all assignments anyway.

The guidelines below are for the typical 3-page analytical memos asked for in many IR/PS classes. Keep in mind that 1-page memos, email memos, or pure information memos will warrant a slightly different format, though the principles should still be the same. Students writing International Politics and Security memos should jump to the very last page of this document as formatting for those memos are also slightly different. Please come to the Skills Development Center if you want specific advice on how to format your particular memo!

Header

A basic header has a “To:” line, a “From:” line, a “Date:” line, and a “Subject:” line. Some memos may write the addressee’s name like a title across the top of the page (e.g. “Memorandum for John Smith, CEO of Siwang Life Insurance”), but unless you have a good reason to do that, it is probably best to stick with the basic format.

The subject line should be informative rather than generic because it needs to capture the addressee’s attention straight away, which means he should be able to tell what your memo is about by reading just the subject.

Bad subject lines:

Policy Recommendation for Siwang Life Insurance

Siwang Life Insurance’s Next Step

Better subject line:

Siwang Life Insurance Needs to Capture Youth Market by Advertising Through a Cellphone Security App

Executive Summary

One of the most important sections of your memo is the executive summary. For a 3-page memo, the executive summary is roughly 1 paragraph and should summarize your key points. As space is limited, you should have only the most essential information in your executive summary: the problem/issue, your analysis, and the solution(s). Avoid all background information except what is absolutely necessary for your argument to make sense. Avoid any superfluous background information, analogies, or examples that may distract away from your main point. This is your whole memo in a paragraph. Treat it as if it is the only thing your CEO or professor will read to make a decision/assign you a grade.

Example of unnecessary information:

Mimi Apparel, founded in 1998, has a tremendous market in young professionals because of their trendy but office-appropriate selection. (Note: This goes into your background, *not* your executive summary! It shows no indication of any problem or issue or what your memo will be about.)

Example of necessary information:

Mimi Apparel is facing three lawsuits unless they change their suppliers' labor standards. (Note: See how this sentence lays out the driving factor behind why Mimi Apparel needs to change operations / policies.)

Headings

Similar to your subject line, your headings need to be as specific and informative as possible. Your audience will sweep through the memo and look for headings that he wants to read or skip, so do not make him hunt for the section he is interested in. You can also have sub-headings within major headings to further facilitate the reading process.

(Background)

This is the section where you will introduce all relevant background information to the issue at hand. Your audience may already know all this information, so they may skip it, but it is always a good idea to include this section in case there is something they do not know and they can come back to it later.

Again, you want to only present information absolutely necessary for your analysis and recommendations to make sense. Since this section may be skipped, you do not want it to overpower your entire memo or take space away from more important sections, so pick and choose carefully.

Analysis

Some memos will merge the analysis with the background information, especially if you are asked to diagnose a problem. Otherwise, the analysis section commonly includes an examination of possible strategies or policies. The format of this section is extremely varied, but it essentially contains the evidence to support any sort of recommendation or argument you are presenting. For policy memos, you would be listing your policy options with pros and cons. For business memos, you would probably

need additional sections for calculations, graphs, or tables leading to your final recommendation. This section can be covered under one heading or multiple headings—just use what you think is the best format for presenting your logic and evidence.

Recommendation(s)

Not all memos have this section, but most assignments in IR/PS will probably want a recommendation or two. Draw upon everything in your analysis section and present what you think is the best policy option or business strategy. Explain your logic and refer back to the previous sections as needed. If you have an action plan, you would include it in this section.

Guidelines Specific to International Politics and Security

Memos for International Politics and Security are actually closer in format to short essays, but some of the same rules of memo writing still apply. You can (but do not have to) use headings to visually segment your memo, and you can also write an executive summary at the start—only, make sure that your “executive summary” has a proper thesis statement if you go that route.

Otherwise, you need to write a solid introduction (with a proper thesis statement) and conclusion and your main body should be in full paragraphs and not bullet points or lists. You should also answer all of the questions in the syllabus, but you do not have to spend equal amounts of space on each question. Focus on “why” questions and use the “what” questions to help you formulate your argument.

Since the paper is so short, only include background information that is necessary for your analysis. A common mistake that students make is falling into a trap of just describing or listing events without a specific argument. Other students make the opposite mistake of making a lot of claims without supporting evidence. In short, do not write facts without an argument and do not write an argument without facts. If that sounds confusing, we at the Skills Development Center are more than happy to assist you!