Writing effective memos

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Technical Communication Program (TCP)
Huang 049
Agenda

• What is the TCP? What do I have to do to fulfill WIM?

• Memos
  Professional writing and Audience
  Format
  Structure
  Sentence level
The Technical Communication Program (TCP): Huang 049 (basement level)

- The School of Engineering’s writing and public speaking center, established in 1976. Instructors specialize in STEM communications.

- **All WIM students must meet** 1x with a TCP instructor to discuss 1 memo for revision,

- An **online sign-up site** can be found at

http://www.signupgenius.com/go/5080F49A9AF2FA5FF2-cs181w

Please go there to sign up!!!
Professional writing: key characteristics

- Information driven
- Functional—such writing “does work”—to inform, recommend, persuade, etc.
- More “formulaic” and formatted than many other types of writing
- Accessible and clear: writer interprets and explains, makes the big picture clear and explicit
- Not narrative, not aimed at suspense—such writing does not withhold key info until the end!
Many (many!) writing problems arise because writer fails to consider the readers!
Keep readers in mind at all times!

Two important “givens” about readers in professional contexts
(even if you do not know that much about them personally)
1. Readers read

► QUICKLY

To do so, they look for well-defined sections – often indicated by headings and subheadings – containing specific types of information.
2. Readers read

► SELECTIVELY

They will read some sections **first** (and sometimes will **only** read these if a document is long) **and pay more attention to openings**—of documents and sections:

- **Executive Summary (or Summary):** concise summation of document’s key points with emphasis on conclusions, findings, recommendations: the *takeaways*

- **Opening sentence(s) of paragraphs and sections**

- **In longer docs, reader may also go to a conclusion section**
Looking at readers in professional contexts another way: it may be fair to say that they can be characterized by the following:

TL;DR

Too long; didn’t read
Given the professional reader’s MO...

...what do you need to do to write an effective memo?
Ok, first—what are memos?

Relatively short professional documents used to communicate information: to inform, brief, recommend, present action items, persuade, warn, explain, etc. In some realms can have very formal meanings (legal, contractual, etc.).

Can be used to move analysis into decision-making sphere or used to support decision making.
Effective documents are not data dumps of loosely strung together observations and facts
Do not bury key information!
Locate main point(s) up front! ("bottom line up front"
or BLUF)

Why?
To allow the most important information to be easily located, quickly grasped
Use this principle on macro and micro levels

- **Macro level:** include a summary (executive summary) at head of document; this summarizes key points of entire memo

- **Micro level:** include good framing or topic sentences in paragraphs that sum up observation, assertion, finding, or recommendation
Memo Writing: **Key Principle**

Use *labels/headings* (and other visual devices when appropriate, e.g., bullets, lists)

**Why?**

*To make document more functional, reader friendly by making information easy to locate*
Hallmarks of good formatting:

• Good use of **white space**

• Minimal indentation

• Content-specific, descriptive, informative **headings**

• *Judicious* use of **formatting devices**: bullets, enumeration, boldface

• Elegance and restraint — **do not overdo the formatting**: avoid excessive underlining, boldfacing, italics, different fonts
Memo format: memo heading

To:
From:
Subject:
Date:

(yes, this is where the email format comes from)
A good subject line can—and should be—very informative!

To: XYZ
From: ABC
Subject: Recommendations for improved security
Date: 1/15/18
Memo format: summary (executive summary) at the head

Sums up main points of document—and yes, includes findings and recommendations, action items/list

Everything in the summary will be *expanded upon* and *amplified* in body of report!

A summary is *NOT* an introduction or a table of contents.
Memo format: memo body

- Paragraphs or short sections—with good topic sentences!
- Internal headings
- White space
- Can use bullet points or lists if they are contextualized
Memo (and any document, really) Structure: The funnel or inverted pyramid: lead from main points, and then provide detail!

- **Summary**
- **Topic Sentences**

**Memo as a whole**

**Summary**

Body of report, (that is, the summary detailed)

**Paragraph or section level**

**Main point**

Supporting details

Details
Sentence level

- Use language understandable to target audience
- Define technical terms if necessary
- Be concise—weed out deadwood
- Be clear—avoid vague pronoun refs, overuse of negative constructions; use active constructions
- Be precise—use the same keywords
- Be appropriate—use professional tone
To sum up

BLUF: Lead FROM your main points:

Make your memo reader friendly by including a summary of key takeaways for readers up front.

Format, design, and edit your document to make material visually accessible (and professional looking) and your writing clear and concise.
The Task Team to identify designers’ resource needs is composed of representatives from all six of our sections. We met twice in October with designers from the six sections to discuss our their resource needs. The Team was established in September per management’s request.

We did obtain some preliminary findings based on the group meetings each of our representatives held with designers from each section in October. The Team believes, however, that before we present a final report on our investigation, we would benefit from one-on-one interviews with designers from each section and/or surveys that each designer would answer. Some designers have voiced concern that some people may not have had a chance to voice their thoughts given the large group setting of the meetings and the very limited times at which meetings took place.

Thus, we would like your approval to extend this investigation for another month. We also welcome any suggestions you may have for us in regard to gathering information.

The members of the Team believe that if we are granted an extension, we would be able to present a final report by November 30.

We look forward to your response.
The Task Team is requesting approval to extend our investigation into resources for designers for another month so that we can speak with designers one-on-one. Based on our initial feedback, we believe we will get more accurate information if we can do this.

Why an extension?

The Task Team was established in September per management’s request to identify designers’ resource needs; it is composed of representatives from all six of our sections. Although we do have some preliminary feedback from the group meetings held in October, the Team believes that we would benefit from one-on-one interviews with designers from each section and/or surveys that each designer would answer. Some designers have voiced concern that some people may not have had a chance to honestly voice their thoughts given the large group setting of the meetings and the very limited times at which meetings took place.

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We look forward to your response and welcome any suggestions you may have.
To: Richard Hernandez, Director  
Orange Grove Products

From: Taylor Chen, Environmental Engineer  
Agarwal, McKee, and Stein Engineers

Subject: Recommended Citrus Processing Waste: Treatment System

Date: October 14, 2015

In your letter of August 20, 2015, you asked me to suggest a treatment process for the wastewater from your new citrus processing plant. You stated that any treatment process selected should exhibit performance effectiveness under average and adverse flow conditions and exhibit cost superiority in terms of initial cost and yearly spending. I have compared three treatment alternatives using the data you supplied and your criteria as a basis for comparison. This report recommends a process for economically and efficiently treating citrus processing waste.

After considering three treatment processes, the activated sludge process, the anaerobic lagoon, and the aerated lagoon, I recommend an aerated lagoon as the most efficient and economical method for treating citrus processing waste. The advantages of the aerated lagoon over the other treatment processes are as follows: The aerated lagoon is the only alternative which could meet the federal pollution standards under adverse flow conditions. It exhibits significantly better performance under all conditions through more consistent BOD reduction and higher organic loading potential. The aerated lagoon affords significantly lower initial and yearly costs due to its ease of construction, operation, and maintenance. Per lagoon, the estimated initial cost is only $400,000 and the annual operating cost $65,800, approximately half as much as the more economical of the other two options.

To give you more detail, aerated lagoons consistently produce a better-quality effluent than do activated sludge processes or anaerobic lagoons. Aerated lagoons exhibit better BOD reduction and higher organic loading potential under both average and adverse flow conditions that do either of the other treatment schemes. The standard for BOD, as published in the Federal Register of July 1, 1990, states that all discharges into receiving streams shall contain no more than 30 mg/liter of BOD. Table 1 shows aerated lagoons with 95% BOD reduction potential to be capable of producing effluent in compliance with federal standards under both average and adverse flow conditions. Activated sludge processes and anaerobic lagoons, on the other hand, can only effectively treat wastewater of average BOD values.
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1. exhibit performance effectiveness under average and adverse flow conditions;
2. exhibit cost superiority in terms of initial cost and yearly spending.

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Summary

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2. The aerated lagoon affords significantly lower initial and yearly costs due to its ease of construction, operation, and maintenance. Per lagoon, the estimated initial cost is only $400,000 and the annual operating cost $65,800, approximately half as much as the more economical of the other two options.

1 Performance Superiority of Aerated Lagoons

Aerated lagoons consistently produce a better-quality effluent than do activated sludge processes or anaerobic lagoons. Aerated lagoons exhibit better BOD reduction and higher organic loading potential under both average and adverse flow conditions that do either of the other treatment schemes.

1.1 Superior BOD Reduction by Aerated Lagoons

The standard for BOD, as published in the Federal Register of July 1, 1990, states that all discharges into receiving streams shall contain no more than 30 mg/liter of BOD. Table 1 shows aerated lagoons with 95% BOD reduction potential to be capable of producing effluent in compliance with federal standards under both average...
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