MYTHIC UNIVERSITY ONLINE
memo

DATE :   August 9, 2009
TO :   Users of *Style for Students Online*
FROM :   Joe Schall
SUBJECT : Writing Memos for your Classes

This memo provides you with tips on writing memos for your classes, with special attention to a memo's audience, format, organization, content, tone, and style. Because my advice comes in the form of a memo, you can use this document as a model for writing your own memos.

The Audience for a Memo

It is useful to begin by considering that a memo is essentially a one-on-one communication between writer and reader. Although a memo may be written to a group of people or with various audiences in mind, usually it is a highly goal-oriented communication between two people who need to share information. When you write a memo to a professor in the classroom setting, you are much like the employee who has been assigned to investigate a problem and report back to a supervisor. Therefore, you are expected to provide concrete information, even information that the supervisor might already know, in a form that clarifies ideas and puts them into context. Finally, a memo enjoys a broader context than an essay; hence, you might refer to other related memos as you write, or you might respond to specific requests made by the audience in your text, in effect, carrying on a professional conversation.

Typical Memo Format

The overall format of a memo can be broken down into the heading, the body, and the closing notations. What follows is a brief description of each component.

The Heading

The heading has two parts: part one includes two centered lines at the top of page 1, identifying the name of the company or institution on the first line, with the word "memorandum" on the second line; part two includes the "DATE," "TO," "FROM," and "SUBJECT" lines at the left margin, filled in appropriately.

The Body

The body of the memo follows the Introduction, and it is usually presented in single-spaced paragraphs with a line skipped between each paragraph. The first lines of new paragraphs can appear at the left margin or they can be indented five spaces.

<u>The Closing Notations</u>
The closing notations, used to identify such things as attachments, appear at the left margin two lines below the text of the final paragraph. By simply typing the word "Attachment" as a closing notation, you automatically refer the reader to any attachment, such as a map, a set of calculations, spreadsheets, or a References page.

How Memos are Organized
The general organization of a memo mirrors that of an essay: an introduction, followed by body paragraphs, followed by a conclusion. However, the first paragraph of a memo is typically used as a forecasting device. Note how the opening paragraph of this memo defines the memo's function and reflects its organization. It is sensible to open memos for your classes in the same way, first directly stating the memo's purpose, then setting forth the organization and noting how the memo can be used.

Organization in the body of a memo is typically characterized by the use of section headings and short paragraphs. Paragraphs should not be too bulky—five or six per page is usually ideal. On the sentence level, you should take full advantage of the same organizational tools that you employ when you write an essay: meaningful topic sentences; carefully selected transition words; focused section headings; indented blocks of cited text; a bulleted series of examples; powerful punctuation marks such as the colon, semicolon, and dash.

Selection and Citation of Content
A memo's content, of course, is guided by the assignment and the research required. It is important to remember as you present the content that selectivity and relevance matter greatly. Your job is to select and present the most pertinent, most current information available to you. Do not hesitate, of course, to let your memo's content be heavily informed by your research, but also provide your own interpretation and organization of this research.

As in any essay, you must document the sources of your information so that your reader could find the original source of the information if desired. If your memo uses sources, provide the bibliographic information related to your sources on a References page as an attachment at the end of the memo—just as I have in this memo.

A Memo's Tone and Style
Memos for your classes require a highly informative and straightforward tone, but allow for a slightly informal style compared to essays. As in this memo, "I" and "you" are handy because they provide a straightforward way of communicating, but be careful not to overuse these terms. Stylish prose is key to good memo writing, and you should not hesitate to use active, interpretive adverbs and verbs and concrete, precise adjectives and nouns.

A memo need not be written in a dry, dull fashion; rather, it should emulate the same stylistic standards that good prose has always embraced. These standards are summed up neatly in the popular style guide, *The Elements Of Style*, as follows:

> A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts (Strunk and White 1979).

As this quote suggests, good prose can achieve elegance by its clarity, efficiency, and functionality.

Conclusion
The conclusion of a memo should not simply provide a summary of the memo's entire contents, but a true conclusion—that is, an articulated conviction arrived at on the basis of the evidence presented. The closing paragraph is the place to spell out *the bottom line* to the reader. Therefore, I close with my bottom line about writing memos for your classes:

- Use standard memo format to present your text;
- Use internal organizational tools such as section headings, topic sentences, transition words, and powerful punctuation marks to enhance the flow of ideas;
- Write with the same clarity, grace, and efficiency expected of you in any essay.

Attachment

ATTACHMENT 1

References

Strunk, William Jr and White, E.B., 1979: *The Elements of Style*. Macmillan Publishing
Company, Inc., New York, 92 pp.