

Business Memos

Description: In this lesson, students learn how to write a basic business memorandum. They start with a discussion of the differences between email, memos, and letters—and the appropriate use of each. Then they review several memos to see the basic format and to discuss the elements that help a reader to understand a memo. Follow-up activities may include writing one or more business memos and watching an online video that explains the basics of writing a business memo.

Purposes:

- To help students understand the function of the business memo
- To demonstrate the differences between good and poor memos—through a guided critique of several examples
- To provide guided practice in writing a business email

SWBAT:

- Identify the key differences between email, memos, and letters.
- Identify the appropriate use of email, memos, and letters.
- Identify the basic elements of a business memo as well as the key elements that make it easy to read.
- Write and correctly format a basic business memo.

Materials Required:

- Several example business memos. Memos that relate to the students' program of study are best. (Many can be found online.) We used some building maintenance related memos and other general memos, such as:
Example 1: <http://govme.cityoftacoma.org/download/rfp/TechMemo/BoilEval.pdf>
Example 2: www.cityoftacoma.org/File.ashx?cid=8127
Example 3: <http://www.co.clark.wa.us/water-resources/documents/SWMP/SOUP/TM3FacilityMaintenanceManualComparison.pdf>
Example 4: www.ci.rocky-hill.ct.us/ManagerRpts/2010/3-2010.pdf
- A “modified memo” and original to demonstrate the effects of proper formatting. For the modified memo, remove the formatting features such as page numbers, paragraph spacing, section headings, etc. This modified memo will be the first example. (I used the first two pages of “Example 1”, above. The original was a 14 page document, which made the lack of page numbers in the modified version even more important.)

- Also, find several more examples, such as those listed above. These can be reviewed by the class, using a computer, projector, and screen.
- List of items to discuss regarding the examples. (See example list.)
- White board or poster paper for recording students' comments. (Poster paper is recommended so that the poster can remain on the classroom wall as a reference for students as they work on their business memo assignments.)
- Instructor's computer with projector for viewing the example memos.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Start with a class discussion of the differences between email, memos, and letters for business communication. (See example points of comparison.) Record the class notes on poster paper so the students can refer to them later in class and during assignments.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups, and distribute copies of the modified example memo. Ask the students: What is this memo about? Then let them read and discuss it for 10 minutes or so.
3. Pose the question again to the whole class, and take notes (white board, poster board, etc) of the students' comments. Then ask: Is the memo clear? Was it frustrating to try to read this memo? If so, why? Could it be improved? How? (Discuss and take class notes.)
4. Show (via the projector) or distribute the "real memo" (i.e. the non-modified version) and have students read and discuss it again. Question: What makes this version of the memo easier to read and understand? → If these comments are recorded on poster paper, the poster can remain on the classroom wall for reference as students work on memo assignments.
5. Use the other example memos to show and discuss the elements that are common to all memos (Date, To, From, Subject) and those that vary (Re: vs. Subject) or are optional. Discuss the elements (subject, section headings, page numbers, white space, etc) that make a memo clear for the reader. Record on poster paper students' comments on what makes a good or a bad memo.

Extension Activities

- Watch the online video "The Key Forms of Business Writing: Basic Memo" by UpWrite Press. It's available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5Zyn9y_MDs.

UpwritePress also publishes the textbook *Write for Work: Building Language Skills for the 21st Century* by Kathleen Henning, John Van Rys, and Verne Meyer (UpWrite Press © 2011) ISBN-13:978-1-932436-30-3). This is a recommended text, and it has lessons on writing memos.

- Demonstrate memo templates found in Word and/or other word processing programs.
- Write a business memo to your supervisor (instructor) on an assigned topic.