



How to Write a Memo That Matters: Being Your Own Best Editor


It will often be a better use of your time to fine-tune any substantive edits (e.g., changes to content) before adjusting your piece for clarity and concision. In this pass, you should focus on your arguments alongside your presentation of data and evidence. Make sure you’ve thought through what your audience is looking to gain in reading this piece and what concerns moved them (or you) to action—if you manage to accommodate both, your memo will never miss its mark.

Some memos won’t check every box, and that’s fine so long as you have good reason.

Revision Questions:		✓
Content 	Is the problem you’re trying to solve clearly articulated?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are you using the applicable elements of a finding to tell your story?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Status: What’s happening?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Criteria: What should be happening?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interpretation: Why is it happening?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Outlook: What will happen next?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Did you describe the data in context and does that description clearly link to your key finding(s)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have you identified the origin of the policy problem or challenge?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have you explicitly evaluated the limitations of what is currently happening alongside the potential limitations of your own findings? Have you explicitly defined why your own findings are preferable?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do your recommendations arise logically from the evidence?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are your recommendations feasible, cost-effective, and measurable?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Is the tone appropriate for your reader?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Now that you are certain your memo has all the essentials, take some additional time to work on your presentation. The following checklists make use of the core lessons the Writing Workshop teaches—accessible on our website under the “Resources” tab. Learning to apply the concepts below entails learning to look at your own work as an editor rather than a writer—just keep in mind that nobody becomes an expert overnight.

Clarity 	Do you begin each paragraph with the main point (deductive structure)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do each of your paragraphs contain only one point (paragraph unity)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Does every sentences in each paragraph relate to or expand on the main point (paragraph coherence)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Is the subject close to the verb and are both close to the beginning of each sentence (sentence core)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are you writing about people whenever possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are you using the old-to-new principle to transition between sentences?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are you mostly writing in the active voice?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do you avoid using jargon and define key terms throughout?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Are you using headings and subheadings?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Does your structure and formatting conform to the reader’s expectations?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Concision 	Is your memo as long as it needs to be but as short as it can be?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have you read your memo out loud and in reverse order?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have you rooted out unnecessary weak verbs, nominalizations, and prepositional phrases?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Have you pruned any needless words (“double words,” redundant or meaningless modifiers, empty nouns, and adverbs)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Is your writing free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Does your writing contain fragments, comma splices, or run-ons?	<input type="checkbox"/>