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The Craft of the Memo

Edmond H. Weiss, Ph.D.

For memos to be effective, they must be focused and purposeful, as well as adapted to the reading limitations of busy, inattentive readers. This simple memo about memos drives home the main points.

DATE: February 3, 2008

TO: Business and Technical Professionals

FROM: Edmond H. Weiss, Ph.D.

RE: **Improving the logic, language, and layout of memos/emails**

**Better Memos:
A nine-step plan**

Most memos are either unread or read perfunctorily. But, by following these *nine steps*, you will be able to write better memos—that is, memos more likely to be read, understood, and acted upon.

Know the audience and objective—exactly

Know precisely why you are writing, the intended result or effect. Decide whether you are

- Informing (sending facts, instructions)
- Persuading (shaping opinions and expectations)
- Motivating (causing action)

Pack the subject line and opening sentence

Write long, interesting, thematic subject lines, rather like newspaper headlines. The subject line should get your message off to a quick start. Make your first sentence engaging and original. It should be impossible for the reader to finish your first sentence and say: So What! Or Who Cares?

Write robust, periodic sentences

A *robust* sentence is lean and energetic, no harder to read than it needs to be. A *periodic* sentence puts its main information at the end. In a well-made, readable English sentence, the most important word or phrase **nearly always appears last**. This is the key to making yourself understood, to getting your points across.

Manage the size of paragraphs

Most readers will not read long paragraphs. Any paragraph longer than six typed lines probably needs to be broken into smaller paragraphs or into a table or list.

Use bullets and lists

The paragraph is not the business writer's friend. Although complex ideas need paragraphs, most memos should contain relatively few complex ideas. Instead, effective business writers learn to write with bulleted or numbered lists. And to present procedures or instructions as simple tables and diagrams.

Use readable typography

Use a proportional typeface, no smaller than 11 points. (Although Times New Roman is not especially attractive or readable, it is almost universally available on computers; thus, it is the safest choice for electronically shared documents.)

- Do not use Courier, Prestige, or any of the monospaced typefaces, except for numbers.
- Do not justify (“right-justify”) text—ever.
- Do not hyphenate words at the ends of lines.
- Do not use more than two typefaces in a memo.

Use ample margins

A memo is far more likely to be read if the text is confined *within a 5-inch column*. There is little chance that a memo printed with 6½- or 7-inch column will be read carefully.

The best way to conceptualize memos is as *tables*, containing a 1.5-inch column for side headings and a 5-inch column for body text.

Use access tools and emphasis

A well-made memo (or report) will have frequent headings and subheadings, as well as marginal glosses and indexes to the text.

Good business communication also uses boldface and italics for emphasis, thereby guiding the reader to key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Boldface and italics are preferable to underlining; underlined passages (a throwback to the typewriter) copy badly, fax badly, and scan badly.

Use grammar checkers and readability metrics

Current word processors include a utility that scans the document for errors of grammar and lapses of style. Although these tools make errors and give too many false positives (putative errors where there are none), they are nevertheless worth the time to use them. (They are even more helpful for non-native speakers of English.)

Grammar checkers are especially good at flagging

- Wordy constructions
- Commonly misused terms
- Passive verbs (which, about seven times out of ten, probably should be converted to the active voice)

These programs also calculate the *Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index* for the document. Any memo that scores over 12 or more on this scale is unnecessarily hard to read and needs editing. (This memo scores 9.1.)

Books by Edmond H Weiss

These and other works are available at Amazon and other book sources.



The Elements Of International English Style: A Guide To Writing Correspondence, Reports, Technical Documents, And Internet Pages For A Global Audience by Edmond H. Weiss (**Paperback** - Feb 28, 2005)

Buy new: **\$21.95** 21 Used & new from **\$14.27**

★★★★★ (4)

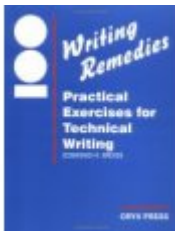


How To Write Usable User Documentation: Second Edition by Edmond H. Weiss (**Paperback** - Jun 26, 1991)

Buy new: ~~\$32.95~~ **\$19.67** 28 Used & new from **\$6.98**

★★★★★ (5)

Books: [See all 45 items](#)



100 Writing Remedies: Practical Exercises for Technical Writing by Edmond H. Weiss (**Paperback** - Sep 4, 1990)

Buy new: **\$25.00** 15 Used & new from **\$2.50**

Seminars, Courses & Speeches

Business/Professional Communication

How to Sell in Writing (Proposals & Business Cases)

The most important business writing is the *advocacy document*, the pitch for funds or approval.

- Analyzing your audience and Win Strategy
- Presenting the “case” with logic and persuasiveness
- Using business graphics to demonstrate and prove

How to Write *Globally*

International business requires sensitivity to the language, culture, and expectations of the international business partner.

- Editing for clarity and readability
- Screening for figurative and idiomatic confusion
- Designing accessible layouts and appropriate feedback paths

Final Draft: The *Especially* Clear Sentence

Good writing is *rewriting*; only revision can assure clarity, correct tone, freedom from errors, and readability.

- Emphasis and making your point
- Twenty flaws in first-draft sentences
- Style-checking software: Can you trust it?

The Art of the Pitch

A well-made presentation is a small five-act play, where each element contributes to effectiveness.

- Strategic planning and design
- Managing stage fright
- Using PowerPoint™ and other presentation tools
- Handling questions and objections
- Creating useful handouts

The Art of Effective E-Mail

To use e-mail well, the writer must exploit its strengths and adapt to its limitations.

- Attention-getting subject lines
- E-mail style and grammar
- Discipline and etiquette for e-mailers
- To attach or to embed ...

Technical Communication

A Writing System for Technical Professionals

Technical professionals cannot achieve their professional goals unless they write their correspondence, reports, and documentation with power and precision.

- Creating documents as engineered information products
- Eliminating common errors and time-wasters
- Writing for *nontechnical* readers

Preparing English Tech Documents for International Readers

Although customers and clients around the world read English quite well, it is still necessary to edit international technical information for the E2 reader.

- Making documents *culture-free* and *culture-fair*
- Correcting problems of style, idiom, and syntax
- Using controlled English
- Adapting to local sensitivities and cultures

Effective Quality Manuals/ Usable Procedure & User's Manuals

A manual is a device that supports people in their work; when well designed, it teaches procedures, enforces standards, and saves money.

- Documenting ISO 9000 and other quality standards
- Replacing unreadable and unmaintainable prose with scripts, tables, and diagrams
- Testing for usability and enforceability
- Designing modular, maintainable publications
- Storyboarding and project management

The Craft of User Requirements & Functional Specs

Those who use information technology and those who create or acquire it must communicate their needs and expectations clearly, especially at the beginning of the design cycle.

- How **User:Developer** communication fails
- Beyond the Waterfall Model
- Tools and processes for functional specification

Organizational Communication

Meetings that Work

Meetings should be energizing and productive—never boring or a perceived waste of time.

- Objectives and agendas: staying on message
- Two warring cultures: ratification vs. exploration
- Roles and games played by participants
- Secrets of master facilitators
- Cultural variables in international meetings

There's Only Now: Managing the Professional's Time

Despite the array of electronic time management tools, too many professionals feel overworked, stressed, and never quite on top of their work.

- Attitudes about time
- Five immutable rules of time management
- Time management traps and how to avoid them
- Products and tools and how to choose/adapt them
- Getting long-term goals and projects into your short-term calendar

Raising Culture Consciousness

An urgent need for international business professionals is to learn, and adapt to, the culture of the communities or countries where they wish to do business.

- Dimensions of difference
- Context and communication
- Individualism versus collectivism
- Timing and pacing (the hidden dimension)

Turning Words into Money: Business Plans & Cases

Projects need funding, capital; even the best ideas can fail for lack of a convincing business plan/case.

- What impresses funding sources
- Missions, visions, and goals
- The logic of the 'business case'
- Clear, persuasive language and graphics
- Presentations for executives and sponsors

Speeches/Short Programs for Professional Gatherings and Meetings

How to Sell an Idea

Why won't people follow your advice? There are eight barriers that keep us from accepting new plans and approaches... and specific techniques to overcome them.

The Secret of Professional Fulfillment

The key to mental health and productivity—on the job or at home—is *equilibrium*: keeping all of life's eight competing values in balance. The tendency is to neglect some while pursuing others, a practice that leads to anxiety and alienation.

Re-Inventing the Memo

Do you have trouble getting your point across to co-workers? A memo is NOT a work of literature, but, rather, an engineered product, designed for clarity, power, and speed. Twelve tactics increase the chance that a memo (or an e-mail) will be read.

The Odor of Mendacity—Why People Don't Believe You Anymore...

In school, we learn ways to "improve" the truth by puffing up our writing with words that inflate, obscure, and disguise. Business and professional speech and writing are filled with these bad language habits, which make us sound as though we are hedging and evading—even when we have nothing to hide.

Does Grammar Count in the Era of E-Mail?

Is e-mail the end of 'correct' communication? Do spelling, punctuation, and grammar matter anymore? Only as much as the recipient of the message matters. All professionals should care about the image they communicate, even in their informal messages.

Business Basics for Technical Professionals

The most important technical question is "How's Business?" Technical professionals must learn to pitch improvements and changes in their departments through business-savvy business cases: proposals aimed at one's own management. Business cases must show how the new procedures or technology will either make or save money, and within an acceptable number of months.