

UNIT 9: WRITING EFFECTIVE MEMOS AND LETTERS

OVERVIEW

The memo has, for years, been the primary form of written communication among employees and managers alike. The use of letters, often perceived to be more formal, has declined in recent years. Although both forms of correspondence have, in some instances, been replaced by online communication, most managers today still use both memos and letters, often distinguishing between the two by assigning arbitrary interpretations of formality to govern their use. In this unit, we will help you decide when each form is most appropriate. We will also present a process for establishing criteria for effective online communication.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- list job-related situations that require either short or long forms of correspondence from managers
- describe the characteristics that differentiate letter and memo correspondence from one another and from longer report writing
- write letters of congratulation, promotion, dismissal, and employment
- write memos, meeting notices, and meeting minutes
- establish criteria for effective online correspondence

DISCUSSION

Because some forms of communication are occasional, employees often have trouble determining which form (e.g., letter, memo, telephone call, or E-mail message) is suitable for various occasions. The decision can be more easily made, however, with the help of audience analysis (discussed in unit 3). In addition, managers can assist employees in making such decisions and, as a follow-up, should occasionally take note of how their employees are using the various types of communication.

Telephone conversations and informal visits are often a more practical and desirable means of communicating. In many relaxed office environments, phone calls replace formal meetings as well as much written correspondence. Telephone use (excluding use of facsimile equipment) generally requires no writing. Telephone conversations are used to inquire, check, or convey status; to set up, confirm, change, or cancel meetings; or to gather information. Office visits can accomplish many of the same goals and can also be used to give directions or teach, discuss issues, negotiate decisions, and the like. As with phone calls, informal visits among employees seldom generate formal writing, although in both instances employees may take notes, create To Do lists, or even write follow-up memos or letters to summarize the details of the discussion.

THE MEMO VERSUS THE LETTER

When it comes specifically to a choice between memos and letters, there is often collective understanding among employees concerning when to use which type of communication. Sometimes, this understanding is incorporated into the policies and procedures of an organization, but most of the time the choice is left to employees themselves. When faced with the choice of writing either a memo or a letter, the majority of employees in the United States choose the memo for internal correspondence, reserving the letter for external and "special" internal use.

Swindle and Swindle (1989) indicate that the distinction between letter and memo should be based on the goals and purposes of each (*ibid.*, 93), rather than on arbitrary, conventional use. They believe that managers should play a visible role in defining how memos and letters should be used by their employees in different situations (*ibid.*, 110), and that they should provide employees with training designed to help in the decision-making process. Such

training might include audience analysis which helps writers to identify the characteristics of their audience and to determine which form of communication would work best for that audience.

When to Use Memos

In general, the memo is effective for situations requiring brevity, summation, general inquiry, or description. The following might qualify as memo-writing situations (ibid., 93–94):

- situations where writing is required, but where economy and practicality are stressed
- situations in which many people need to be informed about relatively simple information
- situations requiring written agreement or confirmation among different management groups (such as departments) within an organization

Reasons for using memos vary, but most memo writers hope to achieve economy, practicality, and ease of creation by electing to write memos. Memos, especially online memos, allow for distribution to multiple recipients at one time. Memos can be used to confirm assignments, decisions, or telephone conversations; make organizational announcements; and provide employees with a vehicle for communicating ideas and concerns to managers. Memos work well as a tool for management correspondence because the prominent location of the name of the sending party in the memo heading generally commands attention.

Memo writing is not problem-free, however. One of the most persistent problems is the sheer numbers of memos that are generated every year. As it becomes easier to send, archive, edit, and even reuse memos using computers, this problem will probably worsen. As a manager, you should make it your business to monitor the volume of correspondence generated and received within your work group, and counsel employees to use memos wisely. Some strategies for using memos effectively include writing with key words and preformatted templates, creating memo files for reference, and preparing preformatted distribution lists.

Obviously, as a manager, you should look for ways to reduce the volume of information that employees must process without sacrificing good communication. Methods include planning to disseminate information more wisely, combining announcements and requests, conveying some information by telephone, and making commonly read types of correspondence, such as meeting notices, available in one central location—as in an online bulletin board or conference disk that all of your employees can access. In addition, as you

examine your employees' use of memos, you may find that some of the information would be better conveyed in letters.

When to Use Letters

The letter is often reserved for longer, more personal, or more formal communication. Communication by letter is often unequal as described in unit 1. Such communication might occur, for example, between a manager and an employee or between a personnel officer and an interview candidate.

Letters can be used to acknowledge receipt of packages from other organizations, to request information, or to solicit goods and services from outside organizations. In your own work as a manager, you probably already correspond with prospective employees using letters, and you may write letters of employment, congratulations, or promotion as well as budget requests using letters. Because many letters are written to address specific situations, strategies for writing them may be situational as well, requiring that you assess the audience carefully before you write. In general, even in letter writing, it is best to convey your message directly and up front, although letters conveying bad news or making an involved proposal may warrant some background before the purpose of the letter is fully stated.

Memo Format

Structurally, memos differ from letters in that they do not contain salutations and complimentary closes. Many organizations, in fact, adopt a boilerplate format for the headings that you first see when reading a memo: headings such as TO, FROM, SUBJECT, and DATE.

When it is written and designed properly, a memo is visually appealing and easy to read. Office memos longer than one page often benefit from headings that segment the text for readers. Many office memos also conventionally include the initials of the sender as well as a list of others to whom the memo has been sent. Occasionally, if there are enclosures that accompany the memo, the word *Enclosure* or abbreviation *Encl.* is included at the bottom of the memo, as are the initials of the typist if the memo was not prepared by its original author.

Although the paragraphs in memos are usually kept short for readability, multiple-page memos are acceptable for complex subjects. In addition, some companies now use software programs that allow writers to create memos easily, transmit them to recipients using electronic mailboxes, and store copies in memo files online.

The format of the memo exhibits its practical, economical role in office communication. The design of the memo aids writers in distributing it to many people, and it helps readers easily recognize both the subject of the memo and its sender. The standard headings are less personal than the salutation of most letters, and the block paragraph style used in the United States makes the text appear different from that used in letters or casual prose. In addition, the brevity of the memo makes it an ideal form for providing summary information or for introducing longer reports. Cover memos, for example are frequently attached to longer reports to establish goals or timetables for their readers or to influence those reading the longer reports.

Swindle and Swindle (1989, 97) illustrate many of the commonly used sections of the memo. You will notice that the writer uses the memo format to report on findings, to summarize advantages of a particular position, and to make a recommendation.

Letter Format

Letter formats are often a source of confusion because of the extent to which they can vary from writer to writer, from company to company, and from culture to culture. Unlike memo writing, letter writing is generally something that we learn as children and adapt to meet our needs throughout our lives. Most children learning to write letters in school, learn, for example, that all letters have some parts in common but that the writing and design of the parts can vary considerably. They learn that personal letters vary from business letters sometimes predictably (as when you affix the title of the person you are writing to in business letters) and sometimes mysteriously (as when the signature of the sender appears twice—typed and then written out—in business letters). As adults, we learn that some conventions of letter writing may change as business and societal preferences change—such as dropping the "Dear" from business salutations—or as the workplace itself changes and invalidates general but overly formal (and gender-specific) greetings such as *Dear Sirs* and *Gentlemen*.

The format that you use or advocate for use in your organization should be adequate for immediate needs but flexible enough to accommodate change. Although specific style guidelines may be set by the organization, in general, all business letters should include the following sections in formats similar to those discussed below.

- **Sender's address or letterhead**—It is important legally for business writers to identify themselves and their company on all business correspondence. The sender's address or company address in letterhead should be displayed prominently on the top center or right of the first page.
- **Receiver's full name and address**—The receiver's full name and address, including job title, should appear in the upper left of the first page. This inside address should match or surpass in detail the address contained on the external envelope.
- **Salutation or greeting**—Few other sections of the letter are as important as this one, because this section predisposes the letter's reader to its writer. To be most effective, the salutation should identify the reader exactly and in a manner that is acceptable, according to how well the writer and reader know one another. Whenever possible, exact names with preferred designations of *Miss*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, or *Mr.* should be identified and used. Outdated designations such as *Madame*, *Mesdames*, or *Sirs* should be avoided.
- **Body**—The body of the letter should be formatted and presented for easy reading. Depending on the organizational style preferences, writers can choose from a variety of accepted paragraph styles, including full and modified block, simplified, and traditionally indented (Swindle and Swindle 1989, 119). Within

the body, paragraphs should be short, and, in technical passages especially, key words or concepts may be identified with run-in headings (headings within the same line as body text) and with bold type.

- **Closing**—Often called the *complimentary close*, the closing completes the writer's thoughts in a manner that displays good spirits, encourages, shows sincerity, or shows respect. Like salutations, closings should be exact, mirroring the tone of the letter as nearly as the writer can. It is important to match the tone of the letter to avoid embarrassing or inappropriate closings such as "Good luck," or "Best regards," in letters of termination, or "Thank you," in letters that do not convey thanks.
- **Sender's signature**—Although signature is not entirely appropriate for the information that customarily ends a business letter, it is a term commonly used to refer to the information of which the signature is only a part. The sender's identification includes the signature of the writer, his or her title, and other information that designates the writer's organizational status such as the department or division and company name.

You will note that Swindle and Swindle (*ibid.*, 121) illustrate all of the sections of a business letter in the sample letter from Springer Motors' purchasing manager, Clara Cooke. Had her letter continued for more than one page, Clara Cooke would have included heading information on the subsequent pages to identify the receiver of the letter, the date, and the page number.

STRATEGY THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE

Although the discussion in this unit so far has focused on many of the identifying, external characteristics of letters and memos, what is conveyed inside the letter or memo is even more important.

Letters That Convey Bad News

Policies and guidelines help managers address sensitive situations in writing. Managers often write sensitive letters dealing with personnel issues, offering employment, explaining company policy, and so on. Managers writing about sensitive issues need to write effectively and know how to avoid personnel and legal problems.

To understand how problems might arise, let's examine one type of letter that managers sometimes have to write and inevitably find distasteful: the letter of dismissal. Such "bad news" letters are generally written for two reasons: company layoffs or poor worker performance.

<p>August 1, 1992</p>
<p>Mr. Tyrone Hill 112 Kenek Ave. Peoria, Illinois 11013</p>
<p>Dear Tyrone,</p>
<p>As I mentioned to you in our conversation today, it has become necessary for Albright to decrease its labor force due to decreased revenue over the past three years. Although senior financial management tried for months to avoid doing so, it is now necessary to dismiss all junior employees—those with less than two years of service—effective August 15, 1992.</p>
<p>This letter is to notify you that your employment with Albright will terminate August 15, 1992, although you will continue to be eligible for benefits, at company expense, through October 1992.</p>
<p>We regret losing an employee with a record as good as yours, and would like to assure you that, should the economic climate improve, you will be notified about the possibility of being rehired.</p>
<p>If I can answer any questions you might have, or recommend you for other employment, Tyrone, please contact me directly. I would be happy to write a letter of recommendation for you based on the work you have done since transferring into my department.</p>
<p>Sincerely, Janice Eccles Manager Accounting Department</p>

As the sample letter shows, the manager serves as company representative in explaining how the company arrived at the decision to lay off employees, what the employees' recourse is, and whether there will be preferences for rehiring. This type of letter must accurately reflect company policy and any legal considerations that might arise from the situation. When writing

such letters, managers must guard against exhibiting prejudice or favoritism, and refrain from making false promises. Effective bad news letters place the news in context, while remaining fair to employees and to the company itself.

Letters That Convey Good News

To be effective, good news letters must guide readers to appropriate responses. Unless they are strictly announcements, good news letters imply some sort of response on the reader's part—consent, further action or inquiry, additional information, some prescribed next step. To ensure that readers respond appropriately, writers should include precise explanations and descriptions of how they expect readers to follow through. This can include some explanation of why certain actions should be taken, but it should not obscure the good news tone of the letter with unnecessary detail. A letter announcing an employee's promotion, for example, should avoid an overly technical explanation of why the employee has merited the promotion, although some mention of the employee's accomplishments is appropriate.

Swindle and Swindle advocate a basic pattern for use in writing good news letters that will help writers avoid over-writing: state the good news, provide related detail, and repeat the good news (Swindle and Swindle 1989, 163–164). Because a good news letter will contain the standard letter parts, it is easy for writers to provide readers with additional information that may lead to further contact. The sender's address and phone number, the complimentary closing, a friendly signature—all encourage contact and reduce the need for over-writing that will spoil good news. The following sample, a succinctly-written good news letter offering employment, illustrates many of these principles.

July 30, 1992

Ms. Joann McDermott
1904 Maple Ave.
Takoma, Washington 92314

Dear Ms. McDermott:

Albright Inc. is pleased to extend to you an offer of employment for the position of Staff Program Specialist. The offer is for a starting salary of \$41,000 per year with full medical and dental coverage as described in our Benefits brochure.

If you decide to accept the position, your starting date would be no later than September 1, 1992. You would report to me during the three-month training period, and then receive an assignment with a manager in one of our branch offices.

To confirm this offer, we will need your letter of acceptance by August 15, 1992. If you have any questions about the position, please contact me or Beth Potter-Stewart, the personnel officer who has been assigned to help you with processing.

We hope that you will accept the offer to join us in the position of Staff Program Specialist, and we look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Samih Abdullah
Manager
Divisional Administration

TEMPLATES, BOILERPLATE, AND FORM LETTERS

The formats used for most memos and many letters may encourage employees to reuse previously written correspondence. Often a valuable source of information and precedent, previously written documents provide new or inexperienced employees with templates or preformatted documents that save them the time and effort associated with learning how to present information in an acceptable and standard fashion. Employees can derive stylistic conventions from previously used memos as well as copy standard formats such as the headings or salutations in a memo. Workplace writers also make use of boilerplate or form letters, which are standard text that is frequently used and has gained acceptance. Such text can include legal descriptions, statements of policy or position, and marketing slogans as well as the organization's preferred ways of saying something.

For managers, the use of templates and boilerplate can save time on employee induction training and mentoring, although such shortcuts sometimes prove problematic. Employees who

overuse these time-savers, especially under the pressure of deadlines, may make false claims or mislead their readers. Sometimes, an oversight can lead to "leaked" or embarrassing information, such as outdated signature or heading information that remains in documents previously distributed. At other times, a writer's style may appear uneven and the presentation of information inconsistent if the document contains excerpts from other memos or letters. For any organization using boilerplate, it is wise to periodically review the material for outdated information and update the text accordingly.

USING TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS ADVANTAGEOUSLY

Memos and letters adapt well to most online environments where they can be readily stored, accessed, modified, reused, sent, and resent within a company. In many companies, online memos and letters are created and shared on computer workstations and large mainframe systems. E-mail or electronic mailing systems, conferencing systems, LAN-based correspondence systems, and standalone software packages all allow employees to take advantage of online memos and other forms of correspondence. As they accumulate, such memos can provide valuable "paper trails" and project histories that require little maintenance and provide even greater potential for reuse. In systems such as IBM's OfficeVision or its predecessor, PROFS (Professional Office Systems), even the standard format of company memos and letters—including company logos—can be programmed to appear on the screen and to print with each piece of correspondence. Incoming correspondence, in turn, may be logged in an *inbasket*, stored in a *notebook*, or discarded in a *wastebasket*.

The future promises even greater innovation in office correspondence through the use of multimedia technology. Integration of voice, video, and print to achieve animated or audio-based correspondence is already a reality in some companies. For example, letters delivered on diskette can now contain personally delivered messages in place of salutations and complimentary closings. In addition, the technology is already in use for linking introductory memos and letters to the larger reports and proceedings they introduce, or to other online information to which they refer.

The existence and use of such technology affects the ways writers prepare online letters and memos. Current characteristics of the technology in fact, suggest ways that writers may need to modify the approach they use in writing letters and memos. For example, because online correspondence can be stored and searched, writers may create more key words to stand for commonly discussed concepts. At the same time, writers will probably realize the

advantages of controlled vocabulary (using the same words for similar concepts) and avoid unnecessary variation in describing similar concepts.

Because the characteristics of online technology may differ according to the software used to support the technology—and because implementation varies from company to company—managers may have to establish guidelines for online use that are specific to their organization's systems. The following list shows some criteria derived by a manager whose employees used IBM's PROFS on a mainframe computer system. Notice that many of the manager's recommendations are designed to enhance use of the technology without limiting freedom of expression for employees.

Sample Criteria for Online Communication

- All employees sending online notes or responding to notes must create a sender profile that includes name, division and local addresses, node, telephone, and business title. When this information is in your profile, it will automatically append to your online correspondence. No online correspondence will pass the department filter (for external distribution) unless this information is in place.
- Every online note should include a key words section (beneath the subject heading) to assist recipients in categorizing correspondence for archiving.
- Important notes should be removed from Mail logs and stored in PROFS Notebooks. Confidential information should be stored in notebooks that have limited access.
- Because Mail logs are periodically purged when they contain too much information, all employees are required to read and react to all online correspondence daily. Employees whose spool occupancy becomes excessive will be asked to delete incoming mail to free disk space.

REFERENCE

Swindle, Robert E., and Elizabeth M. Swindle. *The Business Communicator*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the major differences between letters and memos?
2. What communication needs can be adequately addressed by memos?
3. What parts of a memo can effectively be preformatted in templates?
4. Why should managers encourage the use of templates or boilerplate for previously written memos and letters to save time in the writing process?
5. Give the primary purpose of, and the audience for, each of the following:
 - letter of transmittal
 - meeting minutes
 - customer memo
 - memo clarifying company policies and procedures
6. Decide which of the following writing situations might be accomplished by using memos and which might require letters.
 - an employment offer
 - the introduction of a new procedure for filling in timecards
 - a reprimand
 - a promotion
 - a warning about a computer virus

INTEGRATING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the relationship between external and internal forms of correspondence, and memo and letter formats.

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2. Most employees tend to use memos to convey information unless they are asked to do otherwise. What guidance would you give employees for adopting letter and report formats so that they can make such decisions independently?