RPAD 507
August 19, 2013

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Professional Writing
A Challenge

• Let’s see how many of Professor Fazekas’s powerpoint rules I can break!
Agenda

• Other resources
• Formatting for the assignment
• Professional Writing
• General Principles:
  o Picture your audience
  o Writing for skimming
• Using Exhibits
• Grammar
Other Resources

• Handout of additional writing resources
• Recommended by faculty
Formatting THIS Assignment

• I’m going to give you some formatting instructions now
• Then I’m going to talk about general principles of professional writing
• Then I’m going to return to these instructions
• You have two good samples of the format in your packet
• PLUS: I urge you to STUDY the rubric!!!!
Formatting THIS Assignment

• The top of the memo MUST include lines for To, From, Subject, and Date
• You MUST include a detailed summary
• You MUST have sections, with each section header BOLDED and ending with a period
• Memo MUST be easily skimmable
Formatting THIS Assignment

• You MUST include a table, which must be referred to in the text of the memo
• The table MUST include a descriptive title, headers, and caption
• The table MUST be “stand alone”
• NOTE WELL: “table” means a grid of columns and rows; the word is NOT the same as “graph” or “figure”
Formatting THIS Assignment

• The summary MUST contain “clear, direct responses to the required questions”
  o That means ALL the required questions
  o Make it very clear what text is your summary and when you switch to the rest of the memo
  o SHORT (maybe a quarter page)

• You must have headings for each section
  o The headings must be descriptive
Formatting THIS Assignment

• 2 pp, single spaced, plus 1-2 pages tables
• NO Footnotes
• 1” margins (NOT always Word’s default!)
• Times New Roman 12 pt (not the Word default)
• NO fancy covers
• STAPLE!!!!!!!
• Electronic PLUS hardcopy submission
Professional Writing

• Professional Writing must conform to the rules of your profession
• Represents yourself AND your agency
• Important basis for promotion
Professional Writing

• Does NOT have to be stuffy
• Write as though you WANT your reader to understand you
• Sound smart by making smart points, not by being incomprehensible
Professional Writing

• We will teach you one memo form to use for this assignment
• This is NOT the ONLY way to write a memo, but it IS the way to write THIS memo
• You need to be adaptable
• Every boss/professor has different expectations
Audience

• Two short skits
Audience

• Two types of audience
  o The one you intend
  o Other people who might get your memo

• Always assume any given memo might end up in the public domain
Audience

• Your intended audience brings
  o Memory
  o Interest Level
  o Expertise
    • Content-specific
    • General ability
  o Interests
  o Expectations
Example: E-Mail
What’s Wrong Here?

From: eg123456@albany.edu
Subject:
hey prof
can i take ur class
u said 2 email u
need pn
thx
ttys
Memory

• Do NOT assume your audience remembers what the heck you’re talking about
• What’s crucial to you may be tangential to them
• Can you assume that the recipient remembers you?
Interest Level

• Most professional writing is for people who do NOT want to read it
• Boss gets lots of memos
• Procurement office gets lots of memos
• Journalists get lots of press releases

• Assume they’re skimming
Expertise

• What jargon can you use?
• What concepts can you assume they know?
• What background information can you assume they know (and remember)?
General Ability

- How complicated can you get?
- What reading level can you assume?
Interests

• What agenda does your reader have?
• What questions is she likely to have?
• How much detail does she want?
Expectations

• Does your reader expect a particular format?
• Which grammatical rules does your reader REALLY care about, and which does she let slide?
• How formal should you be?
  o NOTE: you should NEVER NEVER NEVER NEVER NEVER NEVER NEVER use “texting” shortcuts in professional writing, including e-mails and text messages
  o Students who violate this rule will be defenestrated from the third floor
Writing for Skimming

• Your reader will NOT try to figure out what you mean
• Your reader will NOT dig around to find your point or key information
• Your reader will SKIM
Writing for Skimming

• DRILL DOWN!
• Start with a summary
• Prioritize
• Use
  o Sections with Headings
  o Short paragraphs
  o Formatting
Writing for Skimming

- See two sample memos
  - Andersen memo on writing memos
  - Weinberg memo on gasoline taxes
DRILL DOWN!

• Key information is up top
• The reader can CHOOSE to look for more detail
• It is easy to find that detail (if it was important enough to include)
Summary

• Start with DETAILED summary
• Do not ONLY restate question
• MUST convey key points
• Assume summary is ONLY thing reader reads
• Must be short
Prioritize

• Reader will see only part of what you write
• If that part is unimportant, you’ve kept the reader from seeing what they need to see
• Trade off between precision and readability
• Must meet length requirements
Prioritize

• Your job is not ONLY to include the important information
• Your job is to GUIDE the reader’s attention
• The reader’s attention is your most important (and scarcest) resource
• Don’t squander it!
Sections

• Divide your content into sections
• Organize logically
• In one page memo, each section may be one paragraph, or maybe two.
• In longer memo, use subsections
Sections

• Each section has VERY DESCRIPTIVE header
• Make it easy for reader to locate information
• Include ONLY material that belongs in that section
Short Paragraphs

• Much easier to read several short paragraphs than one long one

• All sentences in the same paragraph logically fit together

• Reader will be much more likely to read the FIRST sentence of a paragraph
Use Formatting

• White space
• Indenting
• Bold/Italics
• Centering
• Numbering
• List formatting

• A little goes a long way
Exhibits

• Two types of exhibits:
  o Tables
    • Material presented in a grid of rows and columns
    • Quantitative OR qualitative
  o Figures
    • Graphs
    • Other pictures
Exhibits

• Tables and graphs have THREE advantages over text:
  1. Present information very compactly
  2. Make it easier to see relationships across numbers
  3. Emphasize whatever you’ve chosen to put in an exhibit
Exhibits

• Look at tables 1a, 1b, and 1c
• Which table is best?
Exhibits

• Tables facilitate comparisons
• You have to know the comparisons you want to emphasize
• Main comparison: horizontal, if at all practical
• Secondary comparison: vertical
• Main exception: when you want to compare the number of digits
Exhibits

• In Tables 2a and 2b, what comparisons are easy?
• In Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c, what comparisons are easy?
Exhibits

• Which is best, Table 4a, 4b, or 4c?
Exhibits

• Note Well: to compare decimals vertically, make sure the numbers line up on the same decimal!
• Hundreds should be under hundreds
• Thousandths should be under thousandths
• Easiest way: use same number of decimals, right justify, right indent
Exhibits

• Note Well:
  o If your table is meant to make a point, keep the amount of information low, simple
    • So reader can see the detail YOU want
  o If your table is part of an appendix, you can put a lot more information in
    • So reader can find whichever detail SHE wants
Exhibits

• In general, tables are preferable when
  o the information covers several different dimensions (so that a figure isn’t practical),
  o when the reader needs to see the exact values,
  o when there aren’t a large number of values to present, or
  o when the information to compare is qualitative in nature.
Exhibits

• In general, figures are preferable when
  o the information involves a lot of observations of the same type, such as the price of gasoline every month for several years (see example).
  o Figures are also often more visually compelling than tables.
Exhibits

• Note Well: tables/figures that are part of your paper need to be talked about in the text

• Tell the reader what you want them to see
Exhibits

• Note Well: when you create a professional document, other people will probably work on it
• You want to be robust to careless editing
• Refer to exhibits by NUMBER, not by placement in text
  ○ See Figure 3, NOT “See figure below.”
Exhibits

• Note: Exhibits may be taken away from your paper and used as slides

• Some readers flip through exhibits without reading text

• Exhibits must be “stand alone”
  o Descriptive titles and headers
  o Caption
  o Reader knows what’s being presented WITHOUT reading the text

• This is part of the memo grading rubric
Exhibits

• Discuss exhibit in the text
• Do NOT walk through every number
• Tell the reader what you want them to notice
Exhibits

• Keep tables “clean”
• Don’t clutter them up with a bunch of extra lines
• Do NOT use vertical lines
Exhibits

• Tables can also present qualitative information

• See Sample Table 5
Grammar

• Lots of grammar rules
• Some of them are vitally important
  o They change the meaning of your sentence!
  o “I shot the student who yelled at me” vs. “I shot the student, who yelled at me”
• Others are often ignored, but matter to some people
  o I want to frequently ignore grammar rules.
• Others aren’t rules, but just good style
  o “The assignment, which was very long and painful, started with a presentation by the faculty” v. “The faculty started the long and tedious assignment with a presentation.”
Grammar

• All these rules are landmines
• Very easy to get caught up in them
• They’re important, but it’s MORE important to
  o Have good points
  o Support your points
  o Organize your points
Grammar

• Note: Word’s grammar checker is not very good
Grammar

• If you worry about grammar in your first draft, you will never write anything

• AFTER you revise, save time to proofread

• Do NOT rely on spelling and grammar checkers (often wrong)

• Hard to see what you just wrote
Grammar

• How should you handle gender?
  o Alternate “she” and “he” across examples?
  o Use “s/he” or “his/her”?
  o Use “they,” even in the singular?
  o Use “he” all the time?
Grammar

• Which grammar rules MATTER?
  o Subject and verb agreement
  o Pronoun agreement
  o Fragments/run-ons
  o Correct punctuation
  o Forgetting punctuation at the ends of the sentences (except when in list format)
Grammar

• Which grammar rules MATTER?
  o Using semi-colon as colon
  o Dangling modifiers
  o Using words that are the wrong part of speech
  o Using incorrect preposition
  o Spelling (don’t rely on spell-checker)
Grammar

• Articles (a/an/the)
  o When do you use them?
  o Very jarring to native speaker when you get them wrong
  o Very hard to learn for non-native speakers
  o Personally, I try NOT to count off for them
  o Will detract from your writing, professionally
Grammar

• Rules that some people care about
  o When to use “whom” instead of “who”
  o When to use “that” instead of “which”
  o Ending sentences with a preposition
  o Starting sentences with a coordinating conjunction (and/or/for/nor/but/so/yet)
  o Using first person
  o split infinitives
  o Most bosses/profs have some of these that REALLY bother them (for me, it’s parallelism)
Grammar

• Words that are often confused:
  o Principle/principal
  o Lie/lay
  o Sit/set
  o Likely/liable

• Most bosses/profs have some of these that REALLY bother them

• (For me, it’s effect/affect)