

CE 321: Advice Table for Technical Memos

Advice	Explanation	Example
Give Structure to the information.	Make sure that headings, paragraphs, and lists reflect distinct groups of information arranged in an order that makes sense to your reader.	<p><i>Prefer</i> a structure that reveals the hierarchy of ideas.</p> <p>The equation we used would not suit your design for two reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The 30 ft depth of your tanks will introduce stratification;• The use of salt water in your tanks will create a variation in specific gravity. <p><i>Avoid</i> either mixing unrelated ideas in a single chunk of information or hiding structure within linear text:</p> <p>The equations we used would not suit your design for two reasons. According to hydrostatic theory, the forces act on the center of pressure of the submerged are. The 30 ft depth of your tanks will introduce stratification. Another reason is that the use of salt water in your tanks will create a variation in specific gravity.</p>
Use a direct, personal tone.	Remember that memos are written by people for people (normally within the same organization). Address your reader directly in a level of formality that is appropriate to your working relationship and to the purpose of the memo.	<p><i>Prefer</i> a direct style:</p> <p>We remain available to answer any questions you have about these findings.</p> <p><i>Avoid</i> stiff, institutional prose:</p> <p>It is stated that investigators in the Engineering Applications Division will continue to remain available to render assistance in the understanding of the above listed findings.</p>

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Respond to your reader's needs.	<p>Consider the factors that create your reader's Interest in your memo and address those factors in the way you organize your memo:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the reader asked for specific information? • Is the reader aware of the subject and its importance? • Why does the reader need this information? • What level of detail or evidence will the reader require to accept the content of the memo? 	<p>Rephrase the request as a statement to open your memo:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here is the data you requested from the thermal diffusion experiments. The results should be useful to the Composite Materials Group and should answer their questions regarding the degree of uncertainty in our measurements. The attached graph illustrates the time vs. temperature readings for three composite rods.
Use the subject line (Re:) to your advantage.	Let the subject line focus the reader's attention by highlighting the critical ideas in your memo.	<p>Prefer a subject line such as:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Re: Serious Violations of Safety Regulations—Building A3</p> <p>Avoid overly broad, generic subject lines:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Re: Safety Inspections</p>
Get to the point.	Except for "bad news" situations, begin your memo with the most important point you wish to make.	<p>Prefer a direct, specific opening:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">We believe the equations used in our procedures are valid for use in the design you propose <i>(followed by a list of reasons why along with any limitations or qualifiers to your statement)</i>.</p>