ENGL 3301: Technical and Professional Writing

Memorandum

To: Students
From: Dr. Andrews
Date: 07 February 2021
Subject: Review of memo format

This document is an example of memo format. It also summarizes guidance about subheadings, paragraph and list breaks, and formatting visuals and tables.

Document formatting and design are ways that writers can make texts accessible for readers. "Proper" formatting is a matter of convention and specific organizational cultures, and exceptions to any rule abound; I don't want to get stuck on "proper" formatting as in the "right or wrong way to do things." Instead, you should try to pay attention to context, community, and culture rather than hard-and-fast rules when understanding how texts do what they do.

In this class, I frequently ask you to practice and experiment with generalized approaches to genres such as memos. These genres have common features that readers in workplace cultures look for and expect, such as particular formatting for headers and especially informative subject lines. Other features like distinctive subheadings, readable paragraps and lists, and labeled tables and figures help readers identify and locate information as they use documents and focus on the parts most relevant to them.

Formatting a memo

Memo format is a common structure in companies and organizations. In this class you can create your own from scratch or use one of the templates installed with your word processor. Chapter 2.13, "Memos and Emails" in *Open Technical Writing* is a good primer on functions, formats, and reasons to write memos.

Memos have a few **basic elements**. If you're starting from scratch, type "memo" or "memorandum" at the top, add the header information (To, From, Date, and Subject; occasionally Cc if it's relevant), and then begin the memo's content. Memos and other professional and technical documents commonly use **block format**, a design using left-aligned single-spaced paragraphs with no indentation and a single line of blank space between paragraphs. (This document is in block format.)

Memos—in particular internal or interoffice memos—don't generally use salutations ("Dear Dr. Andrews") or closing signatures ("Sincerely, Rebecca Hinojosa"). Save those features for your emails and letters.

For memos longer than a page, opening the document with a summary helps readers know what the memo contains and why they should read it. This is also known as "bottom line up front" writing.

Your word processor has templates preinstalled in order to help users easily create readable and stylish memos, letters, resumes, and reports. Templates simplify the process of applying color and type designs, have automatic stylesheets preinstalled, and frequently add images and backgrounds to headers or footers. You may use templates in this course if you choose to, and as I have said elsewhere, this course is a good space to experiment and try new things with document designs.

Resources for locating templates:

- [Create a Microsoft Word file from a template](#)
- [Create a Google Docs file from a template](#)

Using subheadings to make text scannable

In documents with multiple topics and sections, subheadings **help readers find information** and **follow key messages** in your content. Whether you simply make text bolder and bigger, use a two-font approach, or use automated style sheets, when you create visually distinctive headings you orient your reader to your message and your document.

Along with visual formatting, the writing style of your subheadings can help readers find and retain key information. Table 1 overviews three common approaches to subheadings in technical and professional writing.
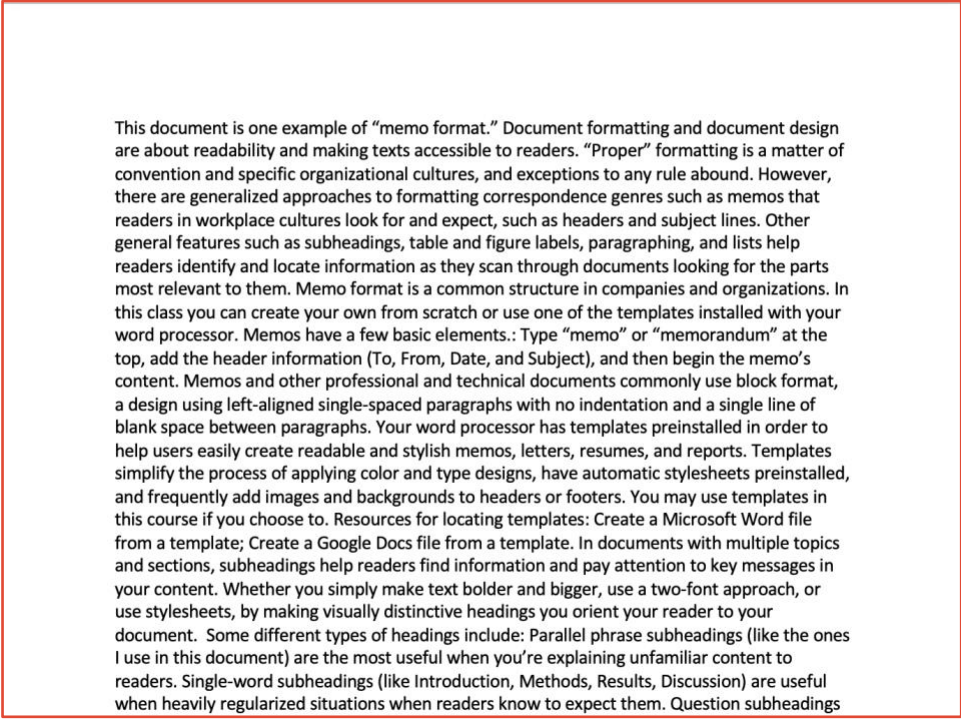
Table 1: Common styles of subheadings		
Heading style	**Examples**	**Comments**
Parallel phrase subheadings	"Formatting a memorandum or memo" "Using subheadings to make text scannable" "Breaking up walls of words with paragraphs and lists" (Examples are from the memo you're reading now)	Useful when explaining new or unfamiliar content because key messages are stated in subheadings as complete phrases with nouns and verbs.
Single word subheadings	[IMRaD scientific articles](#) use the following traditional subheadings: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (or Conclusion). Many publications have prescribed sections. [IEEE TPC Teaching Cases](#), for example, require the following: Abstract, About the Case, Situating the Case, Methods/Approach, Results/Discussion, Conclusion.	Useful in highly formalized situations when readers are familiar with a genre or expect prescribed sections.
Question subheadings	"What is a face covering?" "What is the purpose of a face covering?" "What is a public space? " (Examples are from the [TAMUCC Face Coverings FAQ](#))	Useful for informational resources like Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents, also useful for explaining technical content where you have planned for the types of questions your audience will usually have.

In this course, you won't need more than one or two levels of subheadings in most of your documents. If you find yourself going straight from one level of heading to another without any paragraph text in between, you may be over-dividing your content. Except in the very shortest documents, if each individual paragraph has its own subheading, you've probably got too many headings. To revise, look at your single paragraph sections and recombine them into a larger section with multiple paragraphs under a single subheading.

Breaking up walls of words with paragraphs and lists

By using paragraphs and lists, writers reveal the structure of their text, show relationships and distinctions between ideas, and help readers find and pay attention to important information.

The "wall of words" is infamous in online communities—it's an article or discussion post that cascades down the screen in an unbroken, densely-packed wall of text with no paragraph breaks, images, or any clue to the text structure at all. Figure 1 is an example of a wall of words: it's the text of this memo de-formatted to appear in a big block of text that's difficult to read quickly. If you've ever been in a class that used lots of discussion forums, you've definitely had to suffer through trying to read walls of words—and have probably written a few yourself.

This document is one example of "memo format." Document formatting and document design are about readability and making texts accessible to readers. "Proper" formatting is a matter of convention and specific organizational cultures, and exceptions to any rule abound. However, there are generalized approaches to formatting correspondence genres such as memos that readers in workplace cultures look for and expect, such as headers and subject lines. Other general features such as subheadings, table and figure labels, paragraphing, and lists help readers identify and locate information as they scan through documents looking for the parts most relevant to them. Memo format is a common structure in companies and organizations. In this class you can create your own from scratch or use one of the templates installed with your word processor. Memos have a few basic elements.: Type "memo" or "memorandum" at the top, add the header information (To, From, Date, and Subject), and then begin the memo's content. Memos and other professional and technical documents commonly use block format, a design using left-aligned single-spaced paragraphs with no indentation and a single line of blank space between paragraphs. Your word processor has templates preinstalled in order to help users easily create readable and stylish memos, letters, resumes, and reports. Templates simplify the process of applying color and type designs, have automatic stylesheets preinstalled, and frequently add images and backgrounds to headers or footers. You may use templates in this course if you choose to. Resources for locating templates: Create a Microsoft Word file from a template; Create a Google Docs file from a template. In documents with multiple topics and sections, subheadings help readers find information and pay attention to key messages in your content. Whether you simply make text bolder and bigger, use a two-font approach, or use stylesheets, by making visually distinctive headings you orient your reader to your document. Some different types of headings include: Parallel phrase subheadings (like the ones I use in this document) are the most useful when you're explaining unfamiliar content to readers. Single-word subheadings (like Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) are useful when heavily regularized situations when readers know to expect them. Question subheadings

Figure 1: A wall of words. Screenshot by the author

Large blocks of text are boring, hard to read, and often suggest low-quality or rant-style content. They're hard to skim and scan, and make finding information difficult. In fact, they sometimes even seem purposefully designed for readers to look at, decide not to read, and skip entirely. Skimming through this memo, you can find many examples of **multiple-paragraph subsections** and **short lists**; these **features help readers locate and easily understand information** by breaking information into distinctive units.

Lists are another useful feature for the technical or professional writer, but they're not as simple as adding bullets or numbers and moving on. Give your lists context with a short introductory phrase or sentence (like "Reminders about lists" for the list in this section). Also, keep items in a single list together on the same page. If a list item breaks to the next page, readers may not recognize it's a part of that list.

Reminders about lists:

- Keep lists and list items short if possible
- Use bullet lists for options
- Use numbered lists for steps or when the items' order matters
- Make list items parallel by using the same phrasing or parts of speech throughout

Labeling tables and figures to help readers identify information

In technical and professional writing, writers can use graphics, illustrations, and tables to make complex information like numerical data, abstract concepts, or processes and relationships understandable for readers. To enhance the accessibility of your graphics, use labels and titles to identify and summarize visuals for readers that start by scanning. Labels and titles also help clarify which graphic you're referring to in the text.

In general, **label everything**. If you're using a **table**, place the label and title **above** the visual. If you're using a picture or **figure**, place the label and title **below** the visual. You will see variations of these two arrangements (especially for figures), but these directions are common in technical style guides and conventional in many writing situations. This memo includes examples of both tables and visuals with their label placement for you to refer to.

As well as a label and title, a functional visual should also have a cross-reference in the surrounding text. For example:

- "Table 1 overviews three common approaches to subheadings in technical and professional writing."
- "Figure 1 is an example of a wall of words: it's the text of this memo de-formatted to appear in a big block of text that's difficult to read quickly."
- "Table 13 shows data on the price fluctuation of stickywidgets between 1918 and 2018."
- "See Figure 12."
- "Figure 12 is an arial view of the location of the accident."

Use visuals to clarify, illustrate, and augment your written text, not completely replace it.