MEMORANDUM

To: Our Students
From: Michael O’Leary and Ed Soule
Date: 2018
Re: Good Written Communications

The purpose of this memo is to share some ideas for improving your written communication skills. We begin by noting some challenges faced by authors of business communications and some tips for overcoming them. We conclude with answers to a few FAQs and append a guide on writing good headings.

Please understand my motivation. Every one of you is a source of great ideas. We are not writing coaches, but we do think it's important to help you relate your ideas in a way that achieves the maximum possible impact. This memo refers to writing “memos,” but much of what it covers is relevant to other types of writing as well.

1st Challenge: Your reader’s attention span is limited

Assume your reader lacks the time to read your memo. The most you should expect is a single fast-paced reading.

Tip #1: Get to the point—and stay on it. Try beginning every memo as follows: “The purpose of this memo is to...” Then provide your readers with a roadmap or outline of what’s to come (e.g., “First, I will address _______. Then, I will summarize _______. Next, I will explore _______ ...”). Finally, follow your roadmap methodically with what you write in the body of the memo (using headings and sub-headings to demarcate major sections, with those headings paralleling the road map exactly).

Tip #2: Dispense with chatty text and personal musings. Enough said.

Tip #3: Addition by subtraction. When you have completed a draft or two and produced what seems like a finished product, reduce the word count by at least 10%. Invariably, the pace will pick up and the clarity will improve.

2nd Challenge: Your reader has a lot on her/his mind

Assume that your reader is thinking about several things of varying degrees of urgency, that s/he is being interrupted constantly, and that s/he will get lost and stop reading unless you point the way.

Tip #4: Take your reader on a guided tour. Use informative headings and smooth, clearly delineated transitions between paragraphs and sections. They will guide your readers (and help enforce a clear structure on your own thinking and writing). Remove any obstacles that detract from the narrative flow.
3rd Challenge: Your reader is lazy
It is not your reader’s job to decipher densely written or meandering text. Rather, it is your job to make your ideas easily accessible. As a rule of thumb, paragraphs in excess of 175 words are densely written, meandering, or both. Do not expect people to read them with care or in their entirety.

Tip #5: Paragraphs 101. A paragraph should contain one (and only one) significant idea. State it clearly in the first sentence. Every other sentence should relate to that main idea. No exceptions. Most ideas can be expressed in fewer than 175 words. If one of your paragraphs is longer, then check it for excessive wordiness. If it passes that test but is still >175 words, then identify the key ideas you are trying to express and give each of them its own paragraph. In general, strive to eliminate all non-essential text. Think Hemingway. Move detailed background information and large displays of data to an appendix. Especially for longer memos, periodically remind readers where you are and where you are going.

Tip #6: Tables and Figures. Good tables and figures are an art unto themselves, but – when done well – they can convey a large amount of information in a very efficient and effective way. Comparisons are one instance where a table is often extremely helpful. Discussions of change over time are an instance where a good graph can dramatically increase the extent to which your reader can easily ascertain your most important point. Be sure to number and title any figure, table, etc. and also to refer to that number in the text (e.g., “As shown in Figure 3, …”).

4th Challenge: Your reader is easily distracted.
Grammatical errors and awkward or confused wording will distract your reader and diminish your ideas.

Tip #7: To identify problematic text, proofread a hard copy. We know we are in a tablet-, laptop-, and smartphone-enabled world, but you will find errors in a printed draft that you will miss on a screen. Additionally, read the memo out loud and you will hear errors that you overlooked in reading it. Furthermore, be on high alert for common grammar and usage errors (there/their/they’re, moral vs. morale, tenet vs. tenant, compliment vs. complement, who’s vs. whose, lead vs. led, etc.).

Tip #8: Solicit feedback on clarity and coherence from someone with little or no subject matter familiarity (and a fresh set of eyes; we quickly become blind to our own errors).

5th Challenge: Your reader may not share your point of view
Written communication that is intended to convince should contain a clear argument. This entails reasons in support of your stance and a defense against hypothetical criticism.

Tip #9: Anticipate and counter objections. Formulate the best possible case against your stance and counter it. For instance, after arguing your side, begin a paragraph as follows: “It is arguable that my plan is flawed” or “A case can be made for [pursuing a different course of action than yours].” To counter such opposition, consider the following lead sentences: “Although my plan is imperfect…” or “Although the alternative courses of action have merit, mine is preferable [because…].” This technique is apt to improve your argument and it is almost certain to increase your credibility.
6th Challenge: Your reader wants to know what your point of view is
Written communication should clearly distinguish between your ideas and ideas that “belong” to someone else. Don’t leave readers with any ambiguity about the ownership of ideas in your text.

**Tip #10: Write in the first person active voice.** Don’t hide behind passive language (e.g., avoid phrases like “It is said that crime and temperature are positively related.” Also, don’t use “We” unless you are working with a partner/s. Own your ideas using “I” and active verbs (e.g., “I find that crime and ice cream sales are highly correlated ...”)

**Frequently Asked Questions**

1. Aren’t you making too much of form? What about the substance of my work?
   It is hard to disentangle clarity and coherence from the quality of content. Sloppy writing and muddled thinking tend to go hand in hand. Thus, we may believe that our 400 word paragraph contains important ideas; but if my reader is unable to ferret them out with ease then it does not. In that instance, form trumps content. Our ideas are of no consequence unless they are easily accessible.

   I’m a published writer, but still cannot produce compelling text on the first try. The writing process is an exercise in fine-tuning our thinking: our ideas improve and our writing becomes clearer through successive drafts. We know your time is limited, but we are unaware of an alternative means of creating clear, coherent text.

2. Is it permissible/wise to use bullets or numbered lists?
   A judicious use of properly formatted bullet points is often desirable. As a rule of thumb, bulleted or numbered lists should not cover more than one third of a page; and try not to have them appear on consecutive pages. They are valuable tools for creating “white space,” but too much of a good thing can backfire.

**Credits**
Credit for the original format, occasional dry humor, and content of this advice goes to Prof. Ed Soule. We have co-taught principled leadership classes (and read more memos than we’d like to admit). We also both had business careers before entering academia and strive to keep our writing clear and well structured.
The Best Section Headings Are Often Informative Phrases Not Topic Words

This note provides advice on how to get the most mileage out of informative section headings. It draws on a variety of style guides and writing resources including 2003 work by JoAnn Syverson and Holly Littlefield (University of Minnesota’s Center for Writing). After describing the four types, we provide some brief suggestions about formatting them.

Four common types of section headings convey increasingly rich information

There are four common types of section headings and each one conveys more information to readers. We list them below in increasing order or richness/value and provide an example of each:

1. **Topical headings** (e.g., “Survey”) are the shortest and least valuable. Usually they broadly define what comes next and are just a single word or two (e.g., Introduction, Findings, Conclusion). These are the most common form of headings in academic papers. For academic journals, they are fine, but Informative Headings are far more valuable (and acceptable) in other types of publications.

2. **Question headings** (e.g., “What Did the Survey Show?”) expand a topical heading into a question, and may be more intriguing for your reader, but don’t actually provide any more information than a basic topical heading. On an “efficiency” basis, they’re actually worse than a simple topic heading. They convey no more information and take up more space/attention.

3. **Descriptive headings** (e.g., “100 Students’ Responses to the Survey”) tell you somewhat more about what follows (e.g., sample and sample size). For some types or writing, where an informative heading would be too “casual” or out of the ordinary, a descriptive heading is the next best alternative.

4. **Informative headings** (e.g., “90/100 Student Surveys Point to High Satisfaction with Key Courses”) are the most valuable type, but unfortunately they are also the least common. Taken together, the informative headings throughout a paper (or presentation) can tell a high-level version of your whole story. They almost always include a noun and verb and appear more like a topic sentence. If you had nothing but the informative headings, you should still be able to extract the essence of a paper.

Consistent and carefully formatted headings are best

In addition to using informative headings as much as possible, strive to:

1. Use the **same type** of heading throughout. Don’t mix some topical and some informative.
2. Use a **common syntax** for your headings (e.g., all full sentences or all phrases).
3. Employ **parallel construction** – especially with topical and question headings, start them with the same part of speech [e.g., all question headings should start with a question word (“What did ...?”) not some preamble followed by a question (e.g., not “Given what we know, what did ...?”). This is true for lists like this one (where I begin each listed item with a verb in the same tense).
4. Use **different font size, bold face, and/or italics** to distinguish headings from the text that follows.
5. **Avoid underlining**, which is a hold-over from typewriter and hand-written text days, and risks leading people to believe something is a link/URL.
6. **Omit colons and periods** at the end of headings. Font size, bolding, or italics are sufficient.