

Memorandum Grading Rubric
ECON 225: Economic Development
Bryn Mawr College

1. Background

A requirement for ECON 225 is a memo. At this point you should have a good idea of your topic and your audience and you should be moving into researching what economists, other social scientists, and researchers in government agencies understand about the policy or intervention that is your focus.

Recall the assignment has a required length of five pages double spaced. You may not go over and you may not go under. You have an appendix with unlimited space to provide information that does not fit into the main text of the memo but may be essential in support of statements you make in the main text.

2. Recommendations and Best Practices in Memo Writing

Clear and Direct Prose

Remember, you have very little space to articulate a complex assessment of a policy. Always be thinking about your audience and write for them. They are a busy professional with little time to waste. Be clear and direct and expect them not to tolerate language that is not clear, direct and precise.

There are common mistakes that a professional audience will not forgive. Common mistakes that a professional audience will not tolerate are:

3. Run-on sentences,
4. Incorrect punctuation,
5. Use of the passive voice,
6. Double negatives,
7. Ending sentences in prepositions,
8. Split infinitives,
9. General wordiness,

Also, avoid using adverbs. This may sound strange to some of you, but they are almost always unnecessary in professional and academic writing. They will just take up space and add very little to your point. To emphasize my point, look at my last sentence: "They will just take up space and add very little to your point." If you take out the adverbs "just" and "very," would this change the meaning of my sentence? No. All it would do is tighten the sentence up and make it more efficient. Perhaps it changed the tone a bit, but if anything it made the tone more direct and professional, which is exactly what you are trying to achieve. Avoid adverbs.

Use the Appendix

Just because the memo's text is short doesn't mean you should leave statements unsupported or arguments underdeveloped. If you do, your grade will be penalized. You might be saying, "five pages isn't enough space to develop all points and provide support!" You are correct. But remember, you have an appendix with unlimited space and you should use this to your advantage. The text is where absolutely essential points and pieces of evidence need to go. The appendix is where important information that you assess as not being critical for the text itself should go.

For example, suppose your topic is a cash transfer program in Ecuador. You want to inform the policy maker that a similar but distinct cash transfer program in Laos resulted in a large increase in school performance for the children of those who participated.

You should be asking yourself something like the following, "What is essential for my audience to know here? Do I need to mention in detail the differences between the program in Ecuador and the one in Laos, or can I just say they are similar? Is it okay to leave the statement vague and just say it was a 'large' effect? Or do I need to say the effect was a 50% improvement in reading a writing test scores? Do I need to mention the study was done in Laos where the schooling outcomes are quite a bit worse than those in Ecuador? Do I need to mention the study had deficiencies in its methodology and we can't ascribe a causal interpretation to this finding? Do I need to mention what those deficiencies are in detail and my assessment that it is likely overestimating the effect as a result?"

Now, you should be thinking that if you describe all the rich detail of this study in your memo it would likely take up at least half a page. If you did that, you lose 10 percent of the space in your memo and you still need to mention perhaps 15 other studies, assess what they mean, and make recommendations to the audience. You don't have space to be inclusive like this, and even if you did, the audience will get irritated with what they experience as a memo that is overly detailed and not tailored to their needs. The solution: use the appendix.

Going with the example above, you might decide to include the details that don't take up too much space and aren't overwhelming: The programs are similar with some important distinctions. It is a 50 percent increase, which is a large effect. Likely Ecuador won't experience this same type of effect because it has higher educational attainment than Laos. Also, this study is probably overestimating the effect due to methodological limitations. The details of the differences between the two programs and the details of those methodological limitations are important but does your audience really need to know them? Probably not, but if the audience disagrees and wants to know, they will be irritated if those details aren't at their fingertips in the appendix. Put those kinds of details in the appendix.

Your grade will be penalized if you leave the appendix underdeveloped.

Citing Sources

Use author, date parenthetical citations in the text. You don't need to provide a page number. Provide a full bibliographic entry at the end in a separate section titled "Sources."

Use Chicago formatting for citations in your list of sources.

Formatting

Here is formatting guidance common in professional writing that you should follow:

- Your memo should have the following structure: (1) Header with author, audience, and subject listed. (2) Memo main text, (3) Appendix, and (4) Sources.
- I would format my appendix as an endnote section in word processing software.
- Always include page numbers.
- The alignment of your text should be justified. It looks more professional.
- You might find it useful to have sections within your main text to provide it structure. For example, you might have sections with headers like: (1) Executive Summary, (2) Evidence, (3) Recommendations, (4) Conclusion. This is totally fine and I'd even recommend this in most cases, but know that it will come at the expense of space. In other words, if you use four lines of text for the above subheaders, you **may not** spill over the five page limit for the assignment by four lines.
- Use either Times New Roman or Calibri font.
- Use one-inch margins.
- Spell out integers from zero through nine. Use numerals for 10 and above or numbers with decimals.
- Spell out "percent" instead of using the percent sign, %.

3. Grading

This assignment will be graded along 5 dimensions:

1. Required length of text
2. Cogency of your argument
3. Proper research and relevant citations
4. Appropriate support for your argument and use of the appendix

5. Clarity over how your research can effectively be applied to the audience's question
6. Overall clarity of your writing (see above for helpful tips)

Each dimension will be scored on a zero to five scale. A zero reflects you satisfied no part of that dimension of the assignment. A five reflects excellent work that either has extremely minor or no faults at all.

Your final grade for the assignment will be your score in each dimension added up over the total number of points available (30).

4. A Quick Note of Motivation and Reminder

I am aware this is potentially a very unfamiliar writing format for many of you as it deviates in many ways from structures of academic writing commonly taught in high school and undergraduate college programs. However, this is a common way of structuring ideas and argumentation in professional spaces. This is an opportunity to gain experience in this approach. It is also good practice in becoming a more critical and efficient writer in those more traditional forms as well.

Remember I am available to provide structured feedback on drafts in office hours. If you would like to meet with me to discuss a draft, send me your work 48 hours before our scheduled meeting so I can go over it and provide you comments. My help on the memo is optional.