To: KSG Students
From: Bob Behn
Date: Friday, April 22, 2005
Re: **The Craft of Memo Writing**

You can influence people — and thus both policy and implementation — in three ways: by writing, by speaking, and by sending symbolic signals. Early in your career, your writing may be your most important tool of influence. If your ideas make sense on paper, others may invite you to explain them to larger audiences. And as your career progresses, you will be able to employ symbolism to personally dramatize the messages you send by writing and speaking.

Indeed, you may never acquire the influence that you seek — and make the career advances that you desire — without first developing your ability to write clearly, coherently, and persuasively. Thus, you need to devote significant time, thought, and work to mastering your ability to deploy this powerful instrument of influence. You need to become a master of that much-maligned, yet all-essential policy tool: the memo.

The Influential Memo

In the policy world, everyone reads memos. Obviously, a lot of people must be writing memos. Yet, not every memo that is written is also read. After all, a memo may be tossed to a harried official as he or she dashes out of the office, stuffed into a briefcase, and only retrieved with a jumble of other coffee-stained papers in Seat 29B. Most policy makers find that their memo-reading time is scarce. They refuse to waste this precious asset on junk.

In writing a memo, you are competing for the valuable time of some very influential people. Here at the Kennedy School, the faculty have to read all of your course memos. After you leave the Kennedy School, however, no one is required to read any of your memos. If you establish a reputation for writing organized, concise, informative, and maybe even useful memos, people will read them. If you establish a reputation for producing chaotic, long-winded, obtuse, or irrelevant memos, they will accumulate in everyone's some-day-I-have-to-read-this-stuff pile.

Your First Sentence

In anything you write, your first sentence is your most important. If your first sentence is boring, if your first sentence is incoherent or irrelevant, if your first sentence contains nothing new, no one will read your second sentence.

Thus, you should deliberately design your first sentence to convince an audience drowning in paper — someone who is glancing at your memo while waiting for someone else to answer the phone — that you have some ideas to which they need to pay attention.

- Don't waste your first sentence on boilerplate.
- Don't waste your first sentence telling your readers things they already know.
- Do use your first sentence to convince your very busy audience that the rest of your memo (or, at least, your next sentence) is a must read. Use your first sentence to persuade them that your few pages are precisely what they need to solve one of their most pressing problems.

Good Writing and Good Thinking

Good writing requires good thinking. No writer can save poor thinking. You cannot rescue poor ideas with clever draftsmanship. But bad writing can — and too often does — sabotage good thinking.

Nevertheless, self-critical writing can help improve thinking. Indeed, you may not know what you truly think until you commit that potential thought to paper (or, at least, to the screen) and then evaluate it critically and analytically:

- Does this sentence make sense? Does this paragraph make sense?
- Does my entire memo possess a coherent, internal logic?
- What are the flaws in the core idea? In the presentation of that idea? In the reasoning and evidence supporting that idea?
- Who might quarrel with the analysis in the memo? On what basis? What part of the memo do I need to modify to anticipate and rebut that criticism?

An effective policy memo starts with a solid idea or relevant proposal, makes the case analytically and persuasively, and responds directly to the inevitable objections.

An effective policy memo is convincing because of the coherence of its underlying logic — and because of the clarity of its presentation of that logic.

"Form Follows Function"

Louis Sullivan, the architect who helped rebuild Chicago after the fire of 1871, had it right — and not just about buildings. He also had it right about memos. When writing a memo, don't obey some mindless template. Instead, choose a form for your memo that reflects its function — that conveys your core message.

Indeed, don't just write your memo. Design it. Employ headings and subheadings, bullets and italics, and white space too — all to impart the structure of your argument and to highlight your key points. Design your memo so that your readers can scan it quickly and grasp your core message.

At the same time, don't distract the reader by mixing in too many fancy fonts, by underlining too many words, by creating too many subsections with too many subheadings, by puncturing the page with too many bullets. If your formatting is too confusing, you will only distract or discourage potential readers.

Rather, help your reader understand your message. Don't bury your core idea in the middle of page 3. Don't save it until the end, as if you were Anne Perry crafting an enigmatic mystery novel. Do organize every paragraph so that its key point is absolutely clear— so that it jumps off the page.

Avoid the ubiquitous background section. Lazy writers insert into a background section all of the information that they think their audience might need to know (though it is never clear why). Most likely, this background section will accomplish nothing more than to put the audience to sleep. Tell your audience key facts when they need to know them.[1]

Finally, avoid the impenetrable, intimidating page. Don't make any single page too overwhelming. Don't make any paragraph too dense. Don't make any sentence too long. Design your memo to entice your audience to read it.

Know Your Audience — and Its Needs

Every time you write a memo, you are trying to influence a few key people — maybe just one key elected official, maybe a small team. Yes, if you write a particularly brilliant memo (or a particularly scandalous one), it may be photocopied and widely circulated. Still, you are writing your memo not for mass circulation but for a very small, very specific, very individualized audience.

Unless your purpose is to keep yourself out of jail, you are writing not for your own benefit but for your audience's. Know this audience. Know what he, she, or they want. Know what problems your audience has. Design your memo to solve one of your audience's most pressing problems.

- Maybe your audience needs some basic information.
- Maybe your audience needs to understand the core dilemma of a complex policy problem.
- Maybe your audience needs to choose from among a plethora of competing alternatives.

Design your memo to answer your audience's pressing questions — to help solve your audience's currently important problem. Choose your words and format to help your audience do a better job.

Often, you will know your audience personally. You will know how your audience thinks. You will know how he, she, or they like to receive information. You will understand what your audience knows and doesn't know. Use this inside information to your advantage — to ensure that the content and presentation or your memo responds directly to your audience's presentation preferences, current knowledge, and policy needs.

At the same time, remember that you may have a secondary audience. If your intended audience likes your memo, someone may wish to circulate it more widely. Thus, design your memo so that it could be distributed to educate a wider audience with little or no revisions (and so that it can be leaked with little or no embarrassment).

Readers' Expectations

People who read one of your memos come to the task with expectations. Satisfy them. Make it easy for your readers to obtain the information, analysis, and insight that they seek.

- Do not force your readers to wade through long, convoluted sentences.
- Be direct. If you are too subtle — too clever — your audience may misinterpret your ideas.
- Write for real people, not bureaucrats. Avoid fancy words. If you wouldn't use a word or a phrase in a letter to your college roommate, don't use it in a memo.

Moreover, when reading a sentence, your readers expect to find certain things in certain places.

- The reader expects to find the agent of the action in the subject of the sentence. If you fail to specify *who* did what or *who* should do what, your audience will be confused. They will not understand what really happened in the past, or who you want to make something happen in the future. In a policy or management memo, you need to do more than say what should happen. You have to explain *who,* exactly, has to do what to make that happen. You should give this *who* — this agent who will make happen what you want to happen — the place of honor in the subject of your sentence.

- The reader expects to find the emphasis at the end of the sentence. When you write the "shitty first draft"[2] of any sentence, you may tack a variety of phrases on to the end. You knew that these words belonged in the sentence, but you couldn't figure out where. Still, it should be clear where they do not belong. These words do not belong at the end of the sentence. You should reserve the end of your sentence for the word or phrase that emphasizes your sentence's big point.

Your readers expect you to express parallel ideas with parallel construction. For example, if you create a list of items, each item in that list should have the same format. If you employ a set of bullets, you should begin each bullet in the same way — for example, with the subject of the sentence that composes the bullet, or with a verb. If the first bullet is a question, the subsequent bullets should all be questions. (See the bullets above and below.)

Your readers expect that the number of items on an initial, overview list will match the number of items on the subsequent, more detailed version of that list. For example, if in your first paragraph you write that your memo will focus on five specific problems and name each of them, your reader expects that the rest of your memo will be organized around these five problems — not around three problems, or six data sets, or 14 tactics.

If you satisfy your readers' expectations, they will find it easier to recognize your brilliance.

The Table and The Chart

Sometimes, you can make your point more quickly, more effectively, and with more detail by using a table or chart. This, however, depends not only on the nature of your ideas but also on your audience's desires. If your audience likes tables, give them tables. If your audience hates tables, find a way to make your point without a table.

If you do create a table, make sure that it passes the "photocopy test." After all, a good table — just like a good memo — is apt to be photocopied and distributed. But will the table — without the accompanying text — be comprehensible? This is the photocopy test: If the table can be completely understood without any supplementary words, the table passes this test.

Consequently, make sure that any table you design has:

- a title that explains the point of the table;

- the source of the data;

- clearly labeled axes; and

- two reasonable and clearly labeled scales. (Just because Bill Gates wants to put the tick marks at 13.47, 16.92, 20.37, . . . doesn't mean that you should.)

A table that fails to satisfy one of these conditions, a table that fails to pass the photocopy test, is a table that is worse than useless. It is a table that wastes people's valuable time without conveying any useful information.

There Is No Such Thing As Good Writing, Only Good Rewriting.

Your audience will only read so much. Maybe this is five pages. Maybe it is only one page. Regardless of the limit, you will be pressed to live within its constraints — to include all of your absolutely essential ideas without violating your audience's patience.

To the rescue rides William Strunk: "Omit needless words. Omit needless words. Omit needless words," he told generations of literary gluttons.[3] Ignore his advice at your peril.

But how? "How can I possibly omit any of my absolutely essential words — words without which my audience will never understand the sophistication of my thinking?" The answer is obvious, yet difficult to implement. You have to ruthlessly purge your most cherished words.

You can examine any policy topic in a multiplicity of lengths. About any subject, you can write a 700-page encyclopedia or a 700-word op-ed piece. So before you start to write your memo, you have to determine how long (at least, approximately) it can be.

Are you charged with writing a lean, one-page memo? If so write an opulent, two-page draft. Then get brutal. Lop off sentences. Discard words. Rearrange paragraphs. And then, having pared your literary masterpiece down to one page and four lines, don't mess with the font. You'll be tempted. Don't. Don't engage in the simple and all-too-obvious trick of reducing the font size until those four lines are all absorbed onto page one (and the resulting letters are indistinguishable from some ancient microglyphics).

This is when you earn your memo-writing laurels. This is when you combine literary brutality and intellectual honesty. This is when you put your draft aside for an hour or a day (or even a week) and return to it fresh — prepared to recognize how you can rewrite it one more time to be even more concise and simultaneously more clear. This is when you are forced to decide what is really essential and what can be held in reserve for the second edition.

For the last — but strictly implicit — sentence of every memo that you will ever write is:

"If you think these thoughts are useful, I have some even better ideas."

A Few Notes

1. For an example of how to do this well — of how to introduce key information just when the audience needs to know it — see Tracy Kidder's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Soul of a New Machine* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1981).

2. A useful writing guide is Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994). See particularly pp. 21-27, where she explains the necessity of writing "shitty first drafts" that, of course, only you will ever see).

3. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style,* fourth edition (Needham Heights, Mass.: Pearson Higher Education, 2000), p. xv. If you have, somehow, escaped from every bookstore you ever entered without purchasing this invaluable little book, you should immediately invest $8 in this 85-page literary instructor and place it on your desk right between your thesaurus and the Encyclopedia of Baseball. It will help you become a better memo writer, a better pen pal, and maybe even help you write that critically acclaimed novel.