02.13: Memos and Emails

Tamara Powell
*Kennesaw State University*, tpowel25@kennesaw.edu

Tiffani Reardon
*Kennesaw State University*, treardo2@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/opentc](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/opentc)

Part of the Technical and Professional Writing Commons

**Recommended Citation**

[https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/opentc/14](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/opentc/14)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Educational Resources at DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Technical Communication by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
Memes and Emails  
Tamara Powell and Tiffani Reardon

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Identify basic memo and email formats.
2. Describe the key differences between basic memo and basic email formats.
3. Explain cc, bc, and attachment functions and when to use them.

Introduction to Memos and Emails

If you like movies, especially ones set in historical periods, you might enjoy finding anachronisms, or things in the wrong time period. You might see something from the present, such as a mobile phone, that is not supposed to be in a movie set in the past, such as 1850.

Anachronism

"a person or a thing that is chronologically out of place; especially: one from a former age that is incongruous in the present"

(Merriam-Webster)

For example, a well-known anachronism is in the first Indiana Jones movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark. In the movie, we see a plane flying over a map to show us Indy's route to adventure in Nepal. But while the movie was set in the 1930s, the map is from the 1980s. For example, viewers see the plane fly over Thailand, but the country was called Siam until 1939.

Maybe no one has ever confused the writing of an email or memo with an action movie. But if you enjoy finding anachronisms, there are a few hiding out in your everyday email form. It has anachronisms embedded in it from the old days before computers. Can you think of any right now? As we cover the basics of email and memos, I'll point out a few—let's see if I can tell you about any that you might not know about.
If you have ever written an email, you may have noticed that you have to provide the name of the person you are sending the email to and the subject. The email automatically provides the name of the sender and the date.

Example Memo Format

To: Martha Garner
From: Greg Brown
Subject: Server Outage
Date: December 1, 2015

We will be performing several software updates on our servers this Friday at 7pm EST. The maintenance is required in order to keep our servers secure and up-to-date.

Our lms, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. We expect only a very short interruption of services (i.e. a few seconds while the web server software is restarting).

Email formats are based on memo formats—that is, they are set up to provide the four key pieces of introductory information that a memo states in the heading: to, from, subject, and date.

Memos and emails have the to, from, subject, date heading format in common. For this reason, emails are often considered to be synonymous with memos. Also, much of the information that is shared via email is the information categorized into types of memos, for example, meeting minutes, lab reports, progress reports, directives, and other types of business and professional correspondence.

In fact, the main difference, if one is said to exist, between emails and memos, is that non-email memos exist on paper. The key format difference, then, is the signature.

That's right—it is common in email for persons to "sign" the email like a letter. In an informal email, the person might just sign his or her first name. In a more formal email, the person might have a closing like in a letter—"Sincerely," for example, along with his or her full name and title. In this way, emails can be more like letters.

Example of the Old Memo Format

To: Martha Garner
From: Greg Brown GB
Subject: Server Outage
Date: December 1, 2015

We will be performing several software updates on our servers this Friday at 7pm EST. The maintenance is required in order to keep our servers secure and up-to-date.

Our lms, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. We expect only a very short interruption of services (i.e. a few seconds while the web server software is restarting).

Paper memos NEVER have a closing and signature. Instead, the writer would indicate that he or she really wrote the memo by initialing by his or her name in the paper heading using blue or black ink. Historically, memos were typed up by stenographers and taken back to a boss for approval. Thus, the stenos would put their lower-case initials after a backslash at page bottom, like so:

Example Memo Format

To: Martha Garner
From: Greg Brown
Subject: Server Outage
Date: December 1, 2015

We will be performing several software updates on our servers this Friday at 7pm EST. The maintenance is required in order to keep our servers secure and up-to-date.
Our lms, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. We expect only a very short interruption of services (i.e. a few seconds while the web server software is restarting).

/gb

However, since people write their own messages on their own computers, the /ab now indicates authorship as long as they match the From line.

Of course, in email, the reader feels pretty confident that the email really came from the sender because, presumably, the sender had to log in to a secure email account.

If you take a look at your email when you are about to send one, you will notice some other options you have that are related to the olden days of memo writing and letter writing. You have the options of cc. CC stands for carbon copy. You may not be old enough to remember that before copy machines and computers that could print off multiple copies of a document, people used carbon paper to make copies. When a person would write or type, he or she would slip a piece of carbon paper underneath the document, and the striking of the pen or typewriter key would make a duplicate mark on a second piece of paper underneath the carbon paper, hence the term carbon copy. So the "cc" in the email heading stands for carbon copy, even though we don't use carbon anymore. In fact, sometimes, the cc is just changed to c for copy.

When do you use the cc option? When you want someone to have a copy of the email, but only for reference purposes. Or to put it more casually, to keep someone in the loop. For example, you manage a team, and you recently had a meeting. You send the meeting minutes to the team members who attended the meeting. You also want your supervisor to know that 1) you had a meeting and 2) you covered important topics and some decisions are made. Your supervisor isn't necessarily going to respond to the email and isn't directly involved in the meeting or projects. This is a good time to use a cc. When you cc someone on the email, everyone who gets the email can see who is cc-ed.

Your email has a bcc or bc option. Bcc stands for blind carbon copy, and bc is blind copy, but they are the same thing. When you use the bc option, only the person bc-ed can see who gets the email. The person in the "to" box or anyone cc-ed cannot see that a bc copy was sent or who received it. Some people consider the bc option to be unethical. Persons who disagree say that it is appropriate to use the bc option when emailing a subordinate about a difficult matter—a disagreement regarding policy, for example—and you want to make sure your supervisor knows what you wrote. You would bc your supervisor. You don't want your subordinate to think you are "tattling" on him or her, but you do want your supervisor to know what you did in case the matter ends up in his or her office, he or she is not caught unawares.

People generally agree that using the bc option is appropriate for privacy reasons. For example, perhaps you are an attorney, and you email an insurance company a copy of a client's claim. You might bc the client to ensure the client knows you sent the document and to keep his or her email address private from the insurance company. The insurance company likely assumes that the client will get a copy of the claim, or already has one. In another example, as a professor, I might send out an email to my entire class but bc all the students to keep their emails private from each other. With the bc, every student will receive the email, but each student can only see my name as the sender. Or, you might use bc for courtesy. For example, perhaps you have received an email with the hundreds of email addresses that were cc-ed on the original email, and you have to scroll through them to get to the message. It's annoying. If it's not necessary for the recipients to know who received the email—maybe it's just a reminder that the office is closing early today—and you want to avoid the scroll through the cc's, then you can bc all the recipients. That way, there's no cc scroll, and when someone replies, there's no chance that he or she will accidentally hit "reply all."

Memo Format Example

To: Martha Garner
Through: Allison Hall
From: Greg Brown GB
Subject: Server outage
Date: December 1, 2015

We will be performing several software updates on our servers this Friday at 7pm EST. The maintenance is required in order to keep our servers secure and up-to-date.

Our lms, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. We expect only a very short interruption of services (i.e. a few seconds while the web server software is restarting).

/ah

Something you may not know about is the "through" or "via" line on paper memos. In the military or in especially hierarchical companies, it may be frowned upon for a person to send an email to someone at a level above his or her direct supervisor. At such organizations, any correspondence to a person above the writer's direct supervisor must go through the supervisor. The memo must go first to the direct supervisor, indicated with a "through" or "via" line. The direct supervisor initials by his or her name to show he or she has read and approved the memo, and then sends it to the next level until it arrives at its destination. When the final recipient receives it, he or she is assured that your memo has been read and approved all the way up the chain of command.

In an email-only culture, this same process would be achieved by sending the email to your direct supervisor and allowing him or her to forward the email up the chain of command.

Regardless of how hierarchical you believe your organization to be, it is not generally a good practice to send correspondence—paper or electronic—to persons at levels above your supervisor without talking to your supervisor about the matter first and perhaps asking him or her to unofficially review and approve your memo or email.

Finally, in the days of paper, memos also indicated attachments. If a memo arrived on a desk with the notation "Attachment" it meant that there was supposed to be something paper clipped to the memo with additional information. And the recipient saw nothing paper clipped, something was missing. It is for this reason that you often see in an email a paper clip icon for the attachment button or notification. And because enclosures/attachments are often indicated by paper clip symbols in an email feed, the "Attachment" note is not used in emails.

Driving question: What impression do you want to make on readers in your email/memo correspondence?

Do you want readers to respect your writing, read it with ease, and come away with a clear sense of what you intended to communicate and a positive impression of you as a co-worker or team member?

If so, knowing the memo format and a bit of the reason why memos look as they do will help you in structuring your memo/email properly. As we move through this lesson, you will learn more about what types of content go in the main types of emails/memos, and how to write clearly and effectively.

One last thing. As you can see, memos and emails are not exactly the same thing. But memos evolved into emails, although paper memos are still created, and often then scanned and distributed electronically. In this chapter, we will usually refer to emails and memos as the same thing, and then clarify if we are referring to one or the other specifically.

Five Types of Memos

When this content for this chapter was first being developed, a helpful colleague imparted this wisdom to me: "Just show them a memo, have the participants write one, and boom, success!" Wouldn't it be GREAT if that were how it worked? The high interest in this topic shows how important memos and emails are, and yet at the same time, how much people want to improve their memo and writing skills. And if the problem were that you just hadn't ever seen a memo or email before, well, this chapter would be a lot shorter. It would be great if there were "one memo to rule them all," so to speak, that once you saw it and copied it, all your future memo and email writing endeavors would flow effortlessly from your fingertips.

The truth is, as you well know, there are lots of different occasions to write emails and memos. And emails and memos have been classified into over 10 different types. In this chapter, we will look at the five most common types—progress report, meeting minutes, incident report,
directive, and response to an inquiry. With these five types of memos/emails in your writing arsenal, you should be ready to tackle most memo/email writing tasks.

First, note that progress reports, meeting minutes, incident reports, directives, and responses to inquiry can be created in many formats—as memos, emails, informal reports, and even formal reports. We will look at these types of documents as memos or emails.

As memos or emails, you will want to start by putting the documents in the correct format. For a memo, you will open up a word processing program, such as Microsoft Word, and you will type the memo header at the top of the document: to, from, subject, and date. You will fill in the information, and then you will begin your memo. If it is a longer memo (longer than a paragraph), you may wish to use section headers. But you do not start the memo with “Dear Mr. Carter,” or any other type of salutation.

Example Email with Memo Attachment

Dear Mr. Carter,

I hope this email finds you well. I have attached the progress report for the ABC project. Please let me know if you have any problems accessing it, or if you have any questions.

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in this project.

Sincerely,

Mary Lewis, ABC Project Manager

Note that you also do not sign the memo or end it with any type of closing. After you print the memo, you then initial by your name, and then, if you are sending the memo format by email (this is not uncommon), then you scan it (unless directed otherwise, it is recommended that you save it as a pdf), and you attach it to the email. The email should alert readers to the contents of the attachment.

If you are sending the progress report by email, then you fill in the email headings—the “to” and “subject” lines. Make sure the subject line is clear: “Progress Report for ABC Project.” You may also have readers to include in the cc lines—persons who need to be aware that you sent the progress report but who may not need to act on it, or persons involved in the project who will not respond directly to the progress report but who requested a copy. After you have filled in the headings, you start your email with a greeting and a note letting the readers know what they are receiving. You might write something like the example shown to the right.

It is assumed that you wrote your progress report in MS Word or another word processing program so that you could run spell check and save the document on your own computer. So when you are ready to send it via email, you copy it into the open email form. Proofread it to make sure the copy happened correctly, and then hit “submit.”

Progress Reports

A progress report is much like what it sounds like. It lets your supervisor know the status of an ongoing project. Let's say you work for a company that serves clients by creating web pages for middle school sports teams. But because you are very good at writing and designing documents, you have been put in charge of an annual project—the company newsletter. This newsletter comes out once a year around the holidays, and it's really a feel-good piece sharing the wonderful things your company has done all year. It's important, but maybe not a high stress or high dollar task that you are in charge of. Nevertheless, you are expected to work on it with your team all year and submit quarterly progress reports to your supervisor. Therefore, each quarter you will prepare your progress report on the team meetings, what is planned, what has been done, and what will be done. You also list any problems you are having or any you foresee. This last part is very important. While on the one hand, you don't want a progress report that reads like a disaster report, on the other hand you do want to prepare the reader for any upcoming problems. This preparation is especially important if something really might be delayed or over budget. You don't want to submit perfect progress reports and then suddenly your supervisor finds out the project is behind schedule!

Of course the stakes become higher if a progress report is about a high pressure task. If, for example, your team is in charge of the new renovations on the parking deck, and those renovations are behind, you want to let your supervisor know as soon as possible in the progress report so that he or she can prepare for things like, letting his or her supervisor know that there is a delay, extending the rental on the parking lot that has been used while the deck is built, and moving the clean up crew's scheduled work dates back until they are actually needed, and a host of other things that will be impacted by a change in timeline.

Something related to a progress report is a status report or status update. While a progress report reports upon the progress of a single project, a status report is a report on the status of your entire unit or department—it can encompass a range of projects and activities, and it is usually submitted at regular intervals—monthly or quarterly—regardless of what projects are underway.
Meeting Minutes

For most meetings, notes are kept regarding what important topics were brought up in the meeting and what important decisions were made. These notes are often kept on file so that people can look back through them if questions arise about, for example, important votes or discussions about topics. These notes are called meeting minutes. Sometimes a secretary is appointed to always take minutes. And sometimes the duty rotates among attendees. The minutes are then "written up," which is a common term for preparing them to share with the group. Meeting minutes take a particular form, whether they are distributed via memo or email. The header includes the organization's name, the date and location of the meeting, who was present, and the meeting leader and the person taking the minutes. They also include the time the meeting started and the time the meeting ended.

Meetings have an agenda that is usually distributed before the meeting. Many times, people taking minutes for a meeting like to pull up the agenda on their word processing program and take the minutes right on that agenda so that they know they are using the original wording of the topics, as they are presented to the group.

Most importantly, as mentioned above, minutes include what happened during the meeting, including who presented on main topics and who brought forth and seconded votes, and what decisions were made. It's important not to make the minutes a "play by play" of conversations, and especially don't get bogged down in the details. Just make sure to take down the main points. If a heated discussion breaks out, don't put that in the minutes. Just note that the topic was discussed and note the resolution, if any, or if the topic was tabled (that is, put on hold for another time). You want to portray the organization positively, and for that reason, avoid recording squabbling or other human behavior that is normal, but that is not beneficial to preserve in meeting minutes.

More information about meeting minutes

Incident Reports

Incident reports are written by police officers, security personnel, and anyone who was involved in an incident or accident. As you can see from the story of Police Constable/Police Dog Peach, incident reports (here in the form of a witness statement) often are forms one fills out. Even so, it is important to secure the correct form and make sure that you fill in the requested information. Usually there is a portion of the form where you are asked to tell what happened—provide the narrative of the event. You will want to double check all information before you commit it to the incident report, which is a legal document. You may have to look up the names and titles of persons also involved. You also want to make sure the date is correct, and any equipment names or room numbers are correct. Do not write what you THINK happened. Write where you were and what happened to you or what you saw. Explain what happened after the incident, as well. How did you handle it? What did you do? Also, be very clear and avoid any language that might not be understood by people outside your field.

Complete story of PC Peach
Instead of saying you reached for the bandages but they were "86" (slang for "out of"), say there were no bandages in the first aid kit. Be honest. Dishonest information can put your job in jeopardy or inhibit your ability to receive medical treatment or compensation for an incident/accident.

You do not (and likely should not) make judgments about who is at fault, and I would advise you not to admit that you were at fault or did something wrong. After all, that judgment is better made by someone who can see a bigger picture than you can. Instead, report the facts as clearly as possible.

If there is no form to fill out, then organize your narrative chronologically. Use paragraph breaks at logical points to make it easier to read your report. In incident reports, because perhaps a person was hurt or property was damaged, it's very important to make sure your grammar and spelling are correct. As you probably know, problems in language clarity can create legal problems that again, might impede your ability to receive medical treatment or compensation for an incident/accident.

More information on incident reports

**Directives**

You send out emails and memos for a variety of reasons—usually to distribute information. Sometimes, you want to let people know that tomorrow is doughnut day, and so you might send out a short email such as "Hello Everyone! Just a quick reminder that tomorrow is doughnut day!" Such an email is appropriate because everyone knows what doughnut day means—Joan in marketing will be bringing in some yummy doughnuts to share. And it's probably okay to be that informal because it's also not an official event that requires action on the employees' parts. But what if tomorrow is the annual blood drive? That event may require more explanation, especially since new employees (hired since the last blood drive) may not be aware of the company's long-standing support of the local blood bank. It may also be nice to remind everyone of the positive impact this event has on the local community and how Roger, from Accounts, has a daughter who has a health condition that frequently requires blood transfusions (assuming Roger is okay with sharing that personal information). On more than one occasion, the local blood bank has been able to provide that blood because the company's support helps to make sure they have the resources they need on hand.

Such an email or memo would first start with the announcement of this year's blood drive, a reminder to drink a lot of water and eat a meal before donating, and then name the date, time, and place. Then the memo/email might move into some of the history of the blood drive at the company and present the facts about last year's effort—the number of participants and pints collected. And then end with "I encourage everyone who is able to show up to support the blood drive."

This common type of email/memo is an informational email/memo. A directive is a little different, and it has a little different organization. The directive is not a piece of general information but, as its title makes clear, directions that direct readers to follow a particular procedure or policy.

Unlike the general information memo, a directive generally starts with the rationale behind the directive so that people feel that it is a reasonable request, and also to help people remember it. It then ends by stating the policy or procedure that readers are directed to follow. For example, let's say that for security reasons, the janitorial staff will no longer be allowed access to employee offices. Instead, employees will put their trash cans outside their offices on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for the janitorial staff to empty. Employees will then put their trash cans back in their offices the following morning. This is a new practice, so you want to issue a directive.

First, you explain the situation. You don't want to give too many details because you don't want to encourage similar incidents, and you don't want to cast suspicion on any particular employees, but you do want to provide enough details so that employees understand the rationale behind this policy. You might write that in the past two weeks, a few employees have entered their offices in the mornings to find their computers on. A forensic investigation confirms that the computers were tampered with. As an extra precaution, the janitorial staff will no longer have access to the employee offices. This step is taken to help narrow down who might be responsible for these incidents. At this point, it is not clear if any sensitive information was stolen, but you will let the employees know as soon as any information becomes available. You might also ask everyone to change his or her passwords now for extra security and remember not to leave passwords written down and lying around their computers.

You end with the directive: effective immediately, employees are directed to place their trash bins outside their office doors on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 5pm. The bins are to be put back in the offices on the following business morning. The janitorial staff will no longer enter your offices to empty your trash.

So that's it. A directive is different from a general information memo in that it involves a policy or procedure, and it generally starts by providing an explanation and ending with the new policy or procedure that is being implemented.
Response to an Inquiry

Our final type of memo/email is the response to an inquiry. Most of the memos/emails you send will be informational or response to an inquiry.

Response to an inquiry memos/emails address a question or series of questions—perhaps about an action, a product, or a policy. Perhaps a customer wants to know why something doesn’t work. Perhaps your supervisor wants to know his computer has not yet been updated. Perhaps your team member wants to know what the policy is on splitting up vacation days into half days. Whatever the case, you are responding to an inquiry.

To begin your response, especially if you are responding to a client, you might thank the writer for purchasing your product or for being a loyal customer or client. Keep in mind, this person took time out of his or her day to write you, so it was important. And the person may be out of patience if the inquiry is in relation to a malfunction. If the inquiry is from a colleague, you might begin with "It's nice to hear from you," or another polite phrase to being your response.

Next, provide the answer to the question. If there are multiple questions, and if they are numbered, number your responses the same way for clarity. For example, if question 3 is "The directions say to put tab A into slot B, but I can only see tab A and slot C," then you might answer, "3. Please turn the paper doll over. Slot B is on the side opposite slot C." Also, if there is a website that provides information that you think might be helpful, mention the website and provide the link. Be sure to double check the link to make sure it is correct.

If you cannot answer the question, either because you don't know the answers or because you are not allowed to divulge the requested information (perhaps it is a company secret, or proprietary), let the reader know. Close the email/memo with an offer to assist with other requests or answer further questions.

Please keep in mind that if it is your job to answer questions on the topic of x, then it doesn't look good if you say "I don't know the answer to that question on the topic of x," and end the email/memo. Such a response will sour a customer on your brand very quickly. Just yesterday, I heard a story of a person to whom all responses to inquiries were met with "I don't know." It certainly is easier to do business that way—and it is a real time saver to just have one, standard response. But when you don't answer people's questions, they turn to other people. And they quickly learn that the person with no answers really isn't serving any purpose in the office. The person mentioned above lost her job right before Christmas. The moral of this story is that if it is your job to answer questions on the topic of x, then you should find the answer. Ask a colleague or supervisor to assist you. And if it is someone else's job to answer the question on the topic of x, then you should find the answer. Ask a colleague or supervisor to assist you. And if it is someone else's job to answer the question on the topic of x, then you should find the answer. Ask a colleague or supervisor to assist you. And if it is someone else's job to answer the question on the topic of x, then you should find the answer.

Finally, always be polite and practice the "you" attitude. Think about how it must feel to need information—and to perhaps be frustrated. It's true, you might be frustrated, too, at the questions that you feel are silly or repetitive, but still. Have empathy, be polite, and offer to assist with other questions or requests.