

September 21, 2013

TO: Economics 980q students  
FROM: Pascal Noel  
SUBJECT: How to write a memo

For economics 980q, students are expected to write a weekly memo discussing their progress for the week and listing any questions they have for their group. This memo discusses general guidelines for writing such memos.

A successful memo clearly and concisely communicates a set of central ideas to the reader. In order to accomplish this task, writers should ensure that their memos are scannable and hierarchical. Each of these goals is discussed in more detail below.

### 1. Memos should be scannable

- **It should take 30 seconds to scan a memo.** A memo should be constructed such that a reader can glean its main points in 30 seconds or less. This is accomplished with structure, layout, and clear writing.
- **Summaries are required for a scannable memo.** The first paragraph of a memo should lay out its purpose. The second paragraph should summarize its main points. If appropriate, these two paragraphs can be combined into one. A longer memo should have a conclusion re-capping these points and potentially listing next steps.

### 2. Memos should be hierarchical

- **A hierarchical memo clearly delineates the forest from the trees.** A reader should immediately be able to distinguish primary “forest” points from secondary and tertiary “trees” and “branches,” which expand on the main points. This is very difficult for an essay purely in paragraph form.
- **Lists, bullets, and emphasizeers help reinforce a memo’s hierarchy.** Format is crucial for creating a hierarchical memo. In this memo, a reader will clearly glean that underlined information is most important, followed by bolded information. If a reader wants more information about an idea in a bolded list, they would naturally read the sentences that follow, written in standard formatting.

This is an example of a scannable and hierarchical memo. A real-world example can be found [here](#). Students who follow these guidelines, and use these memos as templates, will write successful memos.