

The last word

Finding memo



IF YOU'RE A SUPERVISOR, MANAGER OR LEADER – OR WANT TO BE ONE – THERE'S ONE SKILL ABOVE ALL OTHERS THAT YOU NEED TO NAIL: THE ART OF THE MEMO.

ASPIRING TO PROVIDE READERS WITH the last word in professional development, the Last Word – drumroll and trumpets – brings you the handiest, dandiest advice ever on memo writing, an art, if mastered, that will identify you as an educator of supervisory, managerial or even – gasp – leadership status.

Put simply – which is something you ought never do in a memo – only upper management folk write memos, which obviously means that only memo writers reach the dizzy heights of upper management.

Here's how to write one, in six easy steps.

Step 1 The memo is always written using the passive voice. 'The curriculum underwent an auditing procedure undertaken by the staff so as to identify potential difficulties in terms of implementation and also to identify initiatives that address substantive solutions that ameliorate such identified potential difficulties.'

Imagine, if you will, the same sentence in the active voice. The memo would identify your staff as the active subject, actually doing the implementation. The risks in doing

this are that the memo would be straightforward and, worse, would use fewer words to convey the same message. 'Staff checked whether the curriculum would be difficult to implement and ways to fix it if it was.'

Step 2 Of course, there's more going on in a good memo than mere passivity. A good memo writer uses words – or implements a lexicon – of three or more syllables in more than 50 per cent of the text. Why 'find likely problems' when you can 'identify potential difficulties'?

Step 3 A good memo writer also makes use of buzz words. A minimum of one per sentence is a good rule of thumb. The best buzz words are those that sound serious but add nothing to the meaning of your sentence. Substantive is a beauty. Substantive solutions in our example are just solutions with the word 'substantive' in front of them. It's worth keeping a list of buzz words handy. Here are some of the best: efficacy; facilitate; feasibility; iteration; prioritise; systemic.

Zeitgeist doesn't make the list even though it would round out the alphabetical shape a bit because it's way too showy. Buzz words

function simply to remind your reader that you're in the know without drawing attention to themselves – and without necessarily meaning anything.

Step 4 Of course, a good memo writer would improve our example above by applying the rule of convolution, which in its most refined form delays using a verb, or predicate, for as long as possible in a sentence. 'Potential difficulties in terms of implementation and initiatives that address substantive solutions that ameliorate such identified potential difficulties were identified in the curriculum, which underwent an auditing procedure undertaken by the staff.'

Now we're getting somewhere.

Step 5 One essential ingredient is, however, missing: acronyms. Since the purpose of a memo is to obfuscate, acronyms should never be spelled out, not ever. The guiding principle is that the avid memo reader ought to remember when an acronym was first introduced, probably back in 1992, and so should just know what it stands for.

One can simply replace 'curriculum' in our example with, say, 'SACSA Framework' or similar, but be warned, acronyms like HSC soon become familiar as they come into common use. Curriculum authorities, of course, work very hard to prevent this, changing CSF to VELS, for example. NSWBOS take note.

Since a memo is a written document, it's essential that an acronym should be impossible to pronounce. APAPDC is the clear standout in the education sector since the passing of the IARTV, which became the ridiculously pronounceable CSE or Centre for Strategic Education.

So there you have it, six easy steps to memo writing. Take them and you'll soon be memorandising with the best of them, and if you get really good at it, you could even apply for a job as an academic, bureaucrat or even – gasp – ministerial adviser.

Oh, and by the way, make sure you call these things meemos, not memos. **T**

This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher.