



Massachusetts Institute of Technology

## Guidelines for Decision Memos

So, you have to write a decision memo and you're wondering what is a decision memo anyway? What do these Gateway people really want from me? What do I know about some dam in India?

I know these assignments can be frustrating, especially when you feel you don't have enough time, but there is a purpose. The public housing case was meant to introduce you to the fast pace of the class, but provide most everything you need – predigested cases – so that you wouldn't have too many loose ends. The Narmada case asks you to stretch a bit more. We want to know if you can take a very open ended case, with many players and many issues and find some way to make sense of the mess. In other words, can you offer guidance to a leading international World Bank Council?

**Here is one strategy with 6 tasks that are explained in detail below:**

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### PLAN

**Task 1: Analyze your audience and define your purpose**

**Task 2: Generate ideas**

**Task 3: Group information under headlines**

**Task 4: Sequence your ideas**

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### DRAFT

**Task 5: Write a first draft**

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### EDIT

**Task 6: Edit for clarity, conciseness, accuracy, visual design, and tone.**



## Task 1: Analyze your audience and purpose

### 1. Purpose:

Why am I writing this? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do I want the reader to do? \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Audience:

Who exactly is my reader? Do I have more than one reader? \_\_\_\_\_  
What is the reader's role: decision maker? Implementer? Influencer? Other?

What does the reader know about my subject? \_\_\_\_\_  
How will my reader react to my main message? Receptive? Indifferent?

### Resistant?

What's in it for the reader? Why should the reader read this or agree with it?

What issues could affect this communication? Ethnic? Corporate? Language?

### 3. Main Message:

If the reader were in an elevator and the doors were closing, what would I yell to that person to remember as my main message?

Once you have your main message ask the following questions:

So what?

Who cares?

Could I be wrong?

## Task 2: Generate ideas

### 1. Brainstorming

A. Brainstorming technique – write as many ideas as you can down without thinking or editing them.

Or

B. Draw a circle in the middle of a piece of paper.

Write your main message in the circle.

Write your ideas on “spokes” that surround and connect to the main message.

Number your ideas in order of importance.

2. **Free writing technique** – write for 5 minutes without stopping. You are not allowed to take your pen off your paper or stop. If you don't know what to say, just keep writing “I don't know what to say”



3. **Questioning** – for 5 minutes write as many questions as you can about your subject with out stopping to consider whether they make sense.

4. **Dictation** – Dictate your ideas into a digital recorder.

### Task 3: Group information under headlines

#### 1. Memo categories that can double as headlines

Summary	Analysis	Proposal
Action Steps	Rational	Specifications
Action Requested	Analysis of data	Summary
Next steps	Implementation Plan	Conclusion

#### 2. Creating Effective headings

The purpose of headings is two-fold. First, headings guide the reader to the important information. Second, the headings give the reader a message about the content in that section. When finished, the reader should be able to get a full sense of the memo just by reading the title and the headings that you write. If you still haven't found your main message, turn your topics into statements and see if your main message surfaces.

<u>Category</u>	→	<u>Effective Heading</u>
Actors		Four Groups of Actors argued four different strategies in the Narmada Case
Top Down Planning		Planning from the top cannot be completely dismissed as a mechanism for affecting change
Transnational Factors		Transnational Actors are often not considered in planning a large-scale project – a mistake that can lead to....

### Task 4: Sequence your ideas

It is not enough to just figure out the points you want to make and your main message, you need to put them in an effective order. To do this, take a look at the headings you wrote for Task 3 and number them in order of importance. Once you do this, you need to study them to find out how read, one after to the other. In other words, your headings, need to flow in the right direction when your read them.



1. Put the main message first and summarize it for the reader in the first paragraph.
2. Put the most important supporting point with effective heading next.
3. Put the second most important supporting point next.
4. Continue to include point after point with its effective heading.

**Then:**

- A. Read them in sequence out loud to yourself.
- B. RE-Organize your headings to figure out if there is a more effective way to order them.
- C. Ask yourself again – So What?

## **Task 5: Write a first draft**

Now that you have your main message and your headings in the right order, it is time to start writing. For this part, you need to consult Task 2 – Generating Ideas. What ideas did you write? Do you need to write more? Less? To begin writing in your categories try the following:

### **Raw Text**

1. Pick an effective heading to work on – one that has a clear message that relates to your main message or core idea. This should be your favorite heading – the one you know the most about or the one you find most interesting.
2. Begin to write on your heading section. You could free write, brainstorm ideas, or use any of the other ideas listed in task 2. The point is to begin to get words on paper.

### **Forming Paragraphs**

Once you have your ideas for your paragraphs, you need to organize them into paragraphs. A paragraph is a unit that discusses a single issue or point. If you want to talk about a new issue, you need to have a form a new paragraph.

Paragraphs have the following characteristics:

1. They are short 5 to 7 sentences at most in memos.
2. Paragraphs have a topic sentence that states the main issue that will be discussed.
3. Paragraphs must be related to the effective heading which is directly related to the paper's main message.
4. Paragraphs can provide evidence and examples to support the main point.
5. Paragraphs can have a short conclusion.
6. Paragraphs use transitional words to connect sentences within the paragraph.
7. Paragraphs link to the next paragraph or to the next section using a transitional sentence (more on this below).

### **Cohesive Tissue**

It is not enough to talk about your ideas in paragraph units. Paragraphs need to connect to one another and to the section that follows. To create connections we use transition words or



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phrases. Words such as “however” or “in addition” are general words that can be used. Other words that speak directly to the subject matter tend to be better connectors.

In addition, transitional sentences are used by writers to connect paragraphs together. Sentences such as “As we will see below, there are three major considerations that...”

## **Task 6: Edit for clarity, conciseness, accuracy, visual design, and tone.**

Once you are finished composing, you need to begin the editing process. It is best if you can ask a friend to read your work for you so that you can get a fresh pair of eyes to help you find mistakes. Here are some general strategies.

Read your memo out loud.

Read you memo backwards one sentence at a time.

Check for typos.

Put your work aside for a few hours, a day in order to make sure it reads well.

Check for effective word choice.