

Format Guidelines for a Memo to the Minister

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this section is to serve as a point of reference for departments that are considering revising their standards for memos to their minister. This section provides insight into the elements that the memo might include.

Memos to the minister play a pivotal role in the operation of the Government of Canada. They are the official record of the advice that the appointed bureaucracy provides to the elected government.

When Parliament is sitting, a medium-sized department sends its minister 10 to 15 memos every day — sometimes 20 or more — each of which is as important as the memo you are working on right now. The prime minister receives about 75. Many of those memos also provide detailed briefing notes or briefing books. In short, your minister receives a huge volume of material from diverse parts of your department every day.

To enable the deputy minister, the minister and their staffs to deal with all that material effectively, rigid formats are often adopted for memos to the minister. They should be followed carefully. This chapter provides one such format. Each section of the memo serves a specific purpose by giving readers predictable types of information in predictable places and in predictable forms.

There are, however, many options for presenting the information that is described here. Again, this section is intended to serve as a point of reference, not a prescription. If you are not familiar with the format your department uses, ask for help from your executive documents unit or your briefing coordinator.

Memos from your assistant deputy minister to your deputy minister may closely parallel memos to a minister. For details in this regard, refer to the section on [Format Guidelines for Memos to the Deputy Minister](#).

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE

Organization charts can be helpful in understanding the formats of documents. (For more details on this, see [Organization](#) and [Formats for Briefing Notes and Briefing Books](#).) Here's how the format of a memo to the minister would look as an organization chart:

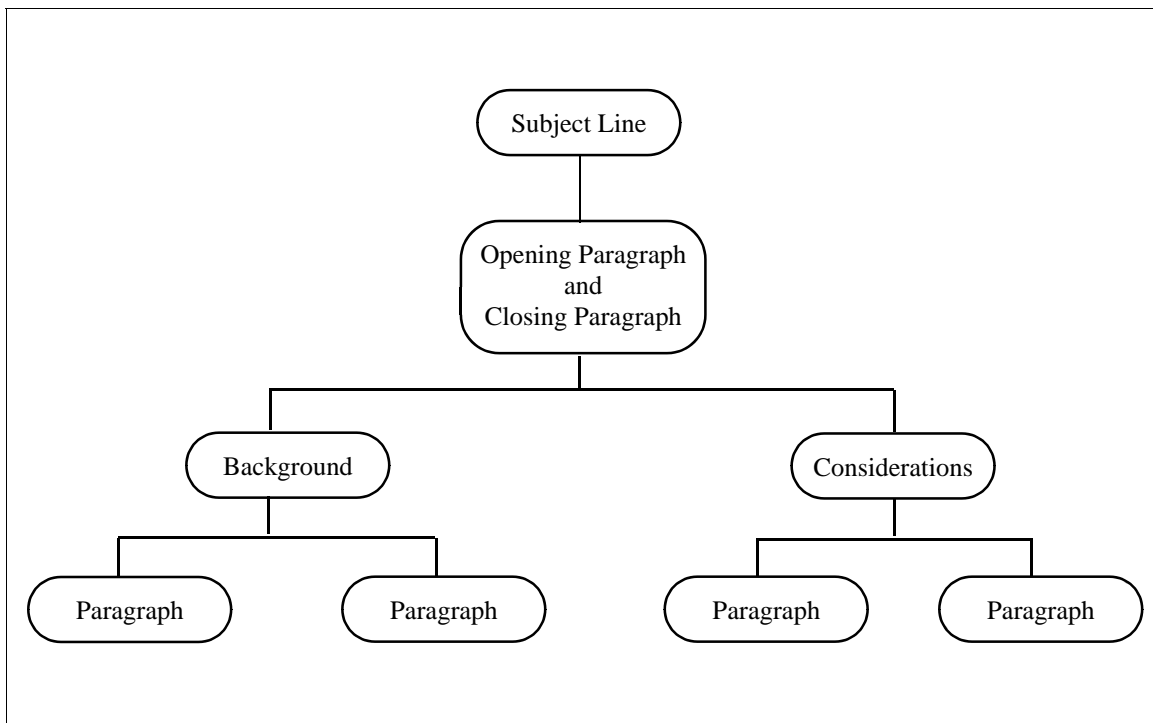


Figure 1

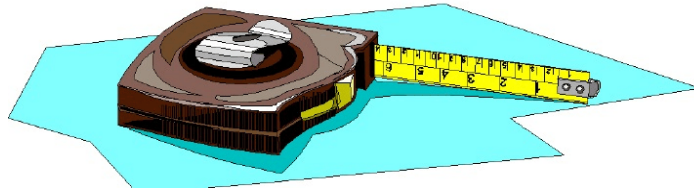
You might find it curious that both the opening paragraph and the closing paragraph form the second tier of this organization chart. These paragraphs serve the role that a summary plays in other documents. They should be able to stand alone in saying something useful to the minister. The background and the considerations simply add substance and rationale to what is found in the opening and closing paragraphs.

LENGTH

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

In any memo to the minister, you will have to omit information that you think is important. This will be true no matter how long or short the memo is — whether it be ten pages or one page. It is part of your job to make the difficult decisions of what to include and what to leave out.

It can take a good deal of time and thought to make a memo short and useful. Who will take that time and do that thinking? You, who knows the file? Or your readers — people who don't know the file the way you do and who are more pressed for time than most of us will ever be?



If you were to write a four-page memo, you would be effectively delegating responsibility upward. Instead of doing the thinking and digesting yourself, you would be delegating it to the deputy minister and the minister to do it for you. And you would have no guarantee that they will digest it and interpret it the way you think they ought to. You could, however, be sure that they wouldn't thank you for the added length.

See the following chapters for tips on how to reduce the length of memos:

- [Abstract vs. Concrete](#);
- [Substance vs. Froth](#); and
- [How to Fix a Four-Page Memo](#).

TWO-PAGE LIMIT

It is sound practice to limit your memos to the minister to two pages. Many departments require it, and a longer memo risks burying the points that matter.

You can place as much additional material as you wish in briefing notes or other attachments. It is not, however, acceptable to write a brief memo that says, in effect, “Here’s a five-page briefing note. Please read it.” That would defeat the purpose of the two-page limit on memos.

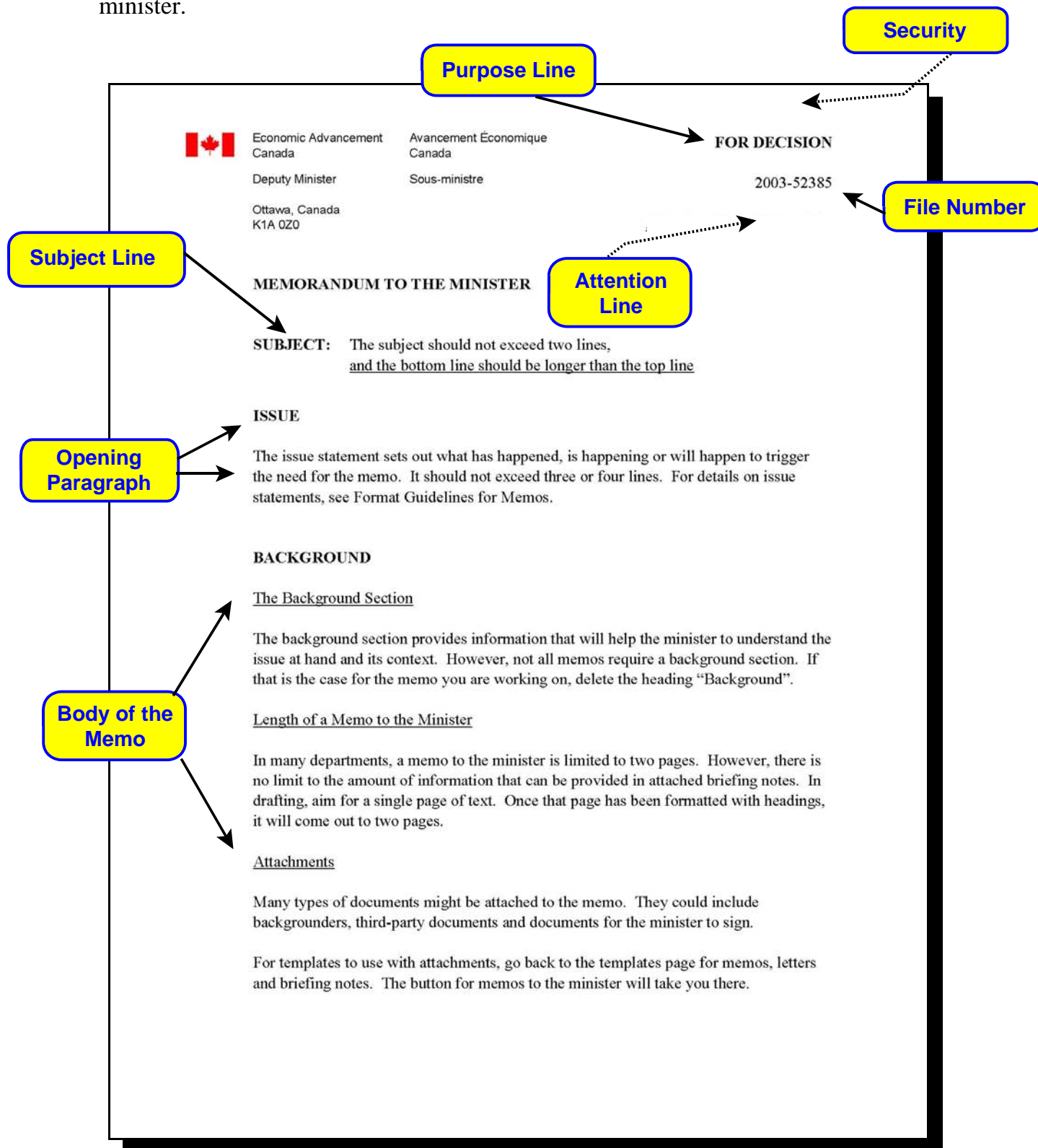
In drafting a memo, aim for one page of text. It should meet the following criteria:

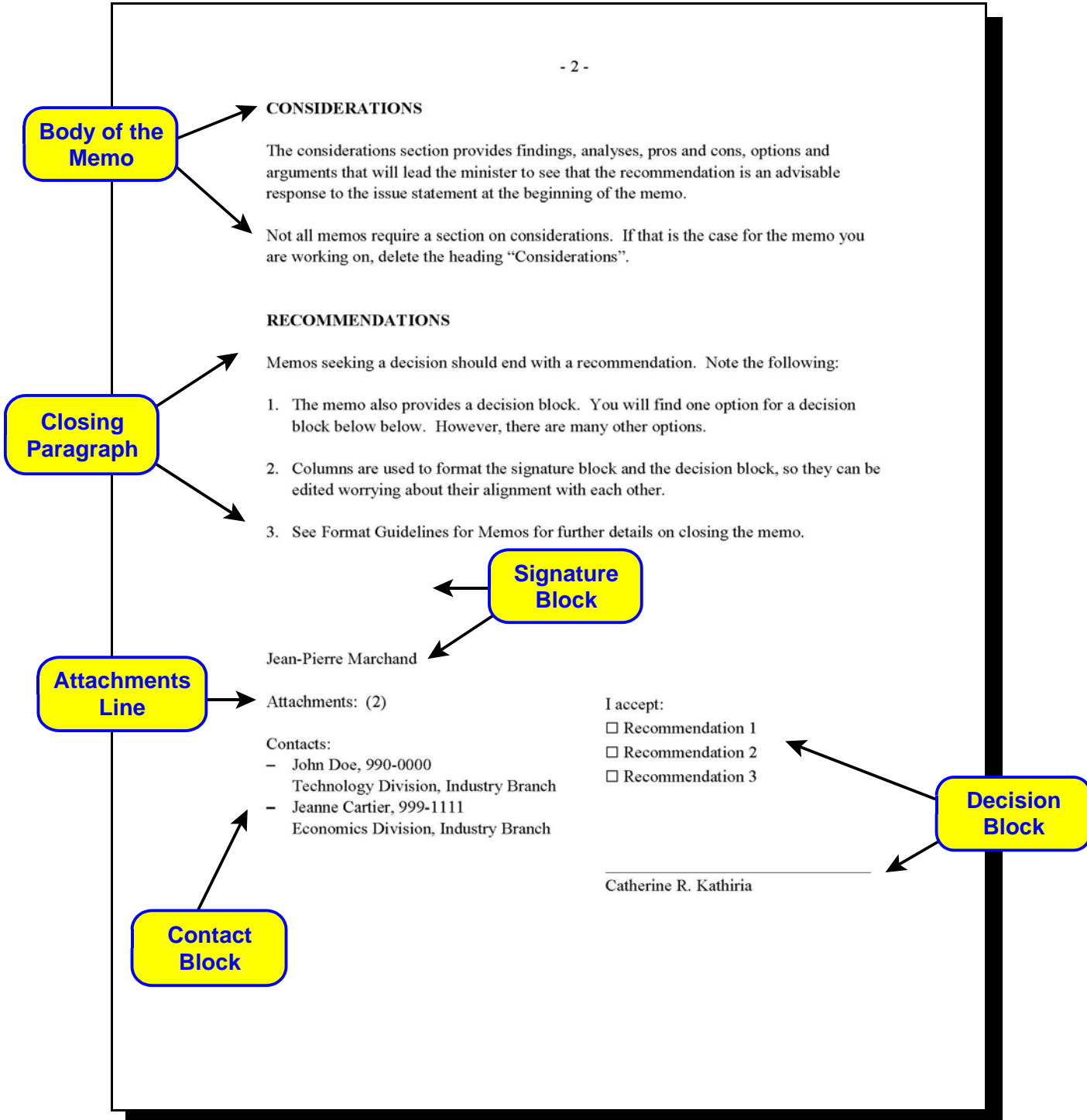
- 1.5" left margin
- 1" top, bottom and right margins
- 1.1 line spacing
- Times New Roman 12-pt. font
- ample paragraphs and sub-paragraphs

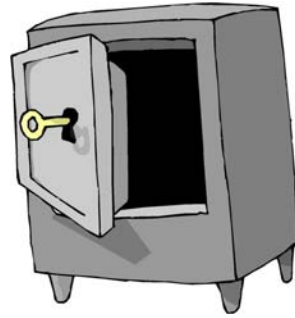
Your single-page draft will then need to be formatted with headings, the signature block, the contact line etc. Once that is done, it will come out to two pages. Better still, use the word processing templates while you are drafting.

FORMAT MAP FOR A MEMO TO THE MINISTER

Click on any of the labels to get more details on the elements of a memo to the minister.







SECURITY CLASSIFICATION

Almost all memos to the minister are subject to release under access to information and privacy laws. Do not deceive yourself into thinking that because you classify a memo as secret it cannot be released to the public. The decision to release a memo to the public is based on the actual content of the memo, not on whether someone has decided to label it secret.

Therefore there is no point in giving a security classification to the vast majority of memos to the minister. A few exceptions are:

- discussion of matters that are to be discussed in Cabinet (e.g., a memorandum to cabinet, a Treasury Board submission);
- discussion of measures that are being considered for inclusion in a budget; and
- discussion of confidential personal or corporate information.

If you are in doubt in this regard, you might find it helpful to consult your access to information and privacy coordinator.

If you need to classify a memo, a good place to put the classification can be above the purpose line. It should also go in the top right corner of each following page.

PURPOSE LINE

Four items could be placed in the purpose line:

- action
- decision
- signature
- information

In most cases, these actions would be cited as one of the following:

FOR ACTION

or: **FOR DECISION**

or: **FOR SIGNATURE**

or: **FOR INFORMATION**

FOR ACTION is used for a recommendation that the minister or the minister's staff take action with respect to individuals or organizations outside of the department. This includes recommendations that the minister:

- draw from attached decks, talking points, Qs and As, briefing books and media lines for events, meetings or encounters with the media; or
- speak with one of his cabinet or caucus colleagues to seek a decision, cooperation, etc.



A decision block would not be needed in an action memo.

FOR DECISION is used for a recommendation that the minister direct or authorize the department to act.

A decision block (see [pages 25 and 26](#)) should always be used in decision memos.

FOR SIGNATURE is used for any memo that recommends that the minister sign an attached document (letter, governor-in-council recommendation, hospitality expense form, etc.).

FOR INFORMATION is used for any memo that does not ask the minister to sign, decide or act on anything. It is also used for a memo that submits a draft document (e.g. a memorandum to cabinet) to the minister for comment to the department.

MULTIPLE PURPOSES

In rare cases, there will be two items in the purpose line, i.e.:

FOR ACTION AND SIGNATURE

or: **FOR DECISION AND SIGNATURE**

or: **FOR DECISION AND ACTION**

In even fewer cases, all three items will be in the purpose line:

FOR ACTION, DECISION AND SIGNATURE

However, if a decision from the minister is needed but signing an attached document implies making that decision, the memo is **FOR SIGNATURE** only.

Don't use **FOR INFORMATION** in combination with any of the other purposes. If a memo is for action, signature or decision, it goes without saying that it is also for information.

FILE NUMBER



In most organizations, the memo's file number will be assigned by a computerized [executive documents tracking system](#). You may be able to generate it yourself, or you may need to obtain it elsewhere. For guidance in this regard, consult your executive documents coordinator or your briefing coordinator.

In the format provided here, the file number is placed right below the purpose line.



ATTENTION LINE

It can be helpful to cite the name of the policy advisor in the Minister's office who needs to see the memo before it goes to the minister. That way, you don't have to rely on the mail room to ensure that the memo gets to the right person.

If your department decides to use an attention line, one place to put it could be right below the file number.

FOR INFORMATION

N00-80000

Attention: Raymond Barker

MEMORANDUM TO THE MINISTER

SUBJECT: Mining sector markets in Central America

SUBJECT LINE

The subject line briefly tells the minister what the memo is about. It should not exceed two lines.

FOR INFORMATION
N00-80000
MEMORANDUM TO THE MINISTER
SUBJECT: <u>Mining sector markets in Central America</u>

Figure 2

The grammatical structure of a subject line is that of a noun plus modifiers. Here is an example:

Inco's adoption of automated mining methods

It should not read like a newspaper headline, e.g.:

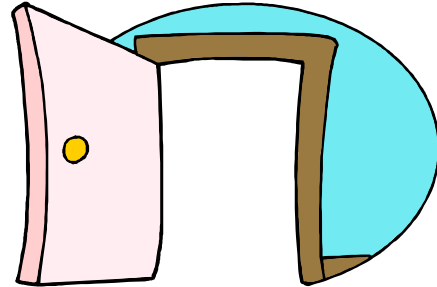
Inco adopts automated mining methods

If the subject line goes to two lines, the bottom line should be longer than the top line. Here are two ways to do this:

Federal-provincial/territorial negotiations on
joint initiatives to reduce unemployment in the construction sector

or: Federal-provincial/territorial negotiations on joint initiatives
to reduce unemployment in the construction sector

OPENING PARAGRAPH



An issue statement is a good way to open a memo to the minister

An issue statement should tell the minister more than what is found in the action line and the subject line. It should tell the minister what specifically triggered the need for the memo — an event, a decision, an incoming letter, a newspaper report etc. Indeed, “trigger” might be a more descriptive term than “issue” for this paragraph. However, “trigger” is a bit too casual for formal documents such as memos to the minister.

In defining the issue, ask yourself how much the minister already knows about the subject. The subject might be rising unemployment in the construction sector. If this is the first time the subject has been raised with the minister, a useful issue statement might read something like this:

ISSUE

On October 13, 2003, Statistics Canada reported that unemployment in the construction sector rose from 5.2 percent to 6.8 percent over the 12-month period from October 2002 to September 2003.

However, once the minister has become aware of this issue, it is not helpful to reuse that issue statement in subsequent memos. You might want to mention it as a reminder in the background section, but not in the issue statement. The next issue statement on the subject should cite something else that triggered the need for the memo, either:

- something more recent that has happened;
- something that is happening right now; or
- something that will happen.

Here are some examples:

ISSUE

On November 2, 2003, the Government of Ontario launched a program to address rising unemployment in the construction sector.

or: **ISSUE**

Economic Advancement Canada is seeking a meeting with the provinces and territories to explore options for a joint response to rising unemployment in the construction sector.

or: **ISSUE**

On December 15, 2003, you will meet with the Honourable Joe Cordiano, Ontario's Minister of Economic Development and Trade, to discuss a proposed joint response to rising unemployment in the construction sector.

or: **ISSUE**

On November 2, 2003, the Honourable Joe Cordiano, Ontario's Minister of Economic Development and Trade, wrote to seek a meeting with you to discuss a proposed joint response to rising unemployment in the construction sector.

or: **ISSUE**

On November 2, 2003, you asked that I brief you on the breakdown of federal, provincial and territorial responsibilities with respect to unemployment in the construction sector.

URGENCY

If urgency is involved, the opening paragraph can be a good place to state it, e.g.:

ISSUE

The above-noted submission is scheduled for Treasury Board consideration on Thursday, May 3, 2001. To meet this deadline, it would have to reach the Treasury Board Secretariat by noon on Monday, April 23, 2001.

LESS-THAN-HELPFUL OPENING PARAGRAPHS

I've lost count of the number of memos I have seen that start with a purpose statement rather than an issue statement. They generally say something along these lines:

PURPOSE

To brief you on rising unemployment in the construction industry.

A statement such as does little more than restate what is found in the purpose line and the subject line. Meanwhile, it uses up precious space. I suggest opting for an issue statement instead.

BODY OF THE MEMO

The body of a memo to the minister usually comprises:

- a section on background; and
- a section on considerations.

One approach to writing the body is to start by writing only the opening and closing paragraphs. Then ask yourself, “What will it take to get the minister to see that the closing paragraph is a sensible response to the opening paragraph?” The answer to that question will form the body of your memo.

For most memos, it is impossible to give you a rule on what to put in and what to leave out. You will, however, find guidance on how to approach the task in [Research and Select the Content](#).

In rare instances, there is no need for either background or considerations. An example would be a memo that provides a briefing book for a ministerial event. In many cases, such a memo can jump straight from the issue paragraph (which describes the event briefly) to the recommendation (which advises the minister to draw from the attached briefing book). In most cases, the memo need not describe the contents of the briefing book. The briefing book should explain itself.

BACKGROUND

Background provides explanatory material to bring the reader up to speed on what’s happening or what’s happened.

If you believe the body of your memo should comprise only considerations, do not feel that you have to include background just for the sake of format.

CONSIDERATIONS

Considerations provide rationale, arguments, pros and cons of options, etc. to justify the conclusion or the recommendation.

If you believe the body of your memo comprises only background, do not feel that you have to include considerations just for the sake of format.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH

A memo to the minister should close with either a recommendation or a conclusion.

RECOMMENDATION

Memos for the minister's signature, action or decision should close with a recommendation.

Recommendations should be brief. Do not present or repeat rationale in recommendations.

State specifically what the minister is being asked to do or decide, as opposed to simply stating a desirable outcome. Put yourself in the minister's shoes. Ask yourself: "If I read this recommendation, would I know precisely what I am being asked to do?"

Instead stating a recommendation like this:

I recommend that there be a cost-sharing mechanism in the MOU.

You could state it this way:

I recommend that you speak with the Honourable Jane Doe, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, to ask that she approve a cost-sharing mechanism in the MOU.

Letters: Responses to Invitations

In cases where a memo involves a letter for the minister's signature, it can be helpful to provide the option of signing one of two or more alternative letters. Responses to invitations are an example. It can save time to provide two letters for the minister's consideration: one that accepts the invitation, and one that declines.



In such cases, the recommendation advises the minister which one the department believes should be signed:

I recommend that you sign the letter in Attachment 1, accepting the invitation.

or: I recommend that you sign the letter in Attachment 2, declining the invitation.

CONCLUSION

Memos for the minister's information should close with a conclusion. The conclusion is your opportunity to interpret the significance of the information and analyses presented in the memo. It should:

- help the minister to see the forest through the trees;
or
- answer the question "So what?";
or
- tell the minister what happens next or at what milestone he or she will be briefed again if a problem or process has been presented;
or
- do all of the above.

The minister assumes that the department will monitor situations and brief him or her as needed. Therefore, it is not useful to conclude by telling the minister:

- We will keep you informed.
or
- We are monitoring the situation.
or
- We will brief you on any significant developments.

You could, however, provide a useful conclusion with statements such as these:

- We will brief you further following the meeting on April 17, 2001.

or

- We will brief you once we reach agreement in principle on the proposal.

or

- We have created a task force to develop an interdepartmental response to these developments.

SIGNATURE BLOCK

In the signature block, leave five blank lines between the last line of the text of the memo and the typed signature line (i.e. the typed words “Jean-Pierre Marchand” in the example below):

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend that you approve Option 1.

① *blank line*

② *blank line*

③ *blank line*

④ *blank line*

⑤ *blank line*

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contact: John Doe, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch

I approve:

Option 1

Option 2

Catherine R. Kathiria

Figure 3

ATTACHMENTS LINE

If attachments are not cited properly, this slows the processing of your memo, sometimes significantly. Check to make sure the number listed matches the actual number of documents enclosed or attached:

- One English version and one French version of the same document count as two attachments.
- If each of a number of copies has official status, each should count as a separate enclosure. Governor in Council recommendations are an example. If there are three English copies to be signed and three French copies to be signed, a total of six attachments would be cited.
- A letter for signature with enclosures counts as one attachment to a memo to the minister.
- A briefing note with annexes counts as one attachment to a memo.
- A package of letters for signature could be counted as one attachment if they are combined under a title sheet.

CONTACT BLOCK

A contact block can expedite processing of the memo by giving the assistant deputy minister's office, the deputy minister's office and the minister's office someone to contact if they have questions about the memo. The contact block includes:

- name;
- area code and phone number; and
- division and branch.

It can be more useful to list the actual author than, say, a director or a director general. If people can't contact the author, it's easy to work up the line to find the director or the director general. However, if a director general is listed as the contact, people can't guess who else in his or her branch knows the file.

Example of a Single-Contact Block

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contact: Richard Oaks, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch

Figure 4

Example of a Multiple-Contact Block

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contacts:

- Richard Oaks, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch
- Michelle Kaldin, 991-1111
Economics Division, Industry Branch

Figure 5

DECISION BLOCK

A decision block should be used in memos where the action line is “For Decision”. Among other things, a decision block helps to ensure that you are given a clear and viable decision, even if it’s not the decision you were hoping for.

The easiest way to insert a decision block is to use two columns with your word processor. That way the formats of the signature block and the decision block don’t distort each other. Another option is to use a word processing text box for the decision block.

The form of the signature block can vary, depending on the nature of the recommendation. Here are some examples:

Yes-or-No Decision

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend that you approve the attached schedule.

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contact: Richard Oaks, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch

- I approve.
- I do not approve.

Catherine R. Kathiria

Figure 6

Options

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend that you authorize the department to pursue Option 3 as set out above.

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contact: Richard Oaks, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch

I approve:

- Option 1
- Option 2
- Option 3

Catherine R. Kathiria

Figure 7

Multiple Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend that you authorize the department to:

1. initiate negotiations with the provinces on partnerships;
2. develop a marketing campaign to promote the concept to stakeholders; and
3. explore opportunities for collaborating on related initiatives with other federal departments.

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachment: (1)

Contact: Richard Oaks, 990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch

I approve:

- Recommendation 1
- Recommendation 2
- Recommendation 3

Catherine R. Kathiria

Figure 8