

Assignment Genres: Writing a Policy Memo

Your first writing step is to make sure you understand the assignment.

Read the prompt and ask yourself:

Why was this assigned? Professors design assignments with specific learning objectives in mind. Does your professor intend for you to learn how to write a literature review, a research proposal, or a policy memo? Is your task to demonstrate your understanding of a concept, or to practice critiquing a theory?

What am I being asked to do? Most prompts contain key verbs, or action words, that help you determine the main tasks. The [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) divides these words into three categories: *information*, *relation*, and *interpretation*.

- **Information words** ask you to demonstrate your knowledge about a subject. Examples include define, describe, explain, illustrate, summarize, trace, and research.
- **Relation words** ask you to show connections between ideas. Compare, contrast, apply, cause, and relate fall into this category.
- **Interpretation words** ask for you to defend your own argument, thesis, or idea. These words include assess, prove, justify, evaluate, respond, support, synthesize, analyze, and argue.

What evidence is required? Some assignments, like a reflective memo, may not require any formal evidence. More often, though, assignments will ask you to draw on outside research or other types of evidence.

About policy memos

In a policy memo, you will usually write from the perspective of a particular role. Your goal is typically to support a recommendation of some kind, so the language needs to be succinct and persuasive. You may be able to use bullet points to present ideas concisely, and you may not need to provide much outside research.

Take a look at this memo assignment from a past year of A-205, especially the underlined parts.

The North Carolina Taxpayer's Association published a report stating that the average salary of North Carolina's public school teachers increased from \$9,500 in 1976 to \$20,000 in 1987, an increase of 111 percent. The Association's report is part of an

effort to stop proposed tax increases, part of which would be used to increase teacher salaries.

You are an analyst working for the North Carolina Superintendent for Public Instruction (the chief state school officer). The Superintendent believes that teacher salary increases are necessary to improve the quality of public education in the state. He has asked you to write a memo (no longer than 425 words) explaining why the Taxpayers' Association figures may be somewhat misleading.

One of the first things you will do is refer to the attached information on starting salaries (for teachers with a B.A. and no experience) and maximum salaries (for teachers with an M.A. and at least 15 years of experience). Among your other points, be sure to address how it is possible for the average salary teachers were paid to increase over 111 percent over the decade, while starting salaries only increased by 92 percent and maximum salaries increased by 87 percent.

Reading the prompt

Format	A policy memo is usually the shortest type of assignment you'll be asked to write. 3-5 pages or 1000 words is typical, but it depends on the faculty member's requirements. This one is on the short side at 425. In a policy memo, it's generally acceptable to use bullet points, headers, and other formatting to make your writing more concise.
Evidence	It is not clear from the prompt whether the professor expects outside research, but the provided salary data is probably most of what you need. In this case, it would be a good idea to ask the professor about the expectations.
Audience	There are many types of policy audiences. In this instance, you have two; the first is the Superintendent. Your second audience is the Superintendent's political opponents who want to block the tax that would fund salary increases.
Purpose	The key action word here is "explain." This is an informational word, so the writer should demonstrate knowledge of a subject (in this case, the salary data). Because the Superintendent has already decided on a plan, you are not trying to gain his approval on the decision. Rather, you are providing him with the information and argument with which to defend it.