

Department of English

Memo

To: Chair of English Department
From: Dr. Allen
Date: 11/13/2014
Re: Observation of Joan Langston

Memos often clearly state the intended reader of the document. Since memos are often sent electronically, they can be distributed beyond the initial reader, either to readers whose job description requires them to see those documents, such as a review committee, or readers who have no job related reason to see the document, such as this teacher's coworkers.

Schools are not only academic settings but work settings. An enormous number of work related documents are created every year in academic workplaces. Much of the technical writing in this setting documents the work teachers and staff accomplish. In the case of this document, the Director of First Year Composition observes lecturers under his supervision and submits reports on his observations to the Department Chair.

On November, 12th, 2005, I observed Joan Langston's English 1301 class. Prior to class Mrs. Langston provided me with a complete lesson plan, an outline of the assignment for that day, a class syllabus, and a schedule of assignments. I was most impressed with the thoroughness of Mrs. Langston's preparation. It demonstrated the seriousness with which she approaches her work.

The opening sentence clearly and concisely states the purpose of this memo, to report on a classroom observation.

Mrs. Langston started class with a lively discussion on the relative merits of form over content in an essay. The students engaged in a dialogue with Mrs. Langston and each other. The animated class discussion indicated that the students in Mrs. Langston's class were comfortable with her and were used to entering into discussions about significant and thought-provoking topics. During the discussion, Mrs. Langston called on students by name, and showed both a personal and professional interest in her students. She responded to their answers with positive feedback that encouraged additional thought from her students.

The writer of this memo uses paragraphs and topic sentences rather than headings to break up and identify the information in each paragraph. Do you think this memo would be been more readable had the author used headings?

Following this discussion, Mrs. Langston broke the class up into small groups for peer editing. I was pleased to see that Mrs. Langston did not simply break the students into groups, but conducted a brief exercise in preparation for group work using a worksheet entitled "Wallowing in Complexity." One of the strengths of this worksheet was that the prompts for student comments were open-ended, encouraging creative and critical thinking, rather than a single or "right" answer. Mrs. Langston encouraged her student to approach the rough draft as "Thinking aloud on paper," which provided a smooth transition into the group work that followed.

This paragraph is full of detailed descriptions of the classroom in operation. Why do you think the writer might have included these details? Do you think the writer thought these details would be read carefully, given the adage, "No one wants to read everything you write?"

The students moved quickly and smoothly into groups; it was evident that they were used to group work, comfortable with each other, and welcomed the opportunity to work together productively. During the group work, Mrs. Langston monitored the groups, stopped and asked questions, and helped students through the exercise. I was impressed with Mrs. Langston's ability to slip into group discussions without disrupting the flow—and then extricate herself from the group—allowing students to interact with each other to accomplish the task she had laid out for them.

Given that the department chair probably receives many more of these memos than she could possibly read, this writer has given the reader clues about the content of each paragraph that will allow the reader to choose which to read and which to skip. Can you identify those clues and the message they send to the reader?

I noticed one problem in an otherwise smooth classroom. One student did not bring in a draft, and I was curious to see how Mrs. Langston would handle that problem. She sat down with that student, reviewed the assignment and the student's progress, as well as the work that remained to be accomplished. She seemed both perplexed and uncertain about how to handle this student. When I discussed the student with her in a follow-up session, she admitted that she has difficulty handling recalcitrant students. I recommended to her that she review the university policies on classroom

discipline. In addition, I plan on including a training session on classroom discipline in the near future. I recommend Mrs. Langston continue as a lecturer next year.

James Allen
Director of First Year Composition

Notice that even when the writer, who has been impressed by Mrs. Langston, writes critically about her, he keeps his statements polite and respectful. His style remains professional. Knowing that this document might find its way beyond his initial reader, he is careful with his language.