

Air Force Style Correspondence

CAP Officer Basic Course

Introduction

How long does it take to make a first impression? The average is about 5 seconds. Would you like to be thought of as an example of the core values? Most likely you would like to be thought of as a person who exhibits “Integrity” and “Excellence” as well as gives and receives “Respect”. One of the ways we work toward that reputation is by communicating well.

Structured CAP communications are done most familiarly through briefings, (covered in other lessons of this course), e-mail, and when formal communications are required, in a CAP memo. For many people outside the unit (parents, higher headquarters, other organizations, etc) the e-mails and memos you send will be the basis by which people form their first impression of you.

1. Be able to state the qualities of a good CAP memo, evaluate and produce high quality memos in a CAP format

Everything you need to know about formatting a CAP memo but were afraid to ask about is found in CAPR 10-1, *Preparing and Processing Correspondence*. To make sure you have the latest copy you can go to the National Headquarters web page and find it under forms and publications/indexes, regulations, and manuals. As of the writing of this lesson the link is http://members.gocivilairpatrol.com/media/cms/u_081503073427.pdf . This should be the first regulation you read. The reg contains 2 pages of guidance and 10 pages of examples to follow. Pay particular attention to the pages that describe the layout. Later in this lesson you will be given some memos to evaluate. If you are a Personnel Officer you should also read CAPR 10-3, *Administrative Authorizations*, figure 4.

CAP memos can accomplish several things. They provide information, give direction, introduce attached documents, ask for support, promise support or announce policy. Most of your CAP memos will likely be in the first four categories.

As an author of a CAP memo you have several responsibilities which are listed below.

Clarity – In all cases, the information in your memo needs to be easily understood by the reader. Clarity is helped by an appropriate organizational pattern. The 5 Ws are good for announcements, who, what, where, when, & why; sequential patterns are good for instructions and so forth. (Organizational patterns are discussed in other lessons in this course and other CAP training) As with all written forms of communication, tone is hard to convey. CAP memos are not the place for sarcasm, witty parenthetical expressions or emotions. Clarity is best achieved by using short declarative statements. This is particularly true when giving directions. A word of caution: word selection can work both ways. Some jargon/technical terms have specific means to people in a particular field. When writing to people in that field, jargon can be used. For the purposes of most CAP memos, clear, concise and commonly understood language is best.

Being concise – Get to the point. CAP memos are not personal letters or prose. They contain a message. CAP memos should have one point/topic, use short declarative sentences, have short paragraphs and be less than a page.

The memo can serve as a cover page for a larger package. It can encourage the recipient to read the entire package or serve as a summary of the package. If used as a summary it should have a brief introductory paragraph (2 to 4 sentences), a concise summary of package

content in a paragraph or using bullets, and a brief conclusion (2 to 4 sentences). In all cases it should be less than a page. Again, brief declarative statements are best.

Appropriate topic – Anything you write on CAP letterhead or you sign using your CAP title must be CAP business, for the benefit of CAP and its members, and consistent with the CAP regulations. At this point in your CAP career you are likely to write a memo announcing a squadron activity, a letter of recommendation for a cadet, responding to other CAP correspondence, requesting assistance. These topics are appropriate.

Inappropriateness most occurs in conjunction with handling with adverse personnel actions, resource accountability, and fund raising. The topic may be appropriate, but the language used and the emotions conveyed may not be. Before you put anything in writing regarding these matters please read the appropriate sections of this course, CAP regulations, and consult with your superior and possibly the legal officer. Once written and sent communications can not be retracted. They can come up years later. They may fall into unintended hands. They may come up in conversation or in court. When in anger or in doubt, think before you write, ask (a superior) before you act, and then wait a day before you mail.

Professional Appearance – CAP memos (used internally) and CAP business letters (used externally) should be in the correct format, and use proper grammar and spelling. Make sure the message is confined to CAP business (See the Ethics Lesson in this course.), and reflect credit upon CAP and the author. There are three easy things that will help you achieve a professional appearance. Proofreading is important, particularly if you are rushed, or make several revisions. It is easy for the author to see what they expect and not what is there. Second, use spell check. We have all seen (I mean seen) absolutely correctly spelled words that are not the correct word. We all no (I mean know) spell check helps but a critical eye is what is needed. Even better is a second set of eyes. Having someone else read the memo before it is sent out can help catch errors, improve clarity, and let cooler heads prevail.

Using CAPR 10-1 and the content of this lesson you should be able to evaluate CAP memos. At the end of this lesson are three CAP memos. Please review their format and content, based on what you have learned. The first page of the file shows the original memo. The second page of the file shows the same memo with the mistakes identified. Review them at this time.

While it would be valuable to require you to write a memo and send it for evaluation it is not possible. Therefore, it is recommended that you prepare a CAP style memo and have it critiqued using CAPR 10-1, by your squadron DA or PD or your mentor for format and content.

2. Be able to state the qualities of a good CAP e-mail, evaluate and produce high quality e-mails in a CAP format.

Author responsibilities - Very much like the CAP memo, a CAP e-mail should be clear, concise, on CAP appropriate topics and present a professional appearance.

Format - E-mail can be less formal when used for quick, informal contact about routine things like arranging a ride. But it can be used for formal CAP business (announce information, give direction, introduce attached documents, ask for support, promise support or announce policy) and be just as formal. It already has a "Memo for" line it is just called "to". The "From" and "Subject" lines have the same name and are automatically generated along with the date. The exception is that we may add in a greeting. If you want to more formal you can format the e-mail to look like a CAP memo or attach a CAP memo.

Attachments are one of the big advantages to e-mail. You can send documents, words, graphs, charts, pictures etc. These greatly enhance communication. When the bulk of the communication is in the attachment(s) the e-mail serves a cover page/to introduce the attachments. When conducting business (rather than having an “e-conversation”) e-mails should be short, like memos. (See above.)

Security - You should never discuss personal information, negative personnel information (suspected or actual) causes of an accident or the details of operational (ES, CD, SAR) missions in e-mails. While it is easy and tempting to send confidential information such as social security numbers, dates of birth, combinations (to buildings, lockers, gates, etc) and the location of the “hidden key”, this should never be done. Once on the internet the confidentiality of the information can easily be compromised by internal misjudgment or carelessness and external security threats. As you learned in your OPSEC training, e-mail is not a secure means of communication. The release of proprietary information, even unintentionally can have severe repercussions on you and CAP.

Appropriateness - A special word must be said about appropriateness and professional appearance. The same possibilities and pitfalls that can occur with memos can happen with e-mails but at the speed of light. Jokes may be funny and create camaraderie, and are part of many people’s e-mail. But they should not be mixed in with CAP business. You would not send a memo/e-mail to your boss at work with a joke in it. Copies of controversial, gossipy or embarrassing things multiply faster than mold in a teenager’s gym locker. Once an e-mail gets on the internet they can not be retracted. Prevention is the only “cure”.

At this point rather than have you read simulated e-mail attached to this lesson, go to your e-mail account and review three e-mails you have sent/received about “formal” CAP business. Evaluate them based on the criteria above.

Lesson Summary and Closure

AF Style correspondence should be clear, concise, appropriate and professional. When in doubt use CAPR 10-1. You only get one chance to make a first impression and it only takes on “oh darn” to wipe out ten good ones.

It may seem funny that CAP has a ten page regulation on how to write a one page memo. In this instance, as in many others, the guidance exists to show you how to be safe, professional, and successful. Use it when you do something the first three or four times. Read it before you develop an opinion. And generally speaking, when somebody says “It is in the regulations.” ask “Where? I need to read about that.” It is a good training opportunity for you and you will be surprised how often you (or they) can’t find it in the regulation. In a fairly short time you can be the “expert on the regulations” and a leader in your unit.

Works Cited

1. CAPR 10-1, *Preparing and Processing Correspondence*, Civil Air Patrol, Maxwell AFB, AL, 1 October 1996.
2. CAPR 10-3, *Administrative Authorizations*, Civil Air Patrol, Maxwell AFB, AL, 26 January 09