The One-Page Memo: A Discipline Worth Building

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Why the constraint itself is valuable

The discipline of writing a one-page memo, made famous by organisations like Amazon as an alternative to slide decks, is valuable for a reason beyond the reader's convenience: the act of compressing a complex issue into a single page forces the writer to genuinely resolve their own thinking, cutting away tangential detail and identifying what actually matters. Many leaders discover gaps in their own reasoning only when forced to write it this concisely.

Why slides often obscure more than they clarify

Bullet points, by design, fragment reasoning into disconnected phrases, allowing genuine logical gaps to hide behind visual structure. A well-written narrative memo, by contrast, requires complete sentences and explicit connections between ideas, which makes weak reasoning far harder to disguise, both from the reader and from the writer themselves during drafting.

A practical structure

The issue, stated in one or two sentences. What decision or question does this memo address, stated clearly enough that someone unfamiliar with the context could understand what is at stake.

The recommendation, stated early. Rather than building up to a conclusion, state the recommendation near the top, then use the remainder of the memo to support it. This respects the reader's time and makes disagreement, if it comes, easier to engage with directly.

The key considerations, briefly. The two or three factors that most influenced the recommendation, including genuine trade-offs and risks, not only the supporting evidence. Omitting real counterarguments undermines credibility once a sharp reader notices the gap.

The ask. What specifically is needed from the reader: a decision, feedback by a certain date, or simply awareness.

The discipline of revision

A genuinely tight one-page memo is rarely produced in a single draft. The most valuable part of the process is often the second or third revision, where the writer cuts material that felt important on the first pass but, on reflection, was not essential to the actual decision. This editing process is where much of the real thinking happens.

Where this format works best

Proposing a decision, summarising a complex situation for a time-constrained stakeholder, or preparing your own thinking before a high-stakes conversation. It is less suited to purely exploratory brainstorming, where the constraint of a firm conclusion would be premature.

The broader habit this builds

Leaders who practise this discipline regularly tend to develop sharper thinking generally, not only better documents, because the habit of forcing clarity onto a page carries over into how they approach decisions even when no memo is required.