Policy Memos

These guidelines teach the strategies, mechanics, and structure of a basic policy memo, which then serves as the guiding document for an oral briefing of a decision-maker. The workshop offers ways to manage evidence to make policy recommendations on serious real-world problems. At the end of the workshop, you will be prepared to write short l,000-word memos—a skill you will apply repeatedly as policy writer.

Introduction: Know your audience. Keep it short.

Though the two genres share many analytical features, a policy memo is not a research report or white paper. In the real world, memos are developed summaries of varying length. At the Kennedy School, the memo is typically a short distillation of the major findings or recommendations on a key issue or significant problem. Although the memo relies on your authority over the deep research that you have conducted on the issue or problem, it also directly addresses the needs, expectations, and concerns of the decision-maker. Be sure to keep those needs clearly in mind as you conduct your research so that, in about two pages, you are able to:

- **Define the problem or issue.** Highlight implications or state significant findings based on the data. Do not merely present data.
- **Show how you arrived at the findings or recommendations through analysis of qualitative or quantitative data.** Draw careful conclusions that make sense of the data and do not overstate or misrepresent it.
- **Summarize your findings or state recommendations.** Provide specific recommendations or findings in response to specific problems and avoid generalizations.
- **Generate criteria for evaluating options.** Explain the key assumptions underlying your analysis and prioritize the criteria you rely on to assess evidence.
- **Analyze each option according to those criteria.** What are the pros and cons? What is feasible? What are the predictable outcomes? Support your assertions with relevant data.
- **Address**—and when appropriate rebut—**counterarguments, caveats, and reservations to your findings or recommendations.** Your credibility as a policy maker relies on your ability to locate and account for counterargument. You should be especially sensitive to the likely counterarguments your decision-maker faces in implementing or acting on your recommendations or findings.
- **Suggest next steps and/or implementation of the findings or recommendations.**
- **Distill the conclusions succinctly in a concluding section and remind the decision-maker of the big picture, the overall goal, the necessity of the investigation, or of the need for specific action.** This answers the "so what?" question that reminds the decision-maker of the value of the research and recommendations. It should be pitched to the decision maker's primary concerns.

Adapted from Marie Danziger, Harvard Kennedy School, "Option and Decision Memos: Basic Components," 1988.

Locating Recommendations in Competing Data:

The PEST and SWOT Feasibility Charts

After you have produced findings on the problem, you must orient the data around likely solutions. The PEST and SWOT feasibility charts are essential starting points in locating recommendations from competing data and perspectives.

PEST focuses on how **political, economic, social, and technological** factors affect the feasibility of a recommendation option. Examples of political factors could include applicable regulations, taxation issues and government policies. Economic factors include inflation, business cycles, government spending, and overall cost, and consumer confidence. Social factors include demographics, public attitudes, and income distribution. Technological factors focus on the technology involved in supporting or implementing a recommendation, including energy use and the availability of key technology. PEST analysis involves not only identifying the relevant factors, but also considering options for responding to these influences.

There are two primary formats of PEST analysis for policy makers, which each offer starting points from which you can drill down to increasingly detailed conclusions and recommendations. The first example chart shows the variability in a strong PEST analysis, breaking it into five categories to assess the feasibility of implementing four recommendation options: Political Feasibility, Administrative Feasibility, Equity, Cost Effectiveness, and Environmental Impact. That chart also shows that the policy writer folded Social Feasibility into the Political Feasibility and Equity tests. The example chart focuses on the problem of pesticides, offering four possible solutions to deal with the problem: (1) Do Nothing/Status Quo, (2) Tax Pesticides, (3) Increase Number of Pesticides Banned, (4) Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops, (5) Limit the Number of Pesticides that can be applied to a particular crop. The chart then assesses the overall positive and negative outcomes or qualities associated with each possible solution to reveal a dominant recommendation: Tax Pesticides.

You can build your own Feasibility Chart by measuring recommendation options in the context of PEST categories and through the perspectives of key interest groups. The more detailed your knowledge of your subject, the more authoritative the outcome of the chart. In this chart, the policy writer prioritizes five hypothetical solutions to the problem of pesticide use:

Options

Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	-	-	+/-
Tax Pesticides	+/-	+	+/-	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+/-	-	-	+	-
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	-	-	+/-	+	+/-
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on	-	+/-	-	+/-	+/-

Certain Crops					
Criteria	Political Feasibility	Administrative Feasibility	Equity	Environmental Impact	Economic Impact/Cost Effectiveness

The PEST chart shows that, while all five possible recommendations have positive environmental impact, only one of the options predominates among the other criteria. In this policy researcher's view, taxing pesticides meets the bar of being administratively feasible and equitable to all parties; it has a positive environmental impact and it is both cost effective and offers a positive economic impact. For this policy writer, taxing pesticides is the best recommendation, which she will highlight early in her memo.

You'll note, however, that the first column—"Political Feasibility"—shows up as the single negative for her recommendation of Tax Pesticides. Thus, in the body of her memo, the writer needs briefly to address and rebut or qualify the shortcomings of the political feasibility of taxing pesticides. The writer will also discuss the highlights and shortcomings of the other findings, demonstrating, for example, the limitations of increasing the number of banned pesticides and of limiting the amount of pesticides applied to particular crops.

A second chart examines the same five possible recommendations through the perspectives of involved interest groups.

Stakeholders Chart

Options

Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	+	-	-	-
Tax Pesticides	+	-	-	+	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+	-	-	+	-	+
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	+	+/-	-	+	+	+
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on Certain Crops	+	-	-	+/-	+/-	+/-
Interest Groups	The Public	Traditional Farmers	Chemical Production Companies	Farm Labor	The Environment	Organic Farmers

The stakeholders chart shows that, while all five possible recommendations (or solutions to the problem of under-regulated and over-used pesticides) have both positive and negative aspects, once again, the solution of taxing pesticides dominates. When the recommendation of "Tax Pesticides" again shows up positively, the writer can feel certain in prioritizing that recommendation.

Should the analyst wish to drill down further into the recommendation of taxing pesticides, she could, for example, compose yet another Option and Decision Chart that breaks "Tax Pesticides" into different components, depending on her overall goals. She might, for example, analyze different types of taxes for pesticides or, alternatively, break the pesticides into subgroups, taxing them according to their virulent effects on people or the environment. The Option and Decision chart is only as authoritative as its creator but

it will focus your attention on possible outcomes or findings. It is a first step in clarifying your ideas before writing the policy memo.

For background on the PEST analysis method, see, for example: http://www.ppm.net/business-plans/what-is-a-pest-analysis/

SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) **Analysis**. The SWOT analysis is adopted from organizational management and business strategy. It surveys the surrounding environment of a specific policy or strategy that you are analyzing or proposing. It allows you to identify the internal characteristics of the policy as either strengths or weaknesses and classify external factors as opportunities or threats.

After assessing and classifying internal and external factors, analysts construct a 2-by-2 matrix with the following four cells: strengths-opportunities (S-O), weaknesses-opportunities (W-O), strengths-threats (S-T), and weaknesses-threats (W-T).

This example tracks a strategy to expand public library services:

The Executive Summary

An effective strategy is to draft a couple of short, orienting paragraphs (a mini Executive Summary) as you begin writing, which will help you structure your analysis. (You will necessarily return to these short "Executive Summary" paragraphs at the end of the process of writing, revising them and your recommendations according to your final analysis.) In telegraphic style, explain who the target audience is (i.e., the decision-maker for your policy proposal), clarify the problem, and describe the main points that the decision-maker should know. The Executive Summary serves as a road map for your policy paper, highlighting key themes and guiding the decision-maker's understanding of the longer paper.

The core characteristics of the Executive Summary (and the Short Memo itself):

WHO and WHAT

1. **Acknowledges** the target audience and intended use/s for the paper
2. Concisely **states the problem** either in terms of current policy or as a problematic situation

WHY

3. Offers **reasons** for initiating changes to that policy or situation
4. May sign post **key policy options** or approaches; sometimes this is simply stated as the status quo, sometimes it includes alternatives that seek to remedy or address the problem

5. May sign post the **pros and cons** of key options
6. May briefly reference the **methodology** used to examine the data

HOW / When / Where

7. **Recommends** primary course/s of action **or states findings** that may lead to recommendations in future policy work
8. Offers brief **supporting reasons** for selecting or highlighting that course of action or findings

The last sentence may offer a timeline for completion or set up a roadmap that tells the reader how the memo is structured.

The Structure of the Policy Memo

You may decide to start with an optional executive summary, which orients the reader to the problem, key findings, and/or recommendations. Note that this is not a requirement for short memos, but it is a useful technique in instances where there are a number of findings or recommendations. You'll see examples linked at the end of this set of guidelines that show both types of short memos.

Every memo includes:

1. BLUF Statement or Bottom Line Up Front explanation of the problem or issue.
    - States the *problem* in terms specific to the goal of the decision-maker. Directly addresses the decision-maker's needs in the opening lines.
    - Tells the decision-maker why a policy change or research is needed.
    - Briefly details the problem. Be careful to focus on the problem, not the background.
2. Explanation of the pros and cons of policy areas or issues leading up to your recommendations or the areas relevant to your findings
    - Review the Current Policy – What is it and why is it done this way? Assess briefly how well it is or is not working.
    - For an action memo: Statement on the Necessity for Change – What circumstances (e.g., changes in government, leadership, stability, etc.) have changed that make a new approach advisable or necessary?
    - Discuss the alternatives to the current policy option by enumerating and explaining each policy option in turn; or, for a findings memo, describe two or three key areas that could motivate further research or become the basis for future recommendations.
    - For an option and decision memo, explain the pros and cons of each policy option. You may rely on the PEST chart here, selecting pros and cons through the lens of such core features as—(1) political feasibility, (2) economic feasibility/cost effectiveness, (3) administrative feasibility, (4) equity, and/or (5) such other rationales as security implications or environmental benefits. Choose the most significant policy options or findings, then compare or contrast among the key options/findings as well as with the current policy. This is the most important part of the paper because it establishes the rational authority and credibility for the recommendations or key findings that follow.
3. Explanation of the Recommendations
    - Identify which option will be recommended and which options will be discounted.
    - Lay out the argument for why that option is better than each of the others. For a findings memo, summarize the supporting data for each major set of findings.
4. Implementation or Next Steps
    - If you have made specific recommendations, briefly identify how and when to implement those options. If there are significant risks, costs, or obstacles associated with implementation, you should discuss them in the earlier section that describes the pros and cons of the policy recommendation/s. This section should be dedicated to the mechanics of implementation.

- If you have written a findings memo and you are not yet ready to advise actionable recommendations, you could use this section to talk about next steps. What is the next logical step that builds on your findings?
- You might briefly include a timeline here that gives a general idea of the phases of implementation or that advises a time frame for moving to next steps. The timeline may be as simple as "in the next six months" or a bit more complex with a break out of the time for each phase of implementation. Remember, though, that the goal is brevity. Your decision-maker can look to the full briefing book or white paper for developed strategy.

5. Conclusion
    - Return to the big picture or the motive of your policy: What is the goal of the policy recommendation? What will happen if the decision-maker does not implement the recommendation? What will happen if she does? This is your opportunity to remind your reader of the urgency of your recommendation.
6. Annexes
    - You may optionally attach a chart, graph, table, or brief supplemental data.

Annotated Sample Policy Memos

These examples highlight three strong formats. The first, by Curt Gilroy on the topic of Army recruitment, relies on an executive summary to telegraph its findings. The second, under the pseudonym of John C. Smith to the Mayor of Detroit, presents its key recommendation as the entry point into the overall flow of the argument. The third, directed to the Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health, offers a before and after example where we can talk about strengths and weaknesses in the presentation style.

As you look over these memos, think about:

1. Who is the key actor or decision-maker? Who is the intended audience?
2. What is the BLUF statement?
3. Why is the problem urgent?
4. When (and where) should action take place?
5. What are the best strategies or options to correct or manage the problem?
6. How do they operate?
7. When and where should they go into effect?
8. What are the key divisions of your argument?

- Anonymous Senior Policy Analyst, Mr. Paul Cote, Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health , *Resource Allocation Guidelines for Flu Pandemic Preparedness,* May 1, 2006. Accessed from "Policy Writing for Decision Makers," DPI820M (Fall 2012), under Assignments 1 and 2 "Short Memo": http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k90606&pageid=icb.page539450
- Curt Gilroy, *The Big Picture on Army Recruitment: Ensuring Efficacy of Recruiting Initiatives*. May 2, 2005. Collected in "Memo Writing Handouts," Communications Program, Writing Skills. (Log-in necessary.) http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab/ab40ecb1a1ece5e6852575d900522cc2/$FILE/Memo%20Writing%20handouts.PDF
    - This prize-winning Spring Exercise memo offers four key findings responsible for a decline in military recruiting, which it highlights in an executive summary. Note that this memo prioritizes the findings rather than the recommendations that might solve the problem of declining enlistment. The recommendations are stated, instead, as general conclusions at the end of each section describing the findings. The memo responds, then, to the decision-maker's request to "define the challenges facing recruitment," leaving open implied next steps in examining and prioritizing recommendations.

- John C. Smith, *Raising the Non-Resident Income Tax.* March 13, 19xx. Communications Program Handouts: "A Good, 'Skimmable' Memo." (Log-in necessary.) http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab/6aca9945c3bdaba2852570cf00641267/$FILE/Handout%20-%20HKS%20-%20Sample%20of%20a%20good,%20skimmable%20memo.pdf

- Rather than starting with an explicit executive summary, this memo folds its recommendation neatly into the flow of the analysis. This is possible, in part, because the memo offers only a single recommendation, which it then analyzes and supports briefly with data. Memos that prioritize a complement of recommendations or findings are better served by frontloading those recommendations or findings into a short executive summary (as seen in the Gilroy memo on military recruitment).
    - The opening paragraph begins with a statement on the problem: "The budget problem facing the city is serious." (Arguably, the decision-maker knows that the problem is serious and the opening statement on the problem could have been even more specifically targeted.)
    - The second paragraph reveals the broad goal of the recommendation that will follow: "The city needs to cut the deficit by at least $30 million in the short run."
    - The third paragraph opens with an explicit recommendation: "As part of the general deficit reduction program, the city should take steps to raise the non-resident income tax rate from ½ to 1%."
    - The analysis that follows then specifies the arguments that support the recommendation.

Resources

General Texts on Policy Analysis:

- Bardach, Eugene. 2000. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- Brest, Paul, and Krieger, Linda Hamilton.. 2010. *Problem Solving, Decision Making, and Professional Judgement: A Guide for Lawyers and Policymakers.* Oxford UP.
- Weimer, David L. and Aidan R. Vining. 1992. *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Online Communications Resources:

- Stanford Policy Lab Communications Resources, http://www.law.stanford.edu/organizations/programs-and-centers/law-and-policy-lab
- Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program, Writing Skills Handouts, http://shorensteincenter.org/students/communications-program/writing-public-speaking-handouts/
- *PAE Guide*, "Standards for Good Analysis," Harvard Kennedy School of Government, http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/PAE-WRITING-GUIDE-2009.pdf
- "Policy Paper Guidelines," International Relations Department, Boston University, http://www.bu.edu/ir/graduate/current/papers/policy/
- Luciana Herman's course on policy writing, DPI820M, "Policy Writing for Decision Makers." Click on Assignment 2 for short memos: http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k90606