Introduction to Policy Writing for Public Policy Professionals

A Practitioner-led Workshop

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Who are you, what is “policy writing”, and why should I care?

• “In public policy work, if you can’t write it or say it, you can’t do it.”

• Writing as communication; communication as the imperative to action

• Background
Agenda

• Introduction – “What this session is and what it isn’t”
• The Ten Commandments
• Political Constraints on the Policy Memo
• Different Types of Written Products
• The Logical Fallacies (if we have time)
• Q&A
What this session is:

- An introduction to the importance of written communication in public discourse and in public decision-making
- An introduction to some tools for producing relevant, useful material in the professional public policy analysis arena
- An introduction to some of the various species of written communication that you will be asked to produce on the first day of your jobs
- An introduction to the constraints that surround effective communication in the public arena
What this session isn’t:

- An English composition lesson
- A guide to how you should write in an academic environment
- A guide to how your PEPP instructor wants you to write your memos
Academic vs. Professional Policy Writing
The Ten Commandments

The three conceptual laws:

1. Thou shall understand the audience for which you are writing
2. Thou shall understand the purpose of the memo
3. Thou shall anticipate the overriding goal that is being advanced
Understand what Audience you are writing the memo for

Easier said than done. Here are some starting points:

- Technical vs. non-Technical
- Decision Maker vs. Advisor
- Single vs. multiple intended recipients
- Legislative, Judicial or Executive
- Internal vs. External

Remember: You may not be writing for professors anymore
Understand what Purpose the memo is meant to have

Why are you being asked to write this memo?

• To inform – a backgrounder, a lit review
• To contextualize – a legislative history
• To analyze – a post-mortem, a white paper, a business case
• To recommend – an option paper
• To justify – a crisis response, a political strategy memo
• To defend – talking points, media advisories

Remember: Memo writing is not an exercise in telling someone everything that you know about a topic.
Understand what the Meta-Goal of the memo is

In what context is this memo needed?

- In response to a crisis outside our control
- In response to a self-inflicted crisis
- To build support for an initiative
- To provide decision-support for an initiative
- To provide political cover
- To further an agenda
- Whose agenda?

Remember: your writings – or those attributed to you – will follow you forever (just ask Glen Poshard or Al Gonzales).
The Ten Commandments

The grammatical laws:

4. Thou shall be concise
5. Thou shall proofread
6. Thou shall submit to the editorial process
The Ten Commandments

The stylistic laws:

7. Thou shall not use acronyms without definitions
8. Thou shall not use overwrought, clichéd jargon
9. Thou shall not make assertions that are unsupportable
10. Thou shall anticipate counter-arguments
The Constraints of the Policy Memo in the Political Arena

• Social and Hierarchical Roles
• Co-construction of Meaning
• Permanence
• Exogenous Events
• Strategic and Political Landscape
• Editorial Process
• Principals and Agents
• Value of Time and Information
On the Impact of Social and Hierarchical Roles

- Example: Is the memo coming out Vice President Cheney’s office, or is it coming out of Vice President Quayle’s office?
- Where are you in the hierarchy and how does that impact your analysis?
On the Co-Construction of Meaning

- Example: How will religious conservatives understand a term, versus how the general public will understand a term.
- What language you use is only half the battle – you must understand how your audience will interpret your words.
On the Permanence of Written Materials

- Example: Torture Memos
- How will what I write be interpreted in the future?
On the Impact of Exogenous Events


- External events can change the value, importance, substance and meaning of policy memos virtually in the blink of an eye
On the Relevance of the Strategic and Political Landscape

- Example: Eisenhower’s farewell address to the nation; “military-industrial complex”.

- What the landscape looks like dictates how your memo will be read and understood.
On the Editorial Process

• Example: Pre-war intelligence on WMD, and uranium acquisition in Iraq.

• Who writes only has as much power as who edits gives them.
On Principals and Agents

- Example: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and April Glaspie - US Ambassador to Iraq in 1990

- Who are you writing for? Are they the principal, or are they an agent? What is the agent’s agenda? Is it the same as yours? As the principal’s? Does the Agent understand YOUR agenda?
On Bureaucracy

• Example: FBI, CIA, NSA non-cooperation

• How many layers does your memo have to penetrate? How do institutional dynamics inhibit information flow?
Several Different Types of Written Products

- The Lit Review
- The Backgrounder
- The Leg History
- The White Paper
- The “One Pager”
- Talking Points
- The Op-Ed
The Source Literature Review

- Length – 1 or 2 pages
- Purpose – familiarize yourself and others with the existing source material
- Builds – familiarity with the topic and with the information landscape around it
The Background Paper

• Length – no more than 5 pages
• Purpose – familiarize an audience with the topic at hand and with the major policy controversy involved
• Builds – familiarity with the topic and with the information landscape around it
The Legislative History

- Length – no more than 5 pages
- Purpose – familiarize an audience with the prior legislative activity surrounding the topic at the Federal, State or local level
- Builds – familiarity with the topic and with the information landscape around it
The White Paper/Option Paper

- Length – 2 or 3 pages
- Purpose – To present an argument and a series of options to pursue in support of a proposed course of action
- Builds – skill in forming arguments and designing strategies
The One Pager

- Length – 1 page
- Purpose – to familiarize an executive/decision-maker about your topic in such a way that they can internalize a large body of information and speak about it intelligibly on short notice
- Builds – skill in editing and concision
Media Talking Points

• Length – $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 page
• Purpose – to provide an executive/decision-maker with enough information about your topic to survive a media confrontation with their credibility on the topic intact
• Builds – concision and strategic thinking skills
The Op-Ed Piece

- Length – 500 to 1000 words
- Purpose – to present an argument on your topic in a way that uses no jargon and that is broadly intelligible to someone with no prior exposure to the information
- Builds – strategic editing skills; media methods familiarity
The Logical Fallacies

• Use them
• Don’t abuse them
• Recognize their use in your opponent’s work
• Recognize their power
• Recognize the futility of falling into a argument about them
Fallacies of Relevance

- Ad hominem
- Appeal to Consequences
- Bandwagon
- Fallacy of inept argument
Fallacies of Presumption

- False Dilemma
- Circularity
- Post hoc ergo propter hoc
- “He’s nae a trrrue Scotsman…”
- *Tu Quoque*
Fallacies of Ambiguity

Straw Man
Suggested Readings


