Policy Memo Grading Outline[1]

The policy memos are graded on a 100 point scale with half of the grade determined by the substance of the memo and the other half determined by the presentation or the way in which the substance is presented.

Substance. There are three key components to substance—theory, understanding policy nuances and evidence. As we think about the likely effects of policy on outcomes for kids, policies that are consistent with some underlying theory of human behavior are more likely to be effective than policies that are not. For example, economic models of labor supply and demand suggest that as the wage rate for teachers is increased, we are likely to attract a greater number of teachers, other things equal. And if school district human resources personnel can differentiate more effective from less effective teachers then the quality of teaching should also increase. Clearly, this rule is of limited guidance when theories provide conflicting predictions. No policymaker will be excited to be treated to a lesson in economics (or politics or psychology) but these models can help you organize your thinking.

Many seemingly simple questions are ultimately more complex once you begin to understand the situation. Is NCLB an effective policy reform? This question has many components to it and a good memo on this would want to explore important nuances. For example, NCLB may have produced good policy outcomes for kids in some types of schools or in some subjects but in fact may have had negative consequences for kids in other schools or subjects. Exploring the theory and evidence across these nuances helps the policymaker differentiate important components of any policy. However, not all details may be important, so focus on important distinctions.

Marshalling evidence is a crucial part of writing an effective policy memo. Your memo should include the most important evidence on both sides of the argument. However, you also need to differentiate the quality of the evidence, so some evidence may be privileged because it is more germane or because it has higher standing in establishing causality.

Presentation. A good policy memo depends upon a reasonable argument organized coherently and presented logically and clearly. It is neither a list of unconnected 'points,' nor a 'lawyer's brief' that argues for only one side of an issue without acknowledging its limitations or liabilities. Qualify your thesis or recommendations whenever necessary but strive at all times to keep the reader's focus clearly where you believe the evidence leads. Stick to essential information or arguments that grow out of your introduction and lead inevitably to your conclusions.

Be certain you have solved the problem before you begin to write. Then organize your presentation to help the reader see how that solution is reasonable and persuasive. Try to picture how the completed policy memo will look before you start to write.

- Get right down to business in your introduction; you will rarely have the luxury of enough space to present elaborate background information, witty or 'elegant' meanderings toward your topic. In fact, we will impose word limits on these memos, which you should not exceed.
- After reading the opening paragraph, your reader should have no doubt concerning the focus of your memo. At the least, the reader will know what problem you are addressing, how you intend to approach it, and the main considerations. Most readers will also appreciate a sense of your conclusions in the introduction. The format of the 'mystery tale,' where a web of confusing evidence is suddenly untangled in a surprise ending, is rarely an effective way to present a professional memo.
- Organize all information to buttress your argument logically. It is seldom convincing to present material in the same order in which you thought through a problem; attempt instead to determine

[1] Drawn from M. O'Hare, "Memo to My Students" Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Vol. 23, No. 2, 365–375 (2004)

what effect your organization will have on the reader. Structure should be logical rather than chronological.

- Stick with the information or analysis useful to your audience. Compress or eliminate anything that does not bear directly on your subject. If you need to demonstrate calculations, or present additional data, include them in an appendix to the main body of your policy memo. Don't distract your reader with unessential material or long digressions.
- Be sure that graphs, tables, or equations are relevant, clearly explained, and coherently tied to your prose arguments. Don't present such materials for their own sake, but only when (and in such a way that) they advance your thesis. Never include a graph, table, or equation you have not previously addressed in the text.
- The reader should sense that you have fulfilled the expectations you created throughout the memo; that you have proven what you set out to demonstrate. The reader must also feel that she understands your final position and the path that leads to it.

In the final analysis, your ideas are no more meaningful to the reader than you are able to make them. Most readers will feel that muddled writing reflects hazy thinking. Try to express ideas in a way readers will understand easily, without ambiguities. Assume the reader will not take the time to ponder fine shadings of meaning you believe your language contains. Keep the language simple and direct.

Wherever possible:

- Choose the plainest words you can find.
- Keep sentences brief.
- Seek lively words and constructions.
- Prefer action verbs and active sentences over forms of to be or passive constructions.
- Make sure paragraphs are coherent, that they have a single controlling idea you have made explicit.
- Edit to eliminate potential ambiguities, awkward expressions, and unnecessary words.
- Proofread carefully to make sure it embodies your exact intentions.
- If you have any questions about the correct usage or meaning of a word, consult a good dictionary.
- When you address a non-technical audience, strive to avoid technical jargon. The professional policy analyst writes to communicate clearly, not to impress the reader with sophisticated terminology. Too often students use jargon to demonstrate they have attended a lecture or read a certain assignment. Even sophisticated audiences appreciate simple, direct prose. The effort to find a clear expression for technical ideas also helps the author test the depth of his or her own understanding.
- There are times, however, when a bit of jargon may provide the most economical means to approach a problem. When you feel such language is essential (or expedient) for developing an idea, you may choose first to define the terms, then to use them to your advantage subsequently.
- In like fashion, be sure to explain all abbreviations the first time you use them.
- While grammatical propriety should not be your first concern, realize that many points of grammar help insure logic and clarity. Beyond that, incorrect usages will distract some readers from your arguments. Follow grammatical conventions; when in doubt, consult a reliable style manual.