**Policy Memos**

Policy memos are not like other academic papers. They should focus on a policy recommendation, not on some type of thesis statement. In general, they should be organized as follows:

1. Statement of topic
2. Brief overview of issue area
3. Overview of existing policy(ies) or policy discussions
4. Pros and cons of existing policy(ies) or policy discussions; including what criticisms might be made about your policy
5. Proposed new policy
6. Arguments about why this policy should be adopted and what weaknesses in existing policy it addresses.

If you use supporting information in a memo, reference the source in the text. For example, you might refer to some research to support an assertion and introduce it this way: "a 2000 study by the Pew Center showed that . . ."

**Writing criteria for policy memos**Borrowed from Steve Frank

Good policy memos should present strong ideas clearly and logically. If you always assume that your reader only has time to skim your memo, you will not go too far astray. There are seven criteria to consider: (1) content, (2) overall clarity and brevity, (3) structure, (4) grammar, (5) tone, (6) style, and (7) presentation.

**Content**: Content, of course, is the most important determinant of a good policy memo. Weak or illogical ideas, no matter how well presented, do no one any good. Here are some things to keep in mind. First, present opinions AS opinions not facts. Opinions presented should also be substantiated. Second, avoid logical fallacies such as appeals to authority, slippery slope arguments, hasty generalizations, faulty causation (post hoc ergo proctor hoc), etc. Third, when citing facts, be correct. Fourth, use logic and facts to support each of your main points and/or to refute opposing points. Fifth, important ideas are better than trivial ideas. Sixth, present your ideas in some sort of useful order. Start with the most important ideas unless there is a compelling reason not to. Seventh, draw on course content. Make as many relevant points that support your thesis as you can, given the constraints of the assignment.

**Overall Clarity and Conciseness**: Clarity should be the goal of all writing. It is the second most important criterion of a good policy memo, next to content. Your ideas should be presented so that readers can understand your points easily and without having to read any sentence twice. If you use effective headings and structure, your clarity will increase immensely. But you also have to have good grammar, style, content, and presentation. Conciseness is also important. Use as many words as you must, but write your memo in the fewest words possible. Focus on the most important points, and be aware of your reader’s time constraints. But do NOT cut out vital information just for the sake of brevity. Again, keep in mind what the reader needs to know. You will likely have to rewrite your papers more than once to get full credit on clarity and conciseness.

**Structure**: Your policy memo should usually have an introduction that contains a thesis statement. A thesis statement gives the reasons behind the recommendation(s) you are making. For instance, a thesis might read: Of these three explanations, I accept explanation A because (1), (2), (3). Such a thesis accomplishes two goals. First, it explains the purpose of your memo. And second, it outlines the direction the remainder of the memo will take. The remainder of the memo should then follow the structure outlined in the introduction. These supporting points should be organized as internally consistent paragraphs. Within each paragraph, you should lead your reader from old to new information. By that, I mean you should usually build on previously introduced concepts in the first part of a sentence and say something new in the predicate. It is also important to use helpful transitions between sentences. Finally, you will conclude. Usually you will not need a separate paragraph to conclude a policy memo, but occasionally you may. At the very least, your memo should not end so abruptly that it seems odd to the reader. Eventually, you will be able to judge what is appropriate, given the nature of the paper and the audience.

**Grammar**: Proofread more than once. Poor grammar does more than obscure ideas. It blinds the grader.

**Tone**: Tone refers to the author’s voice. Writing can sound angry, indignant, cheerful, humorous, cautious, etc. It can range from stilted to formal to informal to conversational to just plain old colloquial. The voice that comes across is affected by sentence length, bolding, italics, capitalization and punctuation. And don’t forget it! You should choose your own tone. But here is some advice. First, be aware that angry tones are rarely persuasive. Second, your writing will sound more reasoned if you avoid painting yourself as an extremist -- even if you are. Third, indignation can at times be effective, but more often it makes you seem ridiculous to people who disagree with you. Fourth, humor is often inappropriate. By all means, experiment with tone. But use wise judgment, and be prepared to lose points if the reader doesn’t think your tone works.

**Style**: Style is similar to tone and is difficult to define. So let me describe what I mean by giving you concrete advice. The first advice is to write actively. To do that, make the grammatical subject of your sentence the agent and make the verb the agent’s action. Ex: John hit the ball. John is the subject and the agent. Hit is the verb and John’s action. Passive ex: The ball was hit by John. Second, use strong, descriptive verbs. Ex: John tapped the ball or John smashed the ball. Third, avoid turning perfectly good verbs into nouns. Ex: The smashing of the ball was performed by John. This will help you with the next piece of advice. Fourth, avoid stringing prepositional phrases together. Ex: The smashing of the ball was performed by the bat of John. Save your passive voice for those rare occasions when it’s actually helpful. For instance, passive can be used to move a previously introduced concept to the beginning of a sentence so that you continue moving from old information to new information. Ex: After a sentence on President Kennedy, you might write, “He was assassinated later that month by the CIA.” And that might flow better than saying, “Later that month, the CIA assassinated President Kennedy.” In the latter example, you are introducing new information before the “old” or previously introduced concept (President Kennedy). Passive is also appropriate when you want to hide the agent of an action to avoid assigning blame. Ex: “My car was wrecked” sounds less accusing than “My boyfriend/girlfriend wrecked my car.” In short, I’m not telling you to blindly cut all passive voice from your papers. But I do want you to avoid it when it’s unnecessary, which is most of the time. Above all, be conscious of what style you’re using. Eloquence and catchy “leads” are also part of style. In general, clever turns of phrase, similes, metaphors, etc have little place in policy memos. If you can “hook” your reader in less than a sentence, then you are probably fine. But journalistic “leads,” while enjoyable, are not appropriate for most policy memos. Finally, decide right now to renounce metadiscourse. By metadiscourse I mean telling the reader what you are going to do in your memo. For example, “In the next paragraph, I will...” or “In this memo, I...” Metadiscourse is seldom appropriate, certainly not in a policy memo.

**Presentation**: I imagine many of you have never had your papers graded on visual aesthetics before. But in the “real” world, the presentation of your ideas matters; you have to market them. So your policy memo should look as professional as is feasible. It should be formatted so that important ideas can be taken at a glance. Without relying on “gimmicks,” be inventive in using fonts, headings, white space, charts, graphs, pictures, bolded words, bullets, graphics, etc. Remember, though, the important consideration is professionalism not creativity. So don’t put in unnecessary graphs or spend time and money on report covers.