



Recommendations for Writing Policy Memos

Writing good policy memos is an important skill. It involves more than simply writing out your ideas. These are a few ideas that may help in learning this art form.¹

(1) Write for a Policy Audience

Keep in mind that the reader is typically an extraordinarily busy person with too much to read. Consequently, you must grab the reader's attention in the first paragraph, and hold it. This implies that *the first paragraph should state clearly what the memo is about and its bottom line message*. It also implies that *every paragraph must say something important*. *If it does not, it should not be in the memo*. Similarly, *every sentence should contribute to your argument*. Especially when writing short memos of 1-2 pages, *sentences that fail to move your argument forward should be omitted*.

A good memo *persuades* the reader that your argument is important. It should not be a listing of facts or options without a point of view. Instead, it should include your interpretation of the facts, and /or your analysis of the attractiveness of alternative options.

Avoid jargon. Most people in policy positions don't like it. One reason is that they typically cannot use it in talking to the media, and often policymakers rely on memos from staff for draft language to use in answering questions.

Often headings are useful in organizing the memo. They draw the reader's attention to important points you want to make, and avoid awkward transitions.

Avoid long lists of proposals (or for that matter, anything else). The reader's eye tends to skip over long lists.

You may need to re-write the introductory paragraph after completing the memo. Often, the process of crafting the content of the memo helps clarify your memo's main point, which you should emphasize in the opening paragraph. Often there is a paragraph in the body of the memo that works better as an opening paragraph than the opening with which you started.

¹ This document was prepared by Richard J. Murnane and teaching assistants in his class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Write strong and concise paragraphs. Use strong topic sentences to inform your reader of the purpose of each paragraph. State the main idea of each paragraph within the first two sentences. Then continually tie your discussion to your focus or main point. Explain, both along the way and in your conclusions, how everything fits together.

In a memo, you can only make a few main points. Choose carefully. Make sure issues of importance take up equivalent space: the more important, the more space, and vice versa.

Be direct when you write. Memos should be clear and concise - remember the adage that *quality* is better than *quantity*. In the interest of making maximum use of space, keep your sentences short, use adjectives and adverbs sparingly, and avoid parenthetical remarks. Memos should not have substantive footnotes.

Be precise in your word choice. For example, don't say "and" when you mean "even though."

Express key statistics in creative, meaningful ways. Again, the reader's eyes will skip over long lists of numbers or words the importance of which is not explained.

In an opinion piece, anticipate questions and debate. Add support to your assertions by incorporating examples or facts that support your main statements. If possible, briefly note opposing opinions and why you discount them.

Try out your memo on a colleague. It is often difficult to judge by yourself how well a memo works.

(2) Follow the Steps to Writing a Good Essay

Break your writing down into manageable pieces. Doing so not only helps you manage your time better, it also allows you to concentrate on one activity at a time rather than trying to do everything at once. This also may make the argument in your final product clearer to the reader.

- *Plan and gather ideas*
Spend some time brainstorming and gathering the ideas and thoughts you will need to include in your essay. Refer to your notes and readings for important concepts. Collect facts and examples to support your answer.
- *Organize and develop a focus*
Think, make notes, and prepare the material you want to use before you begin to write. Consider the most effective way to present that material to your reader. A short topic outline is sometimes a good way to organize thoughts.
- *Write*
Flesh out your outline with facts and examples. Remember to provide strong topic sentences and transitions between ideas so that your arguments are clear to the reader. See more suggestions above.

- *Revise and polish*

Try a draft out on a colleague or friend. Can s/her understand your argument and discern your main points? *Never* rely on your first draft; its best to write a draft, let it sit cold, then come back, read, and revise.

(3) Citations (the Economics format)

Be sure to properly cite *within the text* any evidence you discuss that is linked to a particular study rather than is just the general knowledge of the profession. The correct format is the last name and year of the paper or book. For example, the correct format is: “Long (2000) found ...” or “One study found ... (Long, 2000).” Also note the page number if using a quote.

In referencing material that you might use in your policy memos, please use the economics method of citing a work. Below are two examples. The first is an example where you don’t use the author’s name in the narrative, but are using material that needs to be cited. The second is an example where the authors’ names are used in the narrative.

“Research also shows, however, that there is little in a teacher’s personnel file that would help administrators identify who are the best and worst teachers in any given school or school district (Rivkin et al. 2005).”

“Nevertheless, Toch and Rothman (2008) point out that while our knowledge of how to effectively and fairly evaluate teachers has grown substantially in the past decades, the “vast majority of districts” still do not employ a credible system of measuring the quality of teachers’ work.”

If you have citations in the body of your memo, then at the end of your policy memo you would have a reference section as below. I’m not overly concerned with exactly how you structure the entries in the “Reference” section as long as they are there with last name first and in alphabetical order.

Note: you may well have a policy memo that has no statements that need referencing. But be sure to reference any statements that do require backup. If you have any citations in the body of your memo then you will need to include a reference section at the end. The reference section should be formatted as below.

References

Rivkin, Steven, Eric Hanushek and John Kain. (2005). “Teachers, Schools and Academic Achievement” *Econometrica*, 73(2):417-458.

Toch, Thomas and Robert Rothman. (2008) “Rush to Judgment: Teacher Evaluation in Public Education in Education Sector Reports, January 2008.