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To: Ford School Students
From: David Morse and Elena Delbanco, Ford School Writing Instructors
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Re: Political Policy Writing

Executive Summary

This handout will give you general instructions on the style and content of public policy memo writing. While memo formats vary, we outline here a generic format that includes a memo header (above), executive summary, background summary, analysis of the issues, review of options, recommendations, counterarguments, and a conclusion. To help you see what we mean, we have structured this memo with these sections in mind. Suggestions for handling the content of the memo are included in each section. You may find that few, if any, of your assignments at the Ford School or in the policy world correspond exactly to the format we outline. Instead, an assignment might ask you to do one or more of the tasks explained here, or perhaps all of the tasks but one.

Make your executive summary brief. It should state the specific problem, give an overview of the memo's organization, and *summarize the principle argument or the strategy you recommend*. Don't be coy—don't save your recommendation until the end. Your boss should be able to read the executive summary plus your subheadings and know exactly what you are advocating and how you will make your case.

Many students find it helpful to put off writing the executive summary until the end—once they've figured out and finalized their argument. Perhaps the most useful way to begin writing a memo, then, is by considering your audience. Whereas most college writing is intended for an anonymous, undefined reader, in memo writing you will always have a specific (albeit hypothetical) audience in mind, be it the boss of the NGO for whom you are employed, your state senator, or a political action committee. Understanding the goals, knowledge, and predisposition of this audience is crucial for determining everything that follows in your memo: from establishing the proper tone to framing the problem to recommending a solution.

Background

In this section, you should provide a general and *brief* overview of the history and context of the problem. Provide a few salient facts and figures. Bring us up to the present day. Note that often with shorter memos (1 ~ 2 pages), there's simply no room for a background section, and therefore the most salient facts and figures must be worked into your analysis. To determine what you should include in the background section, consider first and foremost what your audience already knows (most of which should be left out), and what it needs to know to follow your analysis.

NGOs:

- Friends for the Preservation of Mechanical Pencils: etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc.
- Moriarity Sobriety Society: etc.

Options

In this section, you will want to briefly review the various possible options at your reader's disposal, again making use of bullets if possible. Highlight each option then briefly explain how it might be put into action, and its pros and cons.

Note a common pitfall: the so-called “middle ground” approach, in which you explain two or more impractical options, then follow with a practical approach that was in fact your favorite all along. This middle ground approach boxes in your audience so they have no choice but to choose what you recommend, without giving them a proper understanding of the complexity of the problem and the multiplicity of possible policy options before them. Almost always there are several rational choices for action. Your job is to patiently explain the costs and benefits of each.

Recommendations/Strategy

Here is your opportunity to state boldly your opinion—which of the options (or combination of options) is most viable and why. You have a couple of choices here. You may wish to withhold your own favored option from the options in the previous section and wait to include it here. Or you may wish to include it above (say, as option no. 2), then explain in this section that the second option is better than the others and why. To avoid simply repeating the pros of this option from the previous section, you might explain here why this option's pros are better than the pros of the other options, or the cons less troublesome. You might also in this section provide advice as to how the cons might best be circumnavigated. If there are multiple steps or strategies that should be taken in order to implement your policy option, you may choose in this section to explain these further.

Memos can vary widely as to the breadth and depth of the recommendations called for. In a short one or two page strategy memo, nearly the entire memo might be dedicated to an explanation of your recommendations. In this case, you must lay out your strategy while being careful to fold in the essential facts and interpretation as you go along. Another memo might call for an extended analysis of the circumstances, concluding with a single option/recommendation that logically follows from the analysis. Another memo might call for no recommendations or options at all—only analysis. Be mindful at all times that your job is not to tell the reader everything you know on the subject, only everything that the reader has asked—or needs—to hear.

Counterarguments

Very often, the “counterargument” does not constitute a separate section: counterarguments may be found throughout your memo. If you have recommended a specific proposal, you will need to consider a contrary proposal—which you may have done in your “Options” section. If you have recommended a specific strategy, you will need to explain what challenges will confront your organization as you implement this strategy. If you have argued for a specific understanding of a policy problem, you will need to consider the alternative point of view.

In offering these counterarguments, be careful not to simply set up a straw man, easily defeated. Your boss needs to hear these contrary points of view from you, rather than be caught off guard by them in a press conference or meeting. Explaining these counterarguments adequately, then rebutting them in a fair but convincing manner, makes your argument all the stronger.

Conclusion

Here, if space permits, you may want to briefly recapitulate your policy option and the rationale behind it. But don't stop there. A conclusion that merely recapitulates what's already been said ends on a dull note and risks relegating your memo to oblivion. Use this section to speculate on what the future may hold should this issue not be given the attention it deserves, or should it not be addressed in the manner you recommend. And/or speculate on the future benefits of following this option. Quote from an authoritative or eminent source. Leave the reader with a lasting analogy or image. This is your only chance in the memo to indulge in a bit of rhetoric—but do so sparingly, wisely—don't overdo it.