



How to Write a Policy Memo

Policy Memos are short, concise documents used to communicate policy inside government organizations, and beyond. HKS students may write policy memos in the classrooms and in future jobs, both in the public and private sectors.

Following a simple, three-step process, students will be able to craft excellent memos. Those steps are:

Step 1: THINK

Before you write, think through the policy problem of your memo. Ask yourself: *What is wrong? Can I quantify the problem?*

For example, you may wish to write a memo about school overcrowding in your district. But overcrowding is an “issue.” To find the policy “problem,” you will need to quantify and become more specific. Ask yourself: *Are there too many students for the school space? Are there too few chairs for the number of students? Is there too little funding to provide for student needs?*

Let’s say you’ve decided that the main problem is that each classroom will have 5 too many students, according to space and government constraints. Now you can state your problem upfront in your memo as: “Next year, overcrowding in our school district will grow and each classroom will be oversubscribed by 5 students.”

In the thinking stage, you must consider your audience (for the overcrowding example, let’s say the audience is the superintendent of schools): *What does she know about this problem? Does she want to solve it? Why hasn’t she already? What keeps her up at night? What are her constraints - politically, legally, etc.?*

Then, you can consider solutions. Solutions are determined by brainstorming policy options and evaluating those options based on criteria that will be relevant to your audience.

To continue with the example of “overcrowding,” see the table below:

Overcrowding:	Criteria 1: Politically feasible (please parents)	Criteria 2: Operationally feasible (abides by rules)	Criteria 3: Financially feasible (can afford)
Option 1: More desks (crowd the room)	—	— —	+
Option 2: More desks and classroom aids in existing rooms (improve the teacher ratio)	+/-	—	+
Option 3 More classrooms (i.e. build modular space and hire more teachers)	—	+	—
Option 4: Redistrict	—	+	+

(Bardach, Eugene; *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*; CQ Press; 4th Edition; 2012.)

From this analysis grid, adding more desks is both politically and operationally a negative choice and is therefore out (red). The best choice in terms of the criteria (political, operational and financial feasibility) is to add classroom aids (green), so that may be your solution. Your solution could also be nuanced: You can advise your audience that in the short term you recommend classroom aids, but that in the long-term, a more sustainable choice is either redistricting or building module space. This is a trade-off between the cost of more space and the political cost of redistricting. Knowing your audience, which would you advice?

Step 2: WRITE AND FORMAT

Now that you have your entire memo mapped out in front of you, you can easily write a first draft. It is advised to spend about half of your space illustrating the problem, and half explaining your solution and analysis.

Often, you will have more data on the problem than space to write about it. It is important, in that case, to cut down to only the data that the audience needs to understand and solve the problem. Do not spend time including data that your audience knows, unless you believe there is a high likelihood that this memo will be passed along to other readers.

When the draft is completed, be sure to include the bottom line up-front (BLUF): stating both the problem and solution in the introduction. You can also use bold and underline to help highlight the problem and solution.

Step 3: REVISE

It is essential that you save time in the end for revision. Memos become good memos in the revision stage. Good memos are concise, as busy decision makers have little time for reading. To write concise memos, you will need to edit down your word count. To do this, revise sentences from passive to active tense.

For example: “Several school aids are not working anymore” can be revised to “Several school aids retired” (the sentence is now active and has less words).

Also, you can ask a friend or colleague to read your memo for clarity and language. For clarity: ask your friend to read only the first paragraph and then ask him: What is the problem of my memo? If he can’t answer, you need to work on the problem statement. For language: ask him to circle any sentences that are hard to read. Those are the sentence to revise further.

Not all sentences are easily revised to active tense, but making an effort to cut down words and to write in the active voice will be appreciated by your audience and will help you become a stellar memo writer!

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