

# Writing Policy Memos:

## Best practices and actionable tips for memo writing at HKS and beyond

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# Getting started:

What is the most challenging part of writing policy memos for you?

What strengths do you bring to this task?

What weaknesses concern you about this task?

In what context will you be writing memos? Work? Summer internships?  
Here at HKS?

(And how have memo assignments gone for you at HKS?)

# The basics: Format

The problem: Can you state the problem without suggesting the solution?

Analysis: Create criteria to evaluate your alternatives.

- *Criteria*: Standards for evaluating action. [cost, efficiency, etc.]
- *Alternatives*: Different courses of action.

Recommendations: Your recommendations can be nuanced, they can have multiple steps.

Put the Bottom Line Upfront: Start with the problem, and your proposed solution.

# Writing to persuade: Connect with audience

## -Audience position:

- What information will help audience act?
- What change does audience need to make?

## -Formatting expectations:

- Will audience skim?
- How will audience use information?

## -Intended v. unintended audience – who else will read your memo?

# “User-friendly” writing:

## Concision:

Write short sentences.

- “We discussed the problem.” vs. “The problem was the topic of our discussion.”
- Don’t use: actually, generally, practically – i.e. “fillers”

## Active voice:

Use the active: “I lost the money.” vs. Passive: “The money was lost [by me].”  
And: “We must omit.” vs. Passive: “We should not include.”

# “User-friendly” formatting:

- Create a “skimmable” draft (with bold headers)
- Use headers to mark transitions from – problem definition, to alternatives, to recommendation
- Put the bottom line upfront:
  - Problem definition & recommendation in first paragraph.  
(Executive summaries not advised).
- Footnotes are uncommon in memos

