

How to write policy memos:

HKS communications workshop

Lauren Brodsky, Ph.D.

Lecturer in Public Policy, HKS Communications Program

Lauren_brodsky@hks.harvard.edu

Memo writing process:

Three steps, equal time:

1. Thinking (problem definition, research, solution)
2. Writing (draft and formatting)
3. Editing



Step 1: Think about the problem

The problem: Move from issue to problem.

Issue: "School overcrowding."

Problem Statement: "There will be 5 too many students in each elementary classroom next year, violating administration rules."

Can you quantify (i.e. how much?)

Determine audience: Mayor, School Board, Superintendent, Principal.

Can your audience solve this problem? If not, who do they need to reach?

Step 1: Think about the solution

Brainstorm policy options (alternatives) and methods of evaluation (criteria).

5 extra students per class:	Criteria 1: Politically feasible (Please parents)	Criteria 2: Operationally feasible (Follow the rules)	Criteria 3: Financially feasible (Affordable)
Alt 1: More desks (crowd the room)	--	--	++
Alt 2: More desks and classroom aids in existing rooms (improve the teacher ratio)	+/-	+/-	+
Alt 3: More classrooms (i.e. build modular space and hire more teachers)	-/+	+	-
Alt 4: Redistrict	--	+	+

Step 2: Write to connect to audience

-Audience position:

- What information will help audience act?
- What does audience know/need to know?

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

-Connect to: Organizational mission, goals, constraints.



Step 2: Write to persuade

Write with a sense of your own voice, the value you add on this problem:

- Start with problem (1/2 memo), end with solution (1/2 memo)
- Recommendations can be nuanced (more than 1), but must advise decision maker.
 - Demonstrate an understanding of trade-offs.
- Avoid over arguing: Consider the counterarguments, objections and conflicting evidence. (This is not a proposal)

Steps 2-3: “User-friendly” writing:

Edit for concision: Write short sentences, often not always.

Don't use: actually, generally, practically, very – i.e. “fillers”

Edit for active voice, strong verbs:

“Several school aids are not working anymore” vs. “Several school aids retired.”

Use strong verbs: “We need solutions” becomes “solve.”

Edit for clarity:

Define all acronyms, even if you think audience knows them, upfront.

Step 3: “User-friendly” formatting:

-Formatting expectations:

- Will audience skim?
 - How will audience use information?
-
- Use white space to please the reader. Use underline/bold.
 - Edit to ensure the bottom line is upfront (BLUF): Problem definition & recommendation in first paragraph.
 - Footnotes are uncommon in memos. But for academic exercises you can either embed citation and/or endnote.

Resources:

Writing consultants & more communications resources:

www.hkscommprog.org

