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TO: Students in the Maryland Leadership Institute, 2005 Summer Program
FROM: Professor David A. Crocker (with much help from Professor Christopher Forman)
RE: Writing the Policy Memorandum

Effective writing is indispensable to both policymakers and policy analysts. The policy analyst hopes to craft or contribute to effective policy choices. She tries to steer the consumer of her analysis away from choices that she finds unjustified, ineffective, or unduly costly. Even when she remains unable to identify a “best” option, she must at least try to frame the choices clearly. The policymaker (whether elected, appointed, or a career official) wants to be well informed, persuasive to other policymakers, and (especially if elected) well regarded by attentive publics. Whether the facts, as she understands them, warrant changed or continued policies, she must typically sell her position to others.

Brief written presentations (i.e. letters, newspaper op-eds, short policy memoranda, longer policy briefs) are all variously useful for these purposes. Here I review some general guidance on writing, focusing on the policy memorandum.

MLI v. the “Real World”

Before I commence my catalogue of “dos and don’ts,” however, I should mention three important differences between conditions in MLI and in the “real world.” First, students typically have the luxury of time (weeks) to become acquainted with an issue. One may have days, or only hours, to analyze a real problem for a real client. But do not despair at the thought of deadlines. As one source advises:

\[ \text{Do not define yourself by what you know, define yourself by what you can find out. Information is always of uncertain quality, transient and situational. You do not want your self-definition to depend on what you know about an issue at any particular time. You write good policy papers not because of what you know when you start, but because of what you can find out in the process of writing them (Musso, Biller and Myrtle, 1999, p. 5, emphasis in original).} \]

Second, students in Policy Seminar select the topics they write about, and they have considerable freedom to frame a question as they see fit. But, as David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining (1999) emphasize, real policy analysis is generally client-driven, and therefore:

\[ \text{You must address the issue that the client poses. Academic experiences (especially in non-quantitative courses) often do not prepare students for this reality because one has considerable discretion as to topic and approach. This is reasonable because when a professor is the client, he or she is most interested in your cognitive development. Real clients are more interested in getting their question answered. An important heuristic flows from this unpleasant fact: It is almost always better to answer with uncertainty the question that was asked than to answer with certainty a question that was not asked. Another heuristic follows as a corollary: Good analysis does not suppress uncertainty, whether with respect to facts or theories. (p. 255, emphasis in original).} \]

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1 In this memo I borrow extensively and adapt from my colleague Professor Christopher Foremen’s “Memo on Memos,” 1 April 2004.
You have however the flexibility to define your client and hence their issue(s).

Finally, largely because of the circumstances described above, policy analysis in the real world targets far higher stakes than an “A” or “B” in a course. As with legal analysis created for litigation, one’s work may invite strenuous and sophisticated criticism, and occasionally even harsh personal attacks upon its creator.

Some ABCs of Good Writing

Here are some basic writing qualities to aim for, listed alphabetically for ease of recollection.

**Accuracy** – Nothing is more personally embarrassing, or more deflating to otherwise sound analysis, than basic factual inaccuracy. Here is a striking example:

Social Security was created in 1935 with the signing of the Social Security Act by President Theodore Roosevelt. It was designed as a social safety net to help those struggling through the Great Depression.

Each sentence contains an obvious factual inaccuracy. President *Franklin* Roosevelt oversaw the creation of the Social Security program, some 16 years after the death of his elder cousin. And the program, aiming well beyond the Depression, did not pay its first benefits until *January 1940*. (The excerpt above also overuses the passive voice, but more on this below.)

Do not allow your political predisposition to pull you toward inaccurate characterizations of a program or policy. One memo criticized the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform law for its failure to end poverty. But since “ending poverty” was never the goal of that law – its title, instead, plainly announces its emphasis on “personal responsibility” and “work” for welfare recipients -- one can hardly take such an implementation “failure” seriously.

Proofread all your work, and have someone else read it if you doubt your ability to catch your own errors. In the hardcover edition of an otherwise carefully edited book I inadvertently renamed the prominent social policy scholar Rebecca Blank as “Roberta.” The similarity in the two names is no excuse.

I also caution against inaccuracy in spelling and usage. Check the spelling of every word. But accurate spelling will not suffice. Be sure that you are using the word you intend to use. Fortunately for punsters, but unfortunately for nearly everyone else, English is loaded with homonyms. We have *their* and *there*, *sign* and *sine*, *whine* and *wine*, *bear* and *bare*, *further* and *farther*, and countless more.

Words have precise meanings that differ importantly even when the words strongly resemble one another. I regularly catch people using *affect* when they mean *effect*, *principal* when they mean *principle*, and *complement* when they mean *compliment*, or vice versa. The parts *constitute* the whole, while the whole *comprises* its parts. Something is *unique* when there is only one of it; otherwise it is *rare* or *unusual*. The only permissible modifiers for *unique* indicate likelihood. So you may describe something as *possibly unique* but not as *fairly/somewhat unique*. And if you are having trouble deciding between *between* and *among*, or among *between*, *among*, and *amidst*,
note the usage here: between accepts only two entities.\textsuperscript{2} The \textit{converse} of a statement reverses the order of its hypothesis and conclusion. (Example: “If I am eating ice cream, it must be summer” has its converse in “if it is summer, I must be eating ice cream.”) The \textit{inverse} of the original statement retains the order but negates each component: “If I am not eating ice cream, it must not be summer.” One is not \textit{begging the question} by “raising” it but by assuming as true, and perhaps using as evidence, the very conclusion one is trying to prove.

Be sure that the verb in a sentence agrees with its subject. But you may write “the United States \textit{is}” when the need arises. Multiple individuals, chapters, and offices may constitute an organization, but reference to that organization requires the pronoun \textit{its}, not \textit{they}.

One stylistic inaccuracy especially common among persons overexposed to the products of government printing offices is overcapitalization. To say “Social Security is a Federal Government Program” does not make that program any more important. \textbf{Specific} people, places, departments, agencies and offices are capitalized. So are: Congress; its two chambers and full committees (but not subcommittees); the Supreme Court, (along with \textbf{specific} circuit and district courts); particular presidents by name (but not the presidency); all political parties; the Constitution (but not state constitutions) and any \textbf{specific} amendment thereof (e.g. the First Amendment).

\textbf{Balance} – Balance, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder and it is not even always warranted (as in purely polemical writing). But a policy memo that purports to lay out the background to an issue should not stack the deck prematurely or indirectly in favor of one conclusion. Writing with genuine detachment can challenge us when we hold well-defined views but you badly serve a colleague or client with a tendentious presentation. You want to move a reader toward a conclusion with analysis and evidence, not emotion or sleight-of-hand. Bias harms your credibility (and therefore your career) as an analyst. And, as suggested above, unlike the classroom milieu, real world analysis may draw determined critics with a strong incentive to unmask shoddy workmanship.

\textbf{Brevity} – No single accepted length characterizes policy memos. Some clients (including some recent presidents) may demand no more than a page or two. Many will not have the time or inclination for more. For the Policy Seminar, however, the memo should be limited to \textbf{two single-spaced} pages (font 12). One can imagine memoranda of 50 pages or more but probably not for the eyes of a busy policymaker.

But whatever its length the memo should be no longer than absolutely necessary to convey the analysis and information required. It must not be verbose or repetitive. Unnecessary words undermine it. As a rule, bleed out the verb \textit{to be} wherever possible. Don’t write: “Her action was a violation of the law.” Write: “She violated the law.” Avoid leading a sentence with \textit{there is} or \textit{there are}, as in “there are three challenges that face the country today.” Say simply: “Three challenges face the country today.”

Above all one must come to the point quickly. The first paragraph should tell the reader, as succinctly as possible, what is at issue, where you are leading her, and how. Consider the following introduction to a memo about the problems facing immigrant women workers:

Although when one typically thinks of the mistreatment of immigrants, one thinks back to the turn of the century when women and children worked in factories for extremely low wages, immigrants today are still a very vulnerable segment of society. Because English is not necessarily spoken and they are less than fully familiar with the labor laws, immigrants are often abused and paid less than a native citizen would be paid.

Note several problems here. Immigrant women, the ostensible subject of this endeavor, are lost in a torrent of verbiage about vulnerability. The verb “thinks” crops up twice in the first sentence, and “paid” twice in the last. Is the first sentence (and therefore the memo itself) mainly about today’s immigrants or those of century ago? To be “less than fully familiar” would seem a long-winded way of saying “ignorant.” The use of the passive voice deflects attention from whoever is doing the speaking, the abusing, and the paying. In short, the writer is taking her own sweet time, and losing us along the way.

One might revise this promising mess as follows:

**Immigrant women do not face the abysmal factory conditions and wages of a century ago but they remain a vulnerable segment of the labor force. Because they may not speak English or know their rights as workers, immigrant women suffer disproportionate abuse and low pay.**

Beyond the purely visual trick of using boldface, the revision brings the main issue (i.e. contemporary immigrant women and their vulnerability) clearly to the fore while banishing the passivity and redundancy that weaken the original.

**Clarity** – Brevity often enhances clarity, but not always. Eliminating vital information, for example, may introduce ambiguity or deprive the argument of essential support.

Two structural elements particularly enhance clarity: the executive summary and headings (with subheadings, if appropriate). A two-page memo however does not allow scope for the executive summary. Only in a long presentation of more than five pages do you want to label the first paragraph as an “Executive Summary” but even in shorter products you want a first paragraph that performs this function.

If the memo has recommendations, they should appear there first. If the memo has no recommendations then articulate a general sense of the direction an issue is taking and the challenges it poses. The first paragraph should clearly state the issue under discussion and the central points that the remainder of the memo elaborates. In other words “your analysis should not read like a mystery” (Weimer and Vining, p. 291). Indeed, the first paragraph of the memo should probably be the last one you revise (to take account of any significant changes in the remainder of the document). Headings and subheadings guide the reader as she moves along, dissecting the description or analysis into easy-to-follow components. Ideally, the headings and subheadings tell a story.

So do charts and tables. Use them as well.

**Sources**

All information originates somewhere. Sources may include: your own original field research; published or unpublished studies; books; speeches; official hearing testimony; newspaper and
magazine articles; government documents; web sites; and perhaps even memoranda written by others. You must collect, interpret, and present this information effectively. (In place of “interpret” you may substitute such words as: assess, analyze, weigh, evaluate, or judge.) Memos regularly drive decision-making but that is not their only use. Other persons may use your memo to aid their own research and analysis. They may try to verify the information in it. In either case, they may want to retrieve the material on which you rely, if that is possible. For these reasons you must consider accessibility and reliability.

Accessibility – Information that you cannot find is useless to you. If you present information that others cannot find for themselves, they have two choices: trust your memo or discount it. If they are busy, and deem you trustworthy, they are likely to trust your product. But if they obtain the information independently, and it doesn’t bear the interpretation your memo offers, your reputation and effectiveness will suffer, perhaps catastrophically.

You will often (though not always) want to cite your sources by name, usually at the memo’s end, perhaps on a page headed simply “References.” There are many citation approaches – too many to review here. But whichever approach you pick, use it consistently within the memo.

Reliability – Uncertainty and misinformation abound. Approach the former honestly. The causes and effects of public policies are often vigorously in dispute. So is the nature of the problem to which policy responds. You may be unable to resolve these disputes but you are obliged to be aware of them and to acknowledge them where appropriate.

Of course, one wants to avoid misinformation entirely but doing so is not always easy, partly because others honestly err – note the correction boxes run daily by respected newspapers – and partly because deliberate dishonesty or misunderstanding are regrettably widespread. In particular be wary of anecdotes, emotion, and the Internet. All are common and regularly useful tools in contemporary policy discourse but each can also lead a memo writer astray.

Finally, there are many sources of further guidance on matters of style. Two that come readily to mind are the classic The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (currently in its fourth edition) and the more recent, and widely-used, A Writer’s Reference by Diana Hacker (now in its fifth edition).

A suggested template

As discussed in class, the following is a suggested template for Memo sections. This complements the directives you may/will receive in your memo-writing workshop.

1. Summarize your recommendation
2. Introduction: Set the stage. What is the problem? How did it come about?
3. Set forth criteria a good solution should satisfy
4. Describe two or more options (maintaining the status quo can be one option)
5. Evaluate strengths and weaknesses of each option
6. Recommend one option as best (because it best satisfies your criteria) and (optional) next steps
References

Foreman, Christopher. *Memo on Memos* (School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, Mimeo 2004)

Musso, Juliet, Bob Biller and Bob Myrtle. *The Tradecraft of Writing for Policy Analysis and Management* (School of Policy, Planning, and Development, University of Southern California, February 1999).
