

Policy Memo Guidelines

Policy Memos: What are they?

In short, a policy memo is a *succinct presentation of a problem, its context, and a recommended action*.

- A policy memo should be 1-2 pages, easy to understand, and with the goal of informing a very specific audience—usually colleagues, supervisors, or legislators.
- Your audience requires basic information on the problem, a clear explanation of a core dilemma, a strong choice from a variety of alternatives, along with a new strategy or solution.
- *Always* start with your conclusions; keep a logical, coherent flow; and give visual cues (headings, bullet points, highlight key points, whitespace)
- You should avoid jargon, keep it short, and use active voice throughout the document.

Policy memos are not like other academic papers. Because of the need for quick, accurate information in the policy world, policy memos are written so that a specific audience can efficiently access fact-based information in order to make an informed decision.

In the Anderson University Political Science program, the memo is typically a short distillation of the major findings or recommendations on a significant policy problem. Although the memo relies on your authority over the deep research that you have conducted on the issue or problem, it also directly addresses the needs, expectations, and concerns of the decision-maker. You must tailor the document to his/her demands.¹

The reader should leave the document knowing exactly what to do next. Consider the reader's role and give concrete actionable recommendations based on their abilities. Indicate the who, what, when, where, and how.

A policy memo must be well-organized, clearly written and succinct, with a logical connection between the background information, evidence, and conclusions/recommendation. The reader should be able to identify the essential points in a quick scan of the memo (particularly the section headings and topic sentences). In sum, an effective memo should aim for *brevity, clarity, and objectivity*:

- **Brevity:** The busy reader seeks a concise memo.
- **Clarity:** Memos are written for uninformed but intelligent readers. Be direct, specific, consistent, and avoid jargon or highly academic language.
- **Objectivity:** Although policy memos are written to convince a decision-maker to select a certain policy, the author should consider multiple perspectives that address the strengths and weaknesses of all policy options.

The Ford School at University of Michigan has an excellent overview on policy writing. Bob Behn discusses “the craft of memo writing”. The Wagner school at NYU includes some good examples of policy memos. You should read these resources the first time writing a policy memo.

¹You may be familiar with *briefing* memos, which provide background information about a policy area to the decision-maker, usually based on a much longer document of your own original research. *Policy* memos, on the other hand, provide a recommendation for a decision in addition to basic information on a problem.

Writing a policy memo

Stage 1: Research

The first stage in writing a policy memo is becoming an expert in the issue at hand. True, it can take many years to become a real expert on an issue. However, you will find yourself in situations throughout your career in which you are required to present your expertise in a short time-span—on an issue you’ve never thought about before. The first stage is to step back and think about the issue. Questions to ask yourself before writing the memo include:

- Who is your audience? What do they know about the issue? What decision-making power do they possess?
- What purpose does the memo serve?
- What problem is the policy memo addressing? Why is it important?
- What efforts have been made to address this issue already?

Stage 2: Plan

During the second stage, you need to come up with a feasible proposal to address the problem. You will never be able to completely fix the issue. The goal is to take a manageable chunk and come up with one (maybe two) suggestions to address that part of the issue. There is no magic solution, otherwise you wouldn’t be writing your memo. There will be many possible options, so ask yourself the following questions about your policy proposal:

- What population(s) is impacted by the policy?
- What lever(s) do you (or other stakeholders) propose to address the problem? That is, how will the policy make its target(s) change their behavior?
- What are the benefits and trade-offs of the policy? What alternative policies exist?
- What limitations or barriers exist? Consider implementation costs, resources, timing, and political implications.

To assist in the problem-solving process, apply SWOT and/or PEST analysis to the policy problem. Slavishly following this approach is especially useful when you are first learning how to write these memos.

Stage 3: Write

Write your policy memo. Yes, I know what you’re thinking: what have I been doing this entire time? Chances are that at this point you have come up with a document that is far too long and unwieldy to submit to your boss. What you’ve really done is developed a report that will form the basis of your policy memo. The task now is to present your research in a readable fashion. The format of a memo should enhance its readability. It is not written as one lengthy essay. Rather, it is divided into sections, with headings that identify the content or major point of each section. Each paragraph should begin with a significant point (the topic sentence), to be supported or expanded upon in the rest of the paragraph. Each major point should be the focus of a separate paragraph.

A typical memo should include the following sections:

1. **Header** (to, from, date, subject). Include an informative and engaging title in the subject line.
2. **Executive summary**. Summarize the conclusion/recommendations at the beginning.
3. **Background** or context/purpose. This information is generally reported in a neutral fashion. Describe the problem and explain why change is needed. Provide evidence of the scope and significance of the issue, along with factors contributing to the issue or problem. Why should the audience care?
4. **Policy recommendations** or conclusions about the issue. Apply SWOT and/or PEST analysis. Use argumentation and persuasion based on solid facts and evidence. Explain what steps must be taken. Note: The goal of a policy memo is not to persuade the boss of your favorite position. Rather, it is to help your boss make an informed decision of the option that best serves their interest. This is political analysis, not political advocacy.
5. **Policy alternatives** to or **counter-arguments** against your position. Include a fair rebuttal to counter-arguments. Be prepared to pull in good elements of these alternative options.
6. **Limitations** and barriers to implementation (i.e. political, economic, environmental, technical, etc.).
7. **Conclusion**. Reiterate the big picture.
8. **References**. Your research should be thorough and extensive.. You should note when you drew from other people's ideas.

The reader should be able to read the executive summary—and just the executive summary—and be well-briefed. You should also follow the BLUF format:

Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF): In the BLUF format, the first sentence of each paragraph will sum up all of the information in the paragraph. A good BLUF should cover all of the information in a paragraph, like an umbrella. If the paragraph contains any information that doesn't fall under the BLUF's umbrella, that information should be moved to a more appropriate paragraph or the BLUF should be changed to include the additional information. Following the BLUF, the component sentences in the paragraph should be arranged from most to least important (page 2).

Stage 4: Proofread

Policy memos require brevity and specificity. Each sentence must serve to advance your presentation. Be concise and do not waste words. Use clear, direct language, free of bureaucratic jargon, pompous language, or clichés. Eliminate unnecessary words and avoid repetition. Write in the active voice, keep sentences relatively short, and minimize the use of adjectives and adverbs. Avoid vague language and sentences that have no substance or state the obvious. Also, refrain from dramatic embellishment, hyperbole and emotional rhetoric (you are not writing a political speech or an op-ed article).

With such a short document, you should aim for *perfection*. There should be no grammatical, formatting, or spelling errors in the final draft.

Questions to ask after writing the first draft:

1. Is the purpose of the memo clear?

2. Is the language simple, economical, and clear?
3. Is the idea or argument explicit within the first sentence of each paragraph?
4. Is everything there that needs to be there?
5. Is anything there that isn't essential to the purpose?
6. Is the memo easy to read, understand, and remember?
7. Has the memo been carefully edited and proofread?

The Elevator Test: The memo should be so clearly organized and its points so well-packaged that when you give it the Boss at ground level she understands the recommendation by the time she reaches the power floor.

Formatting

Upon submission to Canvas, the format of your memo should be as follows:

1. The document should follow standard formatting guidelines:
 - 12-point font Times New Roman
 - left justified
 - one-inch margin
 - page numbers on every page (bottom center)
 - paragraphs should be single-spaced and separated by a double space
 - submit a PDF, not Word document; a Word document signals “draft” and a PDF signals “polished.”
2. You should use in-text citations using Chicago citation style (Author-Date), accompanied by a reference page. See the Chicago Manual of Style and the APSA Style Manual for assistance.
3. Your memo is not to exceed 1,000 words (not including the reference page). Do *not* exceed this length limit. Your audience is very busy, and he/she will not appreciate a lengthy memo. Brevity is a skill that will serve you well in the professional world.

Resources/References

See below for the resources I have referred to throughout the instructions above:

- Harvard has the best overall summary of policy memos. Their directions include details on SWOT and executive summaries: <https://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Policy-Memo-Guidelines-2.pdf>
- An overview of policy writing: <http://fordschool.umich.edu/writing-center/policy-writing-overview>
- The craft of memo writing: <http://www.atlas101.ca/pm/concepts/behns-craft-of-memo-writing/>
- Examples of policy memos: <https://wagner.nyu.edu/impact/research#>
- BLUF: <https://www.utep.edu/liberalarts/nssi/student-resources/BLUF-Writing-Format.pdf>.
- APSA Style manual: <https://www.apsanet.org/Portals/54/APSA%20Files/publications/APSAStyleManual2006.pdf>.
- Chicago Manual of Style (16th Ed.): https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citation_guide.html