

To: Policy Analysis Students
From: Dave Weimer
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Regarding: Memoranda Writing

Policy analysis is client-oriented advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values. The canonical comprehensive written policy analysis frames an undesirable condition as a policy problem, specifies social goals relevant to the problem, systematically assesses the impacts of alternative policies in terms of the goals, and makes a recommendation based on the assessment. The problem framing involves putting the undesirable condition into perspective: Is it getting better or worse? Is it better or worse here than elsewhere? Is it similar to any other undesirable conditions with which we have more experience? It also involves proposing a causal model of the condition: What factors shape the behaviors that cause the condition? The specification of goals requires arguments about what values are relevant to the problem and the alternatives intended to ameliorate it. Maintaining current policy is generally one of the alternatives considered; other alternatives may be advocated by interested parties or designed by the analyst. Whatever their source, the particular alternatives under consideration must be set out in sufficient detail so that their impacts can be predicted. Systematic comparison of the alternatives involves assessing all their impacts in terms of the goals. A recommendation for some action by the client follows from explicit consideration of the tradeoffs among the goals offered by the alternatives. In the narrowest sense, the recommendation is the advice; more broadly, the entire analysis showing the logic supporting the recommendation is the advice. The policy memorandum should follow the canonical form to the greatest extent feasible within the length constraint.

The comprehensive form typically requires more than a few pages, especially if it considers more than a few alternatives. Yet, many clients want, and will be willing to read, only a page or two. Consequently, a policy analysis of more than a few pages should be preceded by a short executive summary that rehearses the elements of the analysis—problem, goals, alternatives, impacts, tradeoffs, and recommendation. As the first paragraph has the greatest likelihood of being read by the client, it should present the recommendation prominently, preferably in the last sentence that serves as the theme of the entire summary.

The policy memorandum, a policy analysis of strictly limited length, shares many features with the executive summary of a comprehensive analysis. To be effective, however, it generally must present more substantive depth than is typically possible in an executive summary. Therefore, the policy memorandum must usually take a more restricted approach than that of a comprehensive analysis supporting an executive summary. Usually this is accomplished by limiting the number of alternatives considered, perhaps to as few as current policy and one other.

Organization of the Policy Memorandum

What is the form of an effective policy memorandum?

1. Like the executive summary, the policy memorandum should clearly set out its recommendation in the last sentence of the first paragraph. If the policy memorandum is in response to a specific request from the client, then the recommendation should be an appropriate response to that request. In any event, the recommendation should be meaningful to your client in the sense that it calls for an action within his or her authority and capability.

2. The body of the first paragraph should place the recommendation in context by sketching the condition being addressed as a policy problem. In general, it is most effective to work from the general to specific context for the recommendation. For example, an analysis recommending a particular change in policy to reduce the costs of health insurance to employers might start with some evidence of the problem of rising costs, move to the aspect of the problem that the recommendation addresses, and then conclude with the recommendation.

As an example, consider the following first paragraph of an executive summary for a study of the regulation of British Columbia's salmon fishery:

The salmon fishery of British Columbia faces serious challenges. The evidence suggests that, as currently organized, the fishery represents a net drain on the wealth of Canadians. This will remain the case for the foreseeable future, in spite of costly reforms instituted between 1995 and 2001. While some of the problems associated with the fishery can be attributed to inherent market failures, most are attributable to ineffective, or indeed counterproductive, government interventions. Although the current regime probably does not threaten the viability of most salmon runs, it does endanger some of the smaller runs and subspecies. On balance, it is desirable to replace the current regulatory regime with a policy based on exclusive ownership of salmon fishing rights for specific rivers. [David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th Ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2011), p. 2].

Notice how it starts with a general claim of a problem. It then takes a step toward the recommendation by noting some failed reforms and sketching the nature of the problem. Finally, the last sentence states the recommendation.

3. Depending on the nature of the issue, it may be worthwhile devoting the second paragraph to framing the problem. The experiential problem can be put in perspective with various comparisons or statistical information. The causal model underlying the problem may naturally lead one to consider specific alternatives. For example, if the problem can be understood in terms of individuals not seeing the full social costs or social benefits of their actions (an externality problem), then policies that better align individual and social costs and benefits would be natural candidates to consider as alternatives.

4. The next task is to specify the policy alternatives to be considered. Often the alternatives will be current policy and one other policy. If this is the case, then it may be possible to specify them in a single paragraph by contrasting their differences. However, if there are more than two

alternatives, then each one should be set out clearly in a separate paragraph.

5. Systematically compare the alternatives. The comparison should be in terms of all of their impacts. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative? Unlike a lawyer writing a brief, you must argue both sides of the case.

There are several ways to organize the comparison. One way is to organize impacts of the alternatives under headings (goals in the comprehensive analysis). So, for example, one heading might be the cost of implementing the policy; another heading might be the reduction in the magnitude of the problem it is likely to achieve. Each alternative would be discussed under each of the headings. In the case of the current policy and one alternative, the discussion might be presented as the difference between current policy and the alternative, especially if the experiential problem was already set out. Another way is to discuss each alternative in turn. Special care should be taken with this approach to ensure that a full range of impacts is considered for each alternative.

Policy analysts must be bold in predicting—it is always better to make an informed guess than ignore a possible impact. Often in the contexts in which analysts are asked to write policy memoranda, there is no time to do primary research and few, if any, relevant sources can be identified. The analyst must nonetheless make predictions of impacts to move forward. In most cases, some indication of the source and level of certainty of the prediction is appropriately included in the discussion.

6. The concluding paragraph should summarize the comparison of the alternatives and justify the choice of one of them as a recommendation. Under no circumstances should a new alternative be introduced in this concluding paragraph. If, after comparison of the alternatives, the analyst discovers that a modification of one of the alternatives would be desirable or perhaps two alternatives should be combined, then the body of the memorandum must be rewritten with these new alternatives.

Writing Clear and Concise Text

It is not easy to write an effective policy memorandum. Fitting a comprehensive analysis into a few pages is almost always challenging. As busy clients are unlikely to be tolerant of wordy or unclear text, analysts should strive for text that is clear and concise.

For most analysts, this means never giving clients first drafts. Always allow time to edit the original draft.

Absent organizational norms to the contrary, analysts should follow a few specific guidelines. First, write in the active voice. Second, as an individual author, write in the first-person singular. Third, organize your text with well-constructed paragraphs; avoid presentation of points by bullets. Fourth, organize your paragraphs so that the structure of your analysis is clear to the

reader.

The following table offers heuristics for writing comprehensive policy analyses. Most of them are relevant to writing policy memoranda as well.

Communicating Policy Analyses

Do	<p><i>Remember the client!</i> Keep in mind that your task is to provide useful advice.</p> <p><i>Set priorities!</i> Organize your information carefully (essential material in the text, supporting material in appendices).</p> <p><i>Decompose</i> your analysis into component parts.</p> <p><i>Use headings that tell a story.</i> Avoid abstract headings such as “Market Failure.”</p> <p><i>Be balanced!</i> Give appropriate coverage to problem analysis and solution analysis.</p> <p><i>Acknowledge uncertainty</i> but then provide your resolution of it. (Support your resolution with sensitivity analysis where appropriate.)</p> <p><i>Be credible</i> by documenting as extensively as possible.</p> <p><i>Be succinct.</i></p> <p><i>Avoid jargon</i> and clearly explain any technical terms.</p> <p><i>Be value overt.</i> Make explicit arguments for the importance of goals.</p> <p><i>Write crisp text.</i> Favor short and direct sentences; use the active voice.</p> <p><i>Provide clear tables and figures that stand alone.</i> Use them to emphasize important information or support critical arguments.</p> <p><i>Round numbers appropriately.</i> False precision undercuts your credibility.</p>
Don't	<p><i>Write an essay!</i> The difference between an essay and a well-structured policy analysis should be clear to you by now.</p> <p><i>Tell the client everything that you know as it comes into your head.</i> It's fine to think nonlinearly, but write linearly.</p> <p><i>Write a mystery!</i> Instead, state your important conclusions up front in an executive summary.</p> <p><i>Create a new alternative when recommending.</i> Your recommendation should follow from the analysis.</p> <p><i>Use the format of PowerPoint slides.</i> Avoid bullets in favor of well-structured paragraphs.</p>

Source: David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th Ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2011), p. 380.

Recommended Reading: Juliet Musso, Robert Biller, and Robert Myrtle, “Tradecraft: Professional Writing as Problem Solving,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 19:4 (2000), 635-646. (Available at <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/73502775/PDFSTART>)