

Guide to Writing an Effective Policy Memo

Fundamentals

Policy memos are straightforward documents that analyze an issue and offer recommendations to inform and guide a decision-maker. They might be written by policy advisors, advocates, or everyday citizens seeking to effect change in their community. Although context, purpose, and audience may vary, strong memos have similar qualities:

Style and Tone

- **Brevity:** The busy reader seeks a concise memo.
- **Clarity:** Memos are written for “uninformed but intelligent” readers, not policy wonks. Be direct, specific, consistent, and avoid jargon or highly academic language.
- **Objectivity:** Although most 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.

Structure

The specific sections of a memo may differ depending on the content, but many memos include:

1. Header (to, from, date, subject)
2. Summary of memo
3. Background and context
4. Recommendations
5. Alternatives
6. Limitations and barriers
7. Conclusion

Key Questions

Depending on the purpose of the memo, the answers to the following questions may inform your final product:

- 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 addressing? Why is it important?
- 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.

Selected Writing Resources

Guides and Fact Sheets

- [John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, “Policy Memos”](#)
- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Writing Effective Policy Memos”](#)
- [Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, “Tips on Writing a Policy Memo”](#)
- [Thompson Writing Program, Duke University, “Policy Memo”](#)

Presentations

- [The Harris School of Public Policy, The University of Chicago, “Introduction to Policy Writing for Public Policy Professionals”](#)
- [The East-West Center, “How to Write an Effective Policy Memorandum”](#)

Selected examples

Answer the key questions for each sample memo. Consider their similarities and differences. What resonates with you? Did each author achieve his or her purpose? How could each memo have been improved?

- [The Brookings Institution, “Memo to the President: Reform Health Care”](#)
- [John F. Kennedy School of Government, “Memorandum”](#)
- [Luskin School of Public Affairs, UCLA, “Sample Policy Memos”](#)
- [The Stanley Foundation, Center for a New American Security, “Policy Memo”](#)