HARVARD Kennedy School
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

White Papers and Briefing Books

A Communications Program Workshop

This workshop teaches the basic strategies, mechanics, and structure of longer policy papers and briefing books. A white paper is an authoritative report that offers solutions to a problem. White papers are common not only to policy and politics, but also in business and technical fields. In commercial use, white papers are often used as a marketing or sales tool where the product is pitched as the "solution" to a perceived need within a particular market. In the world of policy, white papers guide decision makers with expert opinions, recommendations, and analytical research.

A briefing book provides a decision maker with an overview of an issue or problem, guiding policy with recommendations or with deep background and analysis. Briefing books are often accompanied by short memos and oral briefings that glean important findings or recommendations. The decision maker then refers to the extended briefing book for the deep analysis that supports the core findings and/or recommendations.

Core Components:

Both the white paper and the briefing book rely on your authority over the deep research that you have conducted on the issue or problem and they share many analytical features. The two genres, however, are distinguished by audience, and the structure and flow of information. While the briefing book is more immediately concerned with the precise needs, expectations, and concerns of the decision-maker, the white paper is more typically written for a broader audience. These following guidelines should help direct your analysis for both genres.

- **Define the problem or issue.** Highlight implications or state significant findings based on the data.
- **Analyze—do not merely present—the data.** Show how you arrived at the findings or recommendations through analysis of qualitative or quantitative data. Draw careful conclusions that make sense of the data and do not overstate or misrepresent it.
- **Summarize your findings or state recommendations.** Provide specific recommendations or findings in response to specific problems and avoid generalizations.
- **Generate criteria for evaluating data.** Explain the key assumptions and methodology underlying your analysis and prioritize the criteria you rely on to assess evidence.
- **If you are producing recommendations, analyze the options according to your methodology and assess their feasibility.** What are the pros and cons? What is feasible? What are the predictable outcomes? Support your assertions with relevant data.
- **Address**—and when appropriate rebut—**counterarguments, caveats, alternative interpretations, and reservations to your findings or recommendations.** Your credibility as a policy maker relies on your ability to locate and account for counterargument. You should be especially sensitive to the likely counterarguments your decision-maker faces in implementing or acting on your recommendations or findings.

- **Suggest next steps and/or implementation of the findings or recommendations.** Briefly address the feasibility of those next steps or the implementation.
- **Distill the conclusions succinctly in a concluding section and remind the decision-maker of the big picture, the overall goal, the necessity of the investigation, or of the urgency for action.** This answers the "so what?" question that reminds the decision-maker of the value of the research and recommendations. It should reflect the decision-maker's primary concerns.

Adapted from Marie Danziger, "Option and Decision Memos: Basic Components," 1988.

Locating Recommendations in Competing Data:

The Option and Decision Feasibility Chart and the PEST Matrix

After you have produced findings on the problem, you must orient the data around likely solutions. The Option and Decision Feasibility Chart and a PEST Analysis are essential starting points in locating recommendations from competing data and perspectives.

PEST focuses on how **political, economic, social, and technological** factors affect the feasibility of a recommendation option. Examples of political factors could include applicable regulations, taxation issues and government policies. Economic factors include inflation, business cycles, government spending, and overall cost, and consumer confidence. Social factors include demographics, public attitudes, and income distribution. Technological factors focus on the technology involved in supporting or implementing a recommendation, including energy use and the availability of key technology. PEST analysis involves not only identifying the relevant factors, but also considering options for responding to these influences.
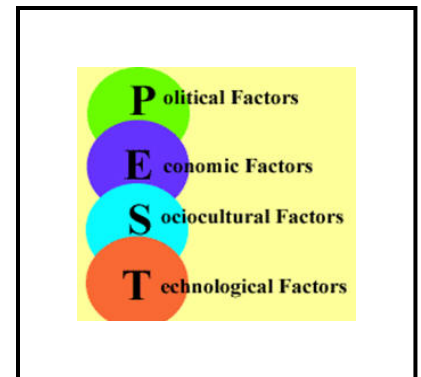
There are two primary formats of PEST analysis for policy makers, which each offer starting points from which you can drill down to increasingly detailed conclusions and recommendations. The first example chart shows the variability in a strong PEST analysis, breaking it into five categories to assess the feasibility of implementing four recommendation options: Political Feasibility, Administrative Feasibility, Equity, Cost Effectiveness, and Environmental Impact. That chart also shows that the policy writer folded Social Feasibility into the Political Feasibility and Equity tests. The example chart focuses on the problem of pesticides, offering four possible solutions to deal with the problem: (1) Do Nothing/Status Quo, (2) Tax Pesticides, (3) Increase Number of Pesticides Banned, (4) Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops, (5) Limit the Number of Pesticides that can be applied to a particular crop. The chart then assesses the overall positive and negative outcomes or qualities associated with each possible solution to reveal a dominant recommendation: Tax Pesticides.

You can build your own Feasibility Chart by measuring recommendation options in the context of PEST categories and through the perspectives of key interest groups. The more detailed your knowledge of your subject, the more authoritative the outcome of the chart. In this chart, the policy writer prioritizes five hypothetical solutions to the problem of pesticide use:

Options

Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	-	-	+/-
Tax Pesticides	+/-	+	+/-	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+/-	-	-	+	-
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	-	-	+/-	+	+/-
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on Certain Crops	-	+/-	-	+/-	+/-
Criteria	Political Feasibility	Administrative Feasibility	Equity	Environmental Impact	Economic Impact/Cost Effectiveness

The PEST chart shows that, while all five possible recommendations have positive environmental impact, only one of the options predominates among the other criteria. In this policy researcher's view, taxing pesticides meets the bar of being administratively feasible and equitable to all parties; it has a positive environmental impact and it is both cost effective and offers a positive economic impact. For this policy writer, taxing pesticides is the best recommendation, which she will highlight early in her memo.

You'll note, however, that the first column—"Political Feasibility"—shows up as the single negative for her recommendation of Tax Pesticides. Thus, in the body of her memo, the writer needs briefly to address and rebut or qualify the shortcomings of the political feasibility of taxing pesticides. The writer will also discuss the highlights and shortcomings of the other findings, demonstrating, for example, the limitations of increasing the number of banned pesticides and of limiting the amount of pesticides applied to particular crops.

A second chart examines the same five possible recommendations through the perspectives of involved interest groups.

Stakeholders Chart

Options

	The Public	Traditional Farmers	Chemical Production Companies	Farm Labor	The Environment	Organic Farmers
Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	+	-	-	-
Tax Pesticides	+	-	-	+	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+	-	-	+	-	+
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	+	+/-	-	+	+	+
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on Certain Crops	+	-	-	+/-	+/-	+/-
Interest Groups	The Public	Traditional Farmers	Chemical Production Companies	Farm Labor	The Environment	Organic Farmers

The stakeholders chart shows that, while all five possible recommendations (or solutions to the problem of under-regulated and over-used pesticides) have both positive and negative aspects, once again, the solution of taxing pesticides dominates. When the recommendation of "Tax Pesticides" again shows up positively, the writer can feel certain in prioritizing that recommendation.

Should the researcher wish to drill down further into the recommendation of taxing pesticides, she could, for example, compose yet another Option and Decision chart that breaks "Tax Pesticides" into different components, depending on her overall goals. She might, for example, analyze different types of taxes for pesticides or, alternatively, break the pesticides into subgroups, taxing them according to their virulent effects on people or the environment. The Option and Decision chart is only as authoritative as its creator but it will focus your attention on possible outcomes or findings. It is a first step in clarifying your ideas before writing the policy memo.

SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) **Analysis**. The SWOT analysis is adopted from organizational management and business strategy. It surveys the surrounding environment of a specific policy or strategy that you are analyzing or proposing. It allows you to identify the internal characteristics of the policy as either strengths or weaknesses and classify external factors as opportunities or threats.

After assessing and classifying internal and external factors, analysts construct a 2-by-2 matrix with the following four cells: strengths-opportunities (S-O), weaknesses-opportunities (W-O), strengths-threats (S-T), and weaknesses-threats (W-T).

This example tracks a strategy to expand public library services.

The Executive Summary

Once you have determined your dominant recommendation/s or findings, you are ready to structure your memo and, when appropriate to your findings or recommendations, write the Executive Summary. The structure of the paper or briefing book should follow the course of your recommendations, not the chronology of the problem or the development of your research. It can help to write a draft of the Executive Summary first as a structuring device, returning to it at the end of the writing process to make sure that it matches your analysis and outcomes. Even a short, two-page memo can benefit from a brief executive summary that foregrounds the recommendations or findings discussed later in the body.

Although the Executive Summary is the most important part of any policy paper, it is often the most difficult to write. Yet there are basic steps that will help turn complex ideas into succinct and powerful arguments guaranteed to capture the attention of a busy reader. You will, for example, need briefly to describe the current policy situation, offer immediate pros and cons of your reasoning for change, and explicitly state your recommendation/s or findings.

The Executive Summary serves as a starting point – but also the end point – for the policy paper. It telegraphs your key recommendations, relying on your authority as a researcher or expert in your field. It not only summarizes your key points for the busy reader, but highlights the recommendations in a memorable way to guide future discussions.

The Structure of the Executive Summary

An effective strategy is to draft the Executive Summary as you begin writing as a device that structures the analysis that follows. (You will necessarily return to the Executive Summary at the end of the process of writing, revising it and your recommendations according to your final analysis.) In telegraphic style, explain who the target audience is (i.e., the decision-maker for your policy proposal), clarify the problem, and describe the main points that the decision-maker should know. The Executive Summary serves as a road map for your policy paper, highlighting key themes and guiding the decision-maker's understanding of the longer paper.

The Core Characteristics of the Executive Summary:

As a general rule, the executive summary is no more than two, single-spaced pages but longer white papers may demand longer executive summaries.

WHO and WHAT / Where

1. **Acknowledges** the target audience, the intended use/s, and the expected dissemination for the paper

2. Concisely **states the problem or issue** either in terms of current policy or as a problematic situation

WHY

3. Offers **reasons** for initiating changes to that policy or situation; explains why the issue is problematic

4. May sign post **key policy options** or approaches; sometimes this is simply stated as the status quo, sometimes it includes alternatives that seek to remedy or address the problem

5. May sign post the **pros and cons** of key options or may highlight the **general trends** in addressing the issue

6. May reference the **methodology** used to examine the data or explain core assumptions that guided research and analysis

HOW / When

7. **Recommends** primary course/s of action **or states findings** that may lead to recommendations in future policy work

8. Offers **supporting reasons** for selecting or highlighting that course of action or findings

The last sentence may offer a timeline for completion or set up a roadmap that tells the reader how the memo is structured.

Briefing Book Criteria

Much policy analysis—and many recent PAEs—adopt a style that resembles a briefing book—that is, a "distilled" version of a traditional report. The finished product is not unlike a long decision memo: brief sentences and paragraphs, bulleted lists where appropriate, the use of headings, underlining, and boldface for "skimmability," and effective use of white space to direct the reader's attention. As in memos, the bottom line is usually "up top": your recommendations are stated first, followed by a logical breakdown of the conclusions, arguments, and evidence you analyzed to reach those conclusions.

Because these PAEs are somewhat briefer than the traditional 40-page report, they focus on presenting the tip of the iceberg. This is why you'll need to determine which supporting material should be supplied in the form of appendices—e.g., discussions of methodology, charts and graphs, regression equations, questionnaires, survey data, focus group responses, budget breakdowns, etc. The idea is to give your readers the choice of which material they need to digest, and when. Some might read only the Executive Summary, some the text of the briefing

book, and some the whole package—appendices and all. Therefore it is important that each of these elements be completely self-contained and able to stand alone.

Briefing Book Checklist:

1. What's the quality of the Executive Summary? Are all of the crucial bases covered for the decision maker's or legislator's personal attention? If this is all the decision-maker were to read before entering into a policy discussion, testifying before a legislative committee, or moving forward on the issue, will she be adequately positioned?

2. Is there a brief, clear storyline that outlines the big picture?

3. How effective is the breakdown of sections? Does it suggest the right logic and structure for the decision-maker and her staff? Are issues framed from the perspective of potential actions by the other key stakeholders and senior decision-makers involved?

4. How focused are the background descriptions? Are problems well specified from the perspective of the likely reader(s)? Has raw data been carefully selected and adequately interpreted for the decision-maker?

5. Is there a clear discussion of the tradeoffs involved?

6. Are all problems matched with potential solutions or guidelines for change?

7. Is a framework for future work by the Administration or the Congress provided? Is there a focus on decisions that need to be made?

8. Is the treatment of advantages and disadvantages (economically, politically) analytically sound and clearly explained?

9. If included, are existing and potential laws and regulations covered?

10. Are recommendations and/or findings feasible, clear, and logically prioritized?

11. Are the graphics of high quality, with captions and narrative summarizing the key points they make?

12. Is the overall presentation and writing quality up to professional standards? Does the book avoid excessive wordiness?

Basic Structure of a White Paper

1. The **Executive Summary**
2. **Introduction and/or Background**. These are sometimes broken out as separate sections with the introduction dedicated to the broad goals and underlying motivations for the paper. They may also describe the context for the ultimate goal, the decision to move forward with research on the topic, or the big picture for the research you are undertaking. This is also where you may describe the operations of the client or the group that is your key stakeholder or decision-maker.
3. **Methodology**. Narrate your methodology briefly. Include the micro data, survey questions, and the specific details for your rationale in the appendices.
4. **Literature Review**. Although standard white papers do not include a lit review, academic research papers often do. You may need to indicate the status of existing academic work or

thinking about the issue and situate your own research in the context of questions that still need answers. How does your work or project fit into the overall context of existing research or common academic perceptions on the general issue?

5. **Policy Options or Policy Context.** Depending on the orientation of your research, you may need to explore the pros and cons of possible policy options.

6. **Findings**. This is your original research. These are accompanied by specific subheaders that describe each finding.

7. **Case Studies and Best Practices**. If your findings are grounded in original case studies, indicate the names of those case studies individually with "Lessons Learned" at the end of each individual case study. Add a subsequent section called "Best Practices" that synthesizes and orients the lessons learned around the needs of the client or decision-maker.

8. **Recommendations**. Again, break these out by specific subheaders. Note: Some white papers may merge the findings and recommendations, with the recommendations flowing immediately from specific findings.

9. **Implementation**.
   - Some white papers fold implementation into the recommendations or into next steps. Others break out this section discretely to detail the specific steps of how and when to implement the recommendations. If there are significant risks, costs, or obstacles associated with implementation, you should discuss them in the earlier section that describes the pros and cons of the policy recommendation/s. This section should be dedicated to the mechanics of implementation.

10. **Next Steps and Conclusion**.
    - Here, you might return to the big picture or the motive of your policy: What is the goal of the policy recommendation? What will happen if the decision-maker does not implement the recommendation? What will happen if she does? This is your opportunity to remind your reader of the imperative of your recommendation.

11. **Appendices**. These typically include the survey data and questions, charts and graphs, and details of case studies that detail your analysis.

12. **Bibliography**. While you will often see professional white papers that do not reference their sources, any academic paper *must* provide a bibliography.

Sample Briefing Books, PAE's and Longer White Papers

- Exemplary Spring Exercise Briefing Book: Cheesebrough, et al. (2001), *U.S. Intervention in the African HIV/AIDS Epidemic.* Distributed in hard copy in workshop.

- Exemplary PAE Briefing Book: Eli Sprecher (2011), *Improving Care at Children's Hospital: How Close Are We?* Distributed in hard copy in workshop.

- Prize-winning PAE: Erica Han and Lymari Morales (2007), [Understanding Muslim Populations: What Leaders Need to Know](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-han-morales-understanding-muslim-populations.pdf),
  http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-han-morales-understanding-muslim-populations.pdf
  - This policy analysis paper synthesizes and prioritizes its findings, offering recommendations as subsets. Many clients are more fascinated by a PAE-writer's survey of the problem than they are interested in the writer's conclusions and recommendations. This paper offers a way of meeting the client's immediate interests without losing sight of recommendations.

- Prize-winning PAE: Mamie Marcus (2007), *Immigrant Voters in Massachusetts: Implications for Political Parties*,
  - http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-marcuss-immigrant-voters-in-massachusetts.pdf
  - This policy analysis paper first highlights the findings, building on them for the subsequent recommendations.

- Lengthy professional white paper: Pew Center, Asia Society. January 2009. "A Roadmap for U.S.-China Cooperation on Energy and Climate Change,"
  http://www.pewclimate.org/US-China
  - This report presents a vision and a concrete roadmap for U.S.-China collaboration focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate the effects of climate change. The report begins with a "Forward" that highlights the importance of a collaboration between the U.S. and China as key leaders in negotiating climate change policy. The Forward also names key goals and describes underlying motivations.
  - The Executive Summary explicitly names basic assumptions for the rationale supporting the methodology, findings, and recommendations. Without those assumptions, readers will not be persuaded of the report's ultimate recommendations. The Executive Summary then advocates its major recommendations before moving on to explicit findings with second-level, more specific recommendations. The conclusion to the Executive Summary underscores the urgency of following its recommendations both in a negative sense—what will happen if China and the U.S. do *not* act on these recommendations—and in a positive sense—what will happen if China and the U.S. *do* act on the recommendations. While conclusions are not mandatory for executive summaries, they do allow you to return to the big picture or the motive and urgency of your policy recommendations.

Resources
General Texts on Policy Analysis:
- Bardach, Eugene. 2000. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- Stokley, Edith and Richard Zeckhauser. 1978. A Primer for Policy Analysis. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Smith, Catherine F. 2010. *Writing Public Policy*. Oxford UP.
- Weimer, David L. and Aidan R. Vining. 1992. Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

HKS and other online resources:
- Communications Program, Writing Skills Handouts (log-in necessary)
  - http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab?OpenView&Start=1&Count=30&Expand=2#2
- *PAE Guide*, "Standards for Good Analysis," Harvard Kennedy School of Government
  - http://www.hks.harvard.edu/degrees/oca/students-alumni/pae/guide/standards-for-good-analysis
- *THE POLICY ANALYSIS EXERCISE: THE WRITING GUIDE.* This booklet serves as a checklist to guide you through strong policy analysis and HKS expectations for PAE writers:
  - http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab/df7ca3946b85b8aa8525773d006b7515/$FILE/PAE%20WRITING%20GUIDE%202009.pdf
- "Policy Paper Guidelines," International Relations Department, Boston University
  - http://www.bu.edu/ir/graduate/current/papers/policy/
- Luciana Herman's course on policy writing, MLD 720M, "Policy Writing for Decision Makers," click on Assignment 4 "Policy Paper" (left menu bar). The website offers additional resources on white papers and briefing books.
  - http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k82503&pageid=icb.page447197