

Writing Policy Memos:

Best practices and actionable tips for memo writing at HKS and beyond

Lauren Brodsky, Ph.D.

Lauren_brodsky@hks.harvard.edu





Getting started:

What is the most challenging part of writing policy memos for you?

What strengths do you bring to this task?

What weaknesses concern you about this task?

In what context will you be writing memos? Work? Summer internships?

Here at HKS?

(And how have memo assignments gone for you at HKS?)

The basics: Format

The problem: Can you state the problem without suggesting the solution?

Analysis: Create criteria to evaluate your alternatives.

- *Criteria*: Standards for evaluating action. [cost, efficiency, etc.]
- *Alternatives*: Different courses of action.

Recommendations: Your recommendations can be nuanced, they can have multiple steps.

Put the Bottom Line Upfront: Start with the problem, and your proposed solution.

Tips for making your memo easy to read

Concision:

-Write short sentences.

- “The problem was the topic of our discussion.” vs. “We discussed the problem.”

-Don't use: actually, generally, practically.

Active voice

-Active: “I lost the money.” vs. Passive: “The money was lost [by me].”

-Active: “We must omit.” vs. Passive: “We should not include.”

Read your memo and ask – *How many words can I cut? Can I make my sentences active and direct?*

Tips for writing a persuasive memo

How can you make your audience care about this problem in your intro?

Storytelling, description, anecdotes, creating a “hook.”

Shared context – i.e. something you and your audience agree on.

To do this well, you need to understand your audience.

How do you keep your audience interested?: Your audience wants to hear from YOU.

What unique perspective can you bring to this problem?

If you are passionate about this issue, can you demonstrate that in your writing?