



Program on Criminal Justice
Policy & Management

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MEMORANDUM

To: Students Enrolled in CCJ-100

From: Christopher Stone

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Subject: Writing Policy Memos

You will soon be writing your first of three policy memos for this course. Like any writing project, this is an opportunity for you to express yourself creatively, but a policy memo is also meant to be a specific kind of professional product. In a good policy memo, you should succinctly convey information, analysis, and conclusions that will help your readers make a better decision than they would have otherwise.

In this memo, I describe some strategies that you might consider when organizing and drafting your memo. The advice here is based on my experience over two decades both writing and receiving policy memos written for government officials and leaders of non-governmental organizations. Every institution has its own culture and style of written presentation. A memo judged great in one context may not even be considered acceptable in another. The advice here is therefore only a starting point. Nevertheless, even if you choose to take a very different approach to drafting a policy memo, your attention to the issues raised here should help you make more conscious and strategic decisions as you write.

Your Voice and Your Audiences

Memos are signed documents. You are writing under your own name. This is not the case when you are drafting an institutional report that will be published without naming its authors or when you are drafting a speech or statement for someone else. Here, you are writing in your own voice, and you should generally use the first person singular.

Example 1: *"I base my recommendations on my own review of the published scientific literature and my conversations with several experts in the field."*

In addition to naming you as the author, the heading of your memo names the person to whom you are writing. In the text of your memo, it is appropriate to address that person (or group) as “you,” using the second person singular (or plural). Be aware, however, that one reason you are writing a memo, rather than just giving an oral report, is to permit the recipient to share your memo with others. Indeed, your recipient may have requested the memo specifically intending to circulate it more widely. One implication of this public nature of the memo is that it should not assume that the reader is privy to the conversations that have preceded its production. A second implication is that you should avoid personal comments, certain forms of humor, or private observations that your recipient would not want circulated. If you need to make observations of this kind, placing them in a cover letter allows your recipient to circulate the memo without them.

Most policy memos are addressed to someone authorized to make a decision, from someone without such authority. You have the knowledge and analysis; your recipient has the power. Your writing should respect this difference in role, authority, and perspective. Do not, therefore, use the first person plural, “we,” as the subject of your sentences. The first person plural tends to erase rather than respect the difference in authority between you and your reader and can be misinterpreted as a subtle usurpation of decision-making power.

Example 2: (A) *“We have a chance to unite our supporters with this proposal because of its multiple levels of appeal,”* should be: (B) *“You have a chance to unite your supporters....”*

The use of “we” is appropriate if the memo has multiple authors or if you are writing to fellow decision-makers of equal status, such as your colleagues on a decision-making committee. But if you are writing a memo to decision makers from the perspective of a staff member, consultant, or advocate, respect the difference between your authority and theirs.

One way to set an appropriate tone on all of these matters is to begin the memo with a sentence that explicitly acknowledges the respective authority and roles of you and your recipient while also orienting others to whom the memo may be circulated.

Example 3: *“You asked me to review your draft proposal to permit all crime victims to participate in the resolution of any criminal case arising from their victimization.”*

Example 4: *“To help inform your decision whether to veto or to sign the racial profiling legislation expected to be adopted by Congress next week, I will first describe the political constituencies lined up in support and in opposition to the bill, and then distill four lessons learned in other states that have adopted similar laws.”*

In sum, you should

- Write in your own voice
- Respect the difference between the “I” who is writing the memo and the “you” whose decision you are helping to inform
- Provide whatever context is necessary for the memo to stand on its own.

The Weight, Balance, and Meaning of the Evidence

Whether you are describing the political strengths and vulnerabilities of a proposed policy, or analyzing its likely impact, you will be relying on some sort of evidence. It is generally not sufficient for you to keep that evidence to yourself, reporting simply the facts as you believe them to be. The question, then, is how much of your evidence you should include in the body of the memo.

You should describe the evidence in detail sufficient for your readers to understand how much weight the evidence deserves, how strong the evidence is on each side of the issue, and what the evidence actually means. These explanations should be as succinct as possible without scientific jargon or highly technical language while still conveying the essential facts.

Example 5: You might be tempted to write: (A) *“Research shows that mandatory drug testing of new arrestees does not help identify those who will violate the conditions of their pretrial release.”* But it would be more helpful to write: (B) *“Evidence from several demonstration sites indicates that drug use is not a useful predictor of pretrial misconduct. While one study in Washington, DC, found drug use had significant predictive value for pretrial misconduct, that value differed by drug type, and the results were not able to be replicated elsewhere. Evidence from five replication sites found that drug testing added little or nothing to pretrial risk classification.”*

In Example 5, version A is simpler, but it leaves your reader vulnerable if later confronted with the Washington study that seems to contradict what you have written. Version B not only alerts your reader to the existence of the Washington study, but explains in simple terms why it carries little weight in comparison with the evidence from the five subsequent studies on which you rely.

Example 6: You might be tempted to write: (A) *“Justice Department statistics show that Massachusetts operates one of the most successful parole systems in the country.”* But it would be more helpful to write: (B) *“A report by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that 83 percent of Massachusetts parole discharges in 1999 were successful—a far higher proportion than in most other states. Yet a Massachusetts Department of Correction study of recidivism among parolees released from prison in 1998 found that 30 percent of them returned to prison in their first year out, and another 12 percent in their second—rates very typical of other states. The apparent inconsistency is explained by the fact that substantially more Massachusetts parolees than nationally serve terms of supervision of three*

months or less, allowing more to complete parole before they are arrested for another crime .”

In Example 6, not only does version B prevent the reader from being misled by the federal government’s state rankings, but it also conveys information about the short duration of parole in Massachusetts in a memorable context.

Example 7: You might be tempted to write: (A) *“Now that the public is less focused on the need to be ‘tough on crime,’ there will be more support for treatment instead of prison for many offenders.”* But it would be more helpful to write: *“National public opinion surveys by Gallup have shown a steady decline in the percentage of Americans who consider crime to be the nation’s most pressing problem, from a high of more than 20 percent to less than 2 percent today. Moreover, focus groups in several states, including California, suggest that even those who rank crime as a high priority are more concerned than in the past about the high cost of prison expansion and more likely to support treatment programs for non-violent drug offenders. This shift in public opinion from being ‘tough on crime’ to being ‘smart on crime’ suggests that you now have an opportunity to propose a more balanced policy.”*

In Example 7, the reference to the evidence in version B provides a clearer definition of “public opinion,” allowing the reader to give different weight to national surveys and focus groups in a particular state. Moreover, version B explains the meaning of the evidence in political terms by suggesting the slogan, “smart on crime.”

In sum, you should:

- Describe the weight that the evidence you cite deserves
- Alert your reader to evidence on all sides of a question, even if you argue that only some of that evidence is reliable
- Explain the meaning of the evidence that you cite

Headings, Bullets, Typefaces, and Footnotes

As with any piece of writing, you should be sure to allocate sufficient time to assembling your evidence, thinking your argument through, and then preparing at least two drafts.

The headings in the final draft of your memo are there for the reader, not for you. Although when you begin to draft it may be helpful to use headings that merely identify sections of the memo’s skeleton—introduction, background, findings, discussion, conclusion—these aids are more useful in drafting than reading. By the time you are done, you will want to replace these with headings that help make your argument.

There is no best way to use headings. Some people prefer long headings that make the argument of the memo when they alone are read in series. Other people prefer shorter headings that help guide the reader from one subject of discussion to the next. Choose a

style that helps your memo make its points as clearly and efficiently as possible. Make the headings an integral part of your memo.

Whatever style of heading you choose, they should be of parallel construction. For example, they should all be full sentences, or all short phrases. Moreover, the sections of the memo under each heading should be of roughly comparable size and importance. If one heading starts a section of three pages and the next three headings each introduce only a single paragraph, you should consider combining the three paragraphs into a single section under a more general heading.

Bullet points, like headings, can be full sentences or phrases, but they should follow the basic rules of parallel construction. In some cases, you may even want bullet points that are two sentences long. But when you are writing more than two sentences, or when your bullet points are of uneven length, you may be better served with ordinary paragraphs, dropping the bullet marks. Bullets are used to present a list of short concepts, suggestions, or descriptions that are most usefully seen by your reader as a complete list. For busy readers, bullets and headings make skimming your memo easier and allow readers to find the essential points. If you put too much of your argument in bullet points, they lose their value.

Emphasizing certain words by placing them in **bold** or *italic* typeface provides the busy reader with yet another way to locate your key points quickly. As with headings and bullet points, the use of specialized typefaces should follow the rules of parallel construction so that the reader quickly learns what kind of text to expect in bold or italics.

Do not use too many of these devices at once. In a short memo, the use of headings, bullet points, numbered paragraphs, bold text, and italic text can overwhelm or distract the reader. Using two or three of these devices well is far better than using more of them without a clear delineation of the role that each plays in guiding the reader through your argument.

The use of footnotes, like the other techniques discussed here, is a matter of style. In general, footnotes should each contain at least one citation. Some will contain more, and others will contain some detailed, explanatory text along with a citation. In general, however, footnotes without a citation may merely represent indecision about whether or not to include certain text in the body of the memo. If you want your reader to read something, put it in the body. A citation alone, however, is not a substitute for a discussion of evidence.

In sum, you should:

- Follow the rules of parallel construction when using headings, bullet points, and special typefaces
- Use these devices to permit a busy reader to skim your memo quickly or return easily to the key points

- Use footnotes for citations that guide the reader to your sources, rather than to describe minor arguments or supplementary evidence.

Summing Up

You should craft your closing paragraphs, along with the first paragraphs, as carefully and skillfully as you possibly can. These should reflect your very best, most engaging writing.

In general, the conclusion should return to the questions raised, the problem posed, or the promises made in the opening paragraphs. Sometimes this will involve using the specific imagery set up in the opening. In other instances, you will merely summarize the answers to the questions with which you began. In any event, the conclusion should present a succinct summary of the major conclusions and recommendations you have formed. This is not the place to introduce new evidence or arguments.

In addition, a good conclusion reminds the reader of the broad, public significance of the underlying issue. The memo may be technical or the issues discussed quite narrow, but the conclusion provides an opportunity to remind the reader not only that the issue is important, but why it is important.

These guidelines are not intended to suppress your creativity. Indeed, writing with a personal, consistent voice, explaining the meaning and weight of the evidence on all sides of the issue, and making careful use of headings and other devices to guide your reader through your argument should give you great scope for individual creativity in both your arguments and your presentation.

Writing memos with this degree of care will take more time than you might expect, especially at first. But the care you put into these memos will be reflected in the quality of the decisions you help to shape, improving public policies and advancing the public good.