



How to write policy memos:

Communications Program Workshop

Lauren Brodsky, Ph.D.

Lecturer in Public Policy, HKS Communications Program

Lauren_brodsky@hks.harvard.edu



Memo writing process:

Three steps, plan accordingly:

1. Thinking (problem definition, options/solution, outline & research)
2. Writing (draft!)
3. Editing/revision & formatting



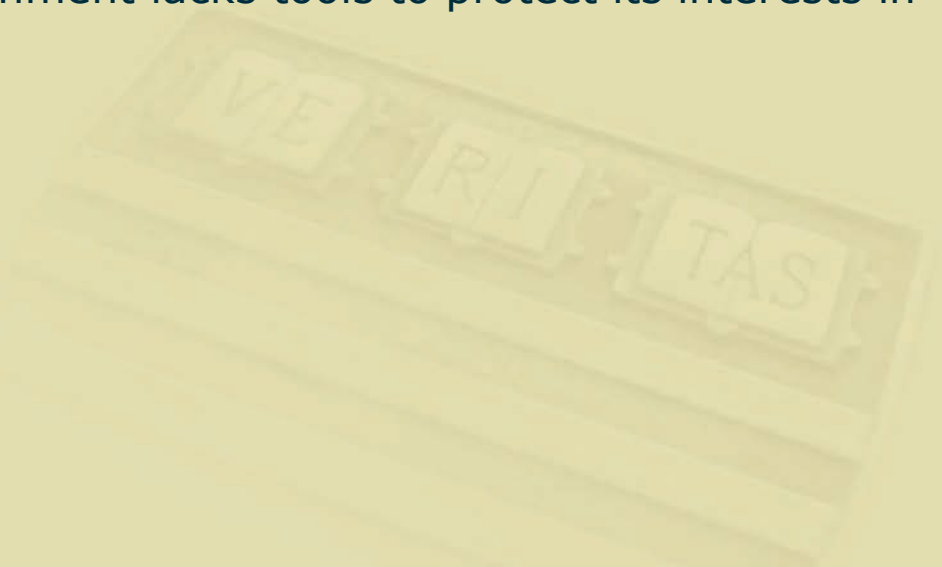


Step 1: Think about the problem

It is important to write about a policy problem, not an issue. What's the difference?

Issue: The geopolitics of the Arctic are shifting.

Problem statement: The U.S. government lacks tools to protect its interests in the Arctic.





Step 1: Think about your audience

Determine audience: *Can your audience solve this problem? With what tools?*

Know your audience:

What is their job? What keeps them up at night? What are their restraints?

And... who else may read your memo?





Step 1: Think about options and solutions

To avoid writing a “pitch,” consider the strengths and weaknesses of options.

Use a SWOT chart to flush out your ideas, prepare to tell your story:

<u>Internal</u> : Things you can control/predict (maybe) →	Strengths: (Advantages, assets, capabilities)	Weaknesses: (Vulnerabilities, pressures, limitations)
<u>External</u> : Things you can't control/predict →	Opportunities: (For creation, development, partnerships, positive change)	Threats: (Competition, obstacles, external change)



Step 1: Plan your memo structure

Create an **outline** with an understanding of memo expectations/structure:

- Start with problem/data (1/2 memo), end with options/solution (1/2 memo).
- Then bring the bottom line upfront (BLUF)
- Recommendations can be nuanced (more than 1), but must advise decision maker.
 - Articulate an understanding of trade-offs, counterarguments, fall back positions & implementation steps.



Step 2: Write, a draft

What is a draft?

- It is the bones of a well structured memo.
- But... the writing isn't yet strategic, concise. You can fix that by revising.

Editing your memo is not a quick skim for typos, it is shifting your writing from draft to polished, useful document.





Step 3: “User-friendly” editing:

Edit for concision: Write short sentences, often not always.

Don't use: actually, generally, practically, very, therefore, moreover – i.e. “fillers.” Simply cut these out whenever possible.

Edit for clarity:

Define all acronyms, or important terms, even if you think audience knows them, upfront. (Except UN, NATO, etc.)





Step 3: “User-friendly” editing:

Edit for active voice, strong verbs:

“Several school aids are **not** working anymore” → “Several school aids **retired**.”

*

“We need **solutions** to this problem.” → “Let’s **solve** this problem.”

*

“We are looking for the organization to create **regulations** on this issue.” →
“**regulate!**”



Step 3: Edit for “user-friendly” formatting:

How can I make my memo “skimmable?” Use underline/bold.

- *Can the audience find the problem, key data points, and solution by skimming?*

Use white space to please the reader. (If you can’t, cut down words).

Footnotes are uncommon in memos. But for academic exercises you can either embed citation and/or endnote. Check with faculty.

HKS Communications Program Resources:

Writing consultants & more communications resources:

www.hkscommprog.org

[How to write a policy memo \(click to open\)](#)

[How to write an executive summary \(click to open\)](#)

Please credit any use of these materials to Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program (www.hkscommprog.org), Harvard University