Writing Effective Policy Papers
Translating Academic Knowledge into Policy Solutions
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Overview

- What is a policy paper?
- How are they used?
- How do you write an effective policy paper?
What is a policy paper?

A policy paper is a research piece focusing on a specific policy issue that provides clear recommendations for policy makers.

- What it is not:
  - Historical analysis
  - Opinion piece
To convince a policy maker’s staff to advocate changing course on a specific policy issue.

- Shape perceptions around issue
  - Bring the issue to policymakers’ attention
  - Frame the issue for them—their perception of the problem and the solutions

- Provide text for their memos
  - Busy staffers prefer not to have to rework complex writing
  - You want them to lift your words directly as much as possible
How is it used?

Legislative Branch

- When and how staffers write memos
  - Boss assigns staffer to conduct research
  - Staffer has personal interest and wants to bring it to boss’s attention
How to get it to legislators

Two kinds of staff:

■ Committee staff
  • More educated and specialized
  • Harder to initiate contact from the outside

■ Personal office
  • Identify Legislative Aide by calling or visiting office
  • Send policy memo (3–4 pages)
  • Try to find contact information for committee staff
How to get it to legislators

- Think tanks
  - Think tanks send pieces to staffers on a regular basis
  - Academics can build relationships with think tanks to collaborate on policy papers

- Congressional Research Service
  - Capitol Hill’s think tank
  - Staffed by former academics
  - Will accept longer policy papers
  - Ask for researcher responsible for your topic
Executive Branch

- **Policy Staffer**
  - No time for extensive research
  - Conduct mostly online research
  - Use more in-depth research conducted by intelligence departments in each agency

- **Intelligence Departments (CIA, DIA, INR)**
  - Track internet publications—make sure your article titles contain the problem and solution to increase the chance of retrieval through Google search
  - More time for extensive research
  - Attend academic conferences—provide “fact sheets” and executive summaries to audience
Deal with short attention spans

- **Clear and concise statements**  
  - No extra points for lengthy prose or sophisticated vocabulary

- **BLUF**  
  - Bottom Line Up Front (begin paragraphs with conclusions)  
  - Key difference between academic and policy writing

- **Only essential information**  
  - Don’t get bogged down in too many details  
  - Distill to essential elements

- **Cover all the bases**  
  - Make it as thorough sounding as possible so they feel they don’t have to go to other sources
Get people to act

- Give specific policy recommendations

- Show how it will impact them
  - How will it impact their constituents?
  - How can you tie it to national security?

- Don’t argue for an ideology
  - Argue for a specific course of action
Maintain a measured tone

- Fact–based argumentation
  - Don’t come across as an ideologue

- Acknowledge potential downsides and ways to mitigate risks
  - Lends credibility to your research
You want the staffer to walk away with answers to two questions:
- Why is the current situation untenable?
- How can it be fixed?
Structure of a policy paper

- Executive Summary/Purpose Statement
  - Most staffers will only read this part

- Body
  - Background
    - What is the current policy? Why is it being conducted this way?
  - Analysis
    - Why is the policy not working? Why is it necessary to find an alternative?
  - Policy options
    - Discuss a few alternatives and their implications
  - Recommendation
    - Provide your recommendation and how it can be implemented

- Conclusion
  - Summarize analysis and recommendation

- Appendix
  - Relevant figures, maps, graphics
Writing exercise

- Transforming academic writing into a policy paper
  - Read the academic blog post
  - Write the analysis section of your policy paper (arguing the author’s points)
    - Why is the policy not working?
    - Why is it necessary to find an alternative?
    - No more than 6 sentences
  - Trade and discuss with a partner
Analysis
US officials’ simplistic view of “secular” politics as good and “Islamic” politics as bad has contributed to Egypt’s current crisis, and is likely to increase anti-American sentiment and undermine American interests in the Middle East.

- Maintaining the current perspective could stifle political reform in Egypt and undermine its security. Taking advantage of US officials’ fear of Islamist politics, Mubarak has repressed the population for decades. The current unrest is the result of a lack of outlets for political dissent.

- Rejecting Islamic politics could undermine US interests in the region by fueling anti-Americanism. Continued support of Mubarak and refusing to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate representative of a subsection of Egyptians will reinforce the popular belief that the US is a hegemonic, anti-Islamic power.
Your challenge

- Serve as the bridge between academia and policymakers
- Be concise without being superficial

“Writing a memo is like figuring out how to convey the full experience of a Thanksgiving meal in a single bite” –Senate staffer