

How to Write Your Policy Memo

PS/IR 101z: Introduction to International Relations

Author: Lindsay Hundley

Paper Objectives

- Convince the President of the United States that the problem must be addressed and that your solution is the best available
- Practice bridging the gap between theory and policy. You should use IR theories we have read and discussed in class (or from outside research) to motivate your discussion of the problem and the policy solution

Sample Paper Outline (4 pages total)

1. Executive Summary (2 sentences)
 - The first sentence should state the problem/issue you are addressing as succinctly as possible. The second sentence should summarize the course of action you recommend.
2. Identify the problem (1 - 1½ pages)
 - Describe the issue you are trying to solve and provide evidence for why it is a problem for the United States.
 - You can make moral arguments if you like, but the President will have an easier time convincing domestic opponents if you also present an argument in terms of U.S. self-interest.
 - Research and discuss any existing policies in place to address this problem.
 - For example, if you were suggesting that the U.S. provide more aid to Zambia, you would need to discuss what the existing policies in place are. This could include a discussion of the current U.S. aid policy to Zambia and a description of how aid is currently being distributed through NGOs.
 - Explain why the existing policy does not solve the problem.
 - Example: The U.S. is currently not sending any aid and/or the NGOs do not have sufficient capacity to feed all those impacted by food insecurity.
3. Propose your solution (1½ - 2 pages)
 - Clearly explain your proposed policy solution with as much specificity as possible.
 - To illustrate the level of specificity, we can revisit the aid to Zambia example. For this proposal, you should specify exactly how much aid to send over how many years. You should specify whether that aid is for a specific use (food assistance) or whether the funds are for the government to use as they see fit. You should also detail whether the aid is unconditional or dependent, for example, on how well the country upholds human rights.
 - Describe how your proposal is an improvement over existing policies.
 - What evidence do you have that your proposal will work? For example, if you are suggesting that the government provide subsidies to certain

industries, you'd want to do some research on how subsidies in related industries have worked.

- Acknowledge and describe some of the shortcomings in your proposal.
 - After acknowledging some of the weakness of your proposal, be sure to explain why your solution is still the best available.
4. Political Feasibility (½ - ¾ page)
- Identify international and/or domestic opponents to your proposed policy. Clearly explain why these actors would not support your policy proposal.
 - Identify ways to win over these opponents to your proposed solution.
5. Conclusion (¼ page)
- Very briefly recap the problem and why your policy is the best solution for that problem. Your conclusion should be no longer than 2-3 sentences.

Policy Memo Writing Tips

Policy memos are not like other academic papers we have asked you to write. The main purpose of a policy memo is to provide analysis and policy recommendations on a certain issue, and they are written for people who are often very busy. Due to the need for quick, accurate information in the policy world, you want to write policy memos so that readers can swiftly access fact-based information in order to make an informed decision. Here are some tips for writing in the style that policy memos require:

- **Bottom line up front** - You should put your bottom line, or main conclusions, upfront. In other words, you should place the most important information at the beginning of your memo and have the less significant details follow in order of importance.
- **Clarity** - Policy memos need to be clear and direct so that your readers can understand your main points quickly. This means that you should avoid lengthy and complicated sentence structures, and you should try to write each of your points in the most straightforward way. A good rule of thumb is to avoid sentences that are longer than 3 lines. Sentences that are close to taking up three full lines should be rare. You should also try to simplify your language, and of course, avoid unnecessary jargon.
- **Organization** - This point is really an elaboration on the points above, but it is really important for policy memo writing that your thoughts are organized in a clear and coherent way. We ***STRONGLY*** recommend that you follow the general outline we've put above. Also, you should make sure that you are not making too many points per paragraph. The first sentence of each paragraph should articulate your main point of that paragraph. Think of it as a "mini-thesis" for your paragraph. The remaining sentences of your paragraph should include the logic and evidence to support your "mini-thesis."
- **Tone** - Policy memos are written in a professional and active tone. This means that you should avoid passive voice (really, a good rule to follow for any writing), and you should also try to avoid personal pronouns. While using personal pronouns in a lot of academic writing is completely acceptable, it is extremely rare to find them in policy memos.

- **Headers** - As you know, your paper will have several sections that elaborate on the points you made in the executive summary. You should use headings to indicate each section, and those headings should provide information about what that section is about. For example, avoid using headings like “Problem” or “Solution.” Instead try to come up with a more informative heading, like “The Link between Food Insecurity and Civil Conflict.”

Outside Research

A well-researched policy memo should have **at least 6** outside sources. We suggest the following resources for your research:

- **Google Scholar**: This is one of the best sources to find academic research related to your topic. We suggest using it as your first source to research all aspects of your memo
- **Stanford Library**: You can search for books in the library but you can also talk with the librarians who have a great deal of experience and training in identifying resources related to your topics.
- **Congressional Research Service Reports**: These reports provide research for Congress on a wide variety of topics. These reports could be a great source for you to look up current policies and recommendations related to your topic. Most reports related to your topics will likely be filed under “Miscellaneous Topics.”
<https://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/>
- **Council on Foreign Relations**: CFR provides excellent backgrounders on a variety of topics in international affairs. They provide useful information on foreign policy problems, current policies, and potential solutions.
http://www.cfr.org/publication/by_type/backgrounder.html

Citations

All of your citations should be formatted as **endnotes**. If you don’t know what endnotes are or how to format them, you can learn more at <http://www.wikihow.com/Do-Endnotes>. We do not have strong preferences for which citation style you choose, but you should pick one and stick with it. We would suggest either MLA or Chicago Style.

You need to cite your online references in your chosen citation style. ***It is not sufficient to simply copy and paste the URL as a reference.***

Do this:

Lederer, Edith M. "U.N. Appeals For \$204 Million to Combat Africa's Food Security Crisis." Time. July 19, 2016. Accessed July 27, 2016. <http://time.com/4414252/the-un-appeal-204-million-el-nino-africa/?xid=homepage>.

Not this:

<http://time.com/4414252/the-un-appeal-204-million-el-nino-africa/?xid=homepage>