



# How to write policy memos:

## Communications Program Workshop

Lauren Brodsky, Ph.D.

Lecturer in Public Policy, HKS Communications Program

[Lauren\\_brodsky@hks.harvard.edu](mailto: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) →	<b>Strengths:</b> (Advantages, assets, capabilities)	<b>Weaknesses:</b> (Vulnerabilities, pressures, limitations)
<u>External</u> : Things you can't control/predict →	<b>Opportunities:</b> (For creation, development, partnerships, positive change)	<b>Threats:</b> (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.*





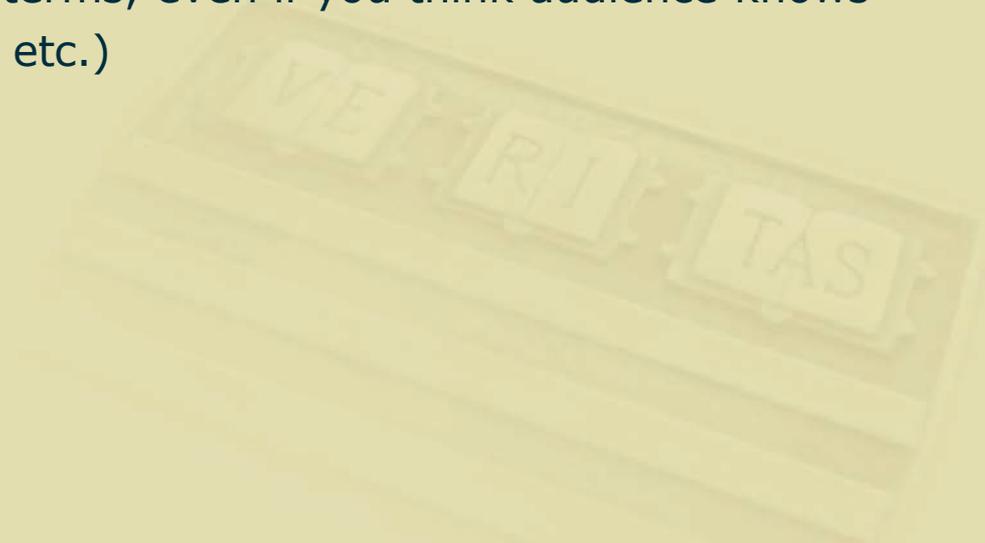
## Step 3: “User-friendly” editing:

### **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](http://www.hkscommprog.org)

Policy Memo Resource

[www.hkspolicymemo.org](http://www.hkspolicymemo.org)

How to write a policy memo:

[https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Academic%20Dean%27s%20Office/communications\\_program/digital\\_resources/lb\\_revised\\_1\\_31\\_18\\_lb\\_how\\_to\\_pol\\_mem.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Academic%20Dean%27s%20Office/communications_program/digital_resources/lb_revised_1_31_18_lb_how_to_pol_mem.pdf)

How to write an executive summary:

[https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Academic%20Dean's%20Office/communications\\_program/workshop-materials/How%20to%20Write%20an%20Exex%20Summ%20TO%20USE%204\\_18\\_18.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Academic%20Dean's%20Office/communications_program/workshop-materials/How%20to%20Write%20an%20Exex%20Summ%20TO%20USE%204_18_18.pdf)