How to write policy memos:

Communications Program Workshop

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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:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Internal: Things you can control/predict (maybe)</th>
<th><strong>Strengths:</strong> (Advantages, assets, capabilities)</th>
<th><strong>Weaknesses:</strong> (Vulnerabilities, pressures, limitations)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>External: Things you can’t control/predict</strong></td>
<td><strong>Opportunities:</strong> (For creation, development, partnerships, positive change)</td>
<td><strong>Threats:</strong> (Competition, obstacles, external change)</td>
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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

Policy Memo Resource
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

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

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