How to Write a Policy Memo That Matters

Here's the situation:

- ✓ You're an expert policy analyst, and a client has asked for your help.
- ✓ Your client has a problem, and they're expecting you to have the skills and expertise to solve that problem for them.
- ✓ Your client wants your solution to the problem in the form of a policy memo because they don't have time to read anything longer.

Where do you begin?

You might think the first step should be to read everything you can get your hands on. Or you might be more inclined to look for publicly available data sets and brainstorm calculations you could perform. It's tempting to think that once you've learned as much as you can about a topic, you'll be able to come up with a solution to your client's problem. A better way to begin is to ask yourself what the client doesn't yet know. More specifically, what is it they *need* to know to fulfill their mission or achieve their goals?

To Write a Policy Memo That Matters:

There are **Three Questions** your client could be struggling to answer:

1. **What is happening?**
2. **What is working?**
3. **What should be done next?**

Your client could be struggling to answer one of these questions or all three. For example, imagine your client is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to reduce the amount of meat consumed by Americans as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and decrease the harmful effects of climate change. What don't they know that they need to know to fulfill their mission?

1. **What is happening?** How much meat is consumed annually in the United States? How many metric tons of greenhouse gas does the production and transportation of meat in the emit on an annual basis?
2. **What is working?** What efforts have already been undertaken to reduce meat consumption, and how effective have those efforts been?
3. **What should be done next?** What policy options could be implemented to help reduce the amount of meat that is consumed and thereby reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States?

Three Types of Policy Answers

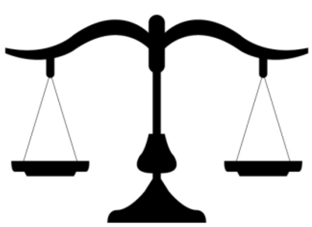
Once you know what unknowns are keeping your clients from fulfilling their missions or achieving their goals, you can be more selective in your research, data collection, and analysis to ensure you are being as efficient with your time as possible. After you know enough to answer our client's questions, you can do so in one of three ways:

1. Descriptive

Answers the question: *What is happening?*

For example: **To what extent are women represented on US corporate boards?**

Representation of women on US corporate boards has increased to about 16 percent, but a number of factors may hinder further progress.



2. Evaluative

Answers the question: *What is working?*

For example: **How effective is the Choose to Change Program in reducing arrests for violent crime among the students who participate in it?**

Those who participated in the Choose to Change Program had 48 percent fewer arrests for violent crimes than their peers who did not participate in the program, and these positive results persisted 18 months after the program ended.

3. Prescriptive

Answers the question: *What should be done next?*

For example: **What policy options could help older workers who lost their jobs during the Great Recession regain employment?**

In the short term, policies to provide enhanced reemployment assistance and help address perceived employer reluctance to hire older works could be most beneficial.

The Four Elements of a Policy Answer

Instead of getting lost in an internet search or a regression analysis when tasked with solving a client's problem, you've now determined what questions your client had and then set out to provide answers to those questions. The next step is to determine which pieces of evidence you'll need to make each type of policy answer as persuasive as. In public policy, we can divide evidence into four distinct types:

Condition What's happening? 	***Criteria*** What should be happening? 
Cause Why is the condition happening? 	***Effect*** What might happen next? 

As a statistically minded policy analyst, it may be tempting to get hung up on the terms "cause" and "effect." Please try not to. We're not talking about causal effect. Instead of "cause," think instead of "correlation" or maybe "contributing factors." What is *contributed* to the condition (i.e., the problem, challenge, or deficiency) you identified? The reason we absolutely need to know this is because your proposed solution—your policy recommendation—needs to address the cause of the problem, otherwise the policy answer you provide to your client's question will not be at all persuasive or helpful.

A descriptive policy answer needs only a condition because a descriptive policy answer will not result in a policy recommendation. That doesn't mean, of course, that it isn't a valuable undertaking to provide a client with a descriptive policy answer. Helping a client understand what is happening can be a hugely important contribution. Evaluative and prescriptive policy solutions, on the other hand, require you to include ALL four elements of a policy finding if you want to persuade your client to implement your policy recommendation.

Writing Deductively with Enough Evidence

In the Key Finding section of your policy memo (see Policy Memo Template below), each paragraph needs to be written deductively, which means that the main point of the paragraph is presented in the first sentence. The remaining sentences in the paragraph should present the data, facts, statistics, as well as your analysis and reasoning (and any context needed) to prove the point you make in the first sentence.

In the example below, imagine that your client is a nongovernmental organization tasked with efficiently and effectively administering food aid in parts of the world ravaged by natural disasters or civil wars. They want to know whether it's best to provide food or cash to those affected.

Note that the criteria are not explicitly stated here because "what should be happening" is implied (i.e., people affected by natural disasters and civil wars should be efficiently and effectively served by your client). In this paragraph, we're presenting evidence that suggests perhaps the best strategy is to combine the two methods of food aid delivery:

Condition

When food aid needs to be administered in countries were inflation is rampant, providing it in the form of cash and food has been shown to be more effective than providing cash alone.

Evidence & Analysis

In January 2010, Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Stephen Devereux published the results of a study they conducted on Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme. Their team of researchers conducted a regression analysis on a two-wave panel survey conducted in 2006 and 2008. The data show specifically that food transfers enabled higher levels of income growth, livestock accumulation, and self-reported food security.

Cause

This may be partially explained by the fact that the cash transfers that were studied were not indexed, meaning they did not adjust to inflation. A reliance on cash transfers that are not indexed to deliver social protection in an inflationary environment "is not an optimal strategy," the researchers noted, "because commodity-based transfers retain their value whereas the purchasing power of cash transfers is eroded by rising commodity pricing" (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2010).

Effect

Until nongovernmental organizations are afforded the flexibility to provide food aid in the combined form of cash and food, they may be missing out on opportunities to deliver food aid as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Policy Memo Template

To: Your Client

From: Your UChicago ID Number

Date: Month Date, Year

RE: Your Recommendation

Executive Summary

In the executive summary, you will state your recommendation; always start with your main point first! Then briefly summarize your main findings as answers to your client's questions. Essentially, you are explaining why you recommending they take action. End the summary with a brief statement of what will happen if the client implements your recommendation.

Background & Methodology

Here you will provide context and any historical or technical information the reader may need to understand your findings—and nothing more. Consider what your reader already knows. You may also need to briefly explain where your data comes from and how they were analyzed. Depending on your findings, you may not even need a Background & Methodology section.

Your Key Finding(s) Should Be Presented as a Full Sentence with a Subject and a Verb

In the key finding section(s), you will answer your client's questions directly. You will also provide evidence (and the context surrounding the evidence), as well as your analysis of the evidence in support of your descriptive, evaluative, or prescriptive answer. You may also need to include information on any limitations associated with your findings and rebut alternative options, if necessary.

Recommendations

Your recommendations should link the root causes of the requestor's problem, which you should have identified in your key findings section, with *what* needs to be done by *whom.* Your recommendations should be feasible, cost effective, and specific without being too narrow.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should place your key findings in a broader context that reminds the reader of the issue's importance. Why is important that action be taken immediately? A good conclusion will weigh loss aversion against hope for the future as motivating factors.

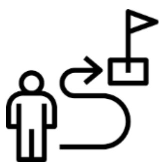
Writing Recommendations That Matter

To be most effective, recommendations to improve operations or conduct further research should (1) clearly identify feasible actions that need to be taken and (2) provide the appropriate level of detail to facilitate implementation and subsequent follow up. Other considerations include:

	Audience	Address your recommendation to a person or program so that it's clear who's responsible for ensuring the recommendation is implemented.
	Purpose	To be valuable to your client, your recommendations must: 1. Explicitly connect to the description of the evidence. 2. Evaluate between the cause of whatever barriers or challenges are holding the client back vs. the potential outcome you would expect to arise from the recommendation. 3. Be feasible, cost-effective, and measurable.
	Explanatory Statement	Focus on concisely presenting who should do what and why. Avoid phrasing that reintroduces the barriers or challenges you uncovered. That information should be presented in the key finding section.
	Lead-in Sentence	If you're making multiple recommendations, use a lead-in sentence like: "We are making four recommendations to improve program operations…" Your recommendations can then be placed into a numbered or bulleted list below the lead-in sentence.
	Clarity and Precision	Choose specific phrasing (e.g., ***explore*** vs. ***ensure*** and ***plan*** vs. ***implement*** require different actions). Avoid being unnecessarily prescriptive. If you want to recommend that certain steps be taken, those steps should be introduced with ***including*** or similar language. If, on the other hand, you want to recommend that your client determine their own course of action to meet your recommendation's intent, you can introduce those steps with ***such as*** or similar language.

Writing Conclusions That Matter

To be most effective, conclusions should make it clear to your reader why it is important for them to act on your policy recommendations now. This section is that last thing they will read before putting down your policy memo. What is the lasting message you want them to take away from all of the hard work you put into it?

	**Purpose**	To be valuable to your client, your conclusions must: • Highlight the significance of your key findings. • Explain why corrective action needs to be taken. • Inspire an immediate response.
	**Tone**	Effective conclusions are: • Fair and balanced • Proactive • Compelling
	**Approach**	The conclusion should: • Highlight outcomes that may follow the enactment of the recommendations: “If you do X, Y will happen.” • Make explicit the stakes of the recommendations.
	**Things to Avoid**	Do not: • Summarize your key findings only. • Introduce new findings or evidence. • Restate your recommendations.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
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Being Your Own Best Editor

	Revision Questions:	✔
Content	Is the problem you’re trying to solve clearly articulated?	
	Are you using the applicable elements of a finding to tell your story?	
	Condition: What’s happening?	
	Criteria: What should be happening?	
	Cause: Why is the condition happening?	
	Effect: What will happen next?	
	Did you describe the data in context and does that description clearly link to your key finding(s)?	
	Have you uncovered the *root cause* of the policy problem or challenge?	
	Have you explicitly evaluated the limitations of what is currently happening vs. the potential limitations of your own findings? Have you also explicitly defined why your own findings are preferable?	
	Do your recommendations arise logically from the evidence?	
	Are your recommendations feasible, cost-effective, and measurable?	
	Is the tone appropriate for your reader?	
Clarity	Do you begin each paragraph with the main point (deductive structure)?	
	Do each of your paragraphs contain only one point (paragraph unity)?	
	Does every one of the sentences in each paragraph relate or expand on its main point (paragraph coherence)?	
	Is the subject close to the verb and the subject-verb close to the beginning of each sentence (sentence core)?	
	Are you writing about people whenever possible?	
	Are you using the old-to-new principle to transition between sentences?	
	Are you mostly writing in the active voice?	
	Do you avoid using jargon and define terms throughout?	
	Are you using headings and subheadings?	
	Does your structure and formatting conform to the reader’s expectations?	
Concision	Is your memo as long as it needs to be but as short as it can be?	
	Have you read your memo out loud and backwards?	
	Have you rooted out unnecessary weak verbs, nominalizations, and prepositional phrases?	
	Have you pruned any needless words (“double words,” redundant or meaningless modifiers, empty nouns, and adverbs)?	
	Is your writing free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors?	
	Does your writing contain fragments, comma splices, or run-ons?	