Tips for Writing Policy Papers

A Policy Lab Communications Workshop

This workshop teaches the basic strategies, mechanics, and structure of longer policy papers. Most policy papers are written in the form of either a public facing white paper or an internal briefing paper, both of which offer authoritative perspective on or solutions to a problem.

White papers are common not only to policy and politics, but also in business and technical fields. In commercial use, white papers are often used as a marketing or sales tool where the product is pitched as the "solution" to a perceived need within a particular market. In the world of policy, white papers guide decision makers with expert opinions, recommendations, and analytical research.

Policy papers may also take the form of a briefing paper, which typically provides a decision maker with an overview of an issue or problem, targeted analysis, and, often, actionable recommendations. Briefing books and white papers often accompany an oral briefing that targets key findings or recommendations. The decision maker then refers to the extended paper for the deep analysis that supports the core findings and/or recommendations.

Core Components:

Although the policy paper relies on your authority over the deep research that you have conducted on the issue or problem, you should also pay close attention to audience, the professional expectations and jargon of your targeted decision makers, and the structure and flow of your argument. Here are some general attributes that structure the analysis and argument for most policy papers:

- **Define the problem or issue.** Highlight the urgency and state significant findings for the problem based on the data. Objectivity is your priority, so resist the urge to overstate.
- **Analyze—do not merely present—the data.** Show how you arrived at the findings or recommendations through analysis of qualitative or quantitative data. Draw careful conclusions that make sense of the data and do not misrepresent it. Your data should be replicable.
- **Summarize your findings or state recommendations.** Provide specific recommendations or findings in response to specific problems and avoid generalizations.
- **Generate criteria for evaluating data.** Explain the key assumptions and methodology underlying your analysis and prioritize the criteria you rely on to assess evidence.
- **If you are producing recommendations, develop a theory of change, and analyze the options and tradeoffs according to your methodology and assess their feasibility.** What are the pros and cons? What is feasible? What are the predictable outcomes? Develop a logic model to gird your analysis and support your assertions with relevant data.

- **Address**—and when appropriate rebut—**counterarguments, caveats, alternative interpretations, and reservations to your findings or recommendations.** Your credibility as a policy analyst relies on your ability to locate and account for counterargument. You should be especially sensitive to the likely counterarguments that a decision-maker would face in implementing or acting on your recommendations or findings.
- **Suggest next steps and the implications of the findings or recommendations.** You may briefly address the feasibility of next steps or explore the implications of your analysis.
- **Distill the conclusions succinctly in a concluding section and remind the decision-maker of the big picture, the overall goal, the necessity of the investigation, or of the urgency for action.** This answers the "Who cares?" question that reminds the reader of the value of the research and recommendations. If you are targeting a decision maker, you should reflect the decision-maker's primary concerns.

Basic Structure of a Policy Paper

1. The **Executive Summary.**
2. **Introduction (and Background)**. These are sometimes broken out as separate sections with the introduction dedicated to the broad goals and underlying motivations for the paper and the background allowing a fuller development of the historical rationale and context for the issue. Sometimes they are joined to describe the context for the ultimate goal, the decision to move forward with research on the topic, or the big picture for the research you are undertaking. This is also where you might highlight your theory of change.
3. **Methodology**. Narrate your methodology briefly. Relegate the micro data, survey questions, and the specific details for your rationale in the appendices.
4. **Literature Review**. Here, you should more fully describe the status of existing academic work or thinking about the issue and situate your own research in the context of questions that still need answers. How does your work or project fit into the overall context of existing research or common academic perceptions on the general issue? What scholarly contributions does your work offer?
5. **Policy Options or Policy Context.** Depending on the orientation of your research, you may need to explore the pros and cons of possible policy options. You should always describe the status quo of current policy, including current intervention efforts.
6. **Analysis of Findings or Evidence**. This is your original research. You want your argument to flow logically and fluidly, but be sure to use descriptive headings and subheadings to help guide and orient the reader.
7. **Case Studies and Best Practices**. If your findings are grounded in original case studies, indicate the names of those case studies individually with "Lessons Learned" at the end of each individual case study. Be aware that "Best Practices" demand rigorous analysis and do not flow intuitively from Lessons Learned. If your analysis of the case studies proves lengthy, you might relegate the full details to Annexes and then summarize each with "Lessons Learned" (and, if relevant, "Best Practices") in the text of the report.

8. **Policy Options and Recommendations**. Again, break these out by specific subheaders. Some policy papers may merge the findings and recommendations, with the recommendations flowing immediately from specific findings. Most, however, present all findings together in a single section, followed by policy options and recommendations. Just to be clear, it's okay if your analysis stops short of full recommendations so long as you clearly lay out the relevance for your analysis of the evidence.
9. **Implementation and Next Steps**. Some policy papers fold implementation into the recommendations or into next steps. Others break out this section discretely to detail the specific steps of how and when to implement the recommendations. If there are significant risks, costs, or obstacles associated with implementation, you should discuss them in the earlier section that describes the pros and cons of the policy recommendation/s. This section should be dedicated to the mechanics of implementation. Again, your paper may stop short of developing implementation, but you might acknowledge implementation as a part of "Next Steps."
10. **Conclusion**. Here, you might return to the big picture or the motive of your analysis: What is the goal of the analysis or of your policy recommendation/s? What will happen if the decision-maker does not act on your research or move forward with the recommendation? What will happen if she does? While you do not want to succumb to rhetoric, this is your opportunity to remind your reader of the importance of your analysis.
11. **Appendices**. These typically include the survey data and questions, charts and graphs, and details of case studies that gird your analysis.
12. **Bibliography**. While professional white papers may not reference their sources, any academic papers *must* provide a full bibliography in addition to fully cited, footnoted references. Footnotes and endnotes, however, are not standard for most white papers.

Heuristics to Assess Competing Policy Options:

The options feasibility charts and the PEST and SWOT matrices

After you have produced findings on the problem, you must orient the data around likely solutions. The option and decision feasibility chart and a PEST analysis can help you locate recommendations in competing data and perspectives.

PEST focuses on how **political, economic, social, and technological** factors affect the feasibility of a policy option. Examples of political factors could include applicable regulations, taxation issues and government policies (which are also sometimes broken out more specifically as "Legal" factors); they can also be construed as the political interests at stake (which may overlap with social factors). Economic factors include inflation, business cycles, government spending, overall cost, and consumer confidence. Social factors include demographics, public attitudes, and income distribution. Technological factors focus on the technology involved in supporting or implementing a particular option, including energy use and the availability of key technology. PEST analysis involves not only identifying the relevant factors, but also considering options for responding to these influences.
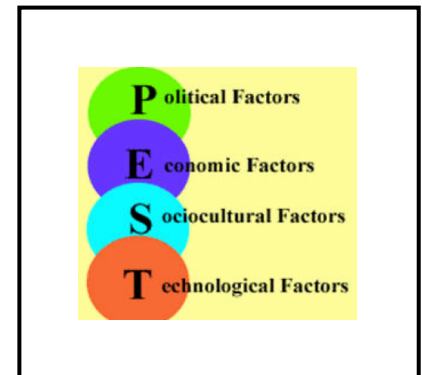
Yet, PEST analysis for policy makers is a somewhat fluid heuristic. It simply offers a starting point from which you can drill down to increasingly detailed conclusions and recommendations. It may also be broken out as PASTEL, for example: Political, Administrative, Social, Technological, Economic, and Legal factors. You should adapt and prioritize the underlying criteria according to your policy needs.

The first example chart shows the variability in a strong PEST analysis, breaking it into five categories to assess the feasibility of implementing four recommendation options: Political Feasibility, Administrative Feasibility, Equity, Cost Effectiveness, and Environmental Impact. That chart also shows that the policy writer folded Social Feasibility into the Political Feasibility and Equity tests. The example chart focuses on the problem of pesticides, offering four possible policy options to control farm pesticide use: (1) Do Nothing/Status Quo, (2) Tax Pesticides, (3) Increase Number of Pesticides Banned, (4) Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops, (5) Limit the Number of Pesticides that can be applied to a particular crop. The chart then assesses the overall positive and negative outcomes or qualities associated with each possible solution to reveal a dominant recommendation: Tax Pesticides.

You can build your own Feasibility Chart by measuring options in the context of PEST categories and through the perspectives of key interest groups. The more detailed your knowledge of your subject, the more authoritative the outcome of the chart. In this chart, the policy writer prioritizes five hypothetical solutions to the problem of pesticide use among farmers:

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Options

	Political Feasibility	Administrative Feasibility	Equity	Environmental Impact	Economic Impact/Cost Effectiveness
Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	-	-	+/-
Tax Pesticides	+/-	+	+/-	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+/-	-	-	+	-
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	-	-	+/-	+	+/-
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on Certain Crops	-	+/-	-	+/-	+/-
Criteria	Political Feasibility	Administrative Feasibility	Equity	Environmental Impact	Economic Impact/Cost Effectiveness

The PEST chart shows that, while all five options have positive environmental impact, only one of the options predominates among the other criteria. In this policy analyst's view, taxing pesticides meets the bar of being administratively feasible and equitable to all parties; it has a positive environmental impact and it is both cost effective and offers a positive economic impact. For this policy writer, taxing pesticides is the best recommendation, which she will highlight early in her memo.

You'll note, however, that the first column—"Political Feasibility"—shows up as the single negative for her recommendation of Tax Pesticides. Thus, in the body of her memo, the writer needs briefly to address and rebut or qualify the shortcomings of the political feasibility of taxing pesticides. The writer will also discuss the highlights, tradeoffs, and shortcomings of the other findings, demonstrating, for example, the limitations of increasing the number of banned pesticides and of limiting the amount of pesticides applied to particular crops.

A second chart examines the same five possible options through the perspectives of involved interest groups.

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Stakeholders Chart

Options

	The Public	Traditional Farmers	Chemical Production Companies	Farm Labor	The Environment	Organic Farmers
Do Nothing/Status Quo	-	+	+	-	-	-
Tax Pesticides	+	-	-	+	+	+
Increase Number of Pesticides Banned	+	-	-	+	-	+
Discourage Pesticides through Tax Breaks to Ecologically Appropriate Crops	+	+/-	-	+	+	+
Limit the Number of Pesticides Used on Certain Crops	+	-	-	+/-	+/-	+/-
Interest Groups	The Public	Traditional Farmers	Chemical Production Companies	Farm Labor	The Environment	Organic Farmers

The stakeholders chart shows that, while all five possible options (or solutions to the problem of under-regulated and over-used pesticides) have both positive and negative aspects, once again, the solution of taxing pesticides dominates. When the option of "Tax Pesticides" again shows up positively, the writer can feel certain in prioritizing that recommendation.

Should the researcher wish to drill down further into the recommendation of taxing pesticides, she could, for example, compose yet another chart that breaks "Tax Pesticides" into different components, depending on her overall goals. She might, for example, analyze different types of taxes for pesticides or, alternatively, break the pesticides into subgroups, taxing them according to their virulent effects on people or the environment. The chart is only as authoritative as its creator but it will focus your attention on possible outcomes or findings. It is a first step in clarifying your ideas before writing the policy paper.

SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) **Analysis**. The SWOT analysis is adapted from organizational management and business strategy. It surveys the surrounding environment of a specific policy or strategy that you are analyzing or proposing. It allows you to identify the internal characteristics of the policy as either strengths or weaknesses and classify external factors as opportunities or threats.

After assessing and classifying internal and external factors, analysts construct a 2-by-2 matrix with the following four cells: strengths-opportunities (S-O), weaknesses-opportunities (W-O), strengths-threats (S-T), and weaknesses-threats (W-T). You should run each of your recommendations through a SWOT analysis.

SWOT ANALYSIS

	Helpful to achieving the objective	Harmful to achieving the objective
Internal origin (attributes of the organization)	Strengths	Weaknesses
External origin (attributes of the environment)	Opportunities	Threats

The Executive Summary

Once you have determined your dominant recommendation/s or findings, you are ready to structure your white paper or briefing book and write the Executive Summary. The structure of the paper or briefing book should build towards your recommendations, not develop the chronology of the problem or research. It can help to write a draft of the Executive Summary first as a structuring device. You will, of course, return to it at the end of the process of writing, revising it in accord with your final analysis.

Although the Executive Summary is the most important part of any policy paper, it is often the most difficult to write. Yet there are basic steps that will help turn complex ideas into succinct and powerful arguments guaranteed to capture the attention of a busy reader. You will, for example, need briefly to describe the current policy situation, offer immediate pros and cons of your reasoning for change, and explicitly state your recommendation/s or findings.

The Executive Summary serves as a starting point – but also the end point – for the policy paper. It telegraphs your key recommendations, relying on your authority as a researcher or expert in your field. It not only summarizes your key points for the busy reader, but highlights the recommendations in a memorable way to guide future discussions. Think of it through the lens of your decision maker: What key points best prepare your decision maker to remember and understand your research and recommendations?

As a general rule, the executive summary is no more than 5% of the full length of the paper, so a 100-page white paper might have a 5-page executive summary. This is merely a rule of thumb. Your executive summary should be as long as it needs to be to summarize your key points.

1) **Motivation/problem statement:** Why do we care about the problem? What practical, theoretical, legal, sociological, or policy gap does your research address? How does your work contribute to the field? How does it intersect—or not—with other scholars' work in the field?

2) **Methods/procedure/approach:** What did you do to get your results? What methods did you use—e.g., developed and analyzed surveys, completed a series of multivariate regressions, analyzed the legislative history of the issue, interviewed stakeholders, etc.

3) **Results/findings/recommendations:** As a result of your analysis, what did you learn/recommend?

4) **Conclusions/implications:** What are the larger implications of your findings? How do they help readers understand the problem? How do they help decision makers understand/solve the problem? How do they help identify the gap in existing research? Are there next steps in pursuing research on the issue?

A useful way to draft your introduction is the journalist's "Who / What / Why / How" heuristic.

WHO and WHAT / Where

1. **Acknowledges** the target audience, the intended use/s, and the expected dissemination for the paper.

2. Concisely **states the problem or issue.** It may orient the problem in terms of policy. What are the limitations or deficiencies in current policy?

WHY

3. Offers **reasons** for initiating research to examine the problem and more fully explains why the issue is problematic.

4. May sign post **key policy options** or **standard approaches**; sometimes this is stated as the status quo, sometimes it includes existing alternatives that seek to remedy or address the problem.

5. May sign post the **pros and cons** of existing approaches or options or may highlight the **general trends** in addressing the issue.

HOW / When

6. May reference the **methodology** used to examine the data or explain core assumptions that guided research and analysis.

7. States **findings** or evidence that explore / describe / explain the issue. It may **recommend** corrective actions or policies.

8. Offers **supporting reasons** for the analysis of the evidence or for selecting or highlighting particular actions.

9. May **conclude** briefly with the urgency and opportunity for action.

A checklist for drafting the executive summary:

1. Are all of the crucial points of your argument covered? Do you prepare your reader for the analysis ahead? Conversely, if this is all the reader had to refresh her memory after reading your full analysis would she be adequately equipped to discuss your argument, testify on the issue, or move forward with a policy debate?

2. Is there a brief, clear storyline that outlines the big picture?

3. How effectively do you summarize the sections ahead? Does the structure of those sections reveal the right logic for your target audience? Have you framed the issues from the perspective of key stakeholders, senior decision-makers, or your target audience?

4. How focused is the background description? Beware of wasting space on background.

5. Are problems well specified from the perspective of the likely reader(s)? If relevant, are existing and potential laws, regulations, and current policy interventions covered?

6. If you are proposing policy options, do you signpost the tradeoffs involved? Are all problems matched with potential solutions or guidelines for change? Is the treatment of advantages and disadvantages (economically, politically) analytically sound and clearly explained?

7. Are recommendations and/or findings feasible, clear, and logically prioritized?

8. Do you suggest a framework for future work on the issue?

9. Is the overall presentation and writing quality up to professional standards? Do you avoid excessive wordiness?

Examples of White Papers and Policy Reports

- RAND Corporation Research Briefs, https://www.rand.org/research.html
  - Example: "Working Conditions in the United States," RAND, 2017
    - https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2014.html

- Congressional Research Service Reports (some are issue briefs, others full reports), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/
  - Example: State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism: Legislative Parameters, June 2016
    - https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R43835.pdf
  - Example: Congressional Gold Medals: Legislative Process, February 2018
    - https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45101.pdf

- NRDC
  - Issue Brief: Where There is Smoke, There is Fire, 2013
    - https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/wildfire-smoke-IB.pdf
  - White Paper / Policy Report: Amedabad Heat Action Plan, 2017
    - https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/ahmedabad-heat-action-plan-2017.pdf

- Pew Center, Asia Society. January 2009. "A Roadmap for U.S.-China Cooperation on Energy and Climate Change,"
  - http://www.pewclimate.org/US-China
  - This report presents a vision and a concrete roadmap for U.S.-China collaboration focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate the effects of climate change. The report begins with a "Forward" that highlights the importance of a collaboration between the U.S. and China as key leaders in negotiating climate change policy. The Forward also names key goals and describes underlying motivations.
  - The Executive Summary explicitly names basic assumptions for the rationale supporting the methodology, findings, and recommendations. Without those assumptions, readers will not be persuaded of the report's ultimate recommendations. The Executive Summary then advocates its major recommendations before moving on to explicit findings with second-level, more specific recommendations. The conclusion to the Executive Summary underscores the urgency of following its recommendations both in a negative sense—what will happen if China and the U.S. do *not* act on these recommendations—and in a positive sense—what will

happen if China and the U.S. *do* act on the recommendations. While conclusions are not mandatory for executive summaries, they do allow you to return to the big picture or the motive and urgency of your policy recommendations.

- Stanford Law and Policy Lab Deliverables, https://law.stanford.edu/education/only-at-sls/law-policy-lab/deliverables/
    o Example White Paper / Policy Report, Fake News & Misinformation: The Role of the Nation's Digital Newsstands, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, Stanford Law School, October 2017
        ▪ https://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fake-News-Misinformation-FINAL-PDF.pdf
    o Example White Paper / Policy Report, Intermediary Liability: The "Right to Be Forgotten" and Blocking Orders under the American Convention: Emerging Issues in Intermediary Liability and Human Rights, Stanford Law School, Fall 2017
        ▪ https://law.stanford.edu/publications/the-right-to-be-forgotten-and-blocking-orders-under-the-american-convention-emerging-issues-in-intermediary-liability-and-human-rights/
    o Example White Paper / Policy Report, Criminal Justice: Diversity in Prosecutors' Offices, Stanford Law School, 3-12-16
        ▪ https://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Diversity-Case-Studies-Final-3.12.16.pdf

- Copyright Office: United States Copyright Office, *PRE-1972 SOUND RECORDINGS* (12/11), Executive Summary. http://www.copyright.gov/docs/sound/pre-72-exec-summary.pdf
- Copyright Office, *PRE-1972 SOUND RECORDINGS* (12/11), Full Report.
    o http://www.copyright.gov/docs/sound/pre-72-report.pdf

- Academic Style Example: Three Years of the Right to be Forgotten, February 2018
    o https://www.elie.net/publication/three-years-of-the-right-to-be-forgotten
    o You'll note that the Abstract and Introduction are the equivalent of an Executive Summary in this paper. You'll also note that the paper frontloads its data in the form of graphs and charts, rather than moving them to appendices as you might with a paper intended for a specific decision maker.

- Prize-winning policy analysis thesis, Harvard Kennedy School
    o Mamie Marcus (2007), *Immigrant Voters in Massachusetts: Implications for Political Parties*,
        ▪ http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-marcuss-immigrant-voters-in-massachusetts.pdf
        ▪ This policy analysis paper first highlights the findings, building on them for the subsequent recommendations. It is far simpler in style, structure, and argument than a Copyright Office white paper, but it offers a good starting point for understanding the structure of a standard white paper.
    o Agustina Schijman and Guadalupe Dorna, *From Vulnerable Mountaineers to Safe Climbers* (2012)
        ▪ http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/mpaid/SYPA_Dorna_Schijman_2012.pdf

- This policy paper offers trenchant insight on the decline of the middle class in Argentina, with actionable recommendations for the government. Following the Introduction, the paper defines its key terms and describes its methodology. It states clear motivations for the research, laid out as goals or objectives. At each step, the authors never lose sight of the practical and actionable nature of their research and recommendations.

Resources

General Texts on Policy Analysis:
- Bardach, Eugene. 2000. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- Brest, Paul and Linda Hamilton Krieger, 2010. *Problem Solving, Decision Making, and Professional Judgment: A Guide for Lawyers and Policymakers*. Oxford UP.
- Smith, Catherine F. 2010. *Writing Public Policy*. Oxford UP.
- Weimer, David L. and Aidan R. Vining. 1992. Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

General Writing Guide:
- Williams, Joseph. 2008. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace.*

Online Resources

- Stanford Law and Policy Lab Skills and Communications Resources
  - https://law.stanford.edu/education/only-at-sls/law-policy-lab/communications-resources/
- Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program
  - http://shorensteincenter.org/students/communications-program/
- The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking
  - https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing/graduate-students/graduate-workshops
- *The HKS Policy Analysis Exercise: The Writing Guide*:
  - http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/PAE-WRITING-GUIDE-2009.pdf
- "Advanced Policy Writing for Decision Makers," HKS communications course (HKS, DPI 821M), which focuses on the production habits, style, and structure for extended white papers and briefing books.
  - http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k92966
- "Policy Writing for Decision Makers," Luciana Herman's basic policy writing course (HKS, DPI 820M), which teaches basic policy analysis, style, and structure for proposals, memos, and oral briefings.
  - http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k91384