

## HOW TO WRITE A POLICY MEMO

### I. WHO READS MEMOS?

The typical recipient of a policy memo a) is extremely busy, b) is far less knowledgeable about the subject at hand than the memo's author, c) is responsible for making important decisions on the basis of memos like the one you are about to write and d) has an agenda. All the suggestions below should be considered in this light.

### II. INTRODUCTION FORMAT

Begin your memo with a short summary introduction. This introduction should tell the reader:

1. The memo topic and what ground or issues it covers.
2. Why you wrote the memo – the request, the debate, the decision to be made, etc.
3. What recommendations you make or key themes to remember. Summarize your main points in a few sentences.
4. Where the memo is headed. You should provide a brief roadmap: Section 1 provides background on Osama bin Laden; Section 2 describes why he turned to terrorism; Section 3 assesses the threat posed by Al Qaeda; Section 4 outlines policy options for dealing with Al Qaeda; Section 5 describes my policy recommendation

Many people never read more than the introduction or executive summary. Those who do will find it much easier to understand your memo after reading it.

### III. WRITING

Your memo should be easy to follow and easy to read. Five guidelines for good formatting should be kept in mind.

1. Stay on point and keep it short. The typical memo should make a single point or a handful of related points. Drop any argument that does not support your main point/s. Concise memos earn wider readership and higher praise than long memos no one ever finishes. You should be direct, choose your words carefully, and edit rigorously. There should be no extraneous words in your memo.
2. Organize your memo around meaningful sections. Repeat the memo's most salient points and conclusions in the section headers. These will help guide the reader quickly through your memo.

Examples:                      Alternatives: Law Enforcement or Military Intervention?  
Criteria for Decision Making  
Fewer Attacks, But Greater Lethality  
From Exile to Terrorism: The Evolution of Hamas  
(Appendix) Terrorist Threat Profile

Start each section with a mini roadmap. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that summarizes its main point. A reader should be able to follow the flow of your memo just by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

Examples:

*Section:* In this section I review Hamas' evolution from a splinter faction of the Muslim Brotherhood into a full-fledged terrorist organization.

*Paragraph:* Abimael Guzman provided the main ideological spark behind the development of the Shining Path organization in the 1960s.

3. Use formatting to enhance the informational content of your memo. An important way to improve ease of readership is the use of tables, figures, and bullet points. The goal in all cases is to say more with less. Make sure when you use these that they actually enhance understanding and don't just look cool. Use bullets for lists and simple ideas. Avoid long lists. Use paragraphs for complex ideas. Tables and

figures should allow the reader to understand more while reading fewer words – if you have to spend a page explaining a figure you probably should drop it.

4. Write for a broad audience. Don't write a memo that only you and three other experts can understand. Avoid technical jargon and bureaucratese. Make your memo self-contained and comprehensive enough (while keeping it short!) to enable others to understand the basis for your conclusions.
5. Provide citations to your sources of information within the text of the memo (Thrall 2006). Bibliographies may be appropriate depending on the circumstances. Obey whatever citation formatting norms are in place where you work.

#### **IV. ANALYSIS & ARGUMENTATION**

The fundamental purpose of a policy memo is to help people make decisions. Your memo should provide exactly as much description as is required to allow your reader to understand your analysis and no more. Even if you are asked to provide background or an overview of an issue, event, person, or group, your goal is to analyze, not merely describe. When necessary, descriptions of historical periods should aim to illustrate the key themes relevant to current policy debates. Likewise, when you are making a case for a policy option, your memo must persuade through logical argument, not simple recitation of facts and assertions.

Example:

*Descriptive style:* 1. Sheik Ahmed Yassin founded Hamas in 1987 to create an Islamic state in Palestine.

*Analytical style:* Three major factors led Sheik Ahmed Yassin to found Hamas in 1987. First,...

#### **VII. CONCLUSION FORMAT**

Your conclusion should reemphasize your main points and recommendations. How exactly you do this will depend on the purpose of your memo. Generally speaking, however, the conclusion is the place to explore the implications of your analysis and recommendations. What arguments or policies do they call into question, which do they reinforce? What additional analysis seems required? What other key decisions must be made in light of your work?

#### **VII. VETTING**

Ask a friend or colleague to read your memo. It can be especially helpful to have someone from outside your discipline read your work. Helpful questions to ask yourself before submitting your memo include:

- Does my introduction provide a clear summary of the memo?
- Is my main point clear?
- Is my memo's organization clear and are all my sections and paragraphs presented in a logical manner?
- Can my reader easily follow the memo?
- Can someone outside my department/organization/profession understand my writing?

#### **VIII. BEAUTY TIPS**

Your memo should dress for success. Check your work for spelling and grammar errors. Legible font sizes, reasonable margins, good paper, and high printing quality are essential.

A. Trevor Thrall  
University of Michigan – Dearborn  
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