

WISE GUIDELINES for Preparing a Public Policy Paper

A public policy paper defines an important current issue (could also be referred to as a problem), provides an up-to-date analysis of the issue, and makes recommendations to policymakers that are designed to fix the issue. The intent of writing the paper:

- Fully informs policymakers, giving them the information, they need to resolve the problem.
- Makes recommendations that are relatively comprehensive and bring the best, most current information to bear on the topic,
- Synthesizes and summarizes information in clear and insightful ways.

A public policy paper is not:

- A technical paper – Do not include 10-20 pages of descriptions of the technology. The challenge is to concisely and clearly give the non-technical reader a sufficient understanding of the technical aspects of the issue involved, without going into detail.
- A legal brief – It is not intended to verify a predetermined conclusion.
- A history paper – Do not include endless historical references and background; address only the info necessary for a reader to understand how we arrived at the current problems and situation.
- A journalistic account – Do not rely primarily on anecdotes, personal experiences, anonymous sources, or newspaper accounts.
- An attempt to not contribute new, original data.

COMPONENTS of the PAPER

A public policy paper must include the following components.

A. Executive Summary

A 1-2 page summary of the central components of your paper – What is the problem? How did we get here? Why has the issue not been addressed, or if it has, what were the failures? Where should we go from here? How will things be better under your recommendations.

B. Main Body of the Paper

1. Define the Issue/ State the Problem – What are you trying to fix?

Begin your paper with a short section (2-3 pages) introducing your issue. The purpose is to give the reader an immediate indication of what you are going to be talking about and why. What issue are you addressing and why is it significant?

Be very explicit about the subject matter and be careful to define the central terms of your paper. Most of this section should be devoted to indicating why this topic is worthy of consideration. Consider that your audience is a group of lawmakers and/or regulators who have the responsibility to create public policies (either legislation or regulations) that will address the issue you have defined. Questions you should answer include:

- What is the key driving force of this issue? For example, what scientific or technological changes led to this issue?
- How many people are affected by this issue? Who are the stakeholders?
- Does this issue have severe economic, environmental, or social consequences?
- If the issue is not dealt with, will it cause irreversible damage?
- Has the issue generated significant public reaction or concern?

2. Background – The info that a reader will need to understand why you think something is an issue to be resolved/ fixed. Why is it a problem?

This section of the paper should describe the key technological and historical aspects of the issue (without resorting to a historical chronology) and the reasons why we have arrived at the current situation. Questions to answer include:

- When did the issue arise?
- Which participants in the system (interest groups, political leaders, etc.) brought the issue to public attention?
- What were the interest and values at stake; e.g., economic growth vs. environmental protection.
- When and how did the government respond? Which levels of government were viewed to be responsible?
- What is the legal and regulatory framework that allowed this situation? For example, describe the laws and regulations enacted, the agencies responsible for administering these laws, etc.
- How have government policies affected the issue to date?

One of the greatest difficulties faced, both in writing the paper and in making the oral presentation, will be to keep this material concise. You will likely gather - via written resources, public hearings, meetings, interviews, etc., vast amounts of information about your topic, and it will be difficult to resist the temptation to inform your reader about everything learned in the process. Don't do it! Find a clever way to get the key information needs across to a lay audience clearly and concisely. Think about using visuals to convey information, such as pie charts,

graphs, and appendices (which you can use to break out info that you may deem necessary but disrupts the concise flow of the paper).

3. Findings aka Problem Statements, Key Conflicts & Concerns

This section flows naturally from the background section by discussing the *immediate* aspects of the issue. You may find yourself mixing up the two sections but try to keep the “findings” and discussion of current reality, separate from the historical information.

Findings are statements of fact and should help describe why your chosen issue has been difficult to resolve. For example, this could include discussion of potential technological breakthroughs, economic costs, impasses (e.g. political gridlock) between key individuals, arguments over the state of knowledge (e.g., our capacity to predict impacts from acid rain), etc. By the end of this section, the reader should have a good picture of the key conflicts. Questions to be asked include:

- What are key constraints to resolving this issue?
- How credible is our knowledge about this issue? Are the participants disagreeing over "the facts"?
- How are the participants behaving in order to realize their values and interests? What resources (money, people, time, media) are they using?

****The background and findings sections of your paper should total about 12-16 pages, including graphics and text.****

4. Your Recommendations for Resolving the Issue

This section (10-12 pages) informs the reader about the viable choices for resolving or mitigating the problem. Alternatives should be limited to options which policymakers can control. It is not appropriate to focus on such broad alternatives as societal changes or new economic systems. Also, do not try to solve the problem by simply recommending more funding, more research, or anything that requires appropriations of federal dollars. This section includes the most important aspects of your paper, 1) the recommended fixes and 2) the expected impact of the fix.

- Listed Recommendations: (3 to 5 options) with descriptions of each “Fix.” You should not feel restricted to obvious options. You are encouraged to be innovative or to adapt alternatives from other related situations.
- Descriptions of the Impact of each Recommendation: Evaluate each recommendation and the impact you expect it will make on the issue you are addressing. Although criteria for evaluating your recommendations, such as economic effects, may be commonly used, there are no clear guidelines for choosing these criteria. The choice largely depends on your knowledge of the problem area, but guard against choosing "loaded" criteria which favor one alternative. Using your selected criteria, assess the

costs and benefits of each recommendation. Who will gain and lose, how much, how soon, etc.?) What trade-offs are involved among alternatives? Is there a clear choice? How feasible are the recommendations? How difficult will it be to implement them?

REMEMBER, this last section is the most important part of your paper and the whole purpose of the paper. You are a sales person, selling an idea that you believe will solve an issue of the day. It is imperative that your reader receive a thorough briefing of the recommended fix followed by the impact of that fix. The impact is your way of helping to sell the solution. Why do you think it will work? Describe how the impact of implementing a recommendation will solve the problem in such and such a way.

You are not required to generate original data for this paper--in most cases sufficient information already exists. By the time your proposal is written, you should know what references and information resources you will be using.

While the results of any policy analyses will seldom eliminate the uncertainties that policymakers face, your recommendations – backed up by solid findings – can help them to make better informed choices. Results of policy analyses are useful only when they systematically describe, evaluate, and compare alternatives using clearly specified criteria and appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures. Policymakers like numbers, hard facts, and comparisons.

While many policymakers desire to have a "bottom line," no single measure or evaluation criterion can provide an adequate summary of the costs, risks, and benefits of alternative policies. The combination of measures and criteria to be used is determined both by what is being evaluated and the interests and values that are at stake. Although economic measures and criteria are often used by policymakers, they seldom provide, by themselves, an adequate basis for evaluation. For example, dollars are not an adequate measure of aesthetic values nor do they provide an accurate indication of how equitably an alternative may distribute costs, risks, and benefits. While it is possible to determine the dollar cost of environmental controls, the associated social costs often cannot be determined. By themselves, economic measures and criteria can be used to evaluate only one component of overall costs, risks, and benefits.