



# Writing for Public Policy

A Guide for Writing Public Policy Memos

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## Statement of Purpose

Writing in the discipline of Public Policy is not the same as writing a traditional research paper or essay. In order to gain a deeper understanding for writing in Public Policy, it is important for any writer to acknowledge the differences between traditional research papers and policy-specific memos. Institutions of higher education frequently teach writing through two common methods: narrative essays or research-based assignments. Public Policy memos *do* fall under the general structure of a research-based paper, but they also contain a distinct subset of discipline-specific features that should not be ignored. When students find themselves in situations where they must write in accordance with intradisciplinary conventions, such as Public Policy memos, they are only able to draw on these generic teachings to guide their writing experiences. The purpose of this document is to correct this information deficiency by providing every writer a detailed, comprehensive guide to writing in the field of Public Policy.

## What is a Public Policy Memo?

At their most fundamental level, policy memos aim to communicate essential information to decision-makers quickly and clearly.<sup>1</sup> They serve as vehicles to persuade their readers to act on a particular issue in a certain way.<sup>2</sup> Much of the time, readers of Public Policy memos include, but are not limited to, politicians, lobbyists, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and public initiatives. Unlike a traditional academic audience, readers of Public Policy papers usually have a finite amount of time they may dedicate to any one policy memo. Therefore, a concise, straightforward presentation of information is essential for a successful paper.

Instead of focusing on ways society *ought to be* in theory, Public Policy memos emphasize ways society *can be* in practice. In essence, the Public Policy discipline values practicality and feasibility over abstraction and theory. A writer may present any idea they wish, but it must be grounded in sound logic, and have clear, practical application to modern day society. The reader must be able to reasonably use the suggestions set forth by the memo towards addressing a certain policy. For this reason, one could not simply write “we need to cut all carbon emissions on earth by next week”. While a novel idea in theory, no decision maker would ever spend more than 30 seconds reading such a document before throwing it in the trash. It simply does not present a feasible solution towards the policy objective of climate change.

In order to gain a fully contextualized understanding of writing within the Public Policy discipline, it is worthwhile to compare and contrast research papers, persuasive essays, and Public Policy memos.

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Fulco, Renny. *Personal Conversation*. 28 Nov. 2017

## Research Papers

The primary objective of an academic research paper is to discover and create new knowledge about a particular topic or subject.<sup>3</sup> Typically, writers are less concerned with taking a side in these types of papers, and are more interested in providing the reader a resource to understand something in a way they may not have before. In essence, provoking thought and providing understanding to the reader is much more important than advocating for a particular outcome. A relevant example of the scope of a traditional research paper could look like this:

“A Comprehensive Outline of Electoral Mechanisms in the United States”

In this paper, a writer would likely discuss the electoral systems which exist in America in great detail. Despite any preconceived notions about the topic, the writer would refrain from making overt efforts to convince their audience of these views. Instead, the paper would serve as a source of information and knowledge for any reader who wishes to gain a greater understanding of electoral systems in America.

## Persuasive Essays

Similar to traditional research papers, persuasive essays require the writer to undertake significant investigation and fact finding. In the same way, they serve as instruments towards informing their audiences about a particular issue through research findings. Persuasive essays do have the purpose of enlightening their readers, however, they also aim to *influence* their audience to take up a particular viewpoint on the topic they are discussing. Writers accomplish effective persuasion through providing evidence which supports their personal interpretation or point of view.<sup>4</sup> Returning to our example of Electoral Systems in America, the scope of a persuasive essay may look like this:

“The Prevailing Electoral System in the United States does not Represent All Citizens Equally”

The writer’s purpose is clear: show the reader *why* the Electoral System in the United States does not represent all citizens equally. By presenting information and evidence which supports this view, the writer is effectively attempting to persuade the reader.

For persuasive essays we generally write for academic audiences. Therefore, persuasive essays need not necessarily present *solutions* to the problems they may outline; so long as they effectively convince their readers of a specific viewpoint, they have done their job.

In relation to our previous example, if the writer provides compelling evidence which effectively convinces the reader that electoral systems in the United States are not fair to all individuals, they have

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<sup>3</sup> “Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Writing a Policy Memo.” *University of Southern California*. 28 Nov. 2017. <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/policymemo>

<sup>4</sup> “Argument.” *UNC College of Arts and Sciences*. 2017. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/argument/>

satisfied their primary objective. A solution as to what kind of system may, in fact, provide equal representation to all individuals is not essential to that objective. Because the vast majority of persuasive writing operates within the realm of academia, this should come as no surprise.

## Public Policy Memos

At this point, it should be fairly clear that Public Policy memos differ considerably from research papers and persuasive essays. In an effort to highlight this distinction, we return to our previous example of Electoral Systems in the United States. The purview of a Public Policy memo relating to this topic might look as follows:

*“Strict Proportional Representation: A Case for Reform of America’s Electoral Systems”*

Any reader of a memo such as this would immediately notice the difference in detail in the title. Along with describing what policy end the memo seeks to accomplish (“Reform of America’s Electoral Systems”), the reader also learns how they should *go about* accomplishing that end (“Strict Proportional Representation”).

This memo would likely provide ample information and discussion relating to existing electoral systems in the United States, as a traditional research paper would. The memo would also include a persuasive argument based off of an interpretation of the evidence included, similar to a persuasive essay. The final component unique to the Public Policy memo, therefore, is the presentation of an actionable solution geared towards a specific audience with decision-making power.<sup>5</sup> If the reader of this memo were to be convinced of its arguments, they then would have a clear, strategic framework for how to act as a result.

Now that the distinction between Public Policy memos and broader academic writing has been emphasized, it is important to examine some key characteristics which comprise Public Policy memos under a greater level of scrutiny.

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<sup>5</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

## Key Characteristics

### Tone

The tone of a Public Policy memo should be neutral and straightforward. Writers should refrain from recruiting emotional rhetoric to argue their viewpoints, as it will hurt their credibility and perhaps distort their argument altogether.<sup>6</sup> Policymakers strive to make decisions based on sound, empirical logic, not emotional conjecture. Once neutrality is lost and emotive biases take over, the writer's conclusions will be scrutinized, regardless of empirical validity. Writers should not be discouraged from using passionate *language* within their memos, but the language must be clearly connected to the evidence presented. Writers should also attempt to avoid clichés and bureaucratic jargon as much as possible, as they carry the risk of taking the reader's attention away from the main point of the proposal. Use of straightforward, plain language which clearly connects to the evidence presented in the memo is always preferred.<sup>7</sup>

### Brevity

The most effective Public Policy memos present information in such a way that the reader understands the main points of the piece after a quick read, or even after reading the first sentence of each section.<sup>8</sup> Themes should not be buried in the middle of paragraphs, and left up for interpretation as to how they relate to the entire memo.<sup>9</sup> Intuitively, this notion of brevity makes sense: decision makers do not have infinite amounts of time to evaluate the rhetorical beauty of policy proposals. For example, the opening sentence of a policy memo advocating for distracted driver initiatives may look like this:

*“Due to rapid increases in cell phone usage in the past decade, coupled with the fact that licensed drivers comprise 67% of the United States’ population, distracted driving has become a significant public policy problem which must be addressed immediately”*

After reading one sentence of this memo, the reader already understands the objective of the entire paper: advocacy of policies which combat distracted driving.

### Objectivity

Objective analysis and critical evaluation are essential ingredients towards success in Public Policy writing. This means that a writer must consider possible *negative* outcomes of a policy they propose,

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<sup>6</sup> Frakt, Steve. “Policy Memo Writing Tips.” *Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs*. 28 Oct. 2014. <http://wws.princeton.edu/admissions/wws-blog/item/policy-memo-writing-tips>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> “Policy Memo.” *Duke Writing Studio*. 2012. <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/policy-memo.original.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Frakt, Steve. “Policy Memo Writing Tips.” *Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs*. 28 Oct. 2014. <http://wws.princeton.edu/admissions/wws-blog/item/policy-memo-writing-tips>

along with the evidence which supports it.<sup>10</sup> By convincing a reader that they must take a particular course of action while considering opposing viewpoints, the writer becomes more persuasive in their argument altogether. Biased methods of research and presentation will only deteriorate a writer's credibility, and, furthermore, degrade the validity of their arguments.

## Audience

Public Policy memos should be crafted with respect to the professional nature of their audience. Readers often have powerful decision-making privileges, and operate within positions of authority. Unlike audiences for other forms of writing, readers of Public Policy memos crave information which easily translates into concrete policy decisions.<sup>11</sup> Writers should take this reality into account, and assume that their readers have limited knowledge of the issue, as well as little time to conduct research about it.<sup>12</sup> While encouraging critical reflection and higher order thinking on issues is always important, readers of Public Policy memos prioritize coherent evidence which supports explicit solutions.

## Political Palatability

Because policy memos often pertain to political issues, it is important for every writer to consider the political positions held by their respective readers.<sup>13</sup> For example, a memo advocating for gun reform policies would likely be met with different feelings by Democrats than Conservatives. Therefore, it is of vital importance that the writer frames their policy proposal in such a way that it caters to the respective political preferences of their audience. If one were to craft a Public Policy memo advocating for gun reform to a *Democratic* legislator, its title may look like this:

“Mandatory Background Checks for Private Firearm Purchases: A Case for Gun Reform aimed towards Curbing the Supply of Readily Accessible Weapons to Dangerous Owners”

A memo such as this would likely appeal to many Democrats because the party tends to take a prohibitionist stance on gun control. Because the title suggests that the policy will curb the supply of weapons, a Democrat would be more likely to respond in a warm way to this memo. In contrast, a memo advocating for gun reform directed to a *Republican* legislator may look a little different:

“Mandatory Background Checks for Private Firearm Purchases: A Case for Gun Reform aimed towards Keeping Guns in the Hands of Responsible Owners”

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<sup>10</sup>“Guide to Writing an Effective Policy Memo.” *Leadership for Educational Equity*. 2009. [https://educationalequity.org/sites/default/files/documents/best\\_practices\\_-\\_policy\\_memo.pdf](https://educationalequity.org/sites/default/files/documents/best_practices_-_policy_memo.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

<sup>12</sup> “Guide to Writing an Effective Policy Memo.” *Leadership for Educational Equity*. 2009. [https://educationalequity.org/sites/default/files/documents/best\\_practices\\_-\\_policy\\_memo.pdf](https://educationalequity.org/sites/default/files/documents/best_practices_-_policy_memo.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

Contrary to the memo addressed to the Democratic legislator, this memo stresses the objective of preserving the right to gun ownership, a commonly held view amongst most Republicans. It should be noted that both proposals outlined above are advocating for the *same solution*: mandatory background checks for private firearm purchases. Therefore, the only difference between the two examples is the way in which the issue are framed. Nevertheless, this difference is not insignificant, and could be a determining factor in how effective the memo is in persuading its reader. Whenever possible, writers should anticipate the political biases of their readers, and frame their arguments in ways which will be most likely to appeal to them.

## Concision

Writers should be succinct in their arguments, and avoid unnecessary details when possible.<sup>14</sup> A Public Policy memo is a document that follows a logical, systematic pattern. Redundant details and complicated sentences carry a high risk for disrupting this chain, and may take the reader's attention away from what is important. Hence, writers should avoid fancy jargon, and only reintroduce a point that has already been made if it is absolutely essential to the reader's understanding and comprehension of the proposal at large.

## Active Voice

Because Public Policy memos aim to inform decision makers about relevant policy problems, the language which accompanies a writer's arguments must suggest some level of urgency. Active voice suggests that a problem is currently ongoing: gun violence in the United States *is* a debilitating issue. Conversely, use of passive voice carries a different set of connotations: gun violence in the United States *has been* a debilitating issue. Although both arguments concern the same topic, it is more of a stretch to assume the latter is referring to an ongoing problem. Writers should leave no doubt in their reader's minds that the issue they are discussing is relevant and important. Therefore, active voice should be used whenever possible.

## Substantiation

Opinions, facts, and inferences made in Public Policy memos must always be substantiated by credible findings and evidence.<sup>15</sup> Decision makers have no interest in hearing generalized, unsupported arguments which amount to little more than pure conjecture. Once a writer fails to substantiate their claims, they lose credibility. A writer should never be worried about finding *too much* evidence to support their claims, as too much is much better than none at all.

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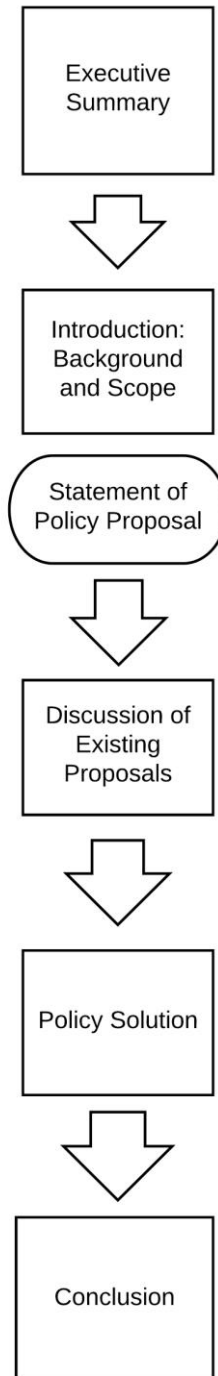
<sup>14</sup> "Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Writing a Policy Memo." *University of Southern California*. 28 Nov. 2017. <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/policymemo>

<sup>15</sup> "Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Writing a Policy Memo." *University of Southern California*. 28 Nov. 2017. <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/policymemo>



## Structure

While there is no-one-size-fits all approach towards crafting Public Policy memos, most tend to follow a common structural framework. A diagram depicting these steps is displayed below.



### Executive Summary

The first section of most policy memos usually includes what is known as an executive summary. By convention, this section generally stands on its own before the main body of text, and serves to provide readers a brief synopsis of the main idea of the entire memo. After looking over the summary, every reader should have an understanding of what the rest of the memo will explain<sup>16</sup> Taking the example of electoral college reform, an executive summary may look as follows:

*“Coming on the heels of only the fifth election in American history where the president elect has not won a majority of the popular vote, our country finds itself embroiled in a divisive debate questioning the legitimacy of our presidential election system: The Electoral College. A significant number of citizens support reformative measures for the electoral college, as they remain in disbelief that a majority of the country could favor a candidate, but not gain the presidency. Supporters of the president elect remain committed to the system and its longevity, as it serves as an important tool to help their preferred candidates retain office. We are now faced with the question of whether the electoral college should be reformed to better represent current American society, or if it should maintain its current structure as the framers intended. Considering the extent to which American society has changed since the time at which the electoral college was constructed, the need for electoral reform is as evident as it has ever been. I propose a modified electoral college voting mechanism which relies on a strict proportional representation measure to equally represent every American citizen and each of our 50 states in a 21st century context.”*

After examining this summary, every reader would understand that electoral college reform is a contentious topic, one which carries historical connotations with it, and one which the writer is suggesting be addressed with a particular course of action. In essence, the writer has boiled down the main points of their memo into one paragraph, precisely what an executive summary strives to accomplish.

Constructing a thoughtful, informative executive summary is not always an easy task. Often times, it can be difficult to maintain the perfect balance between having enough information or having too little. Luckily, there are several strategies writers can employ which will make this process much easier. In reference to the flowchart above, writers should attempt to implement a variety of elements from each section of their essay into their executive summary. This may be as simple as making sure one to two sentences within the executive summary refer to each respective section of the memo itself. For instance, the writer in the previous example included components relating to background and scope, existing policies, and their own policy proposal. Above all else, it is absolutely essential that the policy proposal be listed within the executive summary. Otherwise, readers will not have a way of knowing what the writer seeks to argue for within the memo.

Another common strategy for crafting executive summaries suggests waiting until the end of the essay to write them.<sup>17</sup> Often times, the goals and objectives of a policy memo can change during drafting, making it difficult for writers to have an exact idea of how to synthesize their arguments leading into the paper. By waiting until the end, writers can draw their executive summary from a finished product, not a piece of

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<sup>16</sup> “Policy Memo.” *Duke Writing Studio*. 2012. <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/policy-memo.original.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Fulco, Renny. *Personal Conversation*. 28 Nov. 2017

work that is still evolving. Executive summaries are undoubtedly difficult to master, but nevertheless are essential to good writing in Public Policy.

## Introduction: Background, Scope, and Proposal

The introductory section of any Public Policy memo is critical to the infrastructure of the piece as a whole because it sets the stage for the arguments the writer will eventually make. Typically, this section is no longer than an opening paragraph, however, length can vary depending on the complexity of the issue as well as the anticipated audience.<sup>18</sup> At this juncture, it is essential to capture the reader's attention, and inform them why the subject of the essay is relevant and important. One of the most effective techniques a writer may use towards this end is explaining the *scope* of their issue.<sup>19</sup> For example, in a memo advocating for gun reform, one may explain the extent of the issue like so:

*“Among a group of 22 comparable high-income countries, the United States boasts a firearm homicide rate twenty times higher than those countries combined (Webster). This reality becomes even more troubling when considering the fact that crime rates in the United States have been steadily decreasing since the 1980’s (Galston). It would appear as though less people have been committing violent crimes, yet, those who do are using guns more often than not. The negative effects of gun violence are not exclusive to the criminal sphere. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, and accounts for 44,000 deaths per year. An estimated 50% of these deaths are inflicted by use of a firearm (Suicide Statistics). This would suggest that guns singlehandedly account for 22,000 suicides per year. The fiscal consequences tied to gun violence are equally extraordinary to the amount of fatalities it causes: gun violence costs the United States an estimated \$229 Billion per year, which equates to \$700 per American citizen. For reference, the United States Government spends \$251 Billion per year on Medicaid, a legal government program (Follman).”*

Decision makers require an informed understanding of the magnitude of the policy issue so they can *prioritize* the urgency and severity of a particular response. In this example, the reader can recognize the extent to which gun violence affects the American public, and can make an educated decision on how they will approach the problem.

In addition to scope, it is essential that writers provide a comprehensive background of the policy issue they seek to discuss. Knowing how to balance the amount of content within this section can be difficult, however, there are some techniques which can aid in achieving a proper equilibrium. Writers should always **define** the problem created by the policy situation.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean merely presenting data; this means discussing the *implications* which stem from those findings. The goal is to convince the reader

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<sup>18</sup> Herman, Luciana. “Policy Memos.” *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*. Fall 2012. [https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO\\_Herman\\_Policy-Memos\\_9\\_24\\_12.pdf](https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO_Herman_Policy-Memos_9_24_12.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Fulco, Renny. *Personal Conversation*. 28 Nov. 2017

<sup>20</sup> Herman, Luciana. “Policy Memos.” *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*. Fall 2012. [https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO\\_Herman\\_Policy-Memos\\_9\\_24\\_12.pdf](https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO_Herman_Policy-Memos_9_24_12.pdf)

that the evidence suggests a significant policy problem exists in society. Perhaps the greatest tool available to a writer in their introduction is the ability to generate criteria for evaluating options.<sup>21</sup> Here, one must be strategic in the choices that they make, as they will serve as a foundation for legitimizing their proposed policies later on. Returning to the gun reform example, one may outline evaluative criteria in the following way:

*“American taxpayers, along with direct victims, pay a high price for gun violence in America. Taking into account the mortality and economic costs associated with the problem, the gravity of the situation we find ourselves in today becomes much more clear.”*

After reading the previous statement, a reader would understand that the writer aims to measure the effects of gun violence both in terms of lives lost and economic costs. When proposals are discussed later in the paper, the reader will now be primed to understand the ways in which the writer wishes them to consider those proposals.

Last, but not least, it is of vital importance that a writer include their proposed policy solution within their introduction section.<sup>22</sup> No decision maker has the time to comb through a policy memo for hours. Therefore, policy proposals should not be buried on the third or fourth page of a memo: they should clearly mentioned within the first page of the document.<sup>23</sup> Just as traditional academic papers use a thesis statement to guide their arguments, Public Policy memos utilize an integrated statement outlining their proposals to do the same. While this may be tricky to execute considering that most memos include *multiple* policy solutions, writers should strive to craft a statement which encapsulates the ideas present within each specific proposal.<sup>24</sup> Going back to the gun reform example, a sample policy statement may look as such:

*“In order to combat the issue of gun violence in America today, lawmakers must pursue federal legislation which enacts a broader set of disqualifying criteria within background checks for firearm purchases.”*

The writer went on to argue for mandatory background checks for private sales, a mental health criteria within background checks, and an educational attainment requirement for firearm purchases. Each of these solutions are covered within the statement of the policy proposal, even though they are not specifically spelled out. They all constitute “disqualifying criteria within background checks for firearms purchases.” The reason why this approach can be effective is because it ties together a group of specific policies by a common thread, and delivers them to the decision maker in a concise manner. It is much more challenging to craft a one sentence statement for a group of unrelated solutions than it is for a set

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

which shares a common attribute. Therefore, writers should always attempt to select solutions which embody a broader idea or policy objective.<sup>25</sup>

## Discussion of Existing Proposals

At this point, the writer has clearly outlined the background and scope of their issue, and has provided a proposal for the solutions of which they intend to suggest. Before moving on to the nuts and bolts of each specific argument, writers must include a brief discussion of current policies, both existing and proposed, relating to their problem.

This section should stand as an opportunity for the writer to demonstrate how their solutions expand upon whatever is taking place in current practice. For instance, our memo advocating for gun reform may include the following as a discussion of an existing proposal:

*“In an effort to address the issue of background checks, Congress passed the Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act in 1994. The legislation instituted mandatory background checks for all firearm purchases in the country from licensed distributors. To date, the act has had some success, as an estimated 2 million people have had applications for firearm purchases denied due to disqualifying criteria within background checks. Yet, current studies indicate that 40% of all gun acquisitions are from unlicensed dealers, a demographic not covered by the law. Furthermore, criminals use weapons from these very sources in nearly 80% of the crimes they commit (Webster). Unfortunately, homicide and suicide rates have changed very little since the passage of the act. Ultimately, it is evident that the fatal flaw of the Brady Act is the fact that it permits individuals to purchase firearms from unlicensed dealers without a background check” (Webster).*

In this case, the writer provides an informative dialogue of an existing policy relating to gun control. Not only does their description serve to inform the reader; it also highlights the need for *further action*. When determining existing policies to discuss, writers should always keep in mind how they will factor into the eventual policies they propose. Once an ample discussion of relevant policies relating to the problem outlined has taken place, a writer may begin to introduce their specific policy solutions.

## Policy Solution

The policy solution section is the bread and butter of the entire policy memo; it is the glue that holds the piece together. Here, writers must unpack their broader policy proposal, and describe the specific solutions which went into it. At this point, the reader has a full understanding of the context in which the policy problem exists, as well as the criteria the writer wants them to use to evaluate the problem. Now, the writer must convince the decision maker *why* their specific solutions should be implemented.

While no two policy proposals are exactly the same, most tend to follow a similar blueprint as it relates to arguing for specific policies. The topic sentence of any paragraph suggesting a specific policy should

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<sup>25</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

**always** be a statement of the solution itself.<sup>26</sup> As discussed in the introduction section, no decision maker has the time to probe a paragraph and locate a nuanced argument. In some cases, readers may only have the time to read the topic sentence. Hence, in this section especially, it is critical that the specific argument not be buried within the depths of the paragraph.<sup>27</sup> A sample topic sentence could look like this:

*“The first step the federal government must take towards widening disqualifying criteria for background checks is the passage of legislation which would require background checks for private purchases of firearms.”*

After reading this topic sentence, the purpose of the paragraph is clear: an argument for mandatory background checks for private purchases of firearms. Next, the writer must begin to introduce the evidence which they will use to support their claim. Here, it is permissible to build off of previously mentioned information, as long the writer is not merely repeating it. For instance, in the case of the gun reform example, a writer might reintroduce the statistic that 80% of criminals involved in gun crimes obtain weapons from private sellers. In connection, they may expand upon the finding by saying:

*“Federal Legislation requiring background checks for all sellers would eradicate this private sales loophole which criminals today so commonly exploit.”*

This sentence clearly goes beyond just stating the findings: it articulates what the findings *mean* in the context of the policy situation, and how they *inform* the proposed solution. When arguing for specific solutions, it is imperative that writers qualify their evidence by discussing how it explains and validates the solutions they propose.

It is always to the writer’s advantage to respond to any relevant counterarguments which may arise from the points they make. One strategy in going about this is to insert counterarguments at points within the memo where the reader will be the most likely to have doubts about the solution.<sup>28</sup> It is up to the writer to anticipate areas of their argument which may receive the most criticism, and to be prepared to respond to it. In the gun reform example, a reader might be skeptical of the likelihood that federal legislation requiring background checks for private sales could be passed in today’s political environment. Therefore, the writer may respond by stating evidence within their argument which anticipates this criticism:

*“Contrary to the intuition that our country is sharply divided in relation to gun related policy issues, 77% of gun owners and 87% of non-owners alike support policies which require background checks for private firearm sales”*

After reading this explanation, the decision maker can clearly recognize that the writer has acknowledged a popular counterargument, and has refuted it with sound evidence. Approaching counterarguments in this

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<sup>26</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Frakt, Steve. “Policy Memo Writing Tips.” *Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs*. 28 Oct. 2014. <http://wws.princeton.edu/admissions/wws-blog/item/policy-memo-writing-tips>

<sup>28</sup> Williamson, Abigail. *Personal Conversation*. 30 Nov. 2017.

manner can be much more effective than relegating them to their own paragraph within the memo because they are fresh in the reader's mind. A well placed rebuttal within the context of the argument itself will be much more effective in addressing a decision maker's doubts than confronting the issue after the fact.

Once a writer has stated their claim, substantiated it with ample evidence, and refuted relevant counter-arguments, it is time to conclude the memo.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of a policy memo can be surprisingly tricky because it may seem as though there is nothing left to say. Likewise, a conclusion is not needed in every single context of policy writing, as some audiences will only want the policy proposal. If there is no indication that the writer should exclude it, however, it can serve as an effective tool to bring the issue back to full circle.

All other things equal, the overarching goal of the conclusion is to make the reader recognize how the specific solutions proposed in the memo relate to important broader themes and contexts. Leading into this section, a writer should look to wrap up any detailed discussion of specific policy, and transition towards considerations of what the research and findings really mean for society. Another way writers may think of this is answering the "So What?" question.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it is important to leave every reader with a lasting impression of the memo itself. A strongly worded final sentence will likely leave a reader with a greater incentive to take action.

*"Gun violence has been, and will continue to be, a debilitating ailment to the well-being of the American identity until we check our politics at the door, and fight the problem together."*

Whichever side of the issue a reader may fall on, they will be compelled to act with greater urgency having realized a broader significance to the arguments within the memo.

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<sup>29</sup>Herman, Luciana. "Policy Memos." Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy. Fall 2012. [https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO\\_Herman\\_Policy-Memos\\_9\\_24\\_12.pdf](https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HO_Herman_Policy-Memos_9_24_12.pdf)

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