How does a memo differ from other writing I’ve done?

A memo is not like many of the academic papers you have written in school. It focuses on a recommendation, rather than a thesis statement. Professional memos attempt to solve problems. That is why this writing form is common in policy, law, and business settings.

A memo is a no-nonsense document, designed to be read and absorbed quickly. Often, it contains only a few pages, because your target audience is a busy professional with little time, patience, or inclination to digest a winding, complicated, abstract piece of writing. A memo should present strong ideas clearly, logically, and actively. If you always assume that your reader has time only to skim your memo, you will not go too far astray. Writing short pieces can be more difficult than writing long pieces, because choosing the essential points and making a clear recommendation takes effort.

Memos are frequently passed along in working groups – email and websites can quickly distribute memos beyond the working group, too. In addition, memos often are filed. Therefore, work to eliminate errors, imprecise language, and careless writing – these problems can come back to haunt you.

Improving your memo writing skills now will help you communicate in the jobs you hold in the future. In fact, such skills will be helpful in crafting cover letters, etc., to help you get those jobs in the first place.

How do the policy memos in PUBPOL 301 differ from the ones I wrote in PUBPOL 155?

There are important differences in analytic focus, audience range, and research expectations.

To understand the difference in analytic focus, you can think of the policymaking process as having two main components: inputs (politics) and outputs (policies). PUBPOL 155 emphasizes the output side, but PUBPOL 301 traces back to the input side and considers how politics shape what sort of policy output is possible. PUBPOL 155 introduces students to a variety of analytic tools – game theory, decision analysis, political analysis, cost-benefit analysis, etc. – in order to evaluate competing proposals and decide which policy is “best.” But PUBPOL 301 requires students to go into political analysis in greater depth. The policy memos in this class not only make a clear policy recommendation, they also analyze how and why aspects of the political environment make that recommendation feasible for your audience to pursue.

Those audiences also may differ. In this class, you will write memos to an elected government official (e.g., the governor of California), an unelected government official (e.g., the head of the Environmental Protection Agency), and an interest group (e.g., the Sierra Club). Each operates...
in a different political environment, and therefore your analysis and recommendation should be tailored to the particular political environment of each.

To do this, you will need to conduct some research. PUBPOL 155 students typically receive the raw material (e.g., data) with which to work – but PUBPOL 301 students gather this material themselves.

What should I think about before I start writing?

Think about your audience. Professional memos have a primary audience (the name on the “to” line) but often have a secondary audience (to whom the memo might be distributed) as well. Engage and keep the attention of both audiences by thinking about what they already know about the issue, and also thinking about how you can link the issue to the political context in which they operate. How will they use this document? What is their attitude towards the subject of the memo? What is your status with this audience?

In addition, anticipate questions. The memos that you write in this class will be the result of your research and analysis of a specific issue area. But resist the urge to describe to readers every step in that process. Instead, figure out what questions readers are likely to have, and what evidence would be needed for readers to accept the claims and recommendations you make. Make a plan for answering those questions and providing that evidence.

In policy memos, as in other writing, you should cite your sources. Therefore, as you do research you should note where you obtained pieces of information. Once you begin writing, you can cite those sources in formal footnotes and/or bibliographies – but note that this approach can become unwieldy and hinder readability. If it does, try reducing footnotes and bibliographies by referencing your sources in the text itself. For example, you could refer to some research to support an assertion and introduce it this way: "a 2010 study by the Pew Center showed that . . ."

By what criteria will my memos be evaluated?

There are a number of ways in which your policy memo can delight or disappoint your target audience, and by the end of the semester we will be evaluating your memos on all six of the following criteria: 1) Issue Knowledge, 2) Political Analysis, 3) Organization, 4) Writing, 5) Tone, and 6) Credibility.

Issue Knowledge

You need to convince readers that your issue is important, and that you are an expert who can help them address this important issue. As an expert, you will never be able to fit everything you know into a single policy memo. Instead, choose the crucial points on which to focus. Do not cut out vital information just for the sake of brevity, but constantly monitor your writing with an
eye toward what the reader absolutely needs to know. Then, find ways to convey essential information succinctly. Realize that your assessment of which points are crucial for inclusion will depend on the particular audience – for example, if your target audience is already very familiar with your issue area, then you can focus more on details. But if your target audience is not already very familiar with your issue area, then you will need to outline the bigger picture, in an accessible way. Also realize that you must keep up with the latest developments pertaining to your issue.

Political Analysis

Political analysis includes understanding the institutions and incentive structures facing political actors, the interests that affect their behavior, and the calculations about outcomes that affect policymakers’ decisions. In other words, you need to demonstrate a deep understanding of the politics of enactment for your chosen issue. For example, what interests, institutions, and ideas stand in the way? What allies and opportunities are available to move the issue? What strategies might be employed? As noted above, the policy memos in this class not only make a clear policy recommendation, they also analyze how and why aspects of the political environment make that recommendation feasible for your audience to pursue.

Organization

In the real world, the content of ideas is not all that matters – ideas also need to be presented well. Therefore, make conscious decisions about how you present your ideas. First, format your memo so that important information can be obtained at a glance. Without going too far or relying on gimmicks, experiment with fonts, headings, white space, paragraph length, transitions, graphs, pictures, bold or italicized words, bullets, etc. Second, present your ideas in an orderly fashion. Following the heading, begin your policy memo with an opening summary that explains what actions you are ultimately recommending, and why. This explains the purpose of your memo and outlines the direction it will take. The subsequent sections should flow into one another – for example, if you employ the structure recommended below, the Background sets up Considerations, which in turn lead to Options, and finally to your Recommendation. Just because you’ve already summarized your recommendation in the beginning of the memo does not mean that you should end your memo abruptly. Instead, mention the next concrete step that the reader should take if he or she agrees with your recommendation.

Writing

Strive for clarity: your ideas should be presented so that readers can understand your points easily and without having to read any sentence twice. Also strive for conciseness: use as many words as you must, but no more. In policy memos, avoid sensational or “flowery” writing. Proofread and revise several times in order to eradicate poor spelling, grammar and punctuation – these obscure your ideas and turn off readers. Opt for active writing. In general, make the grammatical subject of your sentence the agent and make the verb the agent’s action. Use strong, descriptive verbs. Save passive forms for those rare occasions when they perform a useful function – e.g., to move a previously introduced concept to the beginning of a sentence so that you flow from old information to new information, or to conceal the agent of an action so that you avoid sounding accusatory.
Tone

Writing can sound angry, indignant, cheerful, pedantic, humorous, cautious, etc. It can range from stilted to formal to informal to conversational to colloquial. Many factors – sentence length, bolding, italics, capitalization, punctuation, word choice, anecdotes, clichés, metaphors, jargon, acronyms, etc. – shape the voice that comes across to readers. Craft your tone carefully. In policy memos, you are aiming to sound professional but not condescending, confident but not stubborn, energetic but not radical, accessible but not glib. Realize that even one unfortunate choice can throw off your overall tone.

Credibility

Credibility hinges on multiple things. When citing facts, be correct. Look for sources that are as timely, comprehensive, and legitimate as possible. Do not present opinions as facts – substantiate any opinion. Avoid logical fallacies such as appeals to authority, slippery slope arguments, hasty generalizations, or faulty causal claims (post hoc ergo propter hoc), etc. Use logic and facts to support each of your main points and/or to refute opposing points. Beautiful presentation cannot overcome weak or illogical ideas.

Do you have advice about how to structure my policy memos?

Content and organization are important for any piece of writing, but they are particularly important for policy memos. Again, think of your target audience, the busy policymaker. What makes her read your memo instead of the many others that cross her desk? What makes her keep reading past the first sentence or paragraph? And what makes it easy for her to locate that powerful statistic, or evocative phrase, or pivotal example when she’s using your memo for talking points in a key meeting? Structure your memo with care.

A useful template for structuring policy memos is 1) Heading, 2) Summary, 3) Background, 4) Considerations, 5) Options, and 6) Recommendation. For each section of your memo, try the following questions to kick-start your thinking and help you identify the core of what a busy policymaker would want to see.

**Heading**

To: [Name, Title]  
From: [Name, Affiliation]  
Subject: [Incorporate the decision/recommendation to be made]  
Date: [When Sent]

**Summary**

What is the issue?  
Why is the status quo unsatisfactory?  
What key information do you offer?
What actions are you ultimately recommending?

Background

What essential points about the issue’s history does the reader need to know?
How has this issue evolved, or become a concern?
Who are the other relevant actors in this issue?

Considerations

What are the 1 or 2 key problems to address?
Why would or could the reader take action?
What will be the criteria for selecting among options?
What positions have other relevant actors taken?

Options

What are the 2-4 most viable options, and why?
What constraints or potential opposition do you see?
What opportunities or potential support do you see?
Based on the criteria for selecting among options, what are the pros and cons of each option? (Don’t forget the status quo!)

Recommendation

What do you want the reader to do?
Why are you making this particular recommendation?
To overcome the risks and opposition you’ve anticipated, what do you advise?
What’s the next concrete step to start implementing your recommendation?