

More Tips on Writing a Policy Memo

Here are a few nuts and bolts suggestions on writing policy memos.

Do

1. Briefly summarize the current situation and proposed change

Don't presume the reader already knows all the relevant details. The memo should be understandable to someone who hasn't been in the loop.

2. Briefly explain key results

Indicate how you obtained your results, don't just put in a bunch of numbers.

3. Place tables and figures *after* they are first mentioned in the text.

The reader shouldn't run into a table or figure until after you've let them know it's coming.

4. Consider using pie or bar graphs to illustrate your numerical results.

However, only do it if it adds something and isn't trivial: no bar charts with just one bar! Also, be sure to include a title, labels for each axis, and indicate any relevant units.

5. Watch out for incorrect but correctly-spelled words.

Be aware that spelling checkers won't stop you from accidentally using an incorrect, but correctly spelled, word. An example that often comes up in these memos is "lose" vs. "loose". Lose is the opposite of "win", and almost always the word that belongs in the memo: e.g., "consumers lose \$1B as a result of the policy". Loose is the opposite of "tight". It's probably NOT what you mean unless you are writing about loose regulations.

6. Write in 3rd person unless you *really* know what you're doing.

Writing in 1st person can make a document more lively and readable but it has to be done carefully to avoid being confusing or condescending toward the reader. Under no circumstances use "we" unless you are part of the organization to whom you are writing (and in memos written for this class, you are not part of the organization -- you are an outside consultant). Also see the "Don'ts" section below on why it's good to avoid second person.

7. Be sure your pronouns agree with their nouns.

In formal American usage, organizations are treated as singular. This is a little tricky because it's different from usage in the UK and elsewhere, and because people don't always follow the rule in informal speech. Here are a couple of examples:

	Singular (US)	Plural (UK)
Example 1	Apple reduced the price <i>it charges</i> for the iPhone.	Apple reduced the price <i>they charge</i> for the iPhone.
Example 2	Tesla <i>is</i> going to announce a new car on Tuesday.	Tesla <i>are</i> going to announce a new car on Tuesday.

In informal settings, people are often inconsistent: they use singular when no pronoun is involved ("Tesla is...") and plural when a pronoun is present ("Apple ... they charge..."). However, formal writing should be consistent: stick with singular or plural

throughout. If you don't go the singular route, be aware some sentences ("Tesla are ...") will look like mistakes to an American reader unless the person is aware of the difference in usage and also knows (or suspects) that you're not from the US.

No matter where you're from, the verb should agree in number with the noun or pronoun. The following are wrong everywhere: "reduced the price it charge" or "reduce the price they charges".

8. Be evenhanded

Focus on stating the facts and try to avoid including too many adjectives that might overstate your case or suggest that small differences are more important than they are. For example, don't say a policy imposes "huge" costs or creates "enormous" benefits unless the costs or benefits really merit the adjectives.

Don't

1. Avoid technical terms that are not widely used by non-economists.

Don't use technical terms that will be unfamiliar to readers. Instead, explain the underlying concept. Here are a few specific terms to avoid: *pareto efficiency*, *deadweight loss*, *consumer surplus*, *producer surplus*, *elasticity*. Two technical terms that CAN be used are *present value* and *expected value* (not needed on the first memo assignment).

2. Be sure you need technical terms you do use.

Ideally, avoid using the terms "marginal benefit" and "marginal cost" as well, although this rule isn't quite as strong because those terms (especially marginal cost) are pretty widely understood.

3. Don't include equations.

They generally aren't appropriate in policy memos.

4. Don't use technical diagrams.

Avoid technical diagrams. For example, in these memos you should NOT include a supply and demand diagram.

5. Don't use 2nd person.

Do not use second person ("you" or "your") in memos. It's only appropriate if you are intending to address each reader as an individual, which you are NOT doing here. Hit the heading for a longer explanation if you're not convinced.

Formatting

1. Do label rows and columns in tables.

2. Do number pages.

3. Don't break tables across pages.

4. Don't have large blank areas in tables.

Avoid having tables with columns or rows that have really large cells for small contents. Usually that happens when one of your rows has very long contents that take multiple lines or your column labels are really long.

5. Don't let tables or figures go beyond the left and right margins.

URL: <https://wilcoxen.maxwell.insightworks.com/pages/1940.html>
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