

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITING POLICY POSITION PAPERS

A Guide for the
Fledgling Analyst



Ribbit

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITING POLICY POSITION PAPERS

A policy position paper should structure a problem facing a decision-maker or decision-makers. It should present the basic, relevant information known about the problem, and should conclude with a recommendation. A position paper should be based upon a clear understanding of the goals decision-makers want to attain--something that is easier said than done.

Any policy problem, from a decision to use or not use nuclear weapons in a regional conflict to the type of solid waste disposal plan to adopt in Hahira, Ga. may be addresses in a policy position paper. The nature of the problem to be addressed and the needs of the decision maker(s) should determine the format of the position paper. Variations of position papers are staff reports, option papers, etc.; each prepared with the needs of the decision-maker in mind. No matter what the name of the paper, each should contain certain elements. The basic format of a position paper is presented below.

Position Paper Format

- I. Cover Material
 - A. Letter of Transmittal
 - B. Executive Summary

- II. Problem History
 - A. Background of the Problem
 - B. Current Status of the Problem
 - C. Importance of the Problem

- III. Problem Definition
 - A. Statement of the Problem
 - B. Statement of Methodology Used in Analysis
 - C. Identification of Actors Involved
 - D. Impact of the Problem

- IV. Alternative Solutions/Policies
 - A. Listing of Alternatives Considered
 - B. Comparison of Alternatives
 - C. Constraints, Including Political

- V. Recommendations
 - A. Description of Policy Recommendation(s)
 - B. Rationale for Recommendations
 - C. Plan for Implementation
 - D. Provisions for Monitoring/Evaluation

- VI. End Material
 - A. References
 - B. Appendices

Each element of a policy position paper may be evaluated through a series of questions. The author should always ask "is it"--is it clear, is it thorough, etc. Some of the key questions that should be asked for each element are indicated below.

Position Paper Checklist

I. Cover Material

A. Letter of Transmittal

Is the letter addressed to all the relevant decision makers? Does it indicate who is to take action, and when? Does it list all the attached materials?

B. Executive Summary

Does the executive summary describe all the elements of the position paper? Does it describe those elements in a way that will be understood by all it is addressed to? (Do not assume that everyone knows what an AWACS is—avoid jargon as much as possible.) Is the summary concise? Is (are) your recommendation(s) clearly spelled out?

II. Problem History

A. Background of the Problem

Is the problem adequately explained in terms of where it came from and what led to the problem to place it in context for the decision maker? Are prior efforts to resolve the problem listed and evaluated? Is the significance of the problem pointed out?

B. Current Status of the Problem

This element relies heavily upon the proper completion of element II A. If that element has been properly developed, you should now be asking the following types of questions. Is the current status of the problem clearly indicated? Have the people currently dealing with the problem—and those that should be currently dealing with the problem—been properly identified?

C. Importance of the Problem

What will happen if the problem is left alone? Why is it important for policy makers to consider the problem?

III. Problem Definition

A. Statement of the Problem

Is the problem clearly defined, using relevant data? (For example, if the problem is the inability of a university to play competitive football because of the number of players ruled ineligible under Proposition 48, have you stated the number of players involved?) Are the cultural or political aspects of the problem included in the definition?

B. Statement of Methodology Used in Analysis

Are the methodologies used in the analysis clearly identified, along with the rationale for selecting those? (For example: "Input-output analysis was utilized to account for the resources that would be required for a given alternative.")

C. Identification of Actors Involved

Are the major stakeholders involved in the problem clearly identified, along with their values and priorities? Are potential players identified, and their possible impact included in the analysis?

D. Impact of the Problem

Is the influence of the problem on current, related policy areas explained? Are the potential consequences of the problem developed?

IV. Alternative Solutions/Policies

A. Listing of the Alternatives Considered

Is the list of alternatives complete? Is there an explanation as to why some alternatives were chosen for further analysis while others were not?

B. Comparison of Alternatives

Are possible alternatives compared in terms of their benefits and costs? Are spillover effects identified and factored into the analysis? Are qualitative elements included with quantitative elements?

C. Constraints, Including Political

Are all relevant constraints in terms of technical (state-of-the-art, cost, etc.) taken into account? Has political feasibility and impact been considered?

V. Recommendations

A. Description of Policy Recommendation(s)

Are all relevant criteria for selecting among alternatives identified? Is the preferred alternative presented clearly?

B. Rationale for Recommendation(s)

Is adequate justification provided for the selection being made? Does that justification include political, as well as technical aspects?

C. Plan for Implementation

Are responsibility centers identified? Is the implementation strategy clearly presented? (A Plan Activity Diagram [PAD] or something similar may be useful here.)

D. Provisions for Monitoring/Evaluation

Does the implementation plan include provisions for monitoring program implementation and for process and impact evaluation? Are unintended consequences provided for?

VI. End Material

A. References

References in a position paper should normally be brief, using the author-date (APA) format (for example: Argyle 1986, 12). A bibliography would normally include only those items actually cited in the text.

B. Appendices

Is relevant supporting material presented in a clear manner? Is the source of all material identified?