Writing Policy Papers

Introduction

The purpose of the policy paper is to provide a comprehensive and persuasive argument justifying the policy recommendations presented in the paper, and therefore to act as a decision-making tool and a call to action for the target audience.

In summarising the ideals and values of the field of policy science, the applied nature of the discipline is central. There are two main factors which differentiate policy science from traditional academia as described below.

Designing solutions for real-world problems

Unlike traditional academia which focuses on building knowledge within a group of peers, policy science must address real-world problems, and therefore provide recommendations and a framework for their application within the targeted society. For example, it is not enough to analyse the causes and patterns of unemployment in a particular society in order to contribute to its understanding as a social phenomenon; a policy study must apply this knowledge to the real situation on the ground by understanding the causes, showing that it is a problem within the community in question and suggesting a course of action to address the problem. Hence, the problem-solution relationship must be seen at the heart of the discipline, which means that any analysis undertaken must be driven and targeted on the search for a practical, implementable and comprehensive outcome.

Presenting value-driven arguments

The search for such a practical outcome not only requires a well-elaborated and comprehensive analysis of all available data, but as the issues under consideration are of a societal nature, the policy researcher or analyst will also have to make some value-driven judgements about the outcome that would best address the specific problem. Hence, proposing specific solutions in the highly politicised environment of public policy and to such a broad audience, means that central to the work of the policy specialist is not just the cold empiricism of data analysis, but probably even more important is the ability to convince your audience of the suitability of your policy recommendations. In other words, the presentation of the outcomes of your data analysis will probably not be enough to make an impact in the policy debate on a particular issue, but through the use of this data as evidence in a comprehensive and coherent argument of your position, you will give your work the best possible chance of having this impact. Majone (1989) sums up this idea excellently:

Like surgery, the making of policy and the giving of policy advice are exercises of skills, and we do not judge skilful performance by the amount of information stored in the head of the performer or by the amount of formal planning. Rather, we judge it by criteria like good timing and attention to details; by the capacity to recognise the limits of the possible, to use limitations creatively, and to learn from one's mistakes; by the ability not to show what should be done, but to persuade people to do what they know should be done (p. 20).

Planning checklist

In preparing to write your policy paper, consider the policymaking process that you are involved in and research that you (and your colleagues) have done to answer the following questions:

• Which stage(s) in the policymaking process are you trying to influence through your policy paper?

• Which stakeholders have been/are involved at each stage of the policymaking process?

• Have you identified a clear problem to address? Can you summarise it in two sentences?

• Do you have sufficiently comprehensive evidence to support your claim that a problem exists?

• Have you outlined and evaluated the possible policy options that could solve this problem? What evaluation criteria did you use?

• Have you decided on a preferred alternative?

• Do you have sufficient evidence to effectively argue for your chosen policy alternative over the others?

Eyin and Quinn (2002) also include checklists for the following: policy paper outline; title; table of contents; executive summary; introduction; problem description; argumentation; policy options; conclusions and recommendations.

Source

• Young, Eyin and Lisa Quinn (2002) 'Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide To Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe', *LGI Documents*,

Further resources

• Majone, Giandomenico (1989) *Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

• Musso, Juliet, Robert Biller and Robert Myrtle (2000) 'Tradecraft: Professional Writing as Problem Solving', *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 19(4):635-646.

• Bardach, Eugene (1996) *The Eight-Step Path of Policy Analysis: A Handbook for Practice*. Berkeley Academic Press.