ESD.10 Introduction to Technology and Policy

Assignment #2: Policy Memo

Due: Monday, Sep 18, at the start of class. Please turn your assignments in to MIT Server before class, and bring a hard copy to hand in during class.

Learning objectives:
- Understand the components of a good policy memorandum
- Gain practice in writing policy memos

Preparation:
To prepare for this assignment, please read the accompanying recent article from the New York Times, entitled "F.D.A. Has Report of Short Circuit in Heart Devices." Further extensive background research is not required nor expected for this assignment.

Assignment:
You are a Special Assistant to the Director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). She has become aware of recent heart device malfunctions, and has asked you to prepare a decision memorandum on this issue. Specifically, she wants to know what the problem really is, and her potential courses of action for dealing with it. She wants to know the brief pros and cons of each course of action, and then your recommendation and reasoning for which course of action DHHS should take. Since she is a very busy woman, she won't read more than one page. Thus, you must keep the memo to one page or less, 11 point Times font (keep in mind the Director is an aging woman who wears reading glasses), and 1-inch margins on all sides. She needs the memo on her desk no later than 2:30pm on September 18. She has a meeting with the DHHS Board of Advisors that same day at 3pm, where she will present your recommendation.

Some guidelines for a good policy memo:
[Material below is drawn directly and indirectly from various sources, in particular http://www.acs.brockport.edu/~gsaxton/introduction%20to%20memo-writing.htm . More excellent resources on writing policy memos can be found at this website.]

Good policy memos are short, concise, and to the point. Good policy memos distill the countless aspects of an issue that *could* be mentioned down to the key few that *really matter* to a decision maker. Simultaneously, they focus on the aspects of the issue that are *actionable* and within the purview and interest of the decision maker – it does you little good to recommend that a decision maker take an action which he or she is organizationally or politically or legally unable to do!

Structure

A policy memo is a document that provides analysis and/or recommendations for a particular audience regarding a particular situation or problem. A well-written policy memo reflects attention to purpose; it is well organized; and it has a clear, concise style. There are three key parts of a good policy memo, usually presented in the following sequence:

1. Introduction - Open the memo by summarizing the problem or situation about which you are writing, and by providing a very brief summary of the conclusions/recommendations you have reached during your analysis. The rest of the memo is designed to support the conclusions or recommendations you present.
2. Background - Keeping in mind that different audiences need different amounts of background information, follow your introduction with a concise summary of any historical or technical that your audience needs to understand the arguments you are building. In many cases, it may be that no background information is needed at all.
3. Supporting arguments or analysis - Once you have set the stage for your audience, show how this information leads logically to the conclusions/recommendations you have provided. You may wish to present and refute counterarguments, present courses of actions along with benefits and drawback of each, etc. – whatever will best support your conclusions.
4. Restatement or summary – Often at the end of a policy memo you will reiterate in one sentence (two at the very most!) your recommendation and chief rationale(s) for it.

Audience

In most cases, you will know the audience for a policy memo because (1) you have been hired by that individual or organization or (2) your instructor provides that information to you. Think carefully about the needs and expectations of your audience. For example, if your audience is an elected official seeking analysis on a highly technical matter, you should generally assume that the official lacks substantial technical expertise. You will need to define technical terms and provide enough background about the situation you are discussing that such a "lay" audience can grasp your arguments. On the other hand, if you are writing for a technically trained audience, you will waste time and energy providing background information that your readers already know.

Style and grammar aspects of policy memos:

- Policy memos are written in a professional style, with proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Wording should be concise, crisp, clear and to the point. In a space-constrained assignment of a memo, your words are like currency that you choose to invest in making your point. Choose them wisely.
- Third- (more often) or first-person (less often) are typically used (e.g. "The Board suggests," "The team recommends," "We believe," "I think," etc.)
- Active voice is always preferable to passive voice.
- Bulleted or numbered lists may be used in moderation.
- Always proofread your memo. Then proofread it again. Then have a colleague or friend proofread it one last time. Remember, a policy memo is read by a very important person, so typos and incorrect grammar will reflect poorly on you.

<u>Length</u>: If you can keep a policy memo to one page while giving the decision maker only the most essential information they need, you have done an excellent job. You will find that the higher the rank of the decision maker reading you memo, the less time they will have to read your memo, and hence the shorter it must be. You will also find that it takes you longer to write a one-page policy memo than it takes you to write a three-page paper. Thomas Jefferson (famous U.S. President) said, "Had I but more time, I would have written less." Plan you time accordingly.

Grading for this policy memo:
The following aspects will figure into your grade for the policy memo:

- Concise and clear framing of the problem, issues, actions, and recommendations are a critical aspect of this assignment.
- The one-page limit, including font and margin specifications, must be strictly adhered to. Submissions that do not meet these requirements must be resubmitted in the proper format and will incur a penalty for intentionally violating the requirement.
- Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and a neat presentation are important in this assignment. Points will be deducted for misspellings, typos, incorrect grammar, and the like.

Please seek the help of the MIT Writing and Communications Center for help, http://web.mit.edu/writing/index.html (617-253-3090). The Center offers scheduled appointments for writing consultation and also takes walk-ins on a first-come, first-served basis. The Center also offers help specifically geared toward nonnative English speakers. We encourage everyone in the class to take advantage of assistance from the Writing Center. They help writers of all skill levels, and even Shakespeare would learn a thing or two from them. When you visit them, bring a copy of your assignment, the work you have done on it, and a notion of the goals you would like to achieve.