

# Policy Memo Requirements & Guidelines

Prepared for: **IPPS Master In Public Policy Program**

September 23, 2010

# Requirements

## Purpose

In response to the MPP student's need to experience first-hand the type of practical and professional work typical of a policy analyst, the Graduate Program in Public Policy requires all students to produce a "Policy Memorandum."

The project is designed to provide MPP students with a capstone experience that will synthesize the knowledge and skills that were acquired during the 56-quarter hours of formal coursework. Included among the skills that students will apply to the Policy Memorandum are problem definition, critical analysis, research, quantitative methods, economic analysis, and cost-benefit analysis.

## Defining the Policy Memorandum

The Policy Memorandum is a practical and professional document that will represent the level of work that is expected from modern professional policy analysts.

Students will:

- Identify and define a real-world policy issue
- Analyze the issue by interviewing professionals with opposing views, conducting research, and gathering data
- Analyze the costs and benefits of the issue
- Recommend courses of action

## Topic Choice

The appropriate topic of study for the Policy Memorandum will:

- Involve a policy decision to be made within the public, private, or nonprofit sectors
- Require a precise problem statement
- Involve conflicting viewpoints or alternative points-of-view
- Require careful delineation of actors and stakeholders
- Involve the use of information, both qualitative and quantitative
- Be specific to relevant issues; not general
- Require cost - benefit analysis

## Length, Formatting and Submission

The Policy Memorandum is expected to be 30-40 pages, including tables and charts, excluding endnotes and reference list. The standard formatting that should be used is 11-point "Times" font, double-spaced with 1" margins.

Students must submit *four unbound* copies on the date of final submission. One-week after the presentation, students must submit an additional *two bound* copies to Mary Reed 107.

## Organization

There should be seven main sections to the Policy Memorandum:

1. Problem definition
2. Methods
3. Issue analysis
4. Proposed solutions
5. Strategic recommendations
6. Weaknesses and limitations
7. Cost-Benefit Analysis

Students may add sections or sub-sections to this general guideline, but should not omit any of these seven primary areas.

In addition, students are required to produce a one-page executive summary of their memorandum (see below for guidelines).

## Policy Memorandum Preparation Process

In order to best prepare students for the capstone project, the following process will be followed each year.

1. A Policy Memorandum Preparation Workshop will be held each Spring Quarter. Led by staff and current Policy Memorandum students, the workshop will overview the project, including: format, technical requirements, topic selection, deadlines overview and other pertinent information. Students will be left with an assignment to be completed during Summer Quarter.
2. A two-hour class session, led by the Program Director, the CBA Advisor and the Policy Memo Coordinator, will be held during the second week of classes. Subject matter to include: Importance of capstone project/intended purpose, expectations, requirements, overview and exploration of A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis, review of example memorandum, CBA overview.
3. A second two-hour class session will be held the following week, consisting of a two-hour block of individual appointments, with the participation of four Policy Memorandum Advisors. Each advisor will meet one-on-one with students. In this meeting the students will present three topics, prepared over summer and refined after first class session. Advisor and student will discuss merits and feasibility of the topics, helping students to choose a workable topic prior to the Topic Proposal Submission.

## Credit Hours

Students must register for four-quarter hours of required credit in the Public Policy Program (PPOL 4995, Independent Research). This credit may be taken any quarter during the student's final year of academic study. In order to register for the credit, please make an appointment with Debbie Sheanin, [debbie.sheanin@du.edu](mailto:debbie.sheanin@du.edu).

## Professional Ethics

Policy Memorandum content should be the student's original thought—or properly attributed in accordance with MLA standards. Any unattributed content will result in a failing grade, with the consequence of a completely rewritten Policy Memorandum (on a new topic) or expulsion from the Program without the MPP degree. The Director and IPPS faculty will determine the consequences after review of the severity of the offense.

## Timeframe

The due dates for the Policy Memorandum are strict. The advisor will consider the student's ability to meet deadlines when determining the final grade.

## Deadlines

See attached tables.

## Grading

The student's final grade will be determined by the student's primary advisor (up to 40 points possible), cost benefit analysis advisor (up to 20 points possible), and panel members (up to 40 points possible); for a total of 100 points.

Students will be evaluated on their public policy problem definition; analytical abilities; thoroughness and quality of research; quality of writing; professionalism; and presentation skills, among others. If a student's final grade is lower than a B- (80 points), he or she must rewrite the portion(s) of the paper that need(s) improvement. The student's graduation will be postponed until such time that an acceptable version (80 or more points) is submitted.

## Presentation

The panel members will consist of the student's primary advisor, the cost-benefit adviser, and one faculty or community member.

The student will present for approximately 35 minutes, the panel members will discuss the student's project and presentation (student is absent at this time) for 15 minutes, and finally, the student will answer questions from panel members and be critiqued for approximately 30 minutes.

Professional attire and practiced presentation skills are expected.

# Guidelines

## Overview

The policy memorandum is a document that outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate. It is commonly produced in response to a request directly from a decision-maker or within an organization that intends to advocate for the position detailed in the document. Depending on the role of the writer or organization producing the document, the memo may only provide a targeted discussion of the current alternatives without arguing for a particular one (i.e. those who adopt the role of 'objective' researcher). On the other end of the scale, i.e. advocates, the memo may focus directly on providing an argument for the adoption of a particular alternative. Nevertheless for any case, as any policy debate is a market place of competing ideas, the purpose of the policy memorandum is to convince the target audience of the urgency of the current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action outlined and therefore, serve as an impetus for action. Remember: a policy memorandum is a tool for decision-making; therefore, it has to provide decision-makers with the necessary information to make policy choices.

## Topic Choice

The choice of your topic is extremely important for the success of your policy memorandum. As mentioned in the requirements, you should choose a topic that lends itself to policy analysis and therefore policy solutions. An appropriate topic has the following characteristics:

- **Precise:** it is easily defined in straightforward terms. Example: "improving graduation rates in public schools" is a precise definition, whereas "improving education in the US" is not. A vague topic choice would be detrimental to the focus of your research. It would also lends itself to vague policy recommendations.
- **Specific:** it is limited to a well-defined policy area and (possibly) to a well-defined domain. A specific topic will help you limit your research to the information that you actually need. Example: "Resource management in the US" would be a very general topic that has countless potential venues of research and analysis, whereas "Water management in Colorado" would focus your research on a specific resource (water) and on a specific geographic domain (Colorado).
- **Disputed:** it lends itself to multiple approaches and points-of-view. If your topic is about an uncontroversial issue, then it is not going to command the attention of your audience; same if the solution to the problem is foregone.

## Features of the Memorandum

An effective policy memorandum should have the following qualities:

- **Focused:** all aspects of the memorandum should be strategically aimed at achieving the goal of convincing your target audience about the accuracy of your analysis and therefore the quality of your policy recommendations. Avoid lengthy digressions. Avoid anything that can distract the reader from the issue at hand
- **Professionally crafted:** your document is a tool for decision-making. Keep it professional. Both the look and the content of the document should be polished, focused, easy to understand. Avoid copy-and-paste. Edit your document carefully: you should use professional language. Be passionate about your topic and your policy recommendations, but avoid hyperboles that could be detrimental to the credibility of your document.
- **Evidence-based:** your audience (decision-makers) not only expect a rational argument but will only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives. You must include a cost-benefit analysis to your document if you want your policy recommendations to be taken seriously.
- **Understandable:** you should use clear and simple language, avoiding the jargon and concepts of an academic discipline. You should also provide a well-explained and easy to follow argument. Again, avoid lengthy digressions; keep the structure of the document coherent and linear.
- **Accessible:** you should make the document easy to use and therefore subdivide the text using clear and descriptive titles to guide the reader. The use of such structure also makes it easy to get back to specific sections of the paper for successive readings. If it is hard to find information in your document, policy makers will not use it.
- **Promotional:** your document should catch the eye of its potential audience. Creating a favorable impression is essential to catch the attention of the reader. A poor-looking or poor-reading document is detrimental to its content.
- **Practical and feasible:** your document should provide arguments based on what is actually happening in reality. Your policy recommendations should sound realistic to the target audience. Again, a cost-benefit analysis is essential to provide a seal of practicality and feasibility to your recommendations.
- **Explicit:** given your policy recommendations, you should provide specific criteria to assess either the failure or the success of the policy changes you are recommending. This criteria should come as much as possible from your cost-benefit analysis.
- **Transparent:** do not try to hide information that does not support your policy recommendations. Recognize the weaknesses of your analysis and be straightforward about it. Being transparent strengthens your argument.

## Organization / Sections of the Memorandum

Your policy memorandum should include a one-page **executive summary**.

The executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a one-page executive summary should include: a) a description of the problem addressed; b) a statement on why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed; c) your recommendations for action.

What follows is a detailed guideline to drafting your policy memorandum.

1. **Problem Definition.** You should clearly define the problem you intend to address in your policy memorandum. You should define your problem in a way that lends itself to policy solutions. A vague definition of the problem will hinder your search for policy solutions. You should also give a clear answer to this question: 'why is this issue a problem?' That also answer the next question: 'why should we dedicate our efforts to this?' You should answer these questions in a clear and compelling fashion when you define your problem. Some people might think that the issue you chose is not even a problem: that is one of the reason why you make your definition as dispassionate as possible. Remember: do not define your solution into the problem.
2. **Methods.** After you have defined your problem, you should devote your attention to gathering data/evidence about the issue. In this section, you should explain clearly what kind of evidence you gathered for your research and the reasons for your choice. Be candid and straightforward. If you wanted to gather 'the perfect data' for your research but you could not, explain why. Highlight the strong sides of your data but also the weak ones. When in doubt, always opt for transparency.
3. **Issue Analysis.** In this section, you should analyze the issue with the tools of your choice (see 'Methods' section). Depending on the issue you are analyzing, it might be useful to provide some historical context, especially if the historical development of the issue at hand can provide some hints about how to treat the problem. Maybe there were some other attempts to solve the problem in previous times that failed, or maybe a similar problem has been addressed in a different context. Having a grasp of the development of the issue over time can help selecting viable alternatives amongst policy options. For example: a policy memo that addresses the issue of public housing should not forget to consider the failure of public housing policies in the past ('The Projects'). Beyond historical information, your analysis will heavily depend on the methodological choices you made. Your analysis tool (hard data, surveys, etc.) will probably not allow you to take into consideration all the factors that contribute to the problem. This is unavoidable. Again, choose transparency and be candid about what you are 'leaving out' of your analysis. Your analysis should individuate the relevant stakeholders in the issue and address their interests. Possibly, you should try to quantify such interests, so you can factor them into your cost-benefit analysis. From a qualitative standpoint, you should also try to assess how intense stakeholders' preferences are about different possible solutions to the problem.
4. **Proposed solutions.** In this section you will analyze the possible solutions to the problem of your policy memorandum. Here you should think hard about what kind of policies could address the problem you are analyzing. You should report solutions that are realistic and viable. If you decide to rule out some solutions, you should be transparent about what makes them unviable or unrealistic. Lay out the possible solutions clearly. Be straightforward about the components of the policy alternatives. Be clear about the conditions that would make a specific policy fail or succeed.
5. **Strategic Recommendations.** This section is the result of your analysis. Here you should convince your audience that the policy you recommend is better than other alternatives. This implies giving a definition of what 'better' means: you should set forth straightforward criteria to judge the success or the failure of policy. This definition of criteria will allow you to structure your cost-benefit analysis.

6. **Weaknesses and Limitations.** In this part, you should analyze your own analysis and policy recommendations to find out what their weaknesses and limitations are. These might come from the data (e.g. you could not get enough data), context (e.g. conditions on the ground could vary in a few years), or other factors such as political will (e.g. “this could be the best way to tackle the issue but there is no way political leaders will green light it”). This section should not be an afterthought. Hiding the potential weaknesses and limitations of your analysis will only make it weaker. Again, transparency makes for better analysis.
  
7. **Cost-benefit analysis.** This section is devoted to assess the practical viability of your policy recommendations. In order to perform a sound cost-benefit analysis, you should be able to quantify the components of your recommendations. You should be straightforward about the sources of your figures. If you have to give estimates rather than hard figures, be straightforward about your estimation process. Some components of your issue might not be easily quantifiable; again, be transparent about such limitations of your analysis. As far as specific requirements go, the cost-benefit analysis should include a matrix consisting of stakeholders (in row form) and alternatives (in column form). One of the alternatives must be the status quo. The matrix should also include weights to address the issue of standing. A comprehensive CBA analysis will also include a matrix for sensitivity analysis and, if possible, one for political feasibility. The M.P.P. program at University of Denver emphasizes economic and quantitative skills. Successful completion of the program requires a combined total of one-year worth of courses in Microeconomics, Quantitative Analysis, and Cost-Benefit Analysis. In order to fulfill and pass the memorandum, students must discuss and explain concepts relating to consumer surplus, producer surplus, dead-weight loss, elasticity, asymmetric information, externalities, and provide appropriate graphs. Remember: ultimately, a sound cost-benefit analysis is the strongest support for your policy recommendation. If there are some doubts about the robustness of this part, there will be some doubts about the soundness of your policy solutions.

# Deadlines

<b>Deadlines for Fall 2010 Graduation</b>	
<b>Date</b>	<b>Task</b>
Monday, September 27, 2010	Final submission of Policy Memorandum to IPPS office (four unbound copies) by 7pm; only very minor revisions will be accepted after this date
Mid-October, 2010	All advisors will meet to review all Policy Memos submitted and make a decision about whether each student will proceed to the presentation stage; if declined, students will need to revise their graduation plans to Winter 2011
Late-October, 2010	Student presentations (2 bound copies due one-week after presentation)

<b>Deadlines for Winter 2011 Graduation</b>	
<b>Date</b>	<b>Task</b>
Monday, October 18, 2010	Topic proposal due (email to lapo.salucci@du.edu) by 3pm
Monday, November 8, 2010	Revised topic proposal due to advisor by 5pm
Friday, December 20, 2010	1st draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and draft CBA) by 5pm
Monday, January 24, 2011	2nd draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and complete CBA) by 5pm
Friday, February 21, 2011	Final submission of Policy Memorandum to IPPS office (four unbound copies) by 7pm; only very minor revisions will be accepted after this date
February 22-25, 2011	All advisors will meet to review all Policy Memos submitted and make a decision about whether each student will proceed to the presentation stage; if declined, students will need to revise their graduation plans to Spring 2011
February 28-May 4, 2011	Student presentations (2 bound copies due one-week after presentation)

## Deadlines for Spring 2011 Graduation

Date	Task
Monday, October 18, 2010	Topic proposal due (email to lapo.salucci@du.edu) by 3pm
Monday, November 8, 2010	Revised topic proposal due to advisor by 5pm
Monday, January 10, 2011	1st draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and draft CBA) by 5pm
Monday, February 21, 2011	2nd draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and complete CBA) by 5pm
Monday, April 11th, 2011	Final submission of Policy Memorandum to IPPS office (four unbound copies) by 7pm; only very minor revisions will be accepted after this date
Mid-April, 2011	All advisors will meet to review all Policy Memos submitted and make a decision about whether each student will proceed to the presentation stage; if declined, students will need to revise their graduation plans to Summer 2011
May 2-13, 2011	Student presentations (2 bound copies due one-week after presentation)

## Deadlines for Summer 2011 Graduation

Date	Task
Monday, January 10, 2011	Topic proposal due (email to lapo.salucci@du.edu) by 3pm
Monday, April 4, 2011	Revised topic proposal due to advisor by 5pm
Monday, May 23, 2011	1st draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and draft CBA) by 5pm
Monday, June 6, 2011	2nd draft of Policy Memorandum due to advisor (full text; all references, charts, and tables; and complete CBA) by 5pm
Monday, June 20, 2011	Final submission of Policy Memorandum to IPPS office (four unbound copies) by 7pm; only very minor revisions will be accepted after this date
Early July, 2011	All advisors will meet to review all Policy Memos submitted and make a decision about whether each student will proceed to the presentation stage; if declined, students will need to revise their graduation plans to Fall 2011
July 11-15, 2011	Student presentations (1 bound copy and 3 unbound copies)