



# How to write policy memos:

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# Memo writing process:

Three steps, plan accordingly:

1. Thinking (problem definition, options/solution, outline & research)
2. Writing (draft!)
3. Editing/revision & formatting



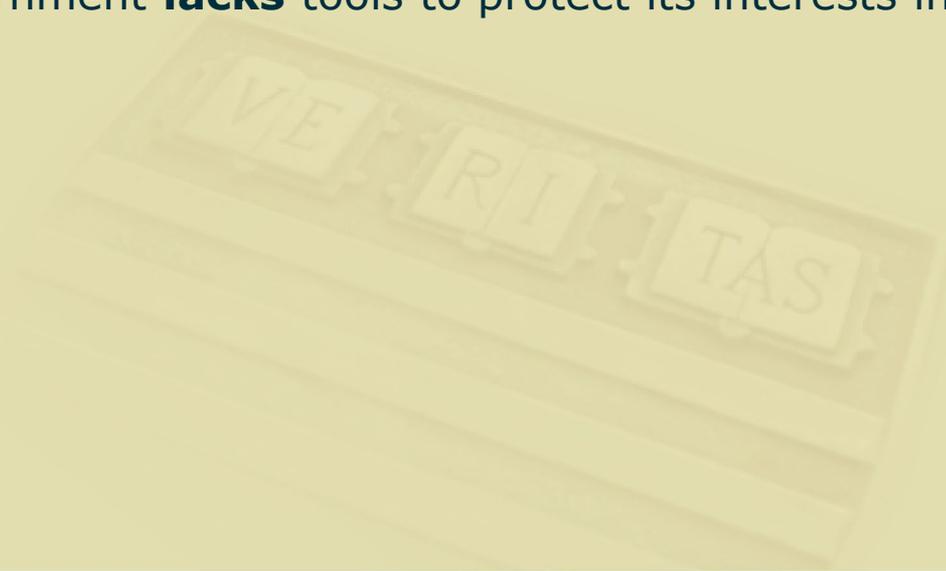


# Step 1: Think about the problem

**It is important to write about a policy problem, not an issue. What's the difference?**

Issue: The geopolitics of the Arctic are shifting.

Problem statement: The U.S. government **lacks** tools to protect its interests in the Arctic.





# Step 1: Think about your audience

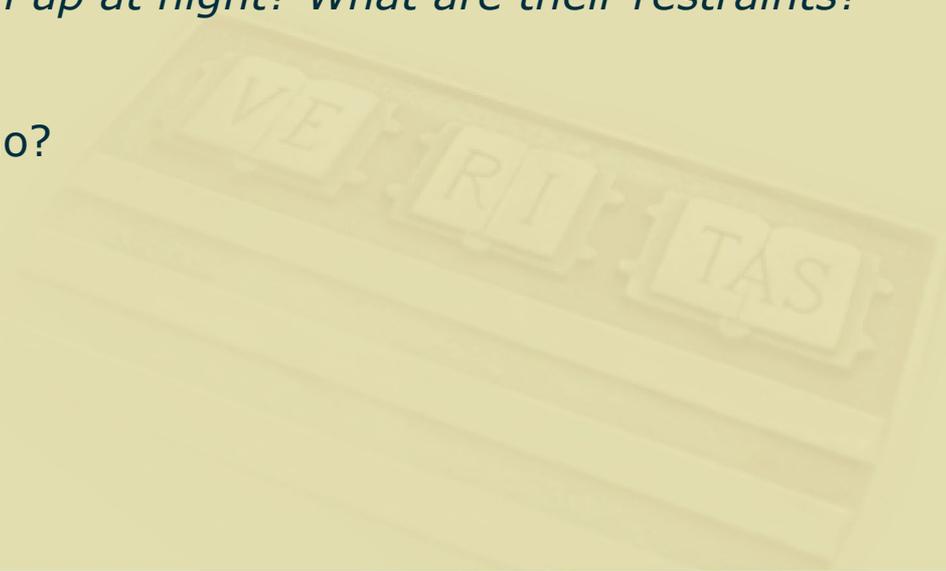
Determine audience: from the choices in the assignment prompt. And then consider:

*Can your audience solve this problem? With what tools?*

Know your audience:

*What is their job? What keeps them up at night? What are their restraints?*

And... who else may read your memo?



# Step 1: Think about options and solutions

To avoid writing a “pitch,” consider the strengths and weaknesses of options.

Use a SWOT chart to flush out your ideas, prepare to tell your story:

<u>Internal</u> : Things you can control/predict (maybe) →	<b>Strengths:</b> (Advantages, assets, capabilities)	<b>Weaknesses:</b> (Vulnerabilities, pressures, limitations)
<u>External</u> : Things you can't control/predict →	<b>Opportunities:</b> (For creation, development, partnerships, positive change)	<b>Threats:</b> (Competition, obstacles, external change)

# Step 1: Plan your memo structure

Create an **outline** with an understanding of memo expectations/structure:

- Start with problem/data (1/2 memo), end with options/solution (1/2 memo).
- Recommendations can be nuanced (more than 1) but must advise decision maker.
  - Articulate an understanding of trade-offs, counterarguments.
  - Articulate first choices, fall back positions.
  - Articulate implementation steps – how does this actually happen?

# Step 1: Plan your memo structure

A cohesive structure always starts with problem and ends with solution:



*Lead with problem or opportunity. (Note concision here!)*

*Follow with solution. Audience is not ready for it until they know what it fixes. (Note bullets but use of verbs!)*

**THE AMERICAN JOBS PLAN WILL:**

-  **FIX** highways, rebuild bridges, and upgrade transit centers
-  **ENSURE** the future is made in America by all of America's workers
-  **REBUILD** our clean drinking water infrastructure
-  **MODERNIZE** homes, commercial buildings, schools, and federal buildings
-  **CREATE** good-paying union jobs and train Americans for jobs of the future

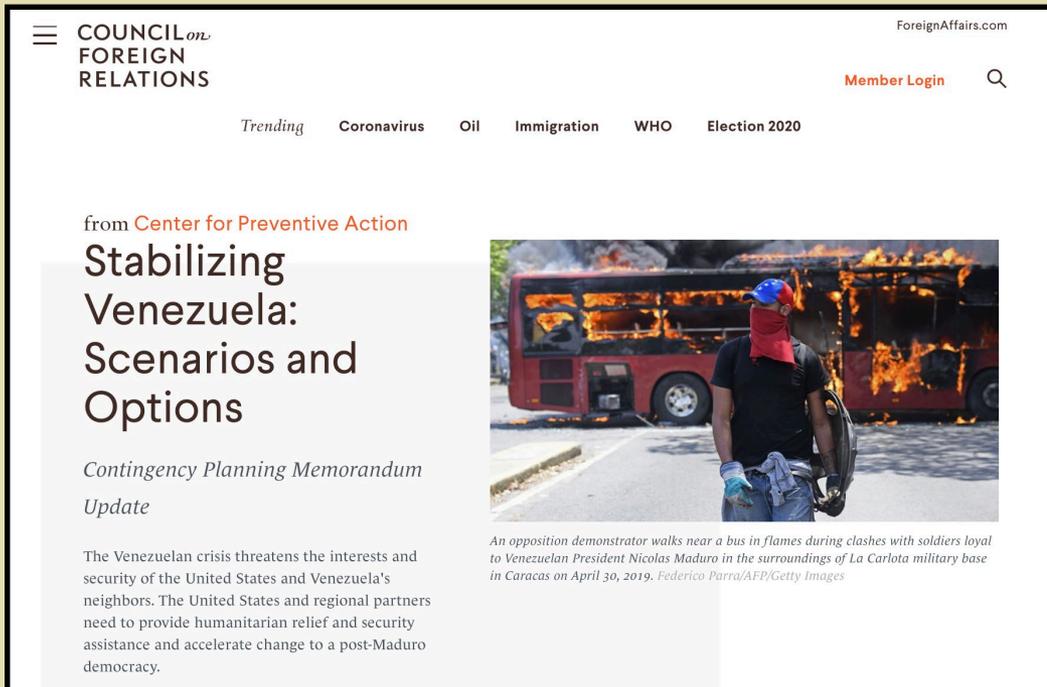
AMERICAN JOBS PLAN



*Could follow on with a cost – like education or economic disparities (but that's not the problem itself that you are solving!)*

# Step 1: Plan your memo structure

Bring the bottom line upfront (**BLUF**) -- (your audience should know What's wrong and What to do about it in the first paragraph).



The screenshot shows the top portion of a webpage from the Council on Foreign Relations. The header includes the site name, navigation links for 'Trending', 'Coronavirus', 'Oil', 'Immigration', 'WHO', and 'Election 2020', and a search bar. The main content area features the article title 'Stabilizing Venezuela: Scenarios and Options' by Frank O. Mora, with a sub-headline 'Contingency Planning Memorandum Update'. A photograph of a demonstrator in front of a burning bus is included, along with a caption describing the event in Caracas on April 30, 2019.

## Introduction

**Frank O. Mora**  
*Director, Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center, Florida International University*

The political situation inside Venezuela remains volatile following the failed April 30, 2019, civil-military rebellion, known as Operacion Libertad, against the Nicolas Maduro regime. The Venezuelan economy also continues to deteriorate, causing widespread humanitarian distress and large-scale outflows of refugees to neighboring countries. Potential state collapse and the spillover effects of the humanitarian crisis and insecurity threaten the stability of the hemisphere. Given U.S. interests in Venezuela and the region, the Donald J. Trump administration should consider how the crisis could worsen and consider a range of policy options to help stabilize Venezuela. Preparing for an immediate post-Maduro Venezuela is as important as hastening political change. "Showing the future" to regime elements, including how they can be part of the country's stabilization and reconstruction, could create the conditions to initiate a democratic transition. As such, this

<https://www.cfr.org/report/stabilizing-venezuela>



# Step 1: Research, strategically

Now ask yourself:

- What information does my audience need to do this work?
- What information do I lack from my outline?
- What information was I planning to put in my memo that is commonly known, or not helpful to move my narrative forward? What can I cut?





## Step 2: Write, a draft

What is a draft?

- It is the bones of a well-structured memo.
- But... the writing isn't yet strategic, concise. You can fix that by revising.

*Editing your memo is not a quick skim for typos. It is shifting your writing from draft to polished, useful document.*





## Step 3: “User-friendly” revision:

### **Edit for concision: Write short sentences, often not always.**

Don't use: actually, generally, practically, very, therefore, moreover – i.e. “fillers.” Simply cut these out whenever possible.

### **Edit for clarity:**

Define all acronyms, or important terms, even if you think audience knows them, upfront. (Except UN, NATO, etc.)



## Step 3: “User-friendly” revision:

### Edit for active voice, strong verbs:

“Several school aids are **not** working anymore” → “Several school aids **retired.**”

\*

“We need **solutions** to this problem.” → “Let’s **solve** this problem.”

“We are looking for the organization to create **regulations** on this issue.” →  
“**regulate!**”

Consideration → consider.

Expansion → expand.



## Step 3: “User-friendly” revision:

### **Edit for simplicity/clarity: i.e. bring important information up:**

\*

- Rather than: *It is important to note that, in Eastern states since 1980, acid rain has become a serious problem.*
- Try: *Acid rain has been a serious problem in Eastern states, since 1980.*

\*

- Rather than: *Because the press is the major medium of interaction between the President and the people, how the press portrays him really influences his popularity.*
- Try: *How the press portrays the President impacts his popularity, as the press is the major medium of interaction between the President and the people.*



## Step 3: Edit for “user-friendly” formatting:

How can I make my memo “skimmable?” Use underline/bold.

- *Can the audience find the problem, key data points, and solution by skimming?*

Use white space to please the reader. (If you can’t, cut down words).

Footnotes are uncommon in memos. But for academic exercises you can either embed citation and/or endnote. Check with faculty.

Consider: is the memo structure logical for your audience and not repetitive? (Maybe it’s time to reverse outline?)

# HKS Communications Program Resources:

Policy Memo Resource: <https://policymemos.hks.harvard.edu>

Writing consultants & more communications resources:  
[www.hkscommprog.org](http://www.hkscommprog.org)

How to write a policy memo:

[https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/lb\\_revised\\_1\\_31\\_18\\_lb\\_how\\_to\\_pol\\_mem.pdf](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/lb_revised_1_31_18_lb_how_to_pol_mem.pdf)