

Writing for Political Decision-makers:  
why and how to write a policy planning paper

One of the more curious phenomena in contemporary professional life is the contrast between the kind of writing that is taught and learnt in political science departments, and that which is required in the world of political decision-making. Academic political writing tends to be theoretical, detached from any particular political outcome and long - and in the case of theses and dissertations, very long. Its counterpart in political life tends to be practical, advisory and short – a couple of pages, no more.

Of course, this is a huge generalisation. Sometimes academics have to write short, and sometimes political advisors are called upon to prepare speeches or full-length descriptive studies that are equal in length to anything written in academia. But these are the exceptions that confirm the rule.

I have no argument with academic paper-writing; it has its logic and its place. And my sense is that there is a growing acknowledgment within the political science sector of academia that their priority must be to enhance the operational capacity of the political elite to make the right and the best decisions. That being said, what will be of concern to anyone who has gone from being a student in a political science faculty to a policy advisory position in a government department or an international organisation is how poorly he or she is ready for the kind of writing such a role entails. I recall how I suffered during my first year in the political affairs division of NATO directorate when asked to draft a one and half page brief for the Secretary General. The problem was not my brain, it was my preparation.

It was largely because of this experience that when I began teaching at university-level in Europe and North America -the problem was strikingly similar on the two sides of the Atlantic - I decided to have my students draft short policy planning papers such as I had been required to write at NATO. I confess that this was in part a stratagem designed to compensate for the fact that as a non-academic, I could not offer my students the great knowledge of theory that my university colleagues had amassed. I also confess that this was a stratagem designed to avoid having to correct twenty-page term papers and to counteract plagiarism. The latter it did. I quickly learned, however, that just as writing short can be extremely time-consuming, so can be teaching students to do so.

In the interim, I have been working as a Senior Fellow at the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces. This has involved working with young professionals from Southeastern Europe who advise politicians –serving, former and would -be - working in parliament, the executive or in civil society settings. The focus is on building their capacity to work for their country and for their region. One of the vehicles we have used to this end has been the policy planning paper.

Working in English with people who do not have English as their first language has its special challenges. And though our task is not to teach people how to write English, we do spend considerable time on giving our young professionals tips on how best to write in a foreign language and, in particular, English.

Our main focus is however teaching these young professionals, some of which may well go on some day to work in their country's political decision-making process or in Brussels with NATO or the EU, how to write short, focused and operationally.

The template we use is the one I was introduced to NATO during my career there (1984-94). I have no idea whether it is still used. It was not necessarily the norm across NATO's divisions at that time. The template which is current in other international organisations or in national ministries will likely be quite different. But all this is not the point. Rather, the NATO template offers a way of thinking about issues and presenting them to decision-makers that is, I dare say, generic. Anyone who wants to brief a political decision-maker or one of his top advisors on how to proceed in dealing with a political problem will need to cover similar ground.

The policy planning paper such as we used in the NATO Political Affairs Division has several parts. First, there is the cover page to the memo, explaining in just a few lines what the paper is about, who it is from and whom it is to and why it should be read. This may sound simplistic. It is, however, vital to understanding that what is advised depends on for whom and by whom the advice is prepared, and that the purpose of the advice is to prepare a political decision.

The body of the policy planning paper typically consists of five parts.

First comes an introductory paragraph of three or four sentences that summarises that which follows.

The second part provides background on the issue at hand. Normally, a decision-maker will have a good general idea of what is at stake. But there will be times when the issue is less familiar and /or highly technical. This may require one or more annexes that the decision-maker can refer to as needed. The body of the text should not be cluttered with detail.

Part three provides the advisor's analysis. This should address only the key issues that the decision-maker needs to take into account to do his or her job.

The fourth part deals with big-picture options and is itself optional. For example, if you are advising a minister on how to increase the capacity of his ministry, you may need to discuss how various political actors feel about the range of policy options, and the pros and cons of different policy paths. Does one batten down hatches and go all out for the status quo? Does one tinker with the status quo in an effort to maintain the prevailing political equilibrium? Has the time come for a radically different approach? And what are the political obstacles to proceeding down one or the other path? These are the kind of strategic issues that may need to be addressed here.

Last but certainly not least are the policy recommendations. Here is where the policy advisor becomes truly advisory. What to do and how and why - this is what this is all about. Recommendations should be tightly focused and limited in number. They should flow out of what has preceded. My take on this is that decision-makers may be able to handle five recommendations, but three overarching recommendations are preferable. The other side of this coin is that most long lists of recommendations can be distilled into five or three points.

That in a nutshell is the approach. I should add that in addition to having our participants putting themselves in the shoes of decision-makers, the idea is also to have them respond to instructions. This is another real world requirement that they may not have encountered previously.

Is this approach producing results? I think so. I hope so. But I would be less than honest if I were not to say that nurturing more capable, mature, democratically-rooted political advisors is a political challenge of the first order.