Missouri Legislative Academy

Writing For Policy-makers

David C. Valentine

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Introduction

This report outlines issues to be considered by members of the academic community when writing for decision-makers but almost all of the information provided here can inform oral presentations as well. The best way to visualize your relationship to decision-makers is by a comparison to a traditional classroom setting. In the classroom, you as the instructor control the subject matter, the pace of presentation, the length of the discussion, and the extent to which your students are active participants in the discussion. None of these conditions are true in most communications with policymakers. In fact, the best way to visualize the context of your communication is as an inverted classroom where the "pupil(s)" control every aspect of your presentation. Consequently, you must focus on the needs of decision-makers and upon efficient communication of information, regardless of whether you are responding to an inquiry from a decision-maker or are providing information on your own initiative.

First Principles

Write to your audience – Decision-makers are action-oriented rather than contemplative people. They do not have the time or the inclination to pour over your report, to evaluate the nuances, or to tease out the unarticulated conclusions. If you want to be relevant, reports and other communications must be direct, clear and coherent. If they are, they will be read and used but, if not, they will be discarded - and you will have wasted your time. Graphs and charts may be used but not without a brief description of the major points illustrated thereby. When you have anything that you want the reader to remember, it should be set out in the text (in bullet points, for example).

Complete v. timely – Most people, and especially people in an academic environment, want their analyses to be thorough and complete but decision-makers define quality differently. For them, an incomplete work that is delivered in time to assist in decision-making is vastly superior to one that is very complete but arrives one day after the decision has been made. It follows, then, that the timeline must set the schedule for completion of a project, not your level of satisfaction with its thoroughness.

Public information – For a variety of reasons, your work should be public information and the recipient should be made aware of that. (NOTE: The information should be public but the fact that a particular person received it need not be public.)

Internal notice – Faculty may wish to notify the Office of Governmental Relations at UMC when working on a controversial issue. Contact the office at 882-2726.

Organizing a Report

Question/Issue

Define the issue – When responding to a request for information, make sure that you understand

the question being asked. Problems can occur for a variety of reasons, including overly broad questions. Defining the issue is also important when you provide information on your own initiative. It tells the reader immediately where the analysis is headed and it helps the writer focus the analysis on that issue alone.

Developing the Response

Identify the timeline – The timing is especially critical if you are responding to a request from a legislator or other decision-maker but it can also be important for other analyses. If you were writing an analysis of the effects of primary enforcement of the seat belt law, for example, you would want that report to become public when a bill was introduced to allow primary enforcement, or before the bill is heard in committee.

Determine what the person needs to know - The most critical question that you must answer is "what does ……(*whomever)* need to know about….….(*the subject*)?" This is a critical aspect of any project because you will know, or you will find, more information about the subject than your recipient will need. You should not burden your reader with extraneous material. If it is not essential to the question, including it will cloud your analysis and confuse the reader. Edit your response to ensure that everything in it is designed to answer the central question.

Unless you have specific information to the contrary, you should assume that the reader has limited knowledge of the issue. In many cases, you can help your reader grasp the issue by providing an organizing idea that can be used to structure information about the issue, including information that may be learned subsequently.

Context - Place your response in context. You cannot assume that the recipient will have a historical or broad view of the subject matter. For example:

- "Medical malpractice insurance rates were the focus of a 1985 interim Legislative committee and in 1986 the General Assembly made the following changes in Missouri law…..".."Today the issues are…..";

- "This issue springs from a proposal made by Governor Carnahan in …..to…..";

- "In FY 02, sales taxes produced $1.9B in revenue, 24% of total state revenue but in FY 03…".

Draw conclusions – The best analysis in the world will not be used if it does not explicitly state the conclusions. Without a statement of conclusions, the reader must dig through the analysis searching for clues as to what those conclusions might be. Even willing readers will not know the material as well as you do and will not be in the same position you are to draw those conclusions.

Recommendations – If you make recommendations, present a range of options for decision-makers to select from rather than just those that appear as the optimal solution. This approach serves several functions. First, you will not lose your opportunity to assist a decision-maker because you misjudged your decision-maker or the larger political environment in which s/he must operate. Second, the larger the decision-making group, the more likely it is that the final decision will be crafted largely from items "on the table" and your range of options explicitly injects those items into the decisional mix. Third, a range of choices is likely to engender more debate and discussion about the broader policy issues, a discussion that should contribute to a more informed decision. Fourth, a single "optimal" recommendation may put decision-makers in a bad public relations box when they cannot accept it. Press coverage is likely to be negative and decision-makers will have difficulty defending themselves and some may do so by disparaging your work product. Finally, it makes it more likely that your work will be accepted by all parties in the discussion.

Structuring Your Analysis

The following format works well in situations where you do not know your readers well enough to structure a response specifically for them.

Question/issue

Conclusion/recommendations

Background

Alternatives

Discussion

References

The first two (*question/issue* and *conclusion*) are essential elements of any communication directed to a policymaker and in many cases will be the only sections of your report that are read. The remaining three (background, alternatives, discussion) may, or may not, be used depending upon the nature of the information presented. The *background section* can be particularly helpful if your work will be used in the future because it provides the context for the issue and in a very short time that context may be forgotten, even by you, or may not be known by future readers. The *alternatives section* is more likely to be used when there are no recommendations. It provides you with an opportunity to identify other possible solutions to the problem. The *discussion section* can be as extensive as you wish. I tend to use this section expansively because policy issues periodically reoccur and, when they do, I have a handy reference point to begin additional research. In addition, if the report makes it into the hands of staff, that staff will be able to use the information in ways that a decision-maker would not use it. Finally, I provide *references* to some of the major sources of information both for my use in the future and for the use of staff.

Conclusion

Policy-makers are constantly seeking information about issues under consideration. The successful academic, and the successful advocate, is one who knows how to organize and present information in ways that are readily understood by an audience that does not have broad expertise in the subject. Those with this ability will always be in demand in policy-making circles.

Endnotes

Author Biography

David Valentine

Dr. Valentine is the project coordinator for the Legislative Academy, a cooperative effort of all four campuses to provide service to and support for legislators. In addition, he teaches and directs the internship program of the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. He previously served as the director of the Division of Research, Missouri Senate. His research interests include environmental policy, election laws and legislative process.

Missouri Legislative Academy
137 Middlebush
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
573-884-3381
http://www.truman.missouri.edu/ipp