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Policy Memo #1

Your next writing assignment is a policy memo on one of the topics listed below. You should team up with another student in the class to write this memo. If you're having trouble finding a partner, email the GSI and she will let you know who else may be looking for a partner.

Memo Topics and Contents

1. A policy concerning one of the "messaging with mother nature" topics
2. A policy issue related to international drug research
3. Peter Singer's arguments concerning rationing of health care
4. The case for using a particular method of valuing human lives (statistical lives, statistical life years, quality-adjusted life years, etc.) in a particular kind of policy problem.

It is important to identify a particular policy, case, decision, or question that provides focus to your memo—don't attempt to tackle too much. If you have questions about your choice of topic or its breadth, don't hesitate to contact me.

You should write your memo as if he were a staff member responding to a request from your boss for your thoughts about the issue in question. You may select the organization on whose staff you serve—the office of a member of Congress, an advocacy organization, etc. Your memo should do several things:

- It should identify the major values that are at stake in the policy decision you have chosen to focus on, identify any tensions among them, and indicate how you believe they should be resolved, keeping in mind (but not kowtowing to) the mission and values of the organization you work for.
- It should be attentive to the views of those who would disagree with your recommendation, anticipating and responding to the most likely argument they would present. It is OK to acknowledge uncertainties about or weaknesses in your argument; better your boss should learn them from you than be surprised later.
- It should recommend a course of action. (Take a stand—don't recommend that your boss duck the issue.)

Pointers Concerning Memos

Here are a few of the items that matter to me when I read memos:

- Use a standard memo format (Date, To, From, Re:).
- Assume your boss is reasonably well informed about the background of the issue, so don't use up space with an introduction the way you might if you were writing a public document for a broader audience.

- Your memo should be written for your boss, but written on the assumption that it might become public, so you shouldn't put anything in writing that you wouldn't be prepared to defend in public.
- This is professional writing—dramatic flair is less important than clear, concise, well-organized prose.
- Write a strong introductory paragraph that serves as an executive summary and makes clear the purpose of the memo and what the reader can expect to find in the memo. I prefer to know the writer's bottom line from the beginning. Don't keep me in suspense about your stance on the issue.
- Rather than make the memo one long string of paragraphs, provide some structure with section headings that help the reader to understand the flow of the memo. This will help readers the first time through and it is really helpful later if they pull it out and want to find a particular point. Use (but don't overuse) section headings, bullets, and similar devices that provide visual structure to the memo at the same time they organize your argument.
- Focus your short conclusion on the message you want to stick in the reader's mind.
- Your memo should focus on arguments about what's right and wrong, not on giving political advice. If you think it's unrealistic to separate the two (and there is sometimes more than a little truth in that), then be clear about when you're saying "you ought to do X" because it's the right thing to do and when you're saying it because there is political advantage or protection in acting that way.
- Don't demonize opponents. Focus on their arguments, not their character.
- Simplicity, brevity, and clarity are critical. Think about the order of your arguments. Do a benefit-cost analysis on every phrase and sentence. Is it doing important work? Is there a shorter way to say it as effectively? Is the sentence in the right place? Is this the right word?
- Grammar, punctuation, word choice, spelling and so on matter. Take them seriously and don't trust Microsoft Word's spellchecker and grammar checker to find all the items that need your attention. Avoid the passive voice. Avoid long sentences when short ones will do. Avoid long paragraphs.
- The body of the memo (after the "DATE, TO:, FROM: and RE:" introductory stuff) should be between 700 and 750 words. It should be double-spaced (you can single space a set of bullets or something like that if that looks better) with a font comparable to 12 point Times New Roman, and have one-inch margins all around.

The memo is due by 11:59 PM on Tuesday, October 13. As usual, send it to the instructor and the GSI as an attachment to an e-mail message, using your names as the name of the file.

The Ford School writing instructors, the GSI, and the instructor are available for consultation as you work on this assignment. You will also find a variety of documents on the CTools site that give pointers on writing memos. There are also some good examples of memos from previous terms. In some cases, the word limit on these memos is greater than it is for this assignment, but I think they are still good models.