Writing Public Policy

A Practical Guide to Communicating in the Policy-Making Process

Catherine F. Smith

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❖ Preface ❖

A student returning to campus from a summer internship in a Washington, D.C., public policy think tank had this to say about a lesson she learned from the experience: "In public policy work, if you can't write it or say it, you can't do it."

My experience as a communications consultant to government tells me that she is essentially correct. As a teacher of writing, I know that communication skill combined with know-how can make a difference. I wrote this book to prepare students and others to effect real change by writing (and talking) to "do" public policy in democracy.

What Is the Purpose of the Book?

It is a practical guide to writing and speaking during public policy making processes. It aims to develop communication know-how and skill. Know-how means knowing what to do or having the ability to interpret situations in context. Skill means knowing how to do, or having competencies ready to use.

It does:

- Describe the public policy making process
- Identify communication's functions and limitations in that process
- Explain standards and expectations for communicating in the public sector or between the public and private sectors
- Guide the use of selected public policy communication genres

It does not:

- Discuss theory of public policy, writing, or communication
- Teach introductory public policy analysis, written composition, public speaking, or public communication

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PUBLIC POLICY MAKING

Public policy exists to solve problems affecting people in society (Coplin and O'Leary 3). Making public policy means deciding what is and is not a problem, choosing which problems to solve, and deciding how to solve them to benefit society. People are likely to differ on the problem and on how to solve it, so conflict is to be expected. Typically, governments decide which problems will be addressed and how to address them. A frequently quoted definition says that public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not do (Dye 1). Other definitions emphasize that government is only one policy-making institution; cultural authorities in religion or business or education make public policy, too. Still other definitions shift the focus from authority to the activity of making policy choices. Those definitions widen the scope of choice-making beyond political institutions, emphasize the importance of process, and point to the influence of context on decision (Clemons and McBeth; MacRae and Whittington). From the perspective of functional communication, the most important characteristic of policy-making activity is that it is a process occurring in a context.

As problem-solving activity, public policy making has three basic components: the problem, the policy, and players. A problem is something perceived to be wrong in a society or its environment. A policy is a goal with a plan of action to solve the problem. A player is an influential participant in the process (Coplin and O'Leary 8). Problems, policies, and players function within political systems and

public discourses to give those components their real meaning in particular contexts and situations.

To illustrate, in the United States, health care costs are rising too fast and too many people are unable to afford health care. That's a *problem*. In general public discourse, most people agree that it is a problem, although there is disagreement on the causes and effects. Most people agree that something must be done, but there is disagreement on what to do. That's democracy. In 1993, the federal government acted. The Clinton administration proposed to guarantee health care for all Americans from birth to death. The proposal had two goals, expanding health care coverage to uninsured people and reducing the rate of spending on health care. The plan of action included consumers being organized into alliances to bargain for cheaper health care; employers and employees sharing costs of health insurance; care providers offering a basic package of services for guaranteed fees; government fixing caps on fees to reduce costs; and federal administrators setting standards for care, protecting consumers' rights, and ensuring that providers fulfilled their responsibilities. That's a *policy*. Members of Congress proposed alternative policies. Lobbyists for a spectrum of interested groups informed and influenced all the proposals. The Clinton administration advocated their proposal. The development of these proposals represented institutional (governmental) discourse about a particular problem. Influential participants who made proposals—the president, legislators, and lobbying groups—were the *players*. In the end, none of the proposals was adopted. Instead, legislators modified the existing health care system to incorporate some elements of the administration's plan and some elements of alternative plans. That's *politics*. The outcome is the present policy solution to the public problem of health care. (The description is taken, with added interpretation, from Wolpe and Levine's *Lobbying Congress: How the System Works*, 2nd ed. [104–116].)

An overhaul of the national health care system is an extraordinary initiative. For understanding public policy making as an ongoing democratic process, ordinary or "unsexy" (as journalists like to say) illustrations might be better. Budgeting exemplifies these regular workaday processes. An actual state budget development is described below, shown from the viewpoint of the communications director for the chairman of a state senate's budget committee.

Preview. The annual state budgeting process occurs over six months with preset deadlines or milestones. In January, the governor proposes a budget for the coming year that represents the administration's priorities and politics. The legislative committees respond in March (for the house) and in May (for the senate) with recommendations based on their priorities and politics. Effectively, three budget proposals—the governor's, the house's, and the senate's—must culminate in a single adopted budget by July 1, the mandated start of the state's new fiscal year.

Scenario

In early January, a state governor holds a press conference to announce the release of his proposed budget for the coming year. Immediately after the governor's press conference, the chairs of the state's house of representatives and senate budget committees comment publicly on the governor's proposed budget in other press conferences, newspaper interviews, and radio and television talk show appearances. The communications director for the senate budget chair tracks public response to the governor's budget and to the senate chair's comments on it.

At the same time, work begins on the senate and house budget recommendations. In the senate, the current chair of the ways and means committee brings his staff (an administrative assistant and Steve, the communications director) to a meeting with staff for the permanent committee. Present are the ways and means chief of staff, chief legal counsel, and chief budget analyst. The chair has authority, as a member of the majority political party, to set the senate's current budget policy. The permanent committee staff has responsibility for developing, with the help of the chair's staff, the senate's recommendations for budgeting according to current priorities.

In the first meeting in January, the chair and the combined staffs review budget history (what's carried over from last year and what's new this year), the state of the economy (current and projected conditions), and the politics of individual budget items (item is nice to have but can be sacrificed if necessary, item is nonnegotiable, we expect a fight on the item, or we go to the mat with the item). They compile a rough list of poten-

tial priorities for the coming year's budget. Because he will draft text for the senate recommendations, the communications director starts taking notes.

After the first meeting, the committee staff fans out in January and February to consult with federal and state fiscal experts, as well as with experts on specific issues in state agencies, government watchdog groups, and advocacy groups. They get more projections for the economy, and they seek external corroboration for their rough list of budget priorities. The communications director goes along to all these consultations.

Next, the committee staff solicits budget requests internally from senate members, state departments, and state agencies. Staffers meet with the members, departments, and agencies about their requests. They begin an initial breakdown of line items to include in the senate recommendations. The communications director stays in touch with the staff. In parallel, he maintains daily or weekly contact with editors and reporters of major news media. He develops relationships and educates the press. They, in turn, keep him up-to-date on budget-relevant news. He maintains good contact both internally and externally because he has dual responsibilities to anticipate debate about the senate's recommendations and to present them in a way that will promote their acceptance by government officials and the public.

A second working meeting is held. The chair and combined staffs intensely debate priorities and preliminarily decide on key priorities. Later in March, when the house budget proposal is released, the combined staffs analyze it, compare it to the governor's proposal, and compare it to their own developing proposal. The communications director participates in the meetings and continues to track press and public responses to the governor's proposal and to the house recommendations. Most important, he translates the key priorities (decided at the second working meeting) into key messages, simple statements that identify a key issue and the senate's proposed way of using tax dollars to address the issue. He gets the chair's and committee senior staff's commitment to emphasize the key messages at every communication opportunity. Whenever they speak or write, they agree that the key messages will be appropriately included.

Throughout March and April, the senate budget committee staff finalizes its recommendations and interacts with the governor's and house committee's staffs. The communications director's attention increasingly turns to his primary responsibility of drafting the document that will both present senate recommendations and publicize them; he must also prepare for debate in the legislature and for negotiation with the governor's office during the budget approval process.

In March, he writes preliminary drafts of the chairman's introduction and the executive summary for the document. (He knows that when the lengthy and detailed document is released, many people, including the press, will read only the chair's introduction and the executive summary.) He emphasizes the key messages in both. He writes (or edits senior staff's) descriptions of major budget categories (health care, education, housing, and so forth). From his notes taken in budget working meetings, he develops arguments to support proposed dollar figures for existing line items and new initiatives in each category.

Also in March, he plans a comprehensive internal and external presentation strategy to be carried out in June. Along with internal distribution to the governor, the legislature, and government departments and agencies, the senate's recommendations will be publicized through an external news media and public events campaign conducted before, during, and after formal release of the recommendations document.

In April and early May, he revises the document based on committee staffers' review of his preliminary drafts and edits of their drafts. He coordinates with news media and advocacy groups regarding a public relations campaign to accompany release of the senate recommendations. By mid-May, the finished 600-page document presenting the recommendations is delivered to the printer. He fields inquiries by the press and the public about the soon-to-be-released recommendations, and he focuses on writing, editing, and revising press releases, other public announcements, and the chairman's comments for the senate budget release press conference.

In late May, the senate recommendations are released, distributed, and announced. Simultaneously, the planned public relations campaign is conducted. Throughout June, while the senate and house debate the budget and the governor responds to their debates, events all around the state (preplanned jointly by the communications director and advocacy groups) direct public attention to senate priorities and funding proposals dur-

ing "health care week" or "education week" or "citizenship assistance week." Meanwhile, back in the senate, the communications director puts out daily press releases, follows up phone contacts by the press or the public, and prepares comments for the chair's use in responding to unexpected developments, politically significant news, or budget controversies.

What This Scenario Shows

This detailed scenario shows public policy making in process. The *problem* is the need to finance state government operations and public services in the coming year. The process is the annual budgeting cycle. The major *players* are three elected officials (the governor and the chairs of the state senate and house of representatives budget committees). Five appointed professional staffs (the governor's, the two chairs', and the two committees') advise and assist the elected officials. Other players are experts inside and outside state government with knowledge on specific topics, policy analysts who will advise authorities on ways to approach the problem, and advocates representing special civic, commercial, or political interests in the solution. The resulting *policy* is a set of priorities and related recommendations for spending.

From this scenario, you might be able to see components of policy making functioning in a flow of actions to conduct a process. In budgeting, basic institutional actions are these: to define priorities in relation to current conditions and goals; to review previous goals; to take reasoned positions on needs, argue for them, and negotiate with others who reason differently; to propose specific objectives and spending levels; to deliberate alternative proposals and decide; and to inform and invite public participation. The flow of activity in this particular process is typical of institutional policy making.

Typical integration of communication and action is shown here, too. Communication products materialize the action and enable further action. For example, what most people call "the budget" is not the policy itself but rather an intentionally persuasive document (composed by the communications director, in this instance) that argues for objectives based on the priorities and that proposes funding allocations to accomplish them. It is only the last of many documents that move the process along. At earlier stages, working discussions are materialized in draft documents. Circulation of the drafts for

comment, editing, and revision facilitates negotiation about priorities. With persuasive expression and specific figures, the final budget document serves both general public discourse (persuasive expression of priorities and objectives) and institutional discourse (specific figures) about governmental spending in the coming year.

Practical aspects of communication in this scenario deserve comment, too. From a communicator's viewpoint, the budgeting scenario, while orderly as an annual and scheduled process, is quite messy in reality. The scenario suggests the density of information, variety of demands, balancing of competing interests, coordination of roles, even the juggling of schedules that characterize a policy process and create the working conditions under which communications are produced. For communicators, this scenario shows well the need for a disciplined approach that keeps you on track, enables you to produce under pressure, and supports accountability in the process.

Such an approach is presented in the next chapter. First, however, the creation and use of information in public policy making is explained.

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❖ 2 ❖

COMMUNICATION IN THE PROCESS

"In public policy work, if you can't write it or speak it, you can't do it."

The undergraduate who said that (after experience in a public policy internship) is right on target. Writing and speaking are not sufficient to make public policy, but they are necessary. Communication enables the process in two fundamental ways.

1. *Communication produces useful information.* Useful information in a public policy process has four major characteristics: it helps to solve problems, it is action-oriented, it has consequences, and it is publicly accessible.

- **Helps to solve problems.** Information is needed at every stage of a policy process—to frame problems, to analyze issues, to debate approaches, to find and decide on solutions. Only relevant information is useful, however. In deciding whether to provide information, always ask and answer these questions: How will it help to solve the problem? Whom will it help?
- **Is action-oriented.** In policy work, information makes things happen. In deciding whether and how to inform in a policy process, always ask and answer these questions: What do I want this information to do? What effect might this information have?

- **Has consequences.** A problem and its solution affect other problems and solutions in many contexts. Consequently, a policy's effects can be wide-ranging. In deciding whether and how to inform in a policy process, always ask and answer these questions: What is likely to happen as a result of this information? What impacts might this information have?
- **Is publicly accessible.** Policy makers are answerable to the people who give them authority. Therefore, information used in public processes must be publicly available. Officially, it is recorded and preserved by government as an authoritative public record. Unofficially, news media and people in everyday social interactions distribute information as well. In deciding whether and how to inform a policy process, always ask and answer this question: How will this information be made public?

2. *Communication makes information intelligible in context.* As it is meant here, context is, narrowly, the public policy process for which information is produced. (The wider meaning of context as anything that might influence a communication is a bit too broad for the purposes of this practical guide to communicating in policy-making contexts.) Intelligibility is the two-way transaction by which communicators use shared knowledge of expectations to create and interpret useful information.

To make information intelligible in context, writers (and speakers) must ensure that recipients can recognize the type of communication underway. Writers (and speakers) do this by knowing, themselves, typical purposes (for instance, problem definition) and the range of document or speech types conventionally used for the purpose. Sometimes called genre knowledge, this kind of know-how involves general ability to understand forms of communication in relation to their function in a context and their effect on the context. To develop that kind of know-how in order to enable appropriate choices by writers (and speakers) is an overall aim of this guide.

Writers (and speakers) and their recipients must share knowledge of expected standards if a document or talk is to accomplish its objective.

Standards

In public policy communication, what matters most is not how much you know but rather how much your readers or listeners know after

they have read your writing or heard you speak. Information is expected to be *useful*.

Presentation is expected to be *clear, concise, correct, and credible*. Public policy work is information-overloaded. Especially in government settings, time is scarce, schedules are nearly impossible, and attention is always divided. Rarely does anybody have patience for disorganized, wordy communication or information that does not serve a purpose. Information functions best when it can be comprehended quickly, trusted as accurate, traced to authoritative sources, and used with confidence.

In the Preface to this book, it is claimed that policy actions are associated with communication practices. Following are some common practices associated with the actors who use them to perform functional roles in a policy process.

Participants, Roles, and Practices

Who generates public policy information? Actors in a policy process do. Typically, actors are the players, varied professionals inside and outside government, and advocates.

Players. Players represent organized interests in a policy process. Unorganized interests—for example, individuals affected by a problem or a policy—are not players, typically. While individuals acting alone can sometimes make a difference in a process, they are not usually players. To be a player in a policy process requires collective and organized effort (Coplin and O'Leary 7).

Typical players in public policy processes include:

- Providers of goods, services, or activities related to the problem
- Consumers of goods or services in the problem area (if organized)
- Experts with specialized knowledge of the problem
- Advocates and lobbyists representing particular interests in the problem
- Officials with authority to solve the problem

For example, in making policy for highway safety, the following players would be involved:

- Automotive and insurance industries as providers of goods, services, or activities
- Organizations of automobile drivers as consumers
- Specialists in automobile design or analysts of the economics of transportation as experts
- Advocates for accident victims and lobbyists for law enforcement associations as representatives of particular interests
- Members of Congress, cabinet secretaries, or state governors as official authorities

Whether they write or speak themselves or they authorize others to do it for them, players generate information in relation to their role or for which they are the credible source. In the auto safety example, automotive industries might communicate technical information on safety features of vehicles. Insurance industries might communicate information on the economic consequences of accidents. Consumer groups might offer accounts of experiences in using automotive products and identify problematic conditions. Expert specialists in automobile design or materials might offer results of research on ways to make cars safer. Expert analysts might offer advice regarding policy choice such as regulation of manufacturers versus education of consumers. Advocates and lobbyists might provide germane information about interested or affected groups, propose policy, and argue for or against policy based on group interests. Elected and appointed officials generate the policy instruments (for example, reallocate funds, create a new program, or provide more oversight for existing programs).

Roles. Players' role-related communications are presented in forms conventionally used for the specific purpose. For example, elected and appointed legislative officials use bills and resolutions. Administrative officials use executive orders, statutes, legal codifications, standards and rules of enforcement, and programs of implementation. (You can learn more about these document types in chapter 4 on government records research, where you are referred to respected sources such as the Library of Congress's database Thomas that includes glossaries of legislative and executive documents.) Advocates use position papers, research reports, and press releases.

Professionals Inside Government. Within government, diverse career or consulting professionals generate most of the working infor-

mation of a policy process. They communicate in roles as, for example, legislative aides to members of a legislature; experts on the staffs of legislative committees; legal counsels to legislative committees and agencies; executive agency administrators; policy analysts and technical specialists attached to many offices. To carry out their responsibilities, they might use any of the following document types:

- "One pagers" (summaries of fact or perspective, limited to one page)
- Memos (more developed summaries, varying length)
- White papers (extensive reportage or analysis including evidence, in contrast to briefer memos or one pagers)
- Legislative concept proposals (outlines of model or idea or strategy for policy, without details)
- Legislative histories (reports of government action or inaction, based on government records)
- Committee reports (synthesis of committee decision and history of action on a topic)
- Speeches (to be delivered by elected or appointed officials)
- Testimonies (to be delivered by executives or professionals)

For some inside professionals, communication is the entire job. The communications director in the state budgeting scenario (chapter 1) is an example. A communications director is a generalist who:

- Writes and produces internal documents of many kinds
- Writes external public announcements of many kinds
- Produces kits of information for news media use

Other professional communicators in government are specialists. They include:

- Speechwriters who draft talks for officials to deliver
- Legislation writers who draft bills for deliberation and formulate laws for codification
- Debate reporters who produce stenographic transcripts and the published records of deliberation and debate

Professionals Outside Government. Significant amounts of information used in policy making come from outside government. Experts of many kinds in academia, industry, and business write or contribute to white papers, reports of many kinds, and testimonies. In addition,

professionals and managers in publicly regulated industries and businesses might provide needed information.

For some outside professionals, communication for public policy purposes is the main focus of their job. Lobbyists are an example. They are experts in a subject and are employed by organizations to ensure that policy makers have information about the subject that is germane to the interests of the employing organizations and to ensure that policy makers are exposed to the full range of arguments on a given issue. Lobbyists might brief legislators and their staffs, or they might draft legislation for consideration. Policy analysts are a different example. They may be either inside or outside government. They are experts in using quantitative and qualitative methods to examine problems and options for solving problems. Analysts might advise policy makers on the choice of policy instruments or provide research results to aid the formulation of policy.

Active Citizens. Ordinary people in daily life inform and influence public policy making when they:

- Write or e-mail elected officials
- Provide comment on their experience relevant to a problem or a policy
- Testify about effects of a problem or a policy on their life or their livelihood
- Conduct letter-writing campaigns, create e-mail lists, and use phone trees
- Form a coalition of competing groups to cooperate in solving a problem
- Create a mechanism such as a lawsuit or a boycott to force response by institutional authorities
- Lobby as a representative of civic organizations, trade associations, professional associations, communities of interest, or constituencies

To summarize, in this chapter so far, you have been introduced to expectations, standards, roles, and communications associated with roles typically found in policy-making contexts. Change reading gears here, please. What follows next is a method, an outline of procedure. It is informed by the culture of public policy communication just presented. It consists of questions that translate culture into a routine intended to guide practical writing and speaking in a policy process. At the end of the outline are two checklists that translate

standards into a compilation of expected qualities in documents or talks, intended to be used for assessing a document you have written or a talk you have planned.

Now, you should only read the outline and checklists for perspective and for familiarity. Later, when you are communicating (for instance, in a course or in meeting a real-life demand), use the outline (or method, as it is subsequently called) *before* you write. Use the checklists *after* you write.

A General Method of Communicating in a Public Process

Ask and answer the following questions to consider the context and situation for a communication, to plan it, and to produce it. The questions account for typical conditions of policy making as well as the dynamics of information exchange in a process. They prompt you to consider all the usual components and to take note of significant particulars that might affect your communication. Your answers to the questions should guide your writing and revising. (If you do not understand what some of the questions mean, it might be helpful to consult a standard textbook on professional or organizational communication.)

Practice this procedure literally (even if laboriously at first) until it becomes routine to ask these questions each time you have a need to communicate. At first, jotting down your answers and keeping your notes nearby as you write will be helpful. Later, when you habitually use this method to prepare for communicating, you can adapt it according to a specific demand. A word of caution: Even if you skip some questions, do not omit whole steps. All the steps are needed to cover the basics. Omitting a step in the preparation wastes time or causes other trouble later.

If you are writing for someone else or if you are producing a document with many contributors (the state budgeting example illustrates both), remember to consult with others as needed to answer the questions.

STEP 1: Prepare. First, ask questions about the policy process.

Policy
- To what policy process (underway or anticipated) does this communication relate?
- Does a policy already exist?

Problem
- What is the problem? What conditions are problematic?
- How do I define the problem?
- How do others define the problem?

Players
- Who are the players?
- What are their stakes in the process?
- Who else has a significant role in the process?

Politics
- What are the major disagreements or conflicts?
- What are the major agreements or common interests?
- How might players try to influence the outcome?

STEP 2: Plan. Second, ask questions about the communication.

Purpose
- Why is this communication needed?
- What do I want to accomplish?

Message
- What is my message?
- How does my message differ from others on the same topic?

Role
- What is my role in this process?

Authority
- Whose name will be on the document(s): Mine? Another's? An organization's?
- For whom does the communication speak?

Reception
- Who is (are) the named recipient(s)?
- Who will use the information?
- Will the document(s) be forwarded? Circulated? To whom? Represented? By whom?

Response
- What will recipients know after reading the document(s)? What will users of its information do?
- What is likely to happen as a consequence of this communication?

Setting and Situation
- What is the occasion? What is the time frame for communicating?

- Where, when, and how will this communication be presented?
- Where, when, and how will it be received? Used?

Form and Medium
- Is there a prescribed form, or do I choose?
- What is the appropriate medium for presentation and delivery? A written document? A telephone call? E-mail?

Contents
- What information will support the message?

Organization
- Where will a succinct statement of the message be placed?
- How should the contents be arranged to support the message?
- How will the document's design make information easy to find?

Tone and Appearance
- How do I want this communication to sound? What attitude do I want to convey?
- How do I want the document(s) to look? Is a style or layout prescribed, or do I choose how to present the contents?

Document Management
- Who will draft the document? Will there be collaborators?
- Who will review the draft? Who will revise it?

STEP 3: Produce. Based on your preparation and planning, write the document. Do it in three separate passes: draft first, review second, and revise third. Separating those tasks allows you to manage your time, handle distractions, and communicate better.

Draft
- Produce a complete working draft in accordance with your preparation and plan (answers to the questions above).

Review
- Compare the draft to the plan, and highlight any differences.
- Get additional review of the draft by others, if advisable.
- Refer to the checklists (shown below) to assess the draft's effectiveness and quality and to highlight needs for revision.

Revise
- Make the changes called for by review.

After a document or talk is produced, assess it by using the following checklists.

Two Checklists

Features of Effectiveness. A public policy communication is most likely to be useful if it addresses a specific audience about a specific problem; has a purpose related to a specific policy process; represents authority accurately; uses the appropriate form; and is presented in a usable design.

☐ *Addresses a specific audience about a specific problem.* In policy work, time is scarce. Specifying a communication's audience or intended recipient(s) and the subject or problem(s) saves thinking time for writer and reader (or speaker and listener). The information's relevance for the recipient should be made clear.

☐ *Has a purpose related to a specific policy process.* Policy processes have several phases. Multiple policy processes are underway simultaneously. Timing matters. Agendas change. Stuff happens. Therefore, specifying a communication's purpose and relevance makes it more likely to get timely attention.

☐ *Represents authority accurately.* Policy communications do more than present information; they also represent a type of participation and power. In order for a policy communication to be taken seriously, to have influence, and to influence rightly, the communicator's role and status—a citizen with an opinion, an expert with an opinion, a spokesperson for a nongovernmental organization, a government official—must be accurately represented.

☐ *Uses appropriate form.* Settings of policy work have their own conventions for communicating. Use the document type, style, and tone of presentation that are expected for the purpose and that accommodate working conditions in the setting of its reception.

☐ *Is designed for use.* People's attention is easily distracted in settings of policy work. Dense, disorganized text will not be read or heard. For people to comprehend under conditions of time pressure and information overload, contents must be easy to find and to use. Written documents should chunk information, use subheadings, and organize details in bulleted lists or paragraphs or graphics. Spoken texts should cue listeners' attention with similar devices.