
The STPF Application: 5 Tips for Writing the One-page Memo

Friday, February 5, 2021

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You want me to write... a policy memo?

Around February of every year is the magical time when prospective AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowships applicants hear back about their semi-final status. If you're one of the applicants who are still in the running at this point: congratulations! You've been asked to prepare a one-page policy memo on one topic out of several provided by the selection committee. While it is not a comprehensive white paper, you might be surprised how long it takes you to write. And, they've only given you a week!

Many prospective fellows then take to LinkedIn to reach out to current and former fellows for "insider

tips" on the interview and memo-writing process (do this!). I've received a few of these phone calls this week, so I thought I would share on paper what this process was like for me, and some tips for writing the memo.

Disclaimer: These are my own opinions so take them with a grain of salt. If you talk to two fellows, you'll hear two different experiences. I claim no authority other than I was accepted into the fellowship!

Here are 5 tips to help you with writing your first policy memo:

1. Choose wisely

- You might be tempted to write about something you THINK that the committee might want to hear, outside of your own expertise. Instead, write about something that you know about, or better yet, something you are passionate about.
- For me, I chose a topic on how to improve the STEM pipeline, through a recommendation of mandating science communication in graduate schools. This set me up perfectly to defend why I chose the memo later in my interview because it's something that's personally important.

2. Know your audience

- Tailor your writing to your intended audience. I wrote my mock memo to the Director of NIH, Francis Collins. I wrote under the assumption that he was a pretty smart guy, and an authority on genetic research, but not an expert on pulmonary physiology (which is what I studied). So, I left out any jargon and wrote in a tone that I thought would speak to him.
- The ability to tailor your memo is important to show your other audience (the selection committee) that you understand how to communicate to a broader audience.

3. Get to the point

- Like many other fellows, I was a relatively productive scientist, publishing quite a few papers in biomedical sciences. Those manuscripts follow the conventional format: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and References. Forget all of that, because this memo is NOT a lengthy scientific paper, nor is it even an abstract! In a brief memo, you only have a few lines to devote to every paragraph, so make sure every word counts.

The ideal structure of a one-page policy memo is:

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1. Take-home message or executive summary.
 2. Brief, concise background.
 3. Supporting evidence.
 4. Conclusions/implementation/greater context.
- In my memo, the executive summary is something we lovingly refer to as BLUF – Bottom Line Up Front. Yes, that’s uncomfortable, I know, as we usually start a paper with “Previous research has shown that blah blah.” But, imagine that the recipient (or more realistically, their staffer) is reading your memo while being jostled on the Red Line Metro. If they could only read 2-3 lines, make sure that your main points are in those lines!

Here was my executive summary:

“The National Institutes of Health (NIH) should recommend that increased investment in scientific communications training for lay audiences is an urgent and relatively low-cost solution to inspire a robust and diverse STEM workforce better equipped to tackle the complex issues facing our nation today and tomorrow.”

4. Support your positions

- After your executive summary, set up the rest of your memo to support your main point. Introduce the problem and summarize the background, then provide evidence. Here you can use your literature search skills and pull relevant data to make your point.
- Based on my above executive summary, you can see that I needed to provide numbers for the potential cost of a “low-cost solution”, and also provide background context that the STEM workforce is not as diverse as it should be. One of the sources provided in the memo instructions was the 2018 Federal STEM Education 5-Year Strategic Plan. If they provide a resource, use it to provide policy context and funding references.
- This is a good time to remind you not to spend *too* much time on research. You have to survey the background quickly and move on crafting your message. One thing I did retain from grad school was my thesis advisor telling me, “eventually you have to stop your lit search and write the paper.”

5. Wrap up by showing you understand the bigger picture

- Why does your issue matter? How do you recommend implementation? In the end, I brought my main points into a greater context, arguing that investment in growing a diverse and robust STEM pipeline has an economic benefit, and improved communication skills could deepen collaboration in government, improve national security, and maintain the US scientific enterprise as a global leader.
- You only need a sentence or two for this big-impact conclusion. Once I actually started working in policy, I found that this section gets really short because I instead prioritize the

information crucial to the main story. Also, sometimes you get only 30 minutes to write a one-pager, so having a week is lovely!

- Have fun with it. Write, rewrite, try different memo prompts, and send these one-pagers to everyone in your circle who is willing to read it and give you feedback. Anything that doesn't fit on one page is still great for your presentation during the interview. The goal is to make a compelling argument using your existing research and writing skills that you've gained in your academic training!

Good luck, you'll be fine!

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