



Power in Brevity: Tips for STPF Applicants on the One-page Memo

Monday, February 14, 2022

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I can write a 20-page book chapter, but can I write a one-page memo? I've kept my audience captive during a 30-minute scientific talk, but how do I brief a one-pager over Zoom to people from different fields? These are two questions that I found myself contemplating (well, more like sweating bullets over) late in the winter of 2020. The glee and elation of making it to the semifinalist round for the Science & Technology Policy Fellowships class of 2020 was being threatened by the dark clouds of doubt—I had never written a memo.Â

I started the process like everything else in my life—I googled it. The images and templates were helpful in learning how a one-page memo should look and be structured. And wow, they were short! There must be power in brevity. Developing the content was another task. I began planning a memo for food and biodiversity, watching various YouTube videos, listening to podcasts, reading articles.

Then I used my audio recorder to start jotting down ideas (I prefer this method as my first-draft outline) and realized that I was all over the place. There were too many things that I found interesting and "worthy" of including. I was having difficulty writing a concise memo on this topic.

I emailed a few STPF alumni fellows who I had come in contact with previously (and I would encourage everyone in this situation to do the same). I asked them for advice, and absorbed what they gave me.

"No one wants a Doctor-Smarty-Pants to come in and tell them how to run the government."

"You can't fix everything; focus on one thing; write it so well that you convince them they should care too."

"When you present, do NOT read the memo. They already have a copy, explain it like you would explain it to your neighbors or partner."

All of this good information I took to heart. And to these great suggestions, I'll add my own. After almost 2 years in the policy fellowship, I have come to understand the difference between "should," "one should consider it," "shall," a command that one shall do it, and "must," which is rarely, if ever, used. Use "should" when possible and stay away from "shall" and "must" you are not a regulator nor are you giving commands top-down. Your role is to advise people who may have to consider more than the one item on your list of recommendations.

With just a few days left and unable to focus on one area of biodiversity, I switched gears entirely and drafted a one-pager on AI (artificial intelligence) and the equity issues of facial recognition for darker complexions and more feminine features. With the same process that I used for my first attempt, I was able to whittle down and submit a focused memo just in time.

Then I began the process of practicing how I was going to deliver the memo briefing over Zoom during the semi-finalist round. Mind you, this was March 2020 and at that point most of us were not video-call veterans. In an attempt to keep the information in my head, I prepared a script with the main points that I wanted to cover. That script was a life saver. It allowed me to be brief, but also convey information on a topic about which I had known nothing just two weeks prior.

Another piece of advice: practice until you do not sound like a robot. That can allow you to skim some of the more detailed pieces if time is running short.

One of the most important parts to the interview and in my opinion, in life, is gratitude. Thank the committee they are doing a lot to select the best from a highly impressive candidate pool. The other important piece is the desire to continually learn. You are a subject matter expert in one area, but you may not be working in your area if you land an STPF fellowship. And even if you do end up working in your area of technical expertise, you are not an expert in government and policy.

Make sure you understand and convey to the committee that your goal in the fellowship is to learn, prepare yourself, and help others to make the world a better place. Your goal is not to teach, mandate, or fix, but rather to learn, aid, and be grateful. In my not-so-humble opinion, that makes a good semifinalist.

Best of luck to all the 2022 semifinalists!

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