

Government 94jb: Secrecy and Transparency

TO: Students Enrolled in Government 94jb
FROM: Jonathan Bruno
DATE: September 29, 2014
SUBJECT: Memo Assignment

1. SUMMARY

This memorandum explains your upcoming memo assignment, due October 30th. I begin by laying out the basic requirements of the assignment. Next, I propose five possible topics from which you might choose. I then characterize your audience for the memo and your role as author. In the following two sections, I discuss the memo's purpose (what it should seek to achieve) and corresponding form (how it should be organized in order to do so). Finally, I offer some additional resources that may prove helpful in completing the assignment.

2. THE BASICS

Your task is to compose **an analytic and persuasive memorandum that addresses, and makes a recommendation about, one specific transparency practice** (whether currently existing or not). You may choose one of the possible topics listed below, or else you may develop a topic of your own. If you take the latter route, I expect you to consult with me on your proposed topic before you begin writing. Outside sources may be cited to provide evidence in support of your analysis (e.g., a study suggesting that transparency practice x tends to produce consequence y). However, such sources are not strictly required. An excellent memo may simply explain what sort of evidence would be needed to assess the likely impacts of the transparency practice in question, and make an informed recommendation in light of whatever uncertainty exists.

Your memo should be approximately **9 to 11 pages in length (double-spaced)**, and is due no later than **11:59pm on Thursday, October 30th**. It should be uploaded to the course website (<http://bit.ly/gov94jb>). In the event of any technical difficulties with the website, you may email your memo to me at jbruno@fas.harvard.edu. The deadline will be strictly enforced: late assignments will lose one full letter grade, and no memo will be accepted more than 48 hours after the deadline. If there are extenuating circumstances that require an extension, you should inform me in advance: extensions will not be granted right before the deadline.

Finally, you are tasked with delivering **a brief, oral presentation of your work** during our in-class symposium on **Monday, November 3rd**. You will have a total of just five minutes to present your question, analysis, and recommendation, so brevity is essential. You may use notes or any other aid during your presentation—memorization is not necessary or particularly desirable here—but I do expect the presentation to reflect some advance preparation. In other words, you should consider in advance how your presentation will be organized, how it will

begin and end, etc. After you finish speaking, you will face questions from the audience for three to four minutes.

I welcome questions about this assignment by email or during office hours. In addition, I will happily provide oral feedback, up to 48 hours before the final submission deadline, on outlines and partial drafts.

3. POSSIBLE TOPICS

You are free to develop a topic of your own choosing, or to select one of the following:

- whether the proceedings of appellate courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, should be broadcast live on television and online via streaming video
- whether legislators should be permitted to engage in confidential discussions and negotiations while formulating new laws, and if so, under what circumstances
- whether the power of Presidents and Prime Ministers to control the concealment and disclosure of documents produced within their own executive offices (e.g. the White House) should be limited in some way, and if so, by what means
- whether administrative agencies (e.g. the EPA, FDA, SEC, etc.) should ordinarily have to disclose information about their policymaking activities in real time, and if not, whether some other kind of disclosure should be required
- whether an independent oversight institution should be empowered to require disclosure of the information and reasoning used by state officials to decide that particular individuals or groups abroad should be targeted in military operations (e.g., “targeted killings” by drone), and if so, what form such an institution should take

4. YOUR ROLE AND YOUR AUDIENCE

In writing this memo, you should imagine yourself as a **policy adviser**. In that role, you are providing analysis and argumentation about whether, and why, the particular transparency practice in question should be pursued (or not) by a constitutional democracy like the U.S. Your audience is a group of officials empowered to follow through on your recommendation, and to bring it into effect. Call them, collectively, the **Transparency Reform Council** (TRC). Imagine that the TRC has the authority to institute any reform you might recommend, whether this would require legislative change, constitutional change, etc. Assume further that the TRC is not motivated by any partial or sectional interests, but simply wants to design transparency rules and institutions in the best possible way.

5. FUNCTION: WHAT YOUR MEMO SHOULD DO

Although there is substantial overlap, a memo is somewhat different than a typical academic paper. Whereas in the academic context you generally take on the role of the dispassionate

investigator, writing to reason, analyze, and inform, in the memo context you are more like an analyst/advocate hybrid. Accordingly, **your memo should do the things just mentioned (reason, analyze, and inform) while also seeking to persuade.** It should give the reader good reasons to understand the issue as you frame it, and ultimately to adopt your recommendation. In other words, it should persuade the reader through analysis and argument to do what you are advocating should be done. In this way, the memo writer is somewhat less dispassionate or disinterested than the academic paper writer, and is more focused on translating the memo's analysis into action by the reader.

6. FORM: HOW YOUR MEMO SHOULD BE ORGANIZED

In this policymaking context, it is safe to assume that your reader is strapped for time, and is likely receiving different recommendations from different advisers. Accordingly, there is a premium on **brevity, clarity, and persuasion.**

This suggests a few concrete organizational principles. First, **it should be possible for the reader to skim your memo and get the gist of your argument in one minute or less.** This can be achieved by placing your conclusion and recommendation right up front, in a brief summary, and by using clear, descriptive headings (and subheadings) throughout. Each section of the memo should have a specific purpose, and the heading you select should identify that purpose. Within each section, some limited use of emphasis (bold and italic text) can be helpful, but don't go overboard: too much emphasis can be distracting. Paragraphs and sentences should be relatively short and digestible. And small, clear words and better than long, fancy ones. In short, readability is your rule of thumb.

Second, your memo should at some point **address the one or two strongest objections** to your argument. You want to imagine what kinds of misgivings the audience might experience when asked to implement your recommendation. Your task is to articulate those misgivings succinctly, and to address them as persuasively as you can.

Third and finally, you want to **end on a strong note.** Your conclusion need not summarize the entire argument, since your summary at the beginning has already done so. Instead, the memo's conclusion should leave the reader with a final, powerful statement of your recommendation, along with a brief explanation of why, in a nutshell, the reader should adopt that recommendation.

7. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You may find the following documents helpful in preparing to write your memo. If at any point these resources recommend approaches that my instructions here seem to rule out, then assume that my instructions control. If you are unsure of any of the guidance provided in these documents, please do not hesitate to contact me with your questions or concerns.

- Prof. Robert Behn (HKS) on *The Craft of Memo Writing*
http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Behn-Craft-of-Memo-Writing-2013-3rev8_26_13.pdf

- Prof. Jennifer Davis (MIT) on *Writing Effective Policy Memos*¹
<http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/36824/11-479Spring-2004/NR/rdonlyres/Urban-Studies-and-Planning/11-479Spring-2004/9CE4ACA2-EC3D-4C1D-91CC-27971E27DCF5/0/pmwriting.pdf>
- Duke University Writing Program on Writing a *Policy Memo*
http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/policy-memo.original.pdf
- American University Policy Memo **Samples**²
I: <http://www.american.edu/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=3453000>
II: <http://www.american.edu/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=3453001>

In addition, the following resources may be helpful as you prepare for your oral presentation:

- Marie Danziger on *Five Steps Toward More Successful Public Speaking*
http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/FIVE-STEPS-TOWARDS-MORE-SUCCESSFUL-PUBLIC-SPEAKING_new2013.pdf
- Marie Danziger on “*Markers*” for Public Speaking
http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Markers-for-Public-Speaking_new2013.pdf
- Michael Walton on *Presenting Policy Analysis*³
http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Presentation-on-presentations-Jan31_2013.pdf

¹ When the specific instructions in this document conflict with my instructions here—for example, in requesting single- rather than double-spaced text—please disregard them and assume that my instructions control.

² I provide these links with some hesitation. Please note that they are *samples* for illustration, *not models* that you should necessarily emulate. In particular, you are not required to lay out several different policy options and then to recommend the best of those options, as these memos do. In some cases, that may be appropriate for your assignment here, but it is certainly not required, and I can imagine cases in which it would actually distract you from addressing your question effectively.

³ This document suggests that charts, graphs, and diagrams are extremely important, perhaps even essential, for effective presentations. Whatever the merits of that claim more generally, it does not apply to this assignment. You are free to use visual aids in your memo and/or presentation if you wish, but there is no requirement to do so. The use of such aids will not necessarily improve the quality of your presentation (or your grade). Use your judgment in deciding whether visual aids are appropriate in your case, and feel free to consult me if you’re unsure.