Writing for Policy: Know Your Audience, Message, and Medium

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PRESENTER: SARAH HUTCHEON MANCOLL, M.S.C., POLICY DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL ISSUES (SPSSI; APA DIVISION 9). CONTACT: SMANCOLL@SPSSI.ORG.
Thank you Division 15!

APA DIVISION 15 (EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY) HAS SPONSORED TODAY’S WEBINAR.
Using Research to Inform Policy

Policymakers and scientists have different (Choi et al., 2005):
- Goals
- Languages
- Time scales
- Conceptions of what constitutes “evidence”
- Attention spans
- Priorities
- People to whom they are accountable

Uses of research in policy and practice (Tseng, 2012):
- Intermediaries: Knowledge brokers, relationship brokers
- “policy windows” (e.g., high quality early child care and education)
Know Your Intermediaries

- Department/college/university press office, public affairs office
- Coalitions
- Scientific, professional, and industry societies
- Funders
- Advocacy groups
- News media

...and don’t be afraid to reach out and alert them to your work or to an issue that might interest them!
1. What Is Your Message?

In a phrase or two, what is it that you want to relay through your writing?

Examples:

• Housing insecurity is a major stressor for local families.
• Our university needs a new approach for preventing sexual violence on campus.
• Ageism continues to be a problem in many workplaces.
• The forcible separation of families can leave behind multigenerational scars.
• We need more public investment in pre-k.
Now That You Have Your Message...

2. WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

- State legislators?
- Executive Branch policymakers?
- Parents?
- Health care providers?
- Veterans?
- School boards?
- Congress?
- Fellow psychologists?
- Business leaders?
- The public?

3. WHAT FORM OF WRITING WOULD BEST CONVEY YOUR MESSAGE TO YOUR INTENDED AUDIENCE?

- Briefs and fact sheets
- White papers
- Public comments
- Public testimony
- Amicus briefs
- Practice guides
- Open letters
- Op-eds (opinion editorials)
- Blogging
- Tweeting
Briefs and Fact Sheets

• The terms “brief” and “fact sheet” are often used interchangeably. On Capitol Hill, they may also be referred to as “leave-behinds” or “one-pagers.” A good brief addresses a problem and is written with an audience in mind.

• Typically 1-4 pages. Easy to understand without specialized knowledge or additional reading

• Informative in nature, though they can also present an argument

• Research is cited, though the citations should not be intrusive or exhaustive (for example, citations are often included in smaller print at the bottom of the page)

• Imagery and visualized data can help tell the story. Information flows logically

• The brief should tell a person WHY this is issue matters, WHAT we know about this issue, and—ideally—HOW we can address this issue

• Right: The first page of a two-page fact sheet issued by the U.S. Department of Justice. This fact sheet uses research findings to dispel myths about school violence
Why Develop a Brief?

• There is a gap between current outcomes and ideal outcomes
• The problem is clear but the solution is not
• The problem is emerging but is not being addressed
• New knowledge has implications for policy and practice

Right: A brief produced by the Ohio Injury Prevention Partnership on infant safe sleep
What Kind of Changes Are Being Promoted?

- Legal
- Administrative policies/regulations
- Agency funding priorities
- Organizational practices
- Program implementation

Who is Your Audience?

- What is their technical knowledge?
- What are the political/organizational constraints?
- What is their exposure to the issue?
- What is their openness to change?
- What information do they need?
- Right: A research brief produced by GLSEN on the experiences of LGBT students in school athletics
Above: A two-page brief issued by Child Trends that uses research to make policy recommendations
Economy of Words

Did you use a big word when a smaller one would have worked?
- “Operationalize” versus “carry out”

Can you cut out words or phrases without changing the meaning?
- “It is important to note that”

Have you used a phrase or clause when a word or two will do?
- “Due to the fact that” versus “because”
De-jargonizing Scientific Writing

Executive function
Working memory
Psycholinguistic
Cognitive skills
Idiolect
Neural connectivity
Analogous
Additional Language Tips

Use the active voice
- People do things (versus “things were done”)
- “The focus of this study” versus “This study focuses on”

Can you say in one sentence what you just said in two or three?
Can you break a long sentence into two clearer ones?
Are the subject and verb easily identified?
As predicted, marginalization predicted greater significance loss ($B = .21, SE = .04, p < .001$), as did discrimination ($B = .38, SE = .06, p < .001$). Moreover, the relationship between marginalization and significance loss became stronger the more one had experienced discrimination ($B = .17, SE = .05, p = .002$). In turn, significance loss predicted support for a radical interpretation of Islam ($B = .17, SE = .07, p = .03$). The confidence intervals suggested that marginalization indirectly related to support for a radical interpretation of Islam via significance loss when having experienced high levels of discrimination ($CI_{95} = .0053, .1282$).

Radical groups like ISIS prey on youth who lack clear purpose and direction by promising belongingness, status, and recognition for those who work on their behalf. And this seems to work—some Muslim Americans who feel a lack of meaning in their lives report being more attracted to radical groups and ideologies.
Presenting Data Visually

What story do you want to tell?
- Use graphs to show relationships, the shape of data (e.g., patterns, trends)
- Use tables to show individual values
- Bar graphs are more effective than pie charts
- Minimize visual clutter (e.g., grid lines, legends, 3-D effects, colors that don’t copy well)
Public Comments

• Members of the public, and issue experts in particular, are often asked by government bodies to weigh in on important issues.

• “Requests for Comment” regarding policymaking within the federal executive branch of government are published in the Federal Register. www.federalregister.gov

• Congressional committees also often issue requests for input when they are in the process of drafting legislation.

• Right: A Request for Comment issued by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in May 2019 as it appeared in the Federal Register. This Request for Comment asks the public to review proposed changes to NSF’s Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide. The public had 60 days to respond.
Above: Senator Lamar Alexander, Chair of the Senate HELP (Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions) Committee, sent a tweet in February of 2018 asking for the public to weigh in on reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the major piece of federal legislation that guides higher education policy in the United States.

Right: SPSSI submitted an open letter to Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Senator Patty Murray regarding reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Drawing from research, the letter states that “since federal grant and loan recipients are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status families and to be students of color, cuts to federal student aid programs would disproportionately affect these students.”

Friday, February 23, 2018

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, HELP Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, HELP Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

On behalf of the society for the psychological study of social issues (SPSSI), we thank you for soliciting comments regarding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and for working in a bipartisan manner to reauthorize the legislation. As you set out in this process, we ask that you keep higher education accessible by preserving federal student aid programs. Any simplification of these programs would have to ensure that the needs of undergraduate and graduate students are met.

Founded in 1936, SPSSI is an organization of scholars, educators, and students who are deeply invested in using psychological science to benefit society. Our membership includes researchers who study access to and success in higher education settings across historically underserved groups, including especially racial and ethnic minority students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and first-generation college students. Since federal grant and loan recipients are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status families and to be students of color, cuts to federal student aid programs would disproportionately affect these students (Shah, de Freitas, and Pullen, 2019).

From the Morrill Act of 1862 to the GI Bill of 1944, the United States has a long tradition of supporting students who might not otherwise be able to obtain an undergraduate or graduate degree. The Higher Education Act is the driving force behind that tradition today. It authorizes the major federal grant, loan, and loan repayment programs that benefit millions of students each year, including: consumer info; index to default strategy; subsidized undergraduate loans; income-driven loan repayment plans; Public Service Loan Forgiveness; Work-Study eligibility for both undergraduate and graduate students; and PLUS Loan availability for undergraduate students’ families and independent graduate students.
Above: Dr. Cristina Muñiz de la Peña gave oral and written testimony on Capitol Hill regarding the forced separation of immigrant families. Photo credit: C-SPAN

“‘The youngest child referred to our program was a 2-year-old who had been separated from his mother while asleep and was kept separated for two months. The mother had been told to leave the detention area and when she asked to take her son with her, the officers told her not to bother because she was going to come right back. After two months of desperation, the mother was reunited with her son in New York. At the time she came to our program for assistance, the boy had turned 3 and demonstrated separation anxiety and hypervigilance.’"
Op-eds

• Hook to a timely news event

• Seek out opportunities with local media outlets (e.g., Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune), professional or industry-specific outlets (SPSSI’s Sound Science, Sound Policy blog, APA’s Psychology Benefits Psychology blog, Chronicle of Higher Education)

• Right: An op-ed written by SPSSI Council member and Policy Committee Co-Chair Linda Silka (Bangor Daily News, 1/1/16)

• Check out the Scholars Strategy Network (https://scholars.org/) or The OpEd Project (https://www.theopedproject.org/) for additional information
Thank you!

Sarah Mancoll, M.Sc.  |  Policy Director
Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI)
www.spssi.org  |  smancoll@spssi.org

Additional Resources:
• Influencing Social Policy: Applied Psychology Serving the Public Interest (2017)

Questions?