Guide

HOW TO WRITE A PERSUASIVE OP-ED

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Contents

1. Structure

- ***Title:*** Keep the title short (8 words or less). Make it catchy. Puns can be good if they're clever (e.g., "Trumping the Politics of Torture"), and questions can work well too ("Is Microfinance a Sustainable Solution to Poverty?").
- ***Introduction:*** Keep it short. Begin with a "hook" to catch the reader's attention. State the argument of the article in one sentence, either as a question, or a short statement (at the end of the first paragraph or beginning of the second).
- ***Body:*** Support your argument with concrete examples backed by referenced evidence.
- ***Conclusion:*** Finish with policy implications, recommendations or a call for action. Make sure you refer back to your opening question or thesis.
- Try to maintain a logical flow of arguments from one paragraph to the next.
- Link the sentences within every paragraph together using the structure (AB)(BC)(CD).
- In other words, every sentence should follow logically from the one directly prior to it.
- Use sub-headings sparingly. They are usually unnecessary in a 900 word article and they should not be a replacement for logical flow between paragraphs.
- Avoid constructions like "This article will discuss the three ways that…" Summarizing your argument is wasted space in such a short article and most readers will skim over such constructions anyway.
- In general, don't summarize what you are going to say. Just say it. And don't summarize what you've said. Instead, put a new spin on it or come to a conclusion of your argument.

2. Content

2.1 How to construct an argument

"*The wise man doesn't give the right answers, he poses the right questions.*"
(Claude Levi-Strauss)

As mentioned in part one, a good article starts with a clear question (no matter if this question is explicitly stated or not, you should at least have it in mind). If you know which topic you want to write about, but have a hard time coming up with a question, then ask yourself ***why you want to write about this topic in the first place***. Your interest usually does not develop out of the blue. Clarifying your broader (epistemological) interest helps you to set the stage and find a clear question, which will help you construct an argument and structure your piece.

Here are a few examples of interests and questions, including some articles we published as examples. These are neither exclusive categories, nor is the list extensive. Any combination of interests is possible and there are other options.

Interest	**Question**	Examples
I detected a pressing problem or shortcoming and would like to suggest a solution.	*How can this problem be solved?*	https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/04/13/bringing-human-rights-home/
I would like to put forward a new perspective or an innovative idea on something, or want to challenge conventional arguments.	*How does this perspective/theory/idea contribute to making better policy? How should policy-makers take it into account?*	https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/03/11/beevelop-rural-ethiopia/ https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/01/25/avoiding-a-persian-flavor-of-dutch-disease/ https://www.policycorner.org/de/2016/07/16/is-microfinance-a-sustainable-

		solution-to-poverty/
I want to (better) explain an event (election outcome, conflict outbreak, peace agreement, political decision) and its implications.	*How can the event be explained and what are implications/lessons for future policies?*	https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/05/17/tu-felix-austria/ https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/01/25/europes-splintered-union/
I want to suggest how to respond to a long-term development that changes conditions for policy-making.	*What are the best ways to deal with this development? What can policy-makers and other actors do to contribute?*	https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/03/25/the-innovative-state/ https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/02/27/seizing-the-benefits-of-brexit/ https://www.policycorner.org/de/2017/02/05/trumping-the-politics-of-torture/

It might be helpful to rephrase your question as a *lack of knowledge* or *gap in understanding*. Then you can tell your readers how you will extend their knowledge or modify what they think they know. If you have problems to formulate why your question is relevant, ask yourself "*So what if we find an answer to it?*". Conversely, you might also ask "*So what if we don't find out?*", to make clear what would be missed if you didn't write the piece and your audience didn't read it.

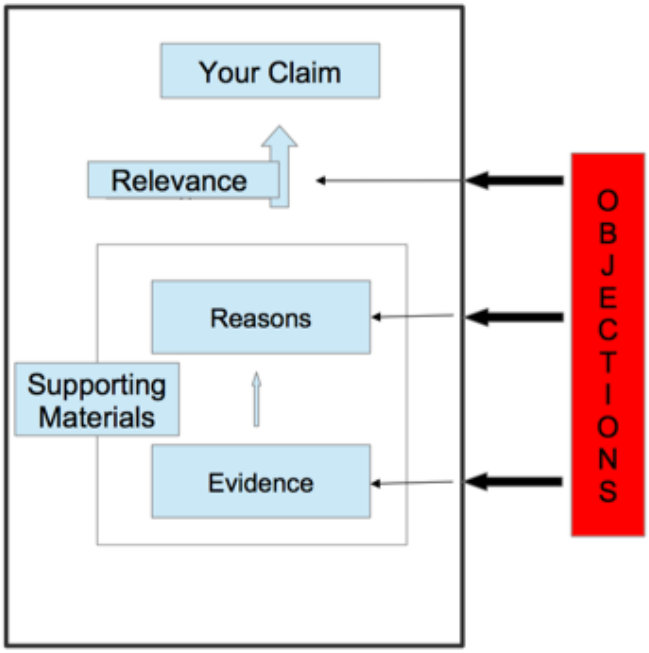
As soon as you have your question, you will have to **take a position** on a debate, an issue or a problem, give an evaluation or a judgement. This could be about theoretical foundations or perspectives, specific rights claims, practical issues of policy or implementation. In academia, we tend to still be more reserved and humble in the claims we make. For a policy paper, **developing a clear opinion and defending it** is crucial. Feeling a bit 'exposed' is therefore natural and an indication of a strong claim. This will lead to you wishing that people accept your claim. And that, in turn, requires a strong argument! The following section draws on ideas from "A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations" by Kate L. Turabian.

What is a good argument?

> *"(...) any **good argument** (...) resembles an amiable conversation in which you and your imagined readers reason together to solve a problem whose solution they don't yet accept. That doesn't mean they oppose **your claims** (thought they might). It means only that they won't **accept them** until they see **good reasons based on reliable evidence** and until you **respond to their reasonable questions and reservations**."* (Turabian 2007, p.49)

An argument is what is needed to support a claim and make it plausible, eventually convincing people to accept your claim. Therefore, answering the following questions can be helpful:

- What are you claiming?
- What reasons support it?
- What evidence supports those reasons? (Examples of cases, historical events, ... or data)
- How do you respond to objections and alternative views? (counter-arguments)
- How are your reasons relevant to your claim?



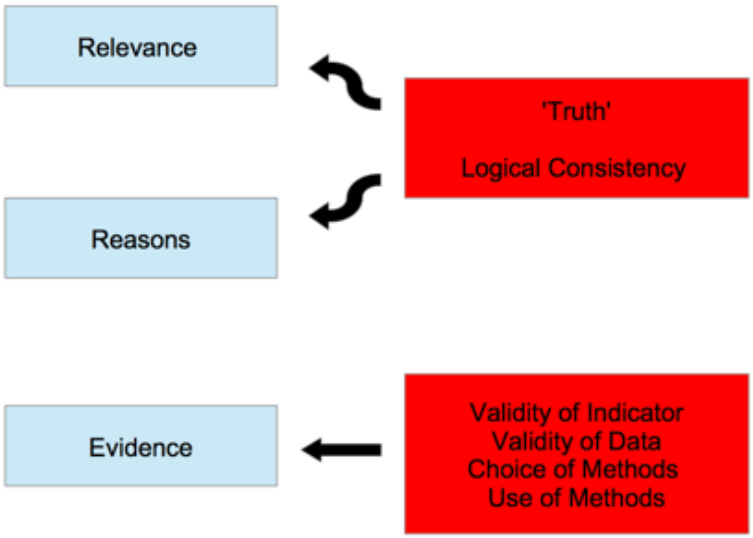
The above picture shows how the elements of an argument relate to each other and indicates where objections might come in.

The difference between reasons and evidence: "We base reasons on evidence", not the other way around (Turabian 2007, p.52). Logical reasons are abstract and we think them up. Hard evidence is what we can collect. It usually comes from outside your mind (except if you

make an argument based on an imagined case). Reasons do need supporting evidence, while evidence only needs reference to a credible source.

Evidence: Particularly in times that are described as "*post-factual*", it is important to consider that people don't necessarily believe what you say based on the evidence you present. This is why you should make an extra effort in citing established and verified sources, such as peer-reviewed academic journals or international organizations, official government statistics, etc. Taking the extra 10 minutes to double-check and verify sources is totally worth it when this makes your piece more convincing to a large range of readers!

Reasons: Important for reasons that you think of, is to ask yourself whether they are inconsistent or contradictory, too few to support your claim or irrelevant to your claim.
People can still disagree if they simply have a different view of the world and how it works. In this case, you might include objections based on a different reasoning and compare it to yours. Like this, people with different reasoning will be more willing to at least respect your point of view.



Objections: Of course, you don't have the space to respond to all possible counter-arguments. Mostly, however, you can already think of the most likely objections people would make to your argument. Taking the chance to discuss them right away can make your piece a lot more convincing. People will have to be more creative and come up with new counter-arguments against your claim. We advise you to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both your own argument, and the arguments you are criticizing.

For most people who are accustomed to (academic) writing, a structuring of reasons and evidence happens naturally. When you explicitly think about it, however, you will be able to improve your argument. If you have difficulties, you can structure your argument in bullet points.

1. *Question and Relevance*
2. *Claim*
3. *Reason 1 supporting your claim*
    1. *Summary of evidence*
        1. *example/source 1*
            1. *you might have to additionally explain your evidence*
        2. *example/source 2*

    (3. Possible counter-arguments and responses)
    1. *Summary of evidence*
        1. *example/source*
2. *Reason 2 supporting your claim*
    1. *...*

The order in which claims, reasons and examples occur to you might give you a hint on how to structure your argument. If you want to deliberately make your piece more readable or build an extra strong argument, consider the following ways to order your reasons (modified from Turabian 2007).

- Simple to complex (To not overwhelm readers)
- More familiar to less familiar (To make readers feel at home)
- Less contestable to more contestable (If readers agree with the first parts, they might be more open to accepting the more contestable)
- Breaking a topic into parts (Easier to follow)
- Chronological (Easier to follow)
- Less important to more important (convincing)
- Causal Chain (Cause --> Effect)
- Comparison and contrast (comparing two different countries, policies, theories, views as your main contribution. Don't confuse it with considering alternative claims and reasons, which you should always do, independently from how you organize your reasoning).

In an academic paper, you would use your conclusion exclusively to summarize the most important points and discuss implications. **We at the Policy Corner want you to focus on innovative policies**. That means if your article does not already discuss one or more policy solutions in the main part, the conclusion should make your policy recommendations explicit. In that case, a conclusion is not just a summary of your claim, reasons and evidence, but SHOULD contain new elements, such as practical ways to implement a policy change.
At the end, you should take the time to re-read your piece as a whole and check our style-guide. Apart from the elements listed there, you can also check the quality of your argument.

- Is there a clear question?
- Do you answer that question?
- Do you make an explicit claim?
- Is this claim backed up by sound reasoning?
- Is your reasoning supported with reliable evidence?
- Do you take into account counter-arguments or possible objections at all levels (reason and evidence)?
- Do you discuss strengths and weaknesses of your argument?
- Does your argument end with a specific policy recommendation?

2.2 Doing Research

What is research?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "research" as "a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding" (Cambridge Dictionary: "research"). Research is not a set process with set rules, but should be regarded as a "creative and strategic process that involves constantly assessing, reassessing, and making decisions about the best possible means for obtaining trustworthy information, carrying out appropriate analysis, and drawing credible conclusions" (O'Leary, Z. (2004), The Essential Guide to Doing Research, *Sage Publications*: 1).
While there are many different approaches to doing research we will present one possibility that can help you and give you orientation during the research process. Feel free however to follow your own approach that fits your way of thinking and creativity best.

Conducting research

Generally, when conducting research it is worth keeping in mind the following six steps (This approach mainly follows Eisenberg, M. and Berkowitz, R. (1987), "The Big6"):

1) Task definition

Clearly formulate your research question or your theses. Be aware of the state of the art in your field and current debates. Think about what areas might need further exploration. It is important to narrow down your research question, e.g. "What can be done about war?" is too broad, instead you might ask "What role does XY play in escalating a certain type of

conflict?“. Your question should be focused but complex enough to develop an interesting and relevant argument.

2) Information Seeking Strategies

Ask yourself what are the best resources to answer the question that I have? It might be newspapers, books, movies, podcasts, academic literature, online databases or you might need to conduct interviews. Be aware of what kind of information you need; it might be general information or statistics, historical, news, opinions or some other type of information. Take this into consideration when deciding what resources to use.

3) Location and Access

Use the resources identified in step two to locate the actual information you need. Think of alternative ways of phrasing what you are looking for when searching databases or the internet. Check information on related topics to situate your argument in a wider context. Be aware of functions of search engines that can help you conduct research e.g. if you found an academic article which is very relevant to your topic in Google Scholar, check who else cited it by clicking on “cited by“. Also check the references of articles you find particularly interesting.

4) Use of Information

When you have identified those sources relevant to your research question, start reading. Keep your research question in mind and formulate clear questions towards the texts you are reading. Check for information that supports your argument and follow up on information that contradicts it. Be sure to document the information you use and cite. While you read, try to be aware of the different parts of your argument and identify which part of the source you are engaging with could support which part of your argument.

5) Synthesis

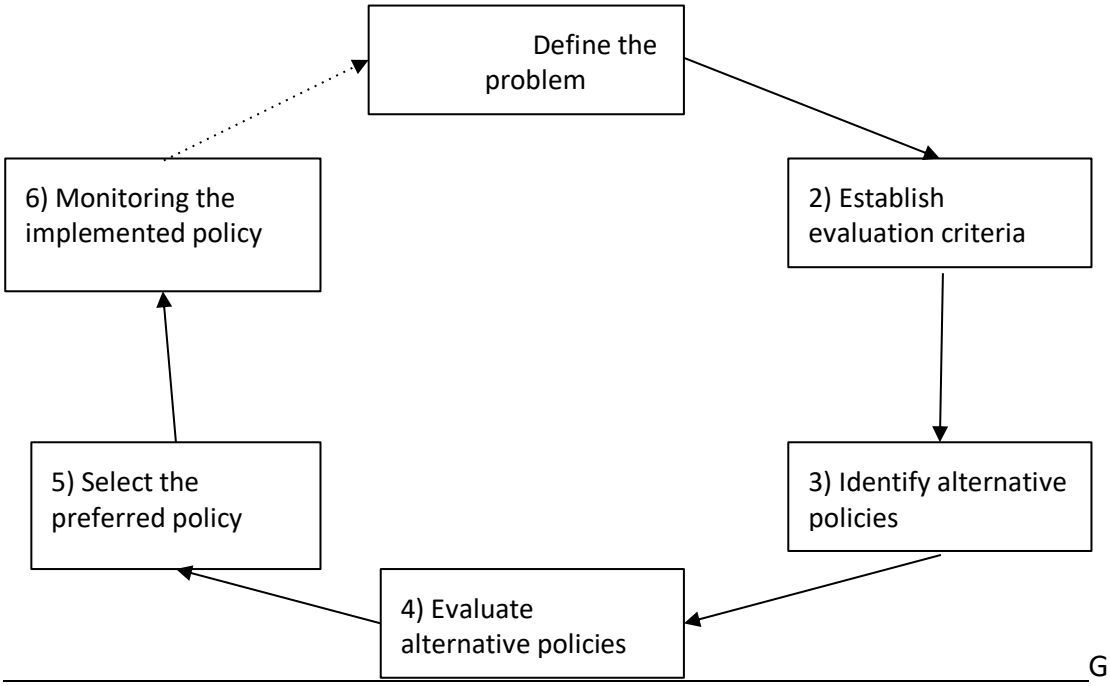
Combine the information that you have gathered from different sources and identify common argumentations. Clearly identify which part of the gathered information supports which part of your argument and where it goes in your OpEd. Besides academic argumentation it might be useful to support your opinion with opinions of other authors or examples. Always make sure that the information you use is correct and up-to-date. That means you might have to check the sources of the information that you are using.

6) Evaluation

Before submitting an OpEd make sure your argument is understandable and solid (check this guide for information on how to build a strong argument). It should be supported by evidence from credible sources and where necessary be backed up by examples. Give your OpEd to friends who are not engaged with the topic you are writing about and check if they can follow your argument. If not, it might be necessary to give more examples or context.

2.3 Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis can be defined as "the process through which we identify and evaluate policies or programs that are intended to lessen or resolve social, economic, or physical problems" (Patton, C. see http://stepsforsuccessfulpolicyanalysis.blogspot.de/2011/10/steps-for-successful-policy-analysis.html) . One approach, developed by Carl V. Patton, includes six steps that can be followed to analyze policies. As with the "conducting research" part above, this is merely a general outline which you can choose to follow or deviate from, according to the needs of your research (Patton, C. and Sawicki, D. and Clark, J. (2013) Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning, *Pearson*).



Graphic 1 (adapted from Patton et. al)

1) Verify, define and detail the problem

Be very clear about what the problem is that the policy approach is trying to address. Also ask which actors are involved and what their interests are. Does the problem necessitate immediate action or can it be approached in the long term? What events led to the problem being put on the agenda i.e. what made it an issue of public concern? Also, situate the problem in a wider context and ask what is at stake for who. It can also be helpful to identify the policy area in which the problem is situated: is it an environmental, security, economic… problem?

2) Establish evaluation criteria

Decide upon criteria that you will use to compare policy alternatives. These might include cost, benefit, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, legality or political acceptability. Think about

which groups to include in your analysis and make sure to ask which groups benefit or are harmed by certain policy approaches.

3) Identify alternative policies

Start by making a comprehensive list of possible policy options. These need not be mutually exclusive but different combinations of these options might later be a conceivable policy option. For inspiration, check what actors propose in order to solve or lessen the problem defined in step one. You can sort these ideas by “basic“ approaches and secondary variations. Include in your options the possibility of just letting things play out and ask yourself what that would actually mean. Take your list and reduce it to the most viable approaches and then ask if these can be combined or modified to reach more desirable outcomes.

4) Evaluate alternative policies

Use the criteria you have established in step two to evaluate the identified alternatives. It is probably necessary to do additional research in this step. Ask how the identified approaches fit the interests of the actors identified in step one and what the implications of the policies might be on different levels such as the economic, political, societal… levels. Check if there are examples where the identified policies have actually been implemented and if there are any lessons learned that might benefit your analysis.

5) Select the preferred policy

Based on the results of the evaluation, choose a policy option. Ask yourself what trade-offs the selected policy options includes for which actor. It might also be a viable option to combine different approaches and think about sequencing, i.e. which approach to use when and for how long.

6) Monitoring the implemented policy

If the policy is implemented, assure continuity by asking if it was implemented fully and correctly and if the problem identified in step one has been addressed. What impacts does the policy have and how do these impacts compare to the desired outcome? If there are unintended consequences, this might generate new problems and necessitate a new analysis.

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3. Style

When writing an op-ed, it is crucial to be concise. Above all, follow the following three principles:

1. State your argument clearly.
2. Avoid ambiguous language.
3. Formulate sentences as simply as possible.

The purpose of these principles, and the more specific guidelines below, is to write in an engaging and persuasive fashion. In order to do this, we must renounce some of the writing rules we learned in high school and university and embrace the style used by writers in leading publications like The Economist and The New York Times. There is a reason these publications are so well read: there is a formula. Here are the basics.

3.1 The Basics

- ***Sentences***: Keep them short.
- ***Paragraphs***: Begin with a topic sentence and keep short (maximum 5 sentences).
- ***Active Tense***: Use the active tense wherever possible. E.g., “A could create B,” not "B could be created by A."
- ***Words***: Use short words instead of long ones (use not utilize), everyday instead of technical (buy not purchase), and avoid academic language like thus, hence, due to, therefore, and “this article will argue that…”
- ***Figures of Speech***: Avoid metaphors or figures of speech that you see or hear often.
- ***Quotes***: Use sparingly. If you quote someone, say who it is and why they said it.
- ***Abbreviations***: Avoid abbreviations (e.g., GFC should be Global Financial Crisis) unless they are very well known, like the US or the EU.
- ***Hyperlinks***: Use in-text links to other websites and data sources that the reader might find interesting or helpful to understand your argument.
- ***Numbers***: Write numbers out up to nine (one, two, … nine). 10 and above can be written in numeric form. Exceptions include percents (“8 percent”) and millions/billions (“2 million”).
- ***Titles***: Should be kept short and catchy.
- ***Jargon:*** Provide brief explanations for technical language or concepts that might not be well known to all readers.

3.2 Writing Elegant Sentences

- Mentally rearrange sentences until you find which one feels the best.
- Cut out all words that can be cut without changing the meaning. “Any time soon” should be “soon” and “the question as to whether” should be “whether”.

- Despite what your high school teacher once told you, it is okay to start sentences with conjunctions like "and," "but," and "so." Excellent writers do so all the time.
- Do not overload your sentences. Choose one of three parts of the sentence (object, verb or subject) and only make one of them long. For example, "A sentence with too much in all three of its parts can ruin a paragraph" has a complex subject ["a sentence with too much in all three of its parts"] connected to a simple verb ["can ruin"] and a simple object ["a paragraph"]).
- Remember that the end of a sentence is the place of emphasis. Put important information at the end and unimportant things in the middle.
- Make definite assertions. "He was not very often on time" should be "He usually came late" and "he did not remember" should be "he forgot."
- Use commas where you naturally pause for speech and where they are grammatically necessary. Otherwise use them sparingly.
- Keep related words together. Do not separate the subject and the principal verb by a phrase or clause that can be transferred to the beginning. "Cast iron, when treated in a Bessemer converter, is changed into steel" should be "By treatment in a Bessemer converter, cast iron is changed into steel."
- Link sentences together by repeating words in various forms. For example, create "linkages" by "linking", and by "repetition" and "repeating."

3.3 Some Advanced Guidelines

- "However," if used at all, should generally be in the middle of the sentence and enclosed by commas. "His approach, however, was fatally flawed."
- Be careful when using quotation marks for words other than quotes. It often connotes derision and is usually unnecessary. If you feel uncomfortable using a word, use another.
- Avoid using the words "this" and "these," Say the name of the thing, or "the," Or don't refer back at all, simply go forward. The reader knows what you're talking about.
- Avoid so-called "elegant variation." For example, not use "industrialization" and "growing structural differentiation" as synonyms. Choose one word and stick to it.
- If possible, modifiers should come next to the word they modify. "He only found two mistakes." should be "He found only two mistakes."
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or jargon word if you can think of an everyday synonym.
- Add a hyphen between multiple adjectives before a noun, but not after. E.g., "high-quality articles," but "the articles were high quality."

4. Turning Academic Papers into an Op-ed

4.1 Identify your core idea

Academic papers are often multi-pronged, addressing a range of phenomena or key research areas under an extended topic. As such, in order to provide clarity and focus to any piece submitted to Policy Corner, isolate the key idea you think is most appropriate, and develop your piece around this.

Ask yourself what element is most engaging to a broader policy-oriented audience, and consider which of PC's topic areas (Economic Policy, Peace & Security, Energy & Environment, Development & Health, Human Rights & International Law, European Affairs, and Politics & Society) best captures the core idea you have selected.

4.2 Reconsider your target audience

The intended audience of your paper most likely reflects the more narrow, academic community that your initial paper sought to address. If this is the case, reframing the issue for a more generalised audience will necessarily allow your article to have greater reach both within the PC community, and any external readership. Here, consider what element(s) are most appropriate for a wider audience (i.e. what particular idea/theme/challenge is both engaging and readily comprehensible for a wider audience).

In this process, it is important to retain the academic rigour and research standards contained within the initial academic piece. It is PC's working assumption that its audience is informed and intelligent, and all submissions must be cognisant of this standard.

4.3 Construct a "hook"

In order to bring your academic content into a more contemporary light and grab the attention of your target audience, construct an engaging introduction, or 'hook', that contextualises the core idea you have selected in a manner that speaks to a topical and/or emerging issue relating to one of Policy Corner's topic areas. This 'hook' will, in some respects, reflect the stylistic technique employed across a large number of Op-Ed pieces in contemporary journalism, so if unsure, consider consulting policy-focused pieces in internationally renowned publications (e.g. Washington Post, New York Times, Foreign Policy etc.).

Your 'hook' should simultaneously crystallise the most important element of the issue you have selected, and drive the reader forwards by establishing the subsequent research as being a necessary to fully comprehend the issue at hand. If appropriate, it can serve to

evoke a strong emotional or intellectual response from the reader, and utilise vivid imagery which places the reader in the particular geographical or temporal space your academic paper occupies.

4.4 Revise for readability and flow

Any revision of audience will necessarily consider revision of field-specific language that may dominate your academic paper. If the terminology utilised serves to alienate a general policy-oriented audience, then consider if simpler language will suffice. If changing terminology compromises the quality and accuracy of the piece, account for any complex or non-standard terminology by providing an adequate explanation of key phrases, where appropriate.

The key here is to use your best judgement. The editing team at PC will revise for readability, but ideally, you should aim to transform your piece prior to the editing process, with a mind to targeted, effective language that reflects the best of popular academic writing. If unsure, consult existing examples on the PC website, or at model international publications such as The Conversation (http://theconversation.com/global). Here, their tagline, "academic rigour, journalistic flair", is instructive, and provides a good starting point.

Where adjusting language or terminology that is specific to your area of expertise, remember to consult the PC style guide and the guidelines pertaining to abbreviations and acronyms, as this will assist in maintaining clarity and consistency with writing published on the site.

4.5 Transform observations into policy responses

A natural consequence of the academic method, is that academic papers will often direct most content towards an evaluation of existing research, and the outlining of any empirical findings/new learnings. They are often necessarily restricted from proposing alternative systems or methods of addressing a problem under analysis. Academic papers, particularly within many public policy disciplines, are restricted from extrapolating their findings into potential future scenarios.

Because policy papers necessarily enjoy the opportunity to propose creative solutions to policy challenges, take the time to isolate and develop policy responses that flow from the academic insights contained within your paper. This is often best done by connecting the core findings to a contemporary issue that contextualises your research in its purest form, and from which an audience can consider the implications of research against an existing fact scenario.

4.6 Revise for length

As per the PC style guide, all submissions should be under under 1000 words. As such, given this will likely require editing down a longer-form version of your chosen content, be selective about what elements need be included. This this includes incorporating, where appropriate, certain content within existing footnotes into the main body of the text. Footnotes that are retained are done so for reference purposes, not an expansion on above content. Remember, the aim of a policy piece is to speak to a core issue with clarity, so keeping the main body succinct and targeted is key.

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