Policy advice
MASTERCLASS

Paper 13

Making a great paper

In our reviews last year, we saw some great papers. They were based on robust analysis, were well written and focussed on the needs of decision makers. We were really impressed and think that you can learn from the great papers and go on to apply those lessons to other papers (as well as learning from the ones that didn't go so well!)

The table below outlines how the weaker, adequate and stronger papers approached various key aspects of policy advice. It's based on what we saw in the reviews, plus our experience of what makes a great paper.

It can be used as an easy prompt when writing papers as you push through and improve the paper. It is also valuable in the peer review process as a framework for concrete positive feedback.

Compare and contrast

Features	Weak papers	Adequate papers	Strong papers
Problem definition	Hard to follow; hidden in middle of report; not sized; source of problem not explained	Readable but long; stated early but not sized; status quo inadequately explored	Sharp, clear; in Executive Summary; data used to show consequences of inaction or size of opportunity
Strategic focus	Donkey deep in detail and process; can't see the wood for the trees	Provides operational context but not explicitly linked to agency/Minister's goals	Clearly aligned with agency/Government's aims; politically nuanced
Risk analysis	Largely absent, or tacked on at the end as a brief afterthought; possibly casual responses as mitigation	Financial or operational risks presented; little on stakeholder/inter-agency risks; limited but sound mitigation	Dedicated risks and mitigations section in options analysis; stakeholder risks explicitly stated accompanied with possible mitigation
Decision making framework for options analysis	Opinion without any evidential support; leaves preferred option as matter of taste	Pros and cons presented – often in bullet points – but trade-offs not easy to see; degree of logic behind preferred option	Options compared against mandated assessment criteria in a table; scores presented; discussion of criteria weighting; preferred option falls out simply and logically
Communication	Text only; full of jargon – often undefined; long, dense paragraphs; full of support material; overuse of passive voice; no subheadings or visual tools	Plain English; occasional table; diagrams and support material in attachments; some functional subheadings	Crisp drafting; active voice in short paragraphs; tables and diagrams used to reduce reliance on text; subheadings with verbs develop the narrative
Front end - Executive Summary, purpose and recommendations	Purpose statement largely repeats paper title; ES summarises each part of paper; multiple noting recommendations	Potted summary but 'so what?' not always spelt out, meaning Minister still needs to plough through whole paper to get the main points	Pulls out most salient aspects of issue at hand for the Minister in tight logic; flags risks; maps out next steps; all in a page or less

Source: NZIER

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