

The “Fifty-Fifty Rule”

A persistent problem – what might be done?

In our regular reviews, we keep seeing papers that are strong on content and weak on presentation. The advice is helpful but difficult to access without the reader slowing down and working through the elements of the paper to organise the argument appropriately.

Too often, we see papers clearly based on a lot of research and thinking about the issue but cannot effectively communicate the problem definition, the best way to consider the dilemma and, even more worryingly, just what might best be done about it.

So, what is wrong that can be fixed?

Our diagnosis is that too much time has been spent on ‘cracking the problem’ and not enough on ‘getting the message across’, or the writing has been left until the last minute. We often shorthand this as being the 50:50 rule. It means that to produce effective policy advice you have to spend as much time and effort working on the quality of the communication as you do on the analysis.

Of course, we don’t expect this maxim to be taken completely literally. For a simple issue or a well-known problem (perhaps one with a standard approach), the thinking can be done comparatively quickly. For a long-term, in-depth research piece – more time will be spent on set-up, engagement and analysis than writing a report on the findings.

But the 50:50 rule remains a helpful reminder – a metaphor to help advisers organise their time. It underlines the need to ensure that the write-up/communication aspect is treated as being as important as the analysis.

In general terms, these papers present in various ways – typically involving many and diverse failings. Indeed, there might be a range of causes driving this result.

Nevertheless, we have found that the generic remedy is the same for a surprisingly high share of these examples. This is because, despite the assorted presentations, the underlying issue is the same.

Our simple hint is that allocating resources to the different aspects of the advice challenge is always important and difficult. But that it needs to be done for a happy outcome.

So, don’t spend all of the resources (especially time) understanding the issue and appraising the alternative solutions so you have to rush the drafting and presentation. It is just as important, if not more, because the analytical effort may be in vain unless the key audience grasps the salient features.

How does it work – given the complexity of the system?

In the real world, drafting advice is not a simple two-stage process – looking at the issue to find out what needs to be said, and then designing the communication.

In oversimplified terms, doing the analytical work and making the paper an easy read are not two parts of the problem to be worked through separately. They are often tied up in ways that can be unhelpful.

This is because looking into a policy issue can be a messy, complicated business with lots of moving parts and often many different people contributing. There is unlikely to be a neat endpoint to stop and remind yourself to now think about how to present the paper.

How the project is organised and managed will differ from instance to instance. And thus, it is going to be a challenge to create a method to ensure the 50:50 rule is always actioned.

How to think about getting it done?

The responses to the various challenges can be matched to how they occur. So, at a high level, the project manager (paper author) might be sufficiently organised to just ‘muddle through’ – find the appropriate time and discipline to arrange the design of the paper to be apt and effective in getting its message across.

In most circumstances, this will positively impact paper quality even if the prescription is only roughly followed. This probability is an empirical finding based on the range of actual work samples we typically see.

Going back to basics means reminding authors that the challenge of communicating the advice is to tell a story that connects easily with the audience.¹

Sometimes, this will be a unique, compelling tale that stands on its own feet and grabs the reader. But mostly, it will take the form of one of the papers discussed in our earlier masterclass on the top seven most common papers.²

Hints on making it happen

Nevertheless, the paper must still be written to meet its own particular need. Within the tailoring to the specifics, our experience shows some general approaches can be used to make the task easier and more effective.

One obvious tactic is the project plan. Drawing up a reasonably detailed outline with key stages and their timing allows the 50:50 idea to be firmly included.

Our realism suggests (to paraphrase von Clausewitz³) no project plan survives intact from contact with implementation. But the exercise is still worth the effort.

Our key messages are:

- **Do not** leave the work on communication until the end of the drafting – it is not a separate job.
- **Do** prepare for the communication work as you go – it will make things easier if you are gathering material, thinking about visual aids and asking simplifying questions throughout the process. (Some ideas are detailed below.)

Take the most frequent type of paper...

In what follows, we have made the ideas concrete by concentrating on a single type of paper. This is the most common type of paper we see and one of the most demanding – the Policy Brief.⁴

(Note that similar hints can be developed for the other types of advice tailoring to their specific attributes. In particular, there is a need for extra planning if the paper is one of a series.⁵)

We are envisaging a conventional presentation using a strong Key points section to open – on occasion, more tailored approaches can be developed to convey the singular features of particular policy issues and advice, e.g. a PowerPoint report, a slide pack or A3.

As a general guide, we suggest keeping the following in mind through the stages of the production.

¹ Some helpful advice on this general topic is provided by a section of the Policy Project’s website at <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-advice-themes/communicating-policy-advice>

² See Masterclass No.10 Introducing the key papers, https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_10_introducing_the_key_papers.pdf

³ Von Clausewitz, the thinker about war is supposed to have said about strategy: *No campaign plan survives contact with the enemy*. Here we see similar sentiments apply to the task of creating and implementing

a plan to prepare policy advice. The plan itself is unlikely to be fully realised but the process is still useful.

⁴ Paper 1 in our Masterclass on different types of papers https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_10_introducing_the_key_papers.pdf

⁵ See Masterclass No. 25 Dealing with a series of papers – integrating the advice https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_25_lg_series_of_papers.pdf

Opening rounds – elements of the advice (early on)

- Once the problem is agreed, consider how best to capture its key features in a few words. This becomes the motivating statement.
- Always gather sufficient data to size up the issue and think about a catchy, succinct way of presenting its salience. Challenge yourself to go beyond 'important' or 'significant' – these words lose their force in the policy context.
- Draw up a list of the groups affected – think of ways of organising this information in a single sentence.

Grappling with the analysis – keep it simple (in the midst of the analysis)

- Is there a straightforward way of explaining how the issue is tackled and why you chose this approach?
- Can you summarise the crucial evidence in a sentence that shows its reliability?
- Can you 'stockpile' material that backgrounds/ expands the core arguments as you go along? It can then be readily used as appendices to round out the logic and satisfy Ministers' needs for more detail. But always ensure the information is relevant – don't put it in just because it's available.
- Where have the criteria for assessing the quality of possible solutions come from – why are they the ones to use?

- Are there some compelling tables, infographics or diagrams that you can use to help boil down aspects of the paper?

Talking through the solution and its implementation (once the key features are clear)

- Is there a simple stand-alone table that presents the options against the criteria? The cells should be self-contained and crisp.
- Can you craft one 'crunch sentence' to show simply why the recommended action was selected? This may take the form of a diagram.
- What will happen next? Think who, what, and when in very concise form. And what about implementation? How is progress to be tracked – in a sentence?
- Make sure you've covered the risks.

Finally (closing off)

- Look at the Key points and ask: will this be enough to tell a convincing story? Don't forget the next step after taking a decision in a typical policy development is to discuss/justify it in a public setting.

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