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Writing Tips for Quantoids

Empirical information can be compelling and interesting when combined with a model and understanding of the world. However, it's your job to weave the statistics into a narrative. Data, statistics, and graphics will help you "tell your story"; they and their production are not the story.

DO:

Use numbers to support your argument, not to make it. Don't write about the numbers; write about ideas and hypotheses.

Use pretty pictures to keep your readers' attention. Graphics (pie charts, histograms, bar charts, etc.) can help tell your story visually. Some people can most easily use info presented graphically.

Describe every statistic or graphic you use in the text. If you can't find room in the text for the explanation, ask yourself if the numbers belong there.

Provide enough information so a statistician can evaluate your work. Use appendices and footnotes for technical details of survey or analysis. This gives future researchers clues to how they can study the issue and to the meaning of your work.

Provide a clear summary of your conclusions drawn from empirical info. It's your job to synthesize all of the data and information. Your one page executive summary may be the only thing your client reads.

Acknowledge the shortcomings of your data and methods. No data or study is perfect for the purpose; yours will be no exception. Part of your job is to explain the uncertainties and caveats associated with your study. What can't we know from this study that we care about? What data, samples, or methodologies might provide better information?

DON'T:

Don't try to teach statistics. Busy policy-makers can't wade through a treatise on statistics. Your job is to provide the "translation", not a lecture on the definition of a confidence interval or a p value.

Don't use the text to describe how you created the statistics. Most clients will not care about your process only your outcome. Data collection and your analysis methods should be described in an appendix, with only the important information in the text.

Don't use a cookie-cutter writing style to describe your outcomes. (E.g., Eastern WA households averaged 10 with a standard deviation of 20. Western WA households averaged 13 with a standard deviation of 15.) Vary your sentence construction and style to create interest. Concentrate on "telling your story" to facilitate this process.

General tips for memo writing:

Make your sentences short and direct. Policy makers are busy people--don't make them wade through endless clauses and qualifying statements. Make your sentences active, clear, and concise. This is not an academic paper and there is no extra credit for flowery phrases or complex clauses. It's your job to make the paper readable and easy to understand.

Headings and short sections give direction to reader. Bold or underlined headings allow the reader to skim and will emphasize important points. By creating short sections you will keep the reader interested and keep your analysis on track.

Put important points first. Don't hide the information your client needs by prefacing it with details. This is not a mystery--you don't have to build your argument for 3 paragraphs before presenting it. Also, extended quotations and repeated citations and references are unnecessary. Put sources in footnotes or appendices, unless important to client.

Always include an executive summary. This is the take-home message for your analysis. It should include the research question, data source, and the key results. A policy-maker should be able to throw away the rest of the memo and still perfectly understand the quality, results, and implications of your analysis.

Don't forget your audience. Only provide information the client needs. Interesting facts don't belong in the analysis unless they will be useful to the client. Don't forget who your client is and what information they need.

Use appendices for tangential or extended materials and information. Your analysis should be lean--just the critical. Use appendices for information you think client could skip, but may want or need. That way, the flow of your narrative is not disturbed and the client can choose to read appendices now, later, or not at all.

Appearance counts. Make your paper look good by using sections, headings, a readable font, and useful graphics. And, don't forget to spell-check. It may seem trivial, but misspelled words won't engender confidence in your analytic abilities.

Writing takes practice. Don't expect your writing to be perfect on the first draft. It takes time to make words serve your purpose. Good rewriting is the key.