



# Policy Writing Skills

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## What Public Policy is?

- “Whatever governments choose to do or not to do”  
(Thomas Dye, 1992)



## What Public Policy is? (2)

- ***authoritative government action***

Public policy is action implemented by the government body which has the legislative, political and financial authority to do so.

- ***a reaction to real world needs or problems***

Public policy seeks to react to the concrete needs or problems of a society or groups within a society, e.g., citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or government bodies.

- ***goal-oriented***

Public policy seeks to achieve a particular set of elaborated objectives which represent an attempt to solve or address a particular need in the targeted community.

- ***a course of action***

Public policy is usually not a single decision, action or reaction but an elaborated approach or strategy.



## What Public Policy is? (3)

- ***a decision to do something or a decision to do nothing***

The outlined policy may take action in an attempt to solve a problem or may be based on the belief that the problem will be solved within the current policy framework, and therefore takes no action.

- ***carried out by a single actor or a set of actors***

The policy may be implemented by a single government representative or body or by multiple actors.

- ***a justification for action***

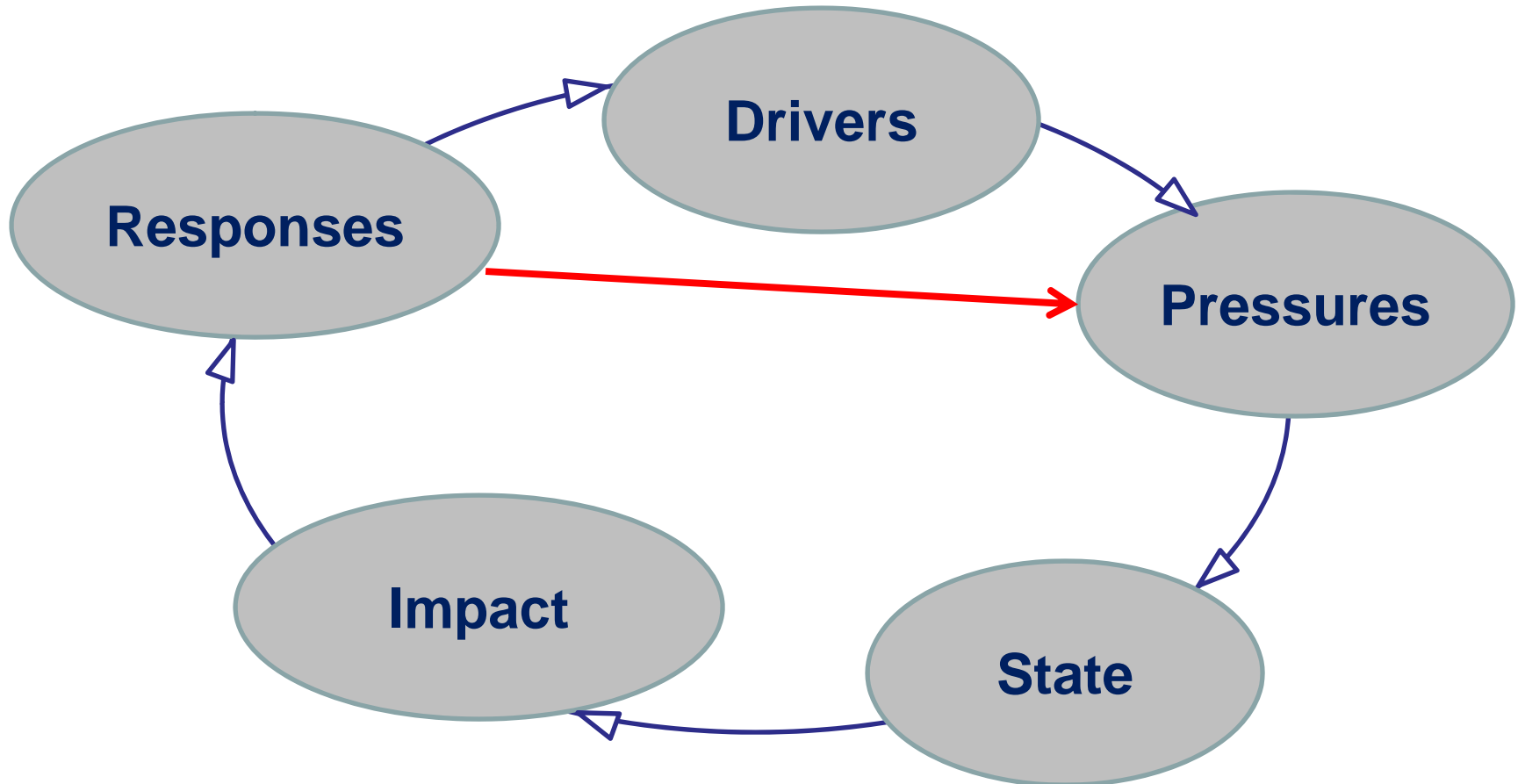
The outlined policy usually includes a statement of the reasoning behind the policy.

- ***a decision made***

Public policy is a decision already made, not an intention or promise.



## DPSIR model





# DPSIR for biodiversity loss

## Drivers of the pressures:

- materialism, corruption, belief in constant growth
- cheap natural resources /expensive human labour
- free trade, cheap transport, perverse subsidies

## Responses to be given:

- taxing the resources and not the labour
- setting absolute limit to the production and consumption
- education of producers and consumers

## Impact:

- decreasing resilience
- higher vulnerability and risks
- decline in ecosystem services
- lower quality of life

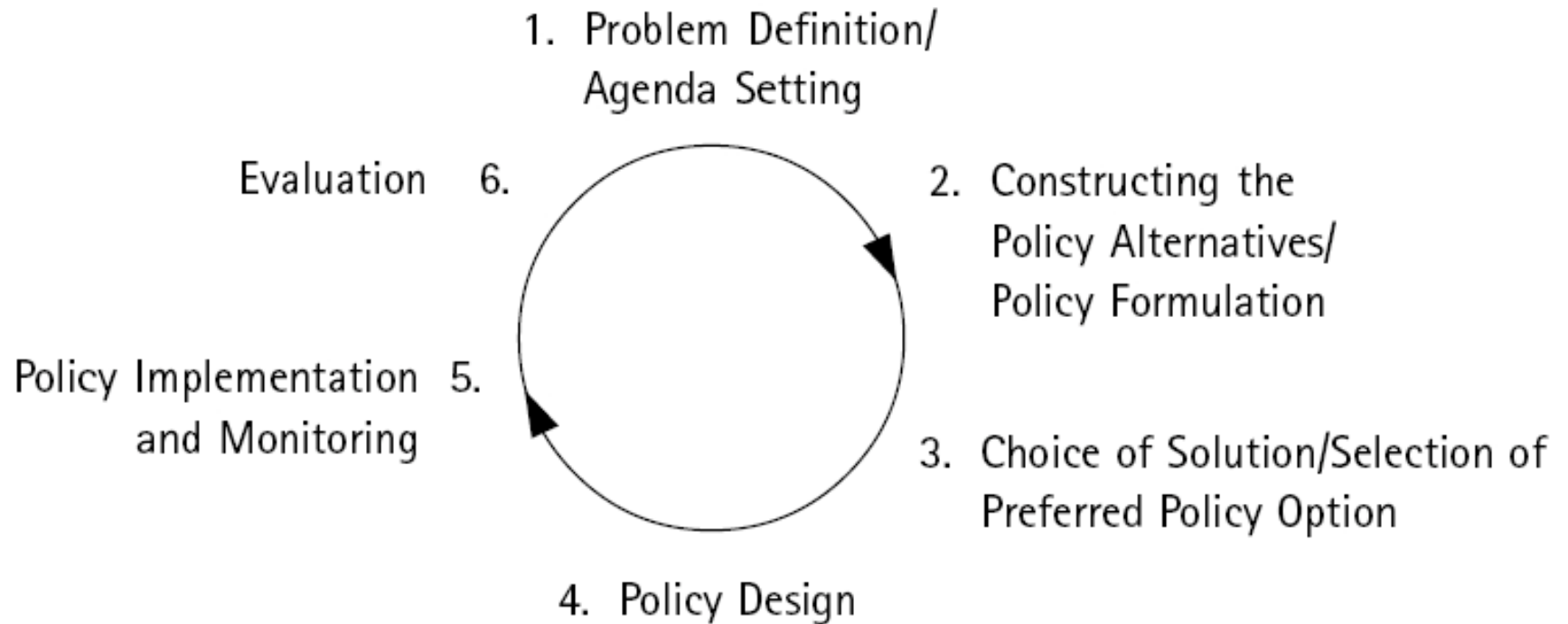
## Pressures:

- changes in land use
- climate change
- invasive alien species
- pollution

**State** of the environment, in this case biodiversity loss



# Policy Cycle





## Step 1: Problem definition/Agenda setting

- You either need to get the problem onto the government's political agenda, i.e., turn the problem into an issue,
- or make it a higher priority issue if it is already on the agenda.
- It is necessary to convince both the relevant government agency and the broader policy community that a real problem exists which requires government action.
- You will need to present a persuasive and comprehensive argument which details the causes, effects and extent of the problem based on a wide variety of sources.



## Step 2: Constructing the policy alternatives/Policy formulation

- You will need to consider what is currently being done, what options others are suggesting as well as your own suggestions.
- You should make the different options mutually exclusive, i.e., avoid options that are simply variations of the same idea.
- You should try to search for the most feasible and realistic policy alternatives.



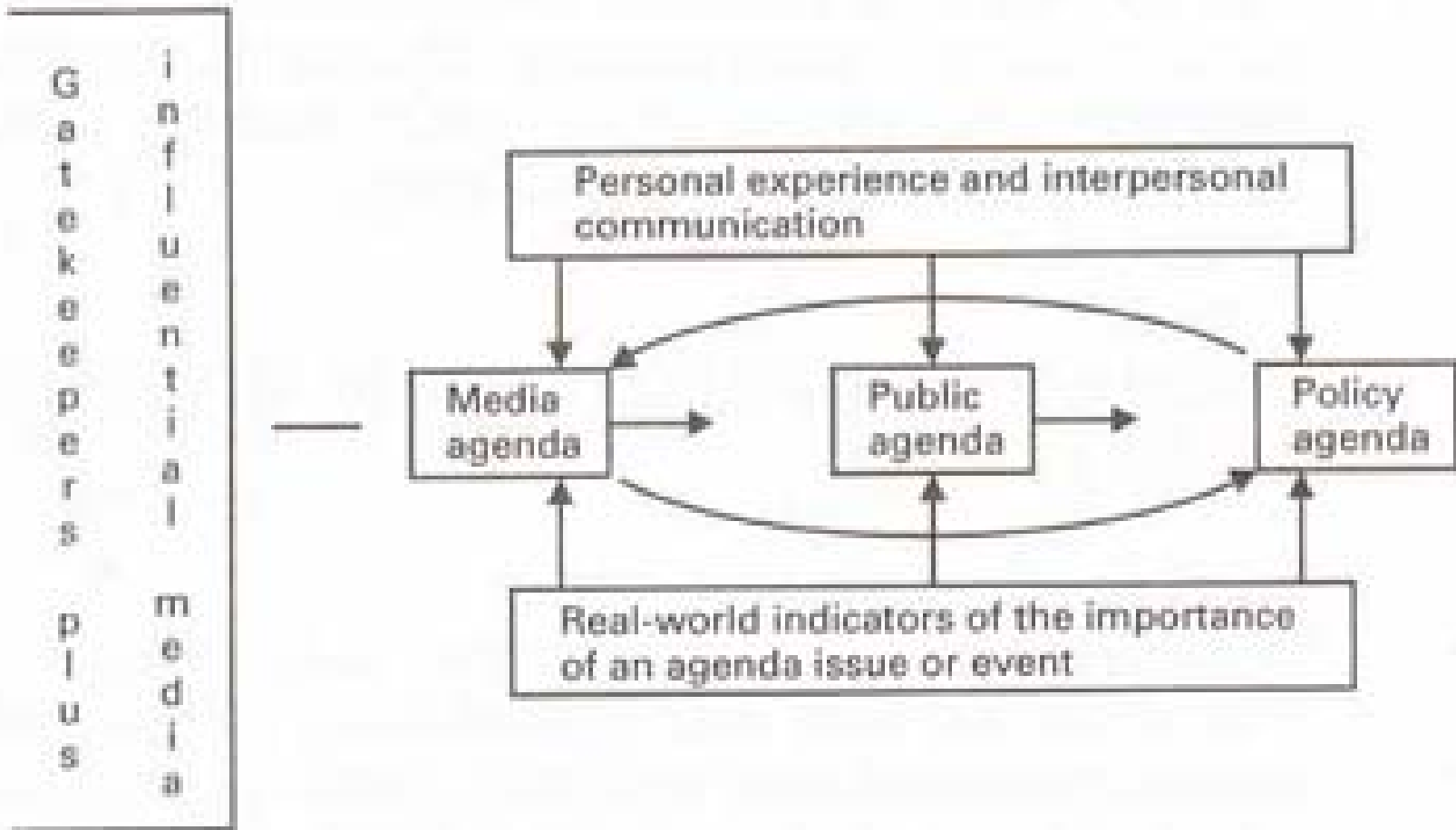
## Step 3: Choice of solution/Selection of preferred policy option

Evaluation criteria will be used to choose the best option and assure legitimacy to the decision. Commonly used:

- **Effectiveness:** To what extent will this alternative produce the desired outcomes, i.e., solve the current problem?
- **Efficiency:** Based on a cost-benefit analysis of both money and social impact, how will this option affect the target groups?
- **Equity:** Is there a fair distribution of costs and benefits?
- **Feasibility/Implementability:** Is there a suitable political, administrative and legal framework in place to allow for the effective and efficient implementation of this option?
- **Flexibility/Improvability:** Does this option have the flexibility to be changed to suit other possible situations or allow for improvements?



# Agenda Setting Theory





## Policy Paper Planning Checklist

- Which stage(s) in the policy-making process are you trying to influence through your policy paper?
- Which stakeholders have been/are involved at each stage of the policymaking process?
- Have you identified a clear problem to address? Can you summarize it in two sentences?
- Do you have sufficiently comprehensive evidence to support your claim that a problem exists?
- Have you outlined and evaluated the possible policy options that could solve this problem? What evaluation criteria did you use?
- Have you decided on a preferred alternative?
- Do you have sufficient evidence to effectively argue for your chosen policy alternative over the others?



# Policy paper is a decision making tool



## Common Elements of Policy Papers

- Title
- Table of contents
- Abstract/Executive summary
- Introduction
- Problem description
- Policy options
- Conclusion and recommendations
- Appendices
- Bibliography
- Endnotes



## Introduction

Typical elements of the Introduction section:

- Context of the policy problem
- Definition of the policy problem
- Statement of intent
- Methodology and limitations
- Road map of the paper



## Problem description

- The problem description presents an argument that an urgent problem exists
- presents a problem within its context
- outlines the past and present of the problem
- builds the foundation for the policy options element of the paper



## Building a coherent argument that is both convincing and easy to follow

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin states that every argument is made up of three basic elements:

- The **claim** is the statement of your position/argument.
- The **support** is the evidence you present to back up your claim.
- The **warrant** explains the connection between the claim and the support. (This warrant may not be explicitly stated, as the writer may consider that explanation of the connection is obvious for the audience.)



## Example

*Shifting expenditure responsibilities.* In some countries budgetary responsibility for social expenditures and the social safety net is being transferred to subnational government. In Hungary, for example, responsibility for welfare expenditures was transferred to the localities in 1993 under the Social Assistance Law. In Ukraine, too, the social safety net is a subnational responsibility. In Russia the central government transferred social expenditures equivalent to some 6 percent of GDP to localities in the 1992 budget, in effect pushing the deficit down. The hope seems to have been that subnational governments would perform the politically painful cutting required, even though the demand for these services is likely to grow with the worsening economic situation. And in 1993, again in Russia, responsibility for key national, interjurisdictional investments (such as in transport) was transferred to the subnational sector.



## Effective use of paragraphing

- The purpose of the paragraph is to indicate both logical and physical breaks in the text.
- This also help readers who are skim reading the paper for a general overview, which is a common practice
- Each paragraph usually develops one argument as stated in the topic sentence.
- Most important part of paragraph = first sentence.



## Effective Paragraphing: coherence

On the paragraph level, this entails establishing clear links between the sentences in the paragraph. Common techniques that are used in making such coherent links are:

- the repetition of key words;
- the use of parallel structures, i.e., similar phrases and sentence construction;
- the use of transition phrases, e.g., then, next, for example, in addition, also, however.



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## Effective use of sources...

builds credibility of the argument

informs the readers of the basis on which you have built your argument



# 1. Choose your sources effectively

Primary data = from your own research

Secondary data = research or writing from other authors  
in the field



## Data gathering methods

- **Survey** - questionnaires, checklists
- **Interview** - structured or unstructured, getting first-hand responses from end users
- **Desk Study** - reviewing existing documentation (reports, publications, websites)
- **Observation** - visiting a site and personally observing what is happening
- **Focus Group Discussion** - facilitated meetings with groups of end users around the issue
- **Case Study** - in-depth investigation over time into one particular end user's experience and outcomes



## 2. Incorporate sources into the argument

Use sources to support your claims.

Common mistake: sources oppress writer's point of view

→ loss of focus in the argument



### **3. Include citations or references for secondary sources**

For other authors' words, ideas and approaches  
Except for common knowledge



## **4. Follow citation conventions of your publisher**

One common example: APA (American Psychological Association), 2001



## 5. Include secondary sources as:

- **Quotation:** the writer wants to be faithful to the original, to present vivid and interesting language or to distance themselves from the quotation or author
- **Summary or paraphrase** (i.e., say what a particular author said but in own words): smoothly incorporates the ideas of another author into own argument.
- **Generalization:** the same approach but consists of a summary of the ideas of more than one author.



## **6. Refer to tables and point out significant data in the text**

Common mistake: writer does not explain why s/he included a chart or table



## Common Elements of Policy Papers

- Title
- Table of contents
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- Problem description
- **Policy options**
- **Conclusion and recommendations**
- Appendices
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## The policy options elements

### *Outlines, evaluates and compares the possible alternatives*

Present all policy options. Evaluate each option in solving the specific problem and how the options compare in this regard

### *Provides a convincing argument for the preferred alternative*

Demonstrate that the chosen policy alternative will most effectively address the problem, the writer should also use the evidence to clearly show why the other policy alternatives have been rejected

### *Focuses on reporting a decision made*

It should report the decisions you made about each option and the reasons behind each decision.

### *Builds a clear and coherent link to the conclusions and rec.*

It is a justification for your final recommendations



## Structure of the policy options element

### 1. Framework of analysis

- This framework is the expression of the ideals and values that guide the writer in taking a certain position in relation to the issues discussed
- The framework of analysis provides a clear statement of and justification for the positions taken

The issues that are covered include:

- (a) **The applicability of procurement laws** and other provisions requiring **competitive procedures** for the selection of contractors;
- (b) **Public access to contracts and information** considered in price setting proceedings. (**freedom of information**);
- (c) **Requirements of impartiality and the prevention of conflicts** of interest in the selection of contractors.

Each of the above may be seen as a basic prerequisite to the conduct of contracting out in a manner that best **serves the interests of the public**. (*Position*) If conflicts of interest are permitted, bidding is not really competitive. Without **competitive bidding** for contracts, there is no assurance that the **public is obtaining the most favorable terms for the provision of its services**. **Without transparency, corruption is more likely and public trust in the fairness of selection process is eliminated**. (*Justification*) Furthermore, without transparency, the general **public is excluded from the contracting out process**. As a result, the **potential benefits of independent public review, criticism, and expertise** are lost.



## Structure of the policy options element

### 2. Evaluation of policy alternatives

- Each policy option is presented and an argument for or against it is presented based on the outlined framework of analysis.
- State both positives and negatives
- State the limitations of your chosen option

Two approaches:

- Tell the reader about the process of deciding on each option, or
- Focuses on answering the questions “why no?” or “why yes?”



## Text and Argumentation for Policy Options

- In the policy options element, the writer's voice should dominate
- Less prominent use of primary or secondary sources in the argument (the writer shows his or her expertise and creativity through option evaluation)



## Conclusion and Recommendations

- The conclusion fulfills the role of the policy paper as a decision-making tool
- Synthesizes the major findings of the research
- Outlines the writer's suggested course of action towards solving the policy problem
- It is responsible for leaving a lasting impression of the paper on the reader.



# Structure of Conclusions and Recommendations

## Synthesis of major findings

Highlights main points from the problem description and policy options elements

## Set of policy recommendations

Outline the measures proposed to solve the policy problem

## Concluding remarks

Complete and close the paper



## Credits

- Eóin Young and Lisa Quinn. **Writing Effective Public Policy Papers - A Guide for Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe** (OSI/LGI, 2002)

[www.publicpolicy.umb.edu/~pubpol/documents/policywriting-toc.pdf](http://www.publicpolicy.umb.edu/~pubpol/documents/policywriting-toc.pdf)

- **The Reporting Skills and Professional Writing Handbook: a practical guide for development professionals** (ELD, 2008)

[www.reportingkills.org](http://www.reportingkills.org)