

Introduction

Policy analysis is a social and political activity. True, analysts take moral and intellectual responsibility for the quality of their policy-analytic work. But policy analysis goes beyond personal decision-making. First, the subject matter concerns the lives and well-being of large numbers of their fellow citizens. Second, the process and results of policy analysis usually involve other professionals and interested parties: it is often done in teams or office-wide settings; the immediate consumer is a “client” of some sort, such as a hierarchical superior; and the ultimate audience will include diverse subgroups of politically attuned supporters and opponents of the analysts’ work. All of these facts condition the nature of policy analysis and have a bearing on the nature of what is meant by “quality work.”

A policy analyst can work in any number of positions. Once upon a time, the term implied a rather wonkish individual who worked in a large government bureaucracy, serving up very technical projections of the possible impacts of one or more policy alternatives to some undersecretary of planning. No longer. Today’s policy analysts help in program evaluation, program design, program management, public communications, planning, budgeting, and other functions. They work alone, in teams, and in loose networks that cut across organizations. They work in the public, nonprofit, and for-profit spheres, both in the United States and abroad. Although their work is ideally distinguished by transparency of method and interpretation, the analysts themselves may explicitly bring to their jobs the values and passions of advocacy groups as well as the technical expertise of “neutral” civil servants. The professional networks in which they work may contain—in most cases, do contain—colleagues drawn from law, engineering, accounting, and so on, and in those settings the policy-analytic point of view has to struggle for the right to counter—or, better yet, synthesize—the viewpoints of these other professionals. Although policy-analytic work products typically involve written reports, they may also include briefings, slide presentations, magazine articles, television interviews, and the use of social media. The recipients of these products may be broad and diffuse audiences as well as narrowly construed paying clients or employers.

The advice in this handbook is directed both to policy analysts in practice and to students and others who, for whatever reasons, are attempting to look at the world through the eyes of a practitioner.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

Policy analysis is more art than science. It draws on intuition as much as on method. Nevertheless, given the choice between advice that imposes too much structure on the problem-solving process and advice that offers too little, most beginning practitioners quite reasonably prefer too much. We have therefore developed the following approach, which we call the Eightfold Path:

- Define the Problem
- Assemble Some Evidence
- Construct the Alternatives
- Select the Criteria
- Project the Outcomes
- Confront the Trade-Offs
- Stop, Focus, Narrow, Deepen, Decide!
- Tell Your Story

These steps are not necessarily taken in precisely this order, nor are all of them necessarily significant in every problem. However, an effort to define the problem is usually the right starting place, and telling the story is almost inevitably the ending point. Constructing alternatives and selecting criteria for evaluating them must surely come toward the beginning of the process. Assembling some evidence is actually a step that recurs throughout the entire process, and it applies particularly to efforts to define the problem and to project the outcomes of the alternatives being considered.

The primary utility of this structured approach is that it reminds you of important tasks and choices that otherwise might slip your mind; its primary drawback is that, taken by itself, it can be mechanistic.

The Problem-Solving Process

The problem-solving process—being a process of trial and error—is iterative, so you usually must repeat each of these steps, sometimes more than once.

The spirit in which you take any one of these steps, especially in the earliest phases of your project, should be highly tentative. As you move through the problem-solving process, you will probably keep changing your problem definition, as well as your menu of alternatives, your set of evaluative criteria, and your sense of what evidence bears on the problem. With each successive

iteration, you will become a bit more confident that you are on the right track, that you are focusing on the right question, and so on. This can be a frustrating process, but it can also be rewarding—if you learn to enjoy the challenges of search, discovery, and invention.

Some of the Guidelines Are Practical, but Most Are Conceptual. Most of the concepts used will seem obvious, but there are exceptions. First, technical terms are sometimes employed. Second, some commonsense terms may be used in a special way that strips them of certain connotations and perhaps imports others. For the most part, all these concepts will become intelligible through experience and practice.

The Concepts Come Embedded in Concrete Particulars. In real life, policy problems appear as a confusing welter of details: personalities, interest groups, rhetorical demands, budget figures, legal rules and interpretations, bureaucratic routines, citizen attitudes, and so on. Yet the concepts described in this handbook are formulated in the abstract. You therefore need to learn to “see” the analytic concepts in the concrete manifestations of everyday life.

Caution: Sometimes, Some Steps Are Already Determined. Suppose your client says, “We need an extra million dollars to run this program in the next budget year: find it.” Does the Eightfold Path apply to this “analysis”? In a limited way. The client has already defined the problem and narrowed the relevant criteria very tightly. There won’t be much creative scope for you when it comes to those steps. But all the other steps are likely to be relevant.

This challenge to “find it” is a simplified version of a more complex challenge—to “design it,” as in to “figure out [that is, ‘design’] a way to protect this subway system from terrorist attack.” Here, too, the problem definition step has already been settled by the client, though the other steps are likely to get the creative juices flowing. Ideas for dealing with design problems in general are introduced in Part III, “Handling a Design Problem.”

Your Final Product

So what will your final product look like? Here is a very rough sketch of a typical written policy-analytic report:

- In a coherent narrative style, you describe some problem that needs to be mitigated or solved.
- You lay out a few alternative courses of action that might be taken.

- To each course of action, you attach a set of projected outcomes that you think your client or audience would care about, suggesting the evidentiary grounds for your projections.
- If no alternative dominates all other alternatives with respect to all the evaluative criteria of interest, you indicate the nature and magnitude of the trade-offs implicit in different policy choices.
- Depending on the client's expectations, you may state your own recommendation as to which alternative should be chosen.

As a complement or even alternative to a traditional prose report, your final product might take the form of a policy brief or PowerPoint presentation. This type of product is becoming more and more common as a result of the increasing premium on delivering clear, crisp messages to busy decision-makers.

- Using a visually attractive format, you focus the audience's attention on the key problem you analyzed and/or your main recommendation.
- You present a small number of figures that capture your key takeaway message (see Appendix E on "Big Data" and visualization tools).
- Your policy brief or PowerPoint presentation should be self-contained and make sense to someone who has not read your full prose report.

The Spirit of the Eightfold Path

The spirit of the Eightfold Path is, we hope, economizing and uplifting. Analyzing public policy problems is a complex activity. It is easy to get lost, to waste a lot of time, to become demoralized. Other manuals and textbooks in policy analysis are primarily concerned that you get the analysis "right," in some sense. This one should help in that respect, too. But, in addition, we hope that this handbook will help you to get it done with reasonable efficiency—and with a minimum of anxious confusion.

Finally, just as policy analysis originates in politics, so it concludes in politics. Political life has two sides: channeling conflict and building community. Policy analysis serves both sides. It channels conflict by showing that some arguments, and their proponents, are in some sense superior to others and deserve to win out. But it helps to build community by marking off potential common ground as well. This common ground is defined by the rules and conventions of rational discourse—where opponents may employ analytical procedures to resolve disagreements, or where they may discover that at least some seemingly irreducible values conflicts can be recast as dry-as-dust technical disagreements over how

much higher a probability Policy A has than Policy B for mitigating Problem P. In short, policy analysis contributes to better governance in a democratic society by focusing debate on the real-world consequences of collective decisions.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is a compilation of many component parts. The primary component is Part I, describing the Eightfold Path and recommending heuristics to help you negotiate it.

Part II focuses on one particular step in the Eightfold Path: assembling evidence. It first appeared thirty-five years ago as a journal article, but we have since modified it and tried to integrate it better into the overall book in terms of both style and content. We include it because its objective is, we think, unique among the many prescriptive works in the social sciences and in journalism about data gathering and interpretation: it is, above all, concerned with using the researcher's time and energy efficiently.

In the first several editions of this book, Part I incorporated suggestions for analyzing not only conventional, discrete problems of policy choice (in which the analytic task is to craft an intervention that will improve an otherwise well-functioning system), but also more ambitious "design" problems (in which the system itself is broken or missing). Because the two generic types of problems were both covered in a single part, it was easy for readers to miss the subtle distinctions between them. Accordingly, this edition includes a Part III that pulls out the material on design thinking. We show how the steps of the Eightfold Path can be "crosswalked" to design "systems of action" that will generate desired outcomes when multiple elements are interdependent and need to work together.

Part IV addresses a specialized topic in policy analysis not dealt with in other works: making use of ideas—and specimens of "smart practices"—that are to be found in other sites. Imitation and adaptation are standard routes to progress (albeit occasionally, to regress) in other areas of life, so why not in public policy?

Previous editions of this book included sections of a RAND Corporation study on the relative worth of mandatory minimum sentences for drug dealers to give readers an example of a real policy analysis (Caulkins et al. 1997). In this edition, we have decided instead to illustrate the concepts of policy analysis by providing excerpts (together with web links) from a variety of reports from think tanks, research organizations, and government agencies. We have chosen this new approach for several reasons. First, there is no one-size-fits-all model of a policy analysis report. Policy analysis reports come in different forms, and analysts should tailor their studies, and the communication of their studies, to the specific problem and audience at hand. Second, we seek to demonstrate the array of substantive

issues on which policy analysis can be performed. Finally, we wish to draw readers' attention to the diversity of modeling tools and data sources that policy analysts today are using to define problems, project outcomes, and cope with uncertainty. While we regard all the excerpted studies as professional work products, we hasten to add that our inclusion of a portion of a particular study should not be taken as an endorsement of the study's methodology, findings, or recommendations. Instructors using this book might consider having their students read the full studies and identify their respective strengths and weaknesses as an assignment or a classroom discussion topic.

Appendix A, "Things Governments Do," is a condensed survey of eleven types of governmental instruments for intervening in society. This edition also offers Appendix B, "Understanding Public and Nonprofit Institutions: Asking the Right Questions"; a newly expanded Appendix C, "Strategic Advice on the Dynamics of Gathering Political Support"; Appendix D, "Tips for Working with Clients"; and a new Appendix E, "Suggestions for Incorporating 'Big Data' and Rigorous Scientific Evidence into Policy Analysis." Appendix E discusses the expanding use of large administrative data sets and increasing reliance on field experiments and other sophisticated methods for causal inference in policy labs and a growing number of government agencies. This appendix offers tips for policy analysts who wish to come up to speed on this important development.

We have tried to keep the style simple and the text short. But the topics covered are numerous and complicated. The result is that the book is in some respects very dense. Our students tell us that the book should be treated not just as a quick and pleasurable read, which of course it is, but as a reference volume to be experienced again and again for its delicious subtleties. No doubt they are right.