Task: Problem Definition memo

File name: lastname_problem.doc (or .docx or .rtf)

Format: Professional memo, 500 to 750 words.

Due Date

Task description: In this memo, you will

1. Explain the organization for which you have chosen to work.
2. Explain the problem you believe that federal-level policy making should address.

Hints and Tips

1. Make sure that the problem you select is something you feel passionate about. This problem, and the various aspects relating to it, will be what you work on for the entire semester. You will find this exercise much more interesting and fun if you pick a topic you like.
2. You might also pick a topic where you have some basic knowledge. For example, if you are a private pilot, or are learning to be one, you might isolate problems with the Federal Aviation Administration’s management of air traffic control. If you’re a “foodie,” you might think about the Department of Agriculture’s management of food safety. Think broadly about the area in which you wish to find a problem, but define the problem itself narrowly. For example, you might be interested in food safety, but you may not be able to handle food safety policy for fruits, vegetables, chicken, beef, fish, shellfish, etc. You would want to narrow the problem to something like “there are too many instances of E. Coli contamination of ground beef.” The idea is to avoid writing a book! And if you have professional experience in a field, by all means use it!
3. You will need to do some basic research on the organization for which you want to work. At a minimum you need to know what the organization is, what it does, and need to explain why you want to work for the organization. Any common search engine will point you to the right sources of information about your agency and for whom you’d work.
4. Specifying the “Department of Defense” or “Department of Homeland Security” is far too broad. These departments contain units that you can identify by going to the department’s web site and looking at an organizational chart. For example, if you believe that the problem is “not enough attention to recovery after disasters,” the agency for which you may want to work would more likely be FEMA than DHS, and then a subunit of FEMA. Of course, I don’t expect you to isolate exactly which unit you will work for.
5. As Eugene Bardach (2009) notes, one can think of problems as deficits or excesses: “There’s not enough of [something]” or “there’s too much of [something]. You can also think of growing gaps—“The wealth gap between the poorest and richest Americans is growing.”
6. Explain why the problem is significant and is harmful, or at least is potentially harmful. If a problem affects relatively few people, it may not seem significant, but it could be significant if the harms done are really severe, are broadly distributed, or both.
7. Any claims about significance and harm must be accompanied by the best possible evidence. The best evidence is sound scientific and social science research. The poorest research is daily journalism, except in some circumstances. I don’t expect you to bring a ton of evidence to this assignment, but I do expect that you will bring enough to the assignment to make a good case for the problem. In the example I provide in this assignment, I rely on technical information from sound on-line sources, and government documents. This is about the lowest standard of evidence I will accept.

8. Avoid defining the solution into the problem. A definition like “there aren’t enough inspectors in meat plants to keep track of E. Coli “presupposes a solution (“more inspectors”).

Research Tools

1. Wikipedia (what?). Yes, you may start with Wikipedia. You may not quote it, but it often links to useful and important web sites, and will give you a broad overview of the topic.

2. Lexis-Nexis. You can use this to research federal law on your problem, and congressional materials about the agency and the problem.

3. Academic Elite. This is a database from a company called Ebsco, which indexes a vast range of popular, professional, academic, and technical journals. To find the best scientific journals, make sure you check the “peer reviewed” box when you search.

4. Google Scholar: If you access this through the NCSU library website, you will be able to search for a remarkably broad variety of sources, many of which are available as full text articles, either from free sources or through databases to which the university subscribes.

5. JSTOR. This is a database of scholarly articles across a wide range of disciplines. This is unlikely to provide the most current scholarship on an issue, but it will point you to sound theory and analysis.

Grading Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Approximate Possible Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear statement of the agency and the office for which you wish to work</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear, concise and appropriate problem definition</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence in writing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence in research</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference