SOME NOTES ON THE MIDTERM EXAM

Here are some general comments about the mandatory question on the midterm, and about the exam as a whole. I hope you find these comments useful in two ways: as advice for approaching the final exam, and as advice for how to handle similar sorts of assignments in your professional career, where careful, concise, and appropriate writing is very important.

On the mandatory question. Most essays reflected a misunderstanding of Stone’s goals and motivations in Policy Paradox. Several essays claimed that her argument is prescriptive—that it is an argument about how the world should work. This is not Stone’s goal; Stone makes clear that her goal is to provide a more realistic view of how politics and politics really work. To do so, she notes that notions of market rationality have dominated policy analysis for several decades, and she then critiques the simplistic assumptions of “The Rationality Project” as it attempts to explain the policy process. She is not—as a remarkably large number of answers claimed—attempting to substitute market economics for another sort of system, because she is not making an argument about economics. Instead, Stone is arguing that we cannot use the rationalist logic of classical market economics for politics, because politics is inherently different from economics. She is showing how the market approach fails to understand how policy is made in a political society, because it often cannot explain the many paradoxes in policy. Her starting point—the polis—seeks to explain the political world as it is in reality, which the market model has failed to do.

Below is what I consider a full-credit answer to this question. This may not be the one perfect answer, but I am not expecting perfection. I expect concise and clear short essays that directly answer the question.

Deborah Stone compares the “market” and “polis” models of political decision making to [Why does she make this comparison?] explain why economic logic has dominated policy and political analysis, and to explain the significant shortcomings of that approach. She does so to offer an alternative to what she calls the “Rationality Project” in policy analysis and policy studies, which is the attempt to impose an economic logic on policy making. Such logic does not explain the many “policy paradoxes” that she describes in the book.

In the “rational” or “market” approach to political decision making, [What is the difference between these two ways of looking at policy making?] Stone argues that analysts who adopt the rationality project assume that people are utility maximizing rational actors with a great deal of good information at hand to make decisions. They rationally weigh policy options and come up with the best solution based on the weighting of these options. The sum of these individual decisions—one-on-one market transactions—is claimed to yield overall social benefit. Stone argues that we cannot conceive of politics this way. Markets, she argues, are competitive, and people compete to maximize their own interests. Politics, on the other hand, is about the public interest; however that is defined, and requires more in the way of cooperation, persuasion, and the careful use of information, as well as competition and the pursuit of self-interest.
[Are there elements of both approaches that can be mixed and matched to provide a realistic view of policy making?]

It would be very difficult to mix and match these approaches because, as Stone sets these up, these are ideal types that stand in opposition to each other. Because these are ideal types, Stone’s depiction of economic logic may be too limited, and economists know that these notions of net benefit and information are related to market failures, such as negative externalities that harm the broader public interest. Their models attempt to account for these problems, but such attempts are still attempts to address problems with markets, not politics. One place they overlap is in the definition of interests: Stone argues that both self and public interest is the goal of politics, while self interest alone is traditionally the goal in market transactions. We can also say that, even though information is incomplete in the polis, people often try to gain the maximum amount of information before making decisions. But Stone notes that people cannot get all the information they need, and that information is used and manipulated for strategic reasons. Participants in policy will promote or withhold information to achieve their policy goals. In the end, Stone assumes that information is much more contested than an economist might assume.

[Which approach do you believe is most realistic?]

Which model is most realistic? Stone’s model appears to be a more realistic model of politics, because it studies the essence of politics: how groups form, how people gather and use information strategically, and how people make claims about the public interest. However, economic analysis may still have a role in evaluating individual policies, or in explaining the behavior of people in market-like systems, such as in choices of what community in which to live, or in studies of how people work to allocate scarce resources. But Stone argues that her approach is intended to provide a more realistic view of how politics really works, and, on its face, the argument is persuasive.

Some additional comments on the exam

1. Many of the essays suggested that students are not reading the books, and did not review the lecture slides and notes. Many of the answers earned very low points because they reflected confusion about the subject matter that the question asks about. I don’t cover everything in the books in lecture; if I did, I wouldn’t ask you to buy the books. Everyone must do the reading, because the reading is what provides the scholarly and theoretical foundation for the central theme of this course, which is evidence-based policy advocacy. To be an effective policy advocate, it’s important to read and understand the books we use. The reading load in this course is no greater than that of a typical graduate course in public policy at other universities, and the workload is lower than that of many similar courses.

2. Confine your answers to the questions. On the “muckraking” question, many people got into diversions into documentary filmmaking, Michael Moore, and other media that may seem like investigative journalism, but really are not journalism.

3. Avoid anecdotes. “When I was a kid, we locked up criminals, and spanked kids, and things were better then.” Anecdotes take up space that could be devoted to answering the question and to demonstrating social scientific knowledge of the question.

4. Follow directions. The exam clearly asks: Be sure to copy the question into your paper so I know which questions you have answered. About 35% of the exams failed to do this.
5. **When extra credit is offered, take advantage of it!** Frankly, I made a serious mistake when I constructed the extra credit opportunity, and it was one you could take advantage of! You could write 5 essays and get 20 points each, and have the same final score as if you’d written 4 essays and received full credit—which few essays did. The mistake I made was in equating five adequate answers with four excellent ones, and I won’t offer exactly the same extra credit opportunity next time. Meanwhile, many of the exams didn’t take advantage of the extra credit opportunity, much to the detriment of the scores.

6. You’re no doubt weary of my comments about writing—if I were in this class, I’d be weary of these comments too. But I would be remiss if I failed to remind you that **readers believe that your writing is a reflection of your intelligence, competence, and credibility.** Good writing makes a good impression; poor writing will hurt you and the organization for which you may work. Good writing can help you advance in your career; poor writing is almost guaranteed to slow your career progress.

This is a graduate seminar, so I expect at least adequate writing, although all of us (including me!) should aspire to **excellent** writing. Yet I am seeing writing problems and errors—such as those listed below—that I repeatedly see in **undergraduate** writing.

You will leave NC State with a **professional** degree, and a remarkable set of skills. But the most important skill you will hone in graduate school is your ability to communicate clearly, persuasively, and logically. Excellent—or even adequate—writing does not come naturally to everyone. No one is a perfect writer, but we should follow the norms of standard written English when writing for the workplace, or for this class.

Excellent writing is **not** the dense, confusing, and wordy writing that we see in the worst sort of academic prose. There is a lot of bad writing in academia, but I am not asking you to replicate bad writing. Your audience will be busy decision makers who have no time for writing that is anything but concise, accurate, and direct—in other words, they don’t really want to read academic writing!

7. **Errors, problems, and phrases to avoid**

This isn’t meant to be a comprehensive list, and some of the things listed here are less crucial than others—while I have preferences about the use of words like *impact* and *data*, other problems and errors here are more severe, such as grammatical errors. And while at least one exam had at least one of these errors, this discussion summarizes the writing problems I have seen all semester. I hope this helps you as you begin your memo rewrites.

a. Many essays used phrases like “**I feel,**” “**I believe,**” and “**In my opinion.**” Exam answers—as well as professional explanations of policy analysis, strategy, policy options, and the other aspects of policy—should be written based on facts and logic, not on one’s opinions or beliefs. In a professional setting, readers will read such hedging as an admission that you don’t know something, or that you lack the confidence to assert the truth of a claim. It is usually better to just assert a claim, rather than qualifying it with “In my opinion,” but it’s important to have the evidence to back up any claim.
b. “Obviously” or “obvious.” There is almost nothing in social science that is “obvious.” It’s better to drop the word—deleting the word almost never changes the real meaning.

c. Avoid using “you” in professional writing. It is too informal, and is ambiguous, because it is unclear whether the author is referring only the reader, or to everyone.

d. “On any given day.” Sports cliché—let CBS abuse this term during March Madness. Say “on any day” if that’s what you mean. Pay careful attention to all clichés, and remove them if necessary. Other annoying clichés that I didn’t see, but you want to avoid anyway, include “on the ground,” “at the end of the day,” “went missing,” and numerous others. Microsoft Word’s grammar checker is good at catching cliché terms.

e. Wordy possessives. Instead of “The resources of media outlets…” just say “Media outlets’ resources…” The first example is like saying “The tail of the dog…” and is instantly recognizable as the beginning of a passive sentence construction.

f. Subjects and verbs have to agree. “The main problems of the United States is terrorism and the economy.” Why is this ungrammatical?

g. Utilize. Bureaucrat- and engineer-talk for use.

h. In-depth. Leave this to TV “journalists.” Used detailed.

i. Impact. Unless something was physically struck, use influence or affect. Impact also implies a kind of binary situation—something has an impact, or it doesn’t. A term like influence allows for greater subtly. Not everyone agrees with this—the American Heritage Dictionary’s usage note on “impact” (at http://www.answers.com/topic/impact) suggests that impact to mean influence is becoming standard. But it sounds like journalism and bureaucracy, and is simply too imprecise for serious analytical writing.

j. Laundry list. Means list. Never use two (or three, or four, or five) words when one will do.

k. Myriad. Means many. Use sparingly. For some writers, it has totally replaced “many” or “a lot,” which makes for some odd sentences.

l. And/or. Legalese. Just use and which means and/or in most cases. Even lawyers are avoiding and/or.

m. Within. Why not just “in”?

n. Media and data are plural nouns. Many style guides have accepted both data and media as singular nouns, but I am of the old school on these words. I prefer “The data show...” to “The data shows...” But media, regardless of what the media say about it, is a plural noun. Wrong: “The news media is very influential.” Right: “The news media are very influential.” The singular of media is medium. However, when you are talking about the news media, write both words out, rather than just using media by itself. Some interesting usage notes at http://grammar.about.com/od/alightsideofwriting/a/mediagloss.htm.

o. Etc. Never appropriate—it means that you’re just covering your bases when you don’t really have more to add to a list. List the other things, or drop “etc.”

p. Populous. This means “populated by lots of people.” Populace means the whole of an area’s population. “Politicians try to serve the needs of the populous.” Why is this an incomplete sentence? Because populous is an adjective, and there is no noun to which it refers in this sentence.
8. Of course, if you've read this far, and have found errors in this note, please let me know! As I have mentioned before, if I am going to hammer on writing issues, you have every right to demand that I write clearly as well.