WRITING FOR A POLICY AUDIENCE

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IPR Community & Collaboration Workshop

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What is a **policy audience** and how do you *effectively* connect with them in writing?

- Writing form follows function.
  "Good" writing is that which effectively communicates its *purpose* to its intended *audience* in a *voice* that the audience accepts as legitimate and worthy of consideration.

Learning objectives for today

1. Understand how to situate yourself in a **policy conversation**

2. Be able to identify the appropriate **audience** for your writing

3. Understand how to clearly articulate **purpose,** make ask (recommendation)

4. Understand how to cultivate an effective **voice** using data, research findings, and narrative to build trust

Workshop outputs

- Articulation of motivation

- Map of audiences, pathway of influence

- Articulation of gap in conversation, opportunities for contribution

- Identification of most resonate facts, story

- Action steps/ homework assignment for yourself

MOTIVATION

What is your place in the policy conversation?

All writing is part of a conversation

- Successful engagement depends on legitimacy, trust, and investment

  - <u>Investment</u>: Why do you want to be engaged in this conversation?
    - It should not be about **your** research! It should be about **improving public outcomes.**

  - <u>Legitimacy</u>: What specifically is your expertise?

  - <u>Trust</u>: How much trust already exists between you and other members of the conversation?
    - Who are the other members of the conversation?

- Is the writing you're doing *commissioned* or *unsolicited*?
  - If unsolicited, you must focus on building trust and demonstrating legitimacy and investment

Reflection 1: Motivation

- Context: What is the policy issue you're working on?
  - *School-based sexual education*

- Investment: Why do you want to be engaged in this conversation?
  - *I want Ohio's standards for sexual education curricula to be consistent with health and educational evidence. School-based sex and sexual health education is important to the development of attitudes, behaviors, and health outcomes around sex and intimate relationships.*

- Did a policymaking actor ask you to write about this issue for them? Or are you trying to spur them to action?

Policy conversations are political, so understand and respect the politics

■ *Politics*: the expression of values (not the same as partisanship)

■ *Public policy*: collective actions aimed at improving social welfare through decisions about rights and resources; collective decisions we make and enforce as a society

■ Decisions are negotiated

■ Evidence includes both facts *and* values

   – *How much information ambiguity is there?*

   – *How much value conflict is there?*
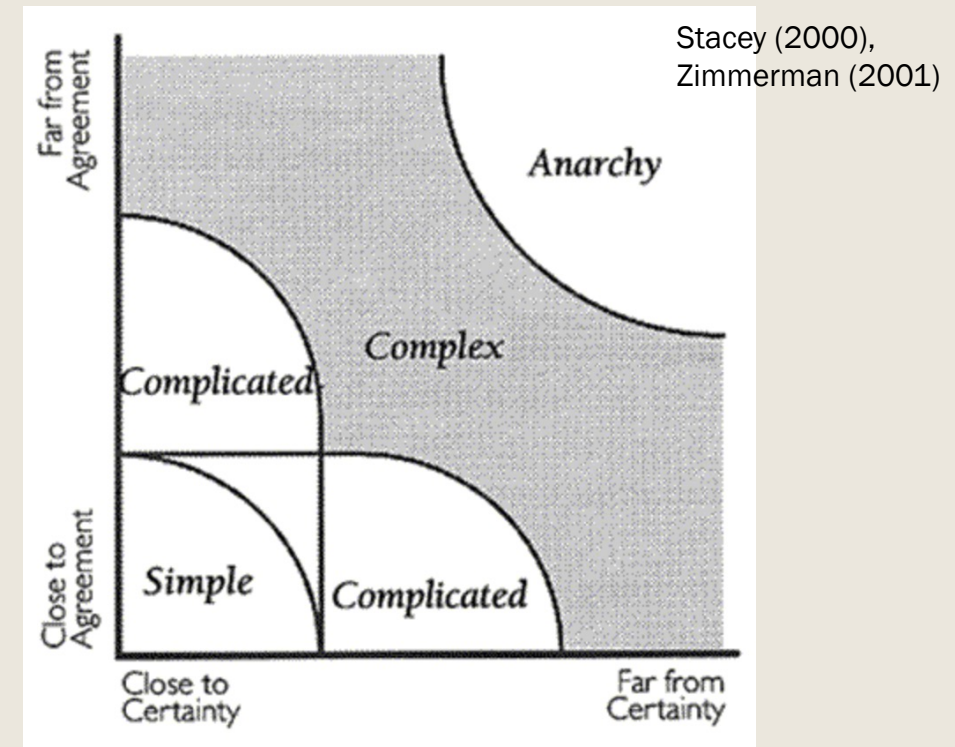
Motivation informs voice, audience, purpose

- Purpose: What change or action are you trying to incite?

- Voice: What tone, expertise, and reasoning do you employ?

- Audience: Who are you speaking to?

- If you're an academic researcher who has largely been in the *scholarly* conversation around this issue, you must use different strategies to cross over into the *public policy* conversation.

IDENTIFYING AUDIENCE

Who are you writing for?
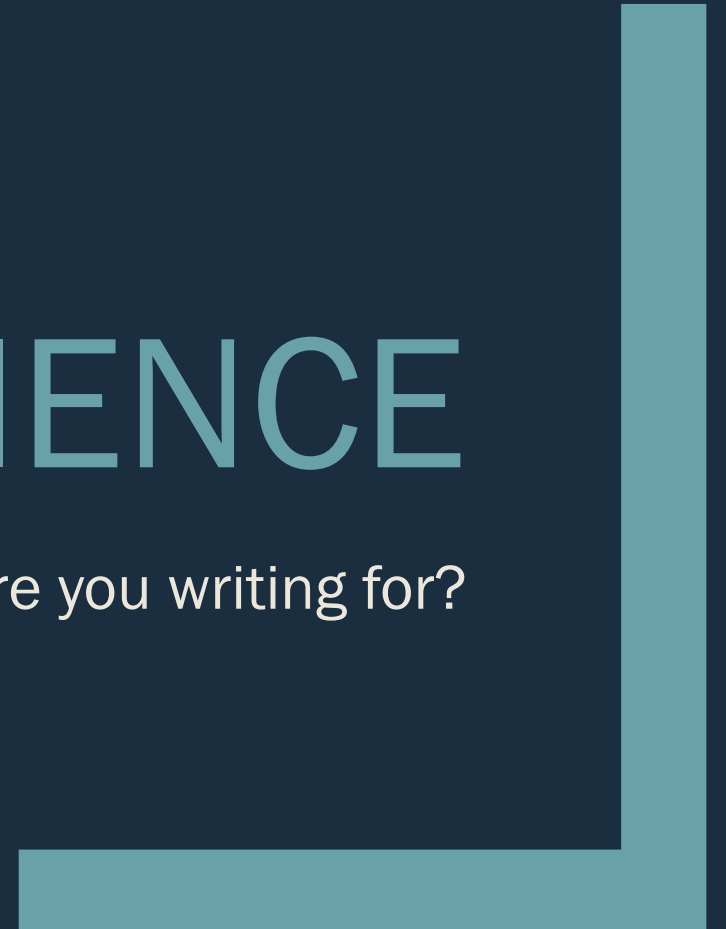
Who has the formal authority to make change?

■ Before you do anything else, you must be clear about who *specifically* has authority to make policy decisions.

■ Who has jurisdiction over the space(s) where policy needs to change?

	Legislative	Executive	Judicial
Federal			
State			
Local			

■ Many **local** governments
  - Counties
  - Cities / villages
  - Townships
  - Special districts: school, fire, health, development disability, mental health

■ Many states (including Ohio) operate under "home rule" provision, granting **local governments** authority to pass laws/ govern autonomously, so long as they are not in conflict with state or federal constitutions
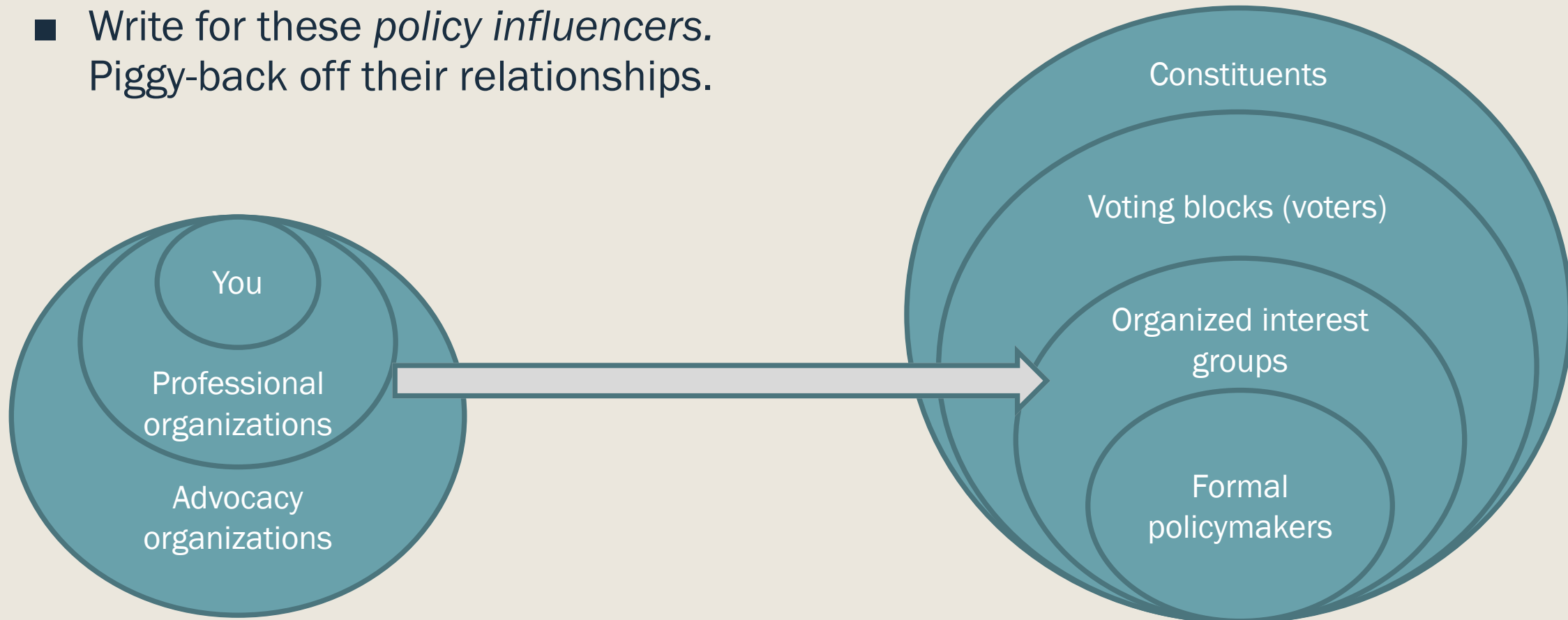
Who do the formal policymakers listen to?

- Spoiler alert: Probably not you.

- **Do your homework**
  - Who do they have a relationship with?
  - Who do they already trust, see as legitimate and invested in the issue?
  - *Who's organized?*
    - Voters v. interest groups

- You're not going to whip every vote. Seek the fertile/receptive ground first. Let some actors go.
  - Prioritize leadership

Constituents

Voting blocks (voters)

Organized interest groups

Formal policymakers
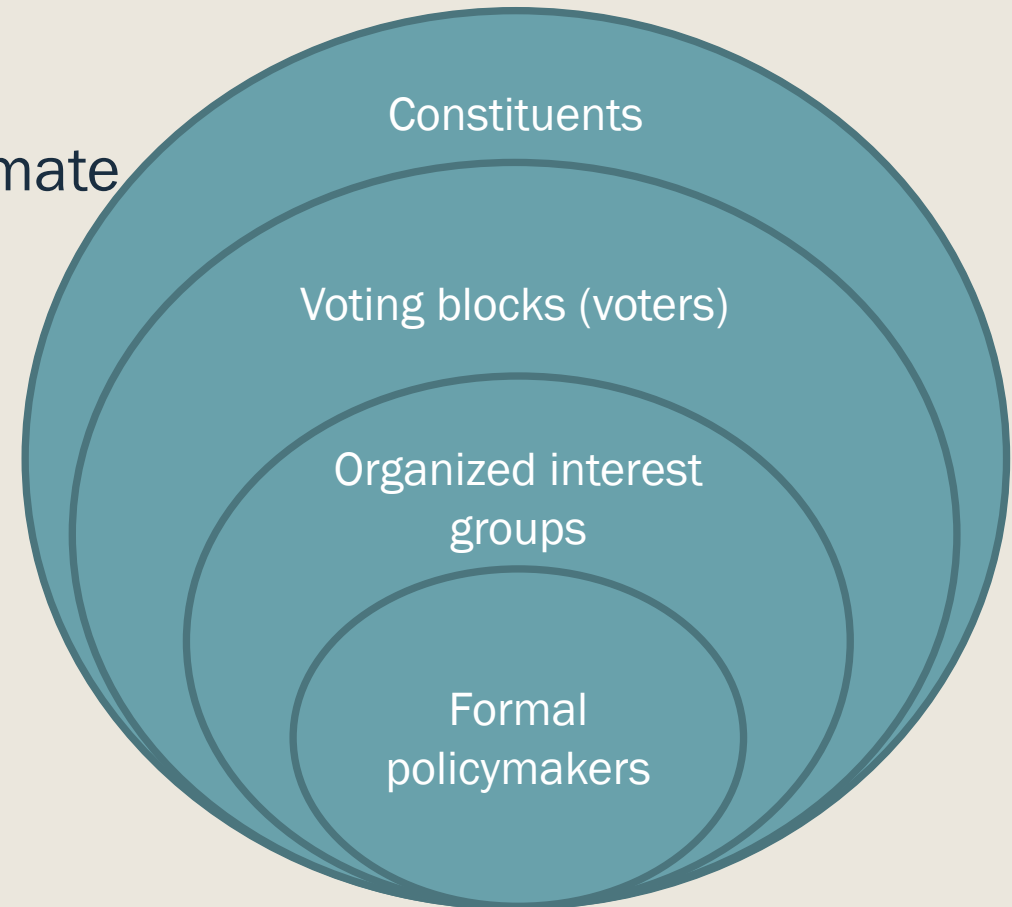
Who listens to you?

- Leverage your *existing* relationships and networks to map out the pathway of influence to the policymaker.

- Write for these *policy influencers.*
  Piggy-back off their relationships.

You

Professional organizations

Advocacy organizations

Constituents

Voting blocks (voters)

Organized interest groups

Formal policymakers

Where are public policy conversations happening?

■ Write for outlets that have proxy relationships with policymakers and policy influencers

– Outlets that provide an umbrella of trust, investment, legitimacy

– Cultivate relationships with these outlets and their editors

– A publication in these outlets can support a relationship with a policymaker

■ *The Conversation, Vox*
local newspapers
national papers
online professional outlets

Reflection 2: Audience

- **<u>Jurisdiction</u>: Who has the authority to make change?**
  - *School district boards of education (local, legislative) have the authority to make changes to sexual education curriculum in Ohio*

- **<u>Influence</u>: Who does that policymaking actor listen to?**
  - *Parent-teacher associations*
  - *School district administrative leadership*
  - *Ohio Department of Education*

- **<u>Network</u>: Do I already have a relationship with any of these influencers or outlets? Or with a member of their network?**

ARTICULATING PURPOSE

What do you want them to do and why?

Be specific about what you want them to *do*

- Common mistake: "If people just have more information, they'll do what I want/agree with me."
  - Policy decisions are not just made on the basis of facts or empirical evidence.
  - Values – include values about what counts as evidence – are just as relevant.

→ **Tell your audience what *they need to do*, NOT what *you know*.** (Musso, et al. 2000)
  - Where are the opportunities to reduce value conflict and information ambiguity?
  - Identify gaps, flaws, and omissions in the current policy conversation that could change the politics.
  - Make the case in terms of rights, opportunities, resources; improvements in overall social welfare.

Think about change in terms of *PrOSACTR*

■ A framework for policy decision analysis

Define and frame the **Pr**oblem

Identify the policy **O**bjectives

Be clear about the **S**takeholders and their roles

Explore, generate policy **A**lternatives

Assess likely **C**onsequences and

Tradeoffs of each policy in terms of objectives

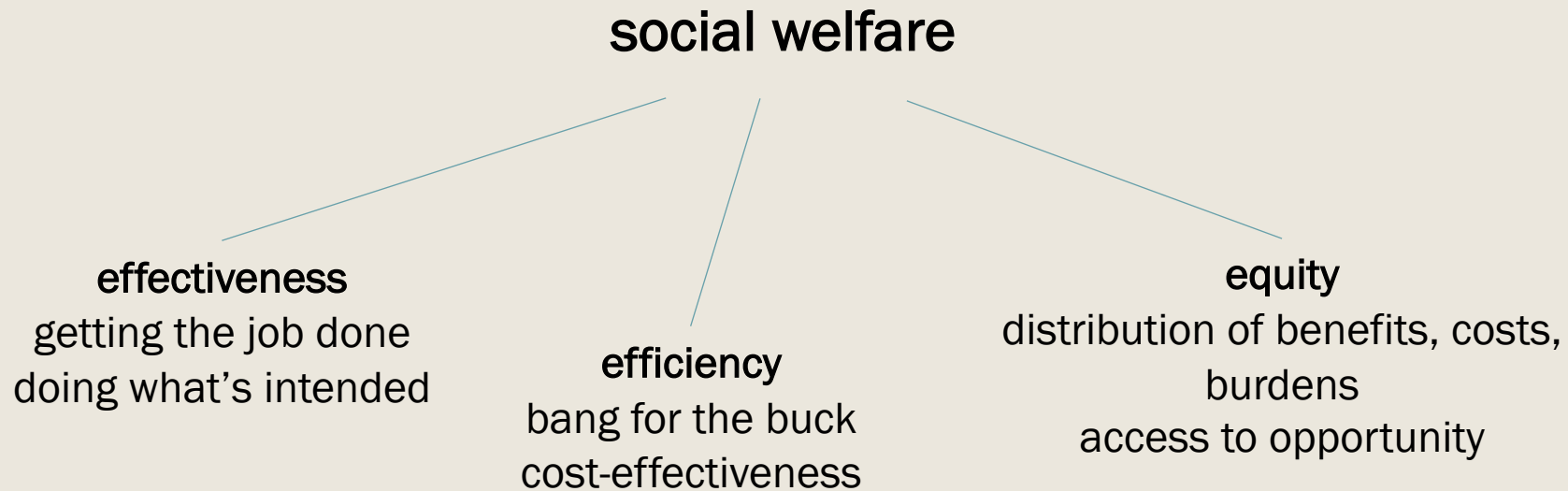Make a clear, logical **R**ecommendation

A change in framing the **problem?**

■ **Problem = observed phenomenon + frame**

– Decisions and words are political.

– How we frame a problem and the words we use influence how receptive our audience(s) are to our analysis, especially our recommendations.

Sexual activity among teens unchanged under abstinence curriculum, but STIs, teen pregnancy, IPV up. How can we improve sexual and relationship health among our youth?

A change in **objectives?**

social welfare

effectiveness
getting the job done
doing what's intended

efficiency
bang for the buck
cost-effectiveness

equity
distribution of benefits, costs, burdens
access to opportunity

Instead of reducing sexual activity, focus on reducing STIs, pregnancy, intimate partner violence

Prioritize the needs of different stakeholders?

Instead of responding to opinions of parents or board members, let's build a curriculum that responds to the needs & concerns of students.

Who's most affected?

individuals groups

Who's most invested?

politically economically

Who's empowered to make change?

directly indirectly

Different types of policy alternatives?

■ Interventions that target the behavior, rights, or resources of a different population / groups / set of actors

■ Interventions that use a different logic (if we do X, then people will do Z and Y will improve)

■ Interventions that use different instruments
   – Regulation
   – Government management
   – Taxing and spending
   – Market mechanisms
   – Education/Information/Persuasion

Require that sexual education be medically accurate and include instruction on consent.

Frame that recommendation as a *request*

- Unless a client has specifically asked for a recommendation, most policy audiences are more receptive to a suggestion or request about a change to the terms of the conversation.

- "Please consider…   ← Policy action (what)
  - Changing in the problem frame
  - Prioritizing different policy objectives
  - Centering the needs of different stakeholders
  - Changing the policy logic, target population, or instrument

- …because it [promotes rights, opportunity, and/or a   ← Public value (why)
  more efficient allocation of resources]."

Reflection 3: Purpose

■ What are the gaps, flaws, or omissions in the current policy conversation? What are we not considering or giving sufficient weight to?

■ How would addressing that gap improve people's rights or opportunities? For whom?

■ How would addressing that gap improve resource allocation (e.g., reduce long-term costs)?

BUILDING VOICE

How do you bring value to the conversation?

Support your recommendation with policy evidence (i.e., data & story)

- "If you don't show me data, I won't believe you; if you don't tell me a story, I won't care." - Tom Daschle
  - In the policy world, evidence is both information and values

- Use a stat that sticks, **story that pulls**
  - What story has emotional resonance?
  - From qualitative work (not necessarily your own)
  - Newspaper stories
  - Personal anecdotes

Jettison the technical

- Data serves to back up your recommendation – to justify why you're asking them to take a particular action

- Focus on easily understandable information
  - Descriptive analyses (e.g., data visualizations, summary statistics)
  - Direct observations (or summaries) rather than complex estimates
  - Use analogy, comparison, and description

- **YOU** must know the detail, complexity, and scientific rigor, but they are likely not that interested. Have it in your pocket, but not your hand.

Reflection 4: Voice

- What 1-2 statistics, facts, maps about this issue really stick?

- What story do I know / have I seen that resonates emotionally?

- What (usually secondary) sources have good information on this issue?

Be a humble & responsible subject matter expert

- Be a willing student of the politics and governance elements of the issue.
  - You are a subject matter – not policy, legal, or political – expert.

- Be humble.
  - Mistake: "If people just have more information, they'll do what I want. And if they don't, they're stupid or terrible."
  - Policy conversations are complex. Policymakers *must* negotiate diverse values.
  - Respect your audience and their environment.
  - Your recommendation is not about your research. That's what gives you expertise, but you need to communicate a recommendation based on whole evidence base, supported by evidence that resonates the most.

- Be conscientious.
  - Does the story of this analysis potentially assign blame to particular groups or otherwise reinforce dominant power structures?
  - Regardless of how careful we think we're being in our presentation of findings, our audience will draw causal conclusions, even if they do so unconsciously.

Writing for a policy audience is about *action,* not knowledge

1. Think carefully about your motivation

2. Aim for the right target, but use relationships to select your audience
    *   Do your homework on your audiences, including public media outlets

3. Ask your audience to do something, take a specific action in a policy-oriented way
    *   Use evidence – both data and narrative – to <u>back up</u> your recommendation

4. Be humble, honest, and conscientious

Resources & Links

- Musso et al., 2000 – "Tradecraft"

- tamarie a. macon's piece in *HealthAffairs Forefront* on equity and language

- Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_of_Ohio)

- Ballotpedia (https://ballotpedia.org/Ohio)

- frazier.202@osu.edu

Genres of policy writing

- ■ Commissioned:
  - – Reports – issue, technical, policy, stakeholder
  - – Briefs – issue, technical, policy, stakeholder
  - – Memos – issue, technical, policy, stakeholder

- ■ Unsolicited:
  - – Expert commentary
  - – Op-eds
  - – Letters to the editor
  - – TED-style talks
  - – Social media posts
  - – Blog posts