00:02 Rebecca Cohen: Hello, my name is Rebecca Cohen, and I'm a senior communication and outreach strategist at the Ford School. I'm also an alum, and I'm so excited that you're considering joining the Ford School community. As we get started today, please use the chat box to tell us where you're joining from. We wannna hear from you. We also wanna hear your questions, so use the Q&A box on the right hand side of your screen to ask questions throughout the webinar. We're going to leave plenty of time for questions.

00:31 RC: As you may have heard, we'll be hosting a virtual spring preview this year, and we're working hard to expand opportunities to engage with faculty, students and alumni online. Please check back to the Future 40s web page often for updates and recordings of the webinars we've held already this week. For today, you may have heard about how graduates of the Ford School are tremendously effective in practical writing for policy. Today we're going to have a special panelist who will share information about the Ford School's resources that help our students boost their writing and take it to the next level. So with that, I wanna introduce Alex Ralph, a longtime instructor with the Ford School's Writing Center. Alex?

01:17 Alex Ralph: Great. Thank you, Rebecca. Hi, all, welcome virtually, thank you guys for joining. You're not quite my guinea pigs, but you guys are my second webinar. So I'm projecting out into the void. I'm going to assume that you won't be totally bored. But if you are, it's a weird thing that I have no way to know. But we're going to assume the best. So thank you for joining us. As Rebecca mentioned, I'm one of four writing instructors at the Ford School. I've spent almost all of my professional career at the University of Michigan. So I've taught here for 20 years, the last nine, which and very happily have been at the Ford School of Public Policy.

01:55 AR: Also, in addition, the last decade, until recently, I've taught every summer in the PPI program. So if there's some of you who are alums of that, please let me know. It's a great program, and the Ford School... I have a vested interest in it, not just because it's my paycheck, but the Ford School is an incredibly special place. I won't give you a hard sell. I'm sure you've applied in other places. I'm sure those are great. This is not a hard sell spiel, but I do think one thing about the Ford School that's great, in addition to the community, is the number of resources they have, the number of resources that devotes to programming and to helping students learn as much as they can.

02:34 AR: I and my colleagues are one of those beneficiaries of the writing center. And so just in terms of institutional history, the Writing Center at the Ford School has been in existence for roughly 35 years. And we've grown from a one person shop to a four person shop. And so I think it's a fair question if the school is that much committed to policy writing and to the instructional policy writing, it's a fair question to ask why are they ponying up all those resources for it? Why do they think it's valuable for the students? Why is it valuable for our graduates from the school?

03:09 AR: And so I'd like to sort of just give... I'd like to give two preliminary answers to that, and then an asterix for that. So, and one reason I think that policy writing is so valuable and so valuable at the Ford School, and this is like, I guess this is an asterix of the hard sell, which is not a hard sell. But I think this is one thing that we do that's a little bit different than other policy schools and the amount of sort of writing instruction we offer is pretty singular, I think. But one of the reasons of those first two reasons that policy writing matters, is I think that the school recognizes that clear writing is clear thinking, and you can't really have one without the other.

03:47 AR: And so, to advocate, as you all will go on to do in some capacity for policies that are important to things that you're passionate about, things that keep you up at night, things that you want to make the world better for by enacting better policies, you want to be able to articulate those as persuasively and as clearly as you can, and so I think that that's one of the reasons that policy writing matters. And within that, there's a lot of different rhetorical strategies you need to be made aware of. And so that's some of what we talk about when we talk about policy writing, whether it's my or my colleagues at the Writing Center teaching you all, or whether that's other subject matter experts.

04:24 AR: And so you need to really be aware of audience, you need to be aware of different rhetorical situations, and you must keep yourself in... You might also need to be aware of audiences that are not going to be terribly receptive to your message. So you're constantly trying to balance your arguments with a receptivity and figure out how to make those more appealing or more persuasive to people who support your ideas or who might not support your ideas. I think that's one way that policy writing matters. I think a second way that it matters is that it is a transferable skill that helps aid your learning in your classes and your academic performance.

05:04 AR: So the first year of grad school, so all of you are either presumably MPPs, or MPAs, the first year of grad school, it can be a little bit strange, and we're not even sort of talking... There's a lot coming at you. And policy writing is a very learnable skill, but it's different than the type of academic writing you've done before. And so part of our job at the Writing Center and part of how we teach policy writing is to try and make those norms of policy writing as transferable and transparent as possible. And we do this beginning in orientation with you all.

05:41 AR: So we have two sessions with you all. And then we sort of go about sort of transferring sort of what policy writing is and how it differs from other types of writing you have done. This is also particularly important because I would say roughly half of you will have not done a lot of policy writing experience either in your academic work or in your career. The memo is kind of the gold standard, especially the first year of policy writing. And, again, probably half of you will not have done that. That is totally okay because the memo is a really nerdy form. It's very much of an insider document. And so if you haven't been in a professional situation or an academic situation where you've been expected to write memos, there's no reason for you to have written them before. And so there's certain sort of norms that you need to sort of understand to help you succeed in policy school, and that's some of what we do.

06:35 AR: And so that's also why policy writing matters. So the first skill is that clear writing is clear thinking. We get you trained for a number of rhetorical situations to make your argument, to advocate for what you're most passionate about. The second is that it's a transferable skill, policy writing, that's gonna help you with your learning and your career at the Ford School. But the abstract piece is not exactly particular to policy writing per se, but I think it's some of what the Writing Center does. And that is that we try and help you use your policy writing, your policy thinking and your policy writing in trying to help you get jobs. And so we'll start talking about resources in a second, but we work very closely with students on all sorts of documents, including career documents. And so this is a professional school. There's a lot of value through the academic fervor, but there's also some real practical benefits of you're coming to school and then you wanna be able to apply your skills and your talents and your passions, and get a paycheck as well. So that's also what we try and help you with, in terms of your writing.

07:37 AR: In terms of resources at the Ford School, in terms of the Writing Center, specifically, what we do is, there's really three main ways that we work with you. One way is through our individual appointment. So every week we offer over 60 hours of writing instruction for students. And this is for undergraduates and for graduates. It's for MTAs, MTPs, KHTs, anyone who's a student at the Ford School. And so what that means is that you can sign up for a half hour or an hour appointment to bring us whatever you're working on. And that work can be anything from your... For a research paper that you're doing, it can be a memo, it can be a for Ford School class, it can be for a non-Ford School class. It can be a resume, it can be a cover letter. It can be a grocery list, it can be a love letter. You can bring us any of those things that you want help on at any stage of the process.

08:33 AR: So that's one way we work with you, and I can get more into the nuts and bolts of that later. But we work with a lot of students individually, and we really strive to meet you where you're at. So this is a service for everybody. If you are the most confident writer in the world, we work with you. If you are someone who does not have a lot of confidence in your writing and is maybe scared or fearful about coming back to school on the amount of written work, we work with you. So at all stages of the process, no matter where you're at or what your sense of your skill level is.

09:06 AR: The second main way we work with students is that we teach classes. So about myself and my three colleagues, we all offer these introduction to policy writing classes, which are very short classes. They're five-week-long classes, they are past sale classes, they are designed to help familiarize students with the policy writing norms and what the types of assignments they will be expected to write at the Ford School. So we see roughly 75-80% of all incoming first year graduate students in these classes. The virtue of these is, again, that these are small and intimate academic spaces. They're capped at six students. Their workshop model... And we get to know, the faculty and students get to know each other well, and we get to really target our instruction to meet students' needs. But it's a shared collaborative environment. So you get to know your classmates well. You get to know your instructors well as well.

10:04 AR: The third main way that we interact with students is through outreach. And so that begins in orientation, as I mentioned, and also we come visit your classrooms a lot. We visit student groups a lot. So you can't really escape us, for better or worse, at the Ford School, is that we're gonna invade your classes or your student groups and talk your ear off more about writing. And so part, those are the three main ways we work at the Ford School with students. Another way of thinking of us is we're... The Writing Center folks, we're like the spies of the Ford School in a non-creepy way, which is that we see all the assignments that professors assign. We've seen... We have a long institutional history 'cause a lot of us have been there for a while. And so we get to have a fairly clean sense of the pulse of the school, and that also means that we get a lot of gossip about what classes are hard, what professor makes the best pot of coffee, I don't know.

11:10 AR: But we end up knowing quite a bit of the school, and we very much value that, and we very much value our relationships with students and working with them. So those are sort of the overview of policy writing. I just wanna talk just a few tips, and then we'll go to Q&A, which I think is probably fun for our timing. And then in terms of the tips, and Chris, this is maybe where you wanna queue the slides. Just wanna run through very quickly.

11:40 AR: Three policy writing tips before Q&A. The first tip is really, if you're thinking about memo writing is if you wanna increase your persuasiveness, you really wanna be mindful of your audience. And so being mindful of the audience. And this is one of the cool thing about policy writing and memo writing is that you don't wanna waste time telling your boss what she already knows. You don't need to tell her what is totally obvious to her. So in memo writing, you will never ever write a sentence like this, "Martin Luther King, an important civil rights leader, gave a speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 20th 1963." The reason you won't write a sentence like that is because everybody over the age of four knows who Martin Luther King is. So you don't need to waste your time with background, okay? So one of the tips is writing audience awareness to improve efficiency and not get caught in background.

12:29 AR: The second policy writing tip, and Chris, if we could go to that second slide, that would be awesome. The second tip is thinking about audience, thinking about key questions. And so, Chris, if you can go one more slide after that, that'll be great.

12:51 AR: Thinking about the audience. And so if you can think about key questions to ask and to answer, that thinks about writing as a conversation, right? And so if you think about, say, your professor in your values and ethics class tasked you with writing an op-ed, right? And so what you wanna be aware of is what are the important questions that an audience might have. And then you wanna keep go about trying to answer those. And again, these are sort of types of rhetorical situations you would want, but anticipating the questions and then answering them allows you generally to come up, if you did that well, with a more persuasive way, a more persuasive solution, a more persuasive theory that you're gonna posit.

13:37 AR: So these are some of the questions that you might ask and answer. And then the last last sort of tip is on a sentence level. And so, policy writing has a scarcity problem. And so if we can go to the third slide, Chris, that would be excellent. Policy writing is a scarcity problem, which is that you spent two weeks researching health care overhaul for your boss but you only have 500 words to convey that, and so you need to figure out, again, what your boss needs to know and what she doesn't need to know. And you also need to figure out what are the most important arguments, what are the most important counter arguments. But also on a sentence level, you want to start airing back on unnecessary wordage.

14:21 AR: And so one such thing is to be verbs. A to be verb is really great for facts and definitions, it's very conversational, but like the walls in my office at home, let's call them beige. If you use it, if you try and avoid a to be verb for something that's just a description, you risk sounding like a really pretentious person. So I would say the walls vivified beigeness. This is not the type of person you wanna set, you wanna say the walls are beige. To be verb is great, but for other types of sentences that are doing things that are more than definition or facts, you wanna move through that and try and minimize to be verbs. So the example here gives an example of how you can take out those unnecessary to be verbs. That's sort of the nerdy kind of stuff we like to talk about, the big picture and smaller picture at the Writing Center. And so now I think would be a good time to segue the questions, but I'm happy to answer that. I'm happy to stick around. I'm happy to give you a hard or soft sell for the Ford School. And so let's go to [15:25] \_\_\_\_.

15:25 RC: Thanks, Alex. Yeah, thank you, Alex. Yeah, so for those of you just joining us, please feel free to add where you are logging in from in the chat. We have folks from all over the world. From the Czech Republic, from Norway. We have people from all over the US, from Chicago, the East Coast, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and a lot of Midwest folks too here in Ann Arbour, in Detroit, Chicago. So, welcome. So we are, as I mentioned earlier, I'm an alum. And I think the resources that the Writing Center provides, it's just an extra set of eyes on your assignments to really get you working those muscles, those writing muscles, to help you be strategic and really write clearly, concisely, and be persuasive and really just boost your writing up to the next level. So let's start out with... Alex, you alluded to this a little bit in terms of the types of things that professors, you're both spies at the Ford School. Can you share with the students what kind of writing do professors expect of students when they come in? Can you give some specifics on that?

16:49 AR: Sure, I mean, so I think Rebecca's question has maybe two parts to it. One is like what a professor can expect on day one. And that's gonna really vary the gamut to it. But the second part is like sort of like, what type of assignments are professors gonna, sort of gonna assign, expect you to run with, and especially for first year, the first year, the memo is the gold standard. So every student, if you're an MPP, will take 510. Those of you who are doing the MPA program, you will also have some writing required classes that might not be 510, but pretty much your first year class is gonna really prioritize the memo, most of all, and there's different forms of memos, but usually the memo starts out being more informational, sort of background, stakeholder analysis, and then as you get more comfortable with it, as your pay grade in your organization goes up, you get to start recommending things. So then it can start to go to longer papers like a strategy paper, or strategy memo or decision memo, but pretty much the memo is gonna be really the thing that will be most frequent. The second most frequent thing you will write in grad school is usually an op-ed. And then after that would be more research papers.

18:16 RC: Right. Thanks. Alright. So next question. This is a little bit more specific, are MPA students able to take the intimate writing workshop courses that you talked about?

18:34 AR: Good question. Yeah, and I should have mentioned, I should have been more clear about that. And so let me answer that now. So MPAs, for better or worse, MPAs are required to hang out in a writing class. So that class is called 522. I think it's like effective policy writing is, I think, the formal name of it. And so that class for that MPA is required. How it works, and I taught it with my colleague, one of my colleagues, David Morse last year with our inaugural MPA class, and so how it works is that of the MPA class, we split you in two, and so half of you will be with one instructor and half of you will be with another, and that is a required writing class. So whereas the MPPs can select into it, the MPAs for better or worse, are stuck hanging out with me and Dave and talking, writing. And that's a 10-week class, it's a one credit class. It is still pass/fail for some of those same principles of... We don't want this to be anxiety-inducing. Our goal is really to get students much more comfortable and facile and confident with policy writing. But that lasts 10 weeks, and is one credit, and is pass/fail.

20:00 RC: Great. Hopefully that answered your question. We have a good mix of folks here coming from all, as you can see, all over the world. Some of our students haven't written anything in a long time, or they're coming from maybe a very different background, like engineering. Do you have any tips for folks to quickly adapt to policy writing? In addition to some of the tips that you shared.

20:29 AR: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, over the summer, I would not worry about it. I wouldn't worry about it over the summer. And I think in class, it is a skill that is acquired and acquired with working at it and thinking about it, and in dialogue with other people. Writing is a really iterative process. So I don't think... I think it's pretty hard personally and also pedagogically to become a better writer just by doing it on your own. And so, one thing that the Writing Center offers, and that the classes offer, as Rebecca say, is another set of eyes. And so one of the things that I think to be hokey, that I think is really beautiful and collaborative about the writing instruction we offer, is that you are working with others. Yes, you go off on your own and you write it, but then you come out and play. Okay? And so, that you bring your paper to myself, for my colleagues, and we talk about it. And that's not really... The emphasis is not just like, "Here's a red pen, here's all the stuff you did wrong." When you bring me or my colleague a paper, we'll say, "What are your questions about it? What are your goals? What do you want us to focus on?" And students might say, "I'm really struggling with organization," or, "I don't understand what a good conclusion looks like."

21:43 AR: Or some might be, "I don't like the style of my sentence structure." So we tailor all of that, but it is a dialogue. And that happens both individually with the student and then also with the group in our classes. The other thing is, if you've been out of school for a while, you have all this knowledge and these skills that you've gotten also. So that's input that you're bringing in to the classes and to the individual sessions that we work with. And if you have a scientific background, you've been trained in logic, in data, in reasoning. Those are all really useful things that will translate quite well to the written page, and that's what we work with you on.

22:27 RC: That's great. And you mentioned data. And I know that's something that I know I've used in my policy career, using data effectively to make your argument. Is that something that you also help students work on in figuring out which data, how much data. Is that part of the writing process?

22:49 AR: Yes, yes, yeah. So again, whether you're doing... If you're writing... So if I have a student who's writing a memo on health care, that might very well be very technical, and it's gonna need a lot of data. But if the reader of that piece gets drowned in the data or doesn't know which data to prioritize, the author is not effectively communicating his or her message. And so, always you need to use data to... You need, 'cause that's evidence that's gonna support your claims. But you need to use it well and judiciously. And so that we do spend a lot of time in our classes on that.

23:35 RC: I think you mentioned this earlier. There are several writing instructors, you mentioned David Morse. How many of you are there, and do you have different specialties that you work with, or is it pretty much just first come, first serve, with the different writing instructors?

23:52 AR: Sure, sure, yeah, and we multiply. We started as one, and then we went to two, and then we went to two and a half, and now we're at four. So somehow we just keep multiplying, but there are four of us there. And in terms of... We don't have specialties. So the Ford School... The Ford School did not hire us to ask us for our recommendations on renewable energy policy. The Ford School did not hire us for expertise on overhaul and health care. That is not what our specialty is or our academic or research training. But that said, what we are hired for and what our expertise is is written and oral communication. And so, you can work with whatever four of us, as you want. So when you wanna make an appointment... Let's say that you work really well with Beth Chimera, one of my colleagues, you will see her schedule, and you can specifically request her.

24:57 AR: So all of us do similar things. Naturally we all have different personalities, 'cause we're different people. But we share our codified general set of practices, but we also work individually with every student. And students self-select among us who they feel like, particularly work well with. So that's the nice thing. So another way of saying this, is that when you make a writing plan with us, window shop. So, you try out working with me and say, "Oh, I got, this worked well, but I wanna see how Molly Spencer does it." And then you fall in love with the way Molly works, and then you stay with her. So that's sort of the nice thing, is that there's options.

25:39 AR: And I think with writing, that's particularly important. There are best practices, and this is what a lot of what I do in my classes is there's a right and wrong way to use a semicolon, there's not a right and wrong way to open a memo. And so what I do with my students and what my colleagues do, is we try and present options, and so, I think of it like shopping. You can try on this shirt, and if it looks good and you like the way it fits, you can buy it and keep, you can stock up on that shirt, but if it doesn't fit with your sense of what you wanna accomplish or whether your personality is, don't buy that shirt, right? And so, I tend to think about writing as a conversation and a dialogue, with best practices, and you need to defend those best practices, but there's not always a clear right or wrong, but we wanna make you aware of the different options and then you choose for yourself.

26:30 RC: That's great. I think that's also part of developing a style, and even though policy writing can be somewhat technical, there is a style to it, and it depends also on the audience that you're talking to, that you're communicating to. So we just have a few minutes left. We had a request in the chat for Alex to sell Ford School. Do your sell. So what makes the Ford School different from your perspective?

26:58 AR: Do the sell, okay. What does... Okay, so here's my take on the Ford School, okay. This is not well thought out, okay. From least important to most important. Least important, there's an amazing amount of food that spontaneously appears at the Ford School, and so even when you're in your mid-40s, as I am, there's still a delight about walking into a room and seeing food, because there's so many events, and so the Ford School will feed you really well. Okay, that's one thing. I think the more important thing, what this gets to, is the amount of resources that the Ford School has are staggering, to be honest. And so, you can access an amazing amounts of resources. COVID-19 is changing everything. We'll get to that in a moment, but the amount of resources to take for classes, for funding, for us professors to work with, is pretty staggering to me. Other hard sell is it is for as well funded and as elite of a public university as it is, it is an incredibly congenial place.

28:10 AR: And so, I've moved to Cincinnati, but the Ford School's a hard drug to shake, to be honest, and so I commute back in [28:18] \_\_\_\_ weird schedule from Cincinnati, but part of that is because it's an incredibly collegial, non-hierarchical place. And so, students and faculty socialize together, they're interested in the... And they share ideas, faculties socialize with each other. It's a very social, congenial, open door, non-hierarchical kind of place, and I haven't been in too many environments like that, to be honest. So, that's one sell. The last thing, which is maybe gets off of this, and this is, everybody is coping with COVID-19, and that's just devastating for a lot of us. But the Ford School, everybody's struggling to figure what to do, but it's been an incredibly heartening institution to be a part of during these last weeks. And so, I think that's a meaningful thing. That's my hard sell, that's my [29:12] \_\_\_\_ hard sell, starting from food, ending with what's getting a really awful time, but I feel more heartened about the human race by coming to work and by working with students and by working with my faculty, that's my hard sell.

29:27 RC: Great, thank you so much, Alex. We are actually at 12:30, but if you all have just one more minute, we have last question, we really wanna try to answer all of your questions on these webinars. So there's a question that came in about particular publications that are good examples of the style of policy writing taught by the Ford School, if you can point to any publications.

29:54 AR: So, nobody publishes memos. But like the memos are... There's no good memo. I mean, there are good memos, but there's not... Memos aren't flying off the shelf, they're real insider documents, but op-eds end and for foreign affairs, like Foreign Affairs is a great publication. So, I think, look to more of your more outward facing types of policy, document policy, documents are not just internal documents for organizations, they are outward facing. So op-eds count as policy documents, right? So I would look for Foreign Affairs, I would look... In any of the places that you like to read, but when you come to school at the Ford School, should you have bought the hard sell, we will show you lots of different examples of them, but it's not like a novel where I can recommend, if you ask me, what novel to recommend, I can rattle off a list. If you say what's the best memo to read, then you can't really go to your book store and buy that.

[chuckle]

30:58 RC: Yeah, and if I could just add to that also, if you're good at writing concisely and clearly getting your point across to your audience, you look at any organization's external communication, if you graduate with a degree in the Ford School, you'll be able to write an effective, in an effective way for external communications in a really strategic way. Okay.

31:27 AR: And then also just, I know we're wrapping up, if you have questions or wanna be in touch, you can just email me, you can find my email on the Ford School Writing Center website, so I'm happy to, I'm on email a lot. I'm happy to answer anything that I might have neglected.

31:42 RC: Great, so anything else, Alex, to leave our students with today?

31:45 AR: No. No. Go blue, good luck, best of luck to you all in these really chaotic times. Best of luck looking after yourself and your loved ones.

31:56 RC: Yeah, thank you so much for participating in the webinar everyone. Each day next week, we're adding lunchtime webinars, so we have one every day next week, focused on our research centers that our faculty will be hosting, so check out the Future 40s webpage, and sign up to learn more, we're adding new information to that page every single day. We hope to see you in Ann Arbor this fall. Go blue.