Russell Lidman
Paul Sommers
Seattle University

The "Compleat" Policy Analyst: A Top 10 List

In this article, the authors provide a list of the top 10 ways to become a "compleat" policy analyst, drawing on lessons from their own experience as policy analysts. The authors make no claims that their list is unique. However, they suggest the items included within it are supported in the academic and practitioner-oriented literature. Counting down from number 10—"The compleat policy analyst knows how to skip steps"—the authors present and comment on the items in turn. The authors suggest the number one concern for practitioners is "to live with uncertainty." Other items on the list include eating crow, loving numbers, and acknowledging values and politics in the analytical process.

Number 10

The compleat policy analyst knows how to skip steps.
Comment: A thorough analysis will collide with a political timetable. The analyst will learn how to skimp on effort without imperiling the accuracy or meaningfulness of the product.

Number 8

The compleat policy analyst will come to enjoy the taste of crow.
Comment: The pace of analysis and skimping on effort will imperil accuracy. Own up to your errors, but learn from them. Apologies truncate the justification cycle, allowing you, a more compleat policy analyst, to return to actual work sooner.

Number 7

The compleat analyst will present lists, at least on occasion.
Comment: Four points.

1. A list allows a presentation to be complete and yet concise.
2. Constructing a list self-imposes the discipline of asking, "What is missing here?"
3. In presenting a list to your audience, they likewise have the opportunity to reflect on what has been presented and what has not.
4. A list has a defined end. The audience knows just how long to meter out its attention.

Number 6

The compleat policy analyst will master clear, concise prose.
Comment: None is required.

Number 5

The compleat policy analyst acknowledges his or her own value set.
Comment: The policy analyst may be faced with strong challenges to his or her beliefs. The analyst may need to struggle to maintain the integrity of his or her analysis and to fend off cynicism, an occupational hazard.

Russell Lidman *is a professor and director of the Institute of Public Service at Seattle University. He previously served as executive policy advisor to Washington's governor, assistant commissioner for policy in the state's Employment Security Department, and director of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, a legislatively directed policy research organization. He earned a PhD in economics at the University of Wisconsin.* ***E-mail: lidmanr@seattleu.edu****.*

Paul Sommers *is a professor at the Institute of Public Service and the Albers School of Business at Seattle University. He previously served as an analyst in the Washington State Office of Financial Management, as senior research fellow at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs, and as a research scientist in the Seattle office of the Battelle Memorial Institute. He earned a doctoral degree in economics at Yale University.* ***E-mail: sommersp@seattleu.edu****.*

Number 4

The compleat policy analyst will love numbers, even if he or she finds them hard to love.

Comment: Quantitative analysis and description are inescapable in policy analysis. Expect to spend a lot of time explaining quantitative work, explaining it again, and then maybe redoing this or that aspect with a new scenario, new data, or an improved model. Then expect this cycle to begin all over again.

Number 3

The compleat policy analyst is not committed to a disciplinary orientation.

Comment: Policy analysis selects for quality generalists. Real-time problems require the analyst to develop nearly instant familiarity with, even hinting at expertise in, a variety of fields.

Number 2

The compleat policy analyst understands that politics is and is not central to policy analysis.

Comment: Policy occurs in a political context. The analyst can describe the effects of a current or proposed policy better than a political pro. However, political professionals can give better political advice than the analyst. Office holders and other public officials—if they are wise—look to the analyst for advice about policy, not the politics of a policy.

Number 1

The compleat policy analyst must learn to live with uncertainty.

Comment: Is this really number one, the most important quality of a policy analyst? Yes and no.

Further Comments

Our top 10 list aims to describe the concerns of policy analysts in public agencies and nonprofit organizations. We are not addressing the work of academics or policy researchers who conduct in-depth analyses of major public issues, such as an assessment of the policy rationale for the Iraq War or workforce research examining the impacts of welfare reform.[1] These are very complicated issues with implications for millions of citizens in this and other countries, deserving of a monograph or book-length analysis.

Many public employees conduct policy analyses under extreme time pressure. Our list of issues to consider is pertinent to their situation, as well as to those whose primary job is more managerial but for whom a policy analysis task comes up from time to time. We imagine this list tacked to the wall of a new state or federal budget examiner dealing with a flood of deadlines and with a strong professional and personal investment in serving the public interest.[2] We also hope it may provoke some thoughts about the nature of this work among veteran policy analysts.

Every compleat policy analyst could produce a distinct top 10 list. We know the difficulty we had agreeing on this list. One of us held out for inclusion of mastery of the three-hole punch, arguing that three-ring binders are well suited to continual change. That did not make the cut. Policy analysis begins with options but gets down to choice, and our choices are represented here.

We believe there is literature and experience to support our top 10. We present this defense of our list, with the caveat that we are perhaps overly practiced at number eight.

10. Time

The pace of the policy-making process is nonlinear, and those who produce analyses have to be prepared for periods of intensity. Eugene Bardach writes, "In fact, time pressure is probably almost as dangerous an enemy of high-quality policy analysis as politically motivated bias, if not more so" (2000, 8).

In Washington State, the governor has only five days to act on a measure passed by the legislature during the period it is in session and 20 days for measures passed after adjournment sine die. One of the authors worked for several years as a policy analyst in the governor's executive policy office. An analyst in this office may be tracking several hundred bills, a few dozen of which are likely to be enacted. Should a bill pass during the legislative session, the policy analysis must be completed quickly. The chief executive is the last stop before a bill becomes a law, and the governor's policy analyst is the last stop before the bill enters an "analysis-lite" zone in which interest groups, bargains, and other manifestations of politics are potent competitors for attention. As much as they may come to dislike the intensity of the five-day window, analysts have to be prepared for measures qualifying for it.

Welfare reform has been on the national agenda since the late 1960s. Related policy research—for example, on the negative income tax and on workforce interventions—has been conducted over many years. Despite all of this valuable research, policy changes over a quarter-century did not fundamentally alter the nature of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Rates of employment for recipients remained low and durations on assistance remained long. The starting gun for major reform—"to end welfare as we know it"—was sounded during President Clinton's first election campaign. Beginning in 1995, the pace of policy development accelerated at the federal and the state levels.

Is there a role for analysis when a policy begins to take off? Sharkansky and Zalmanovitch (2000) suggest that good policy analysts draw on a capacity for improvisation in such situations, modifying carefully constructed plans

quickly as situations change or new opportunities or problems arise. Jason DeParle (2004) describes former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala racing to the While House to provide President Clinton with an analysis prepared by Wendell Primus, a high-level official in her agency. DeParle quotes Shalala on her use of that policy analysis: "Clinton's tendency is to cut the deal too fast.… Anything I could hand him to make him slow down and think, I wanted to do" (144). Primus's work, which described the impact of one version of the reform on child poverty, was not decisive, but it was timely and provided some scale for possible impacts of the reform. His numbers were high, as events subsequently demonstrated, and that is a risk of any analysis built on forecasts.

9. The Skipped Step

"Ready, fire, aim." At times, you will hit the bull's-eye even without all of the preliminaries. You even may get some credit for shooting from the hip. But beware: There is no effective defense for missing the target after having skipped steps. Jennifer Forschey (2005) describes her experience as a junior budget examiner at the Office of Management and Budget, noting that from the first day on the job, she had to learn to discriminate between problems that required long-term effort, situations that could be quickly and easily resolved on the spot, and a few situations that could be more or less ignored. Skipping steps is a learned art, one that Forschey suggests can come only through on-the-job experience.

8. Crow

The compleat analyst will make errors. The goal is to be a one-trial learner—to make an error just once and then learn how to avoid that particular one. This leaves the opportunity to make a new type of error. Fiorino (2001) acknowledges the difficulty of avoiding errors in a technically complex field such as environmental policy making, but stresses the opportunity to learn from one's errors.

Having made an error with some public consequence, the policy analyst faces choices: accept responsibility for the error, ignore it, justify the process that brought it about, or even justify the error itself. We favor the first. The second, ignoring the mistake, is a recipe for a short career in policy analysis.

Blaming circumstances or others may have an aspect of truthfulness. However, as Sissela Bok writes, "An excuse seeks to extenuate, sometimes to remove the blame entirely from something that would otherwise be a fault" (1978, 78). Locating responsibility outside oneself for an error that one committed may lead in the direction of misrepresenting circumstances. In much of the policy arena, where one's word is one's capital, the blame game is not an asset-building strategy.

Most policy analysts can probably describe one or more errors they committed and survived. An interesting anecdote from the management literature illustrates the value of owning up to one's errors. Jerry Harvey (1980) relates the story of a Japan Airlines pilot, Captain Asoh, who landed a plane in the San Francisco Bay, short of the runway. The plane was not damaged severely, and no passengers were injured. Harvey reports that at the National Transportation Safety Board hearing, the captain led off with an admission of his responsibility for having erred. How colorful were the few words he used to concede his guilt is a matter of conjecture. "Faced with circumstances in which many of us find that deception is the norm, he didn't lie" (Harvey 1980, 65). Nor, according to Harvey, was Asoh terminated for his error. Harvey reports that many pilots are aware of what they call the "Asoh defense," admitting one's errors and trusting that the organization will impose only the appropriate penalty, if any.

That owning up to errors is good is a hard sell. It is not made easier by current television reality series that send the opposite message. "The Apprentice," "The Benefactor," and similar zero-sum game shows convey the notion that a single mistake can be fatal. This can be so in the world of television. However, it would be an obstacle to any serious work if this notion were to bleed into the policy arena.

7. Lists

Lists have a decades-long history in public management. Possibly the best-known list is Gulick and Urwick's (1937) description of the work of the chief executive: PODSCORB, an acronym for planning, organizing, directing, staffing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting. Though that list was much debated and is generally regarded as passé—where are performance or mission, for example—there are many long-ago students of public administration who can yet rattle off the seven elements.

The subtitle of Eugene Bardach's *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis* (2000) foreshadows a text built on another broad gauge list. That subtitle, "The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving," should not be taken to suggest that Bardach endorses a cookbook approach to policy analysis. He cautions that "taken by itself, it can be mechanistic." His claims for it are modest: "The primary utility of this structured approach is that it reminds you of important tasks and choices that otherwise might slip your mind" (xiv).

One prominent user of lists is Robert Behn. His article "Why Measure Performance? Different Purposes Require Different Measures" (2003) is a concise statement of eight purposes of performance measurement and the standards to judge reports on those measures. A later report takes lists to a new level with "Eleven Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance" (Behn 2004). This document is a how-to guide for improving performance, con-

veying a sophisticated appreciation of the issues in commonsense terms.

Good lists can help to communicate a complex matter or, as Behn shows, to communicate otherwise dry material. A very good list might even make a long-lasting impression.

6. Prose

The nomination of the *9/11 Commission Report* (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004) for the National Book Award is itself a milestone in the history of public reports. No public report's authors dare hope to emulate a subsequent accomplishment—the 9/11 report will be the basis of a TV miniseries (*New York Times* 2004). The report is based, in part, on public hearings and a large-scale research effort. Despite all that went into it and its multiple authors, the volume conveys a single voice and is an easy and informative read. The compleat analyst has much to learn from this report, not only about how to convey content but also how to effectively and unobtrusively elide over troublesome subjects.

It does not require the use of much jargon or technical detail to lose your audience. The compleat policy analyst will not last long in the field if his or her work is inaccessible. Bardach (2000) poses a thought experiment in "Tell Your Story," the eighth step along his path. He asks you to assume you have just a minute to tell the story of a policy analysis. He writes, "If you feel yourself starting to hem and haw, you haven't really understood your own conclusions at a deep enough level to make sense to others and probably not yourself either. Back to the drawing board until you get it straight" (42).

Good analysis and writing end with preparing a punchy executive summary. Despite all the effort that goes into the body of the report, one needs to acknowledge that the primary audience may never get beyond the summary. One of the authors recalls a conversation with a senior state government staff member who measured his success by the number of years since he had been able to read a report in its entirety. There is a caution: Although busy decision makers will not read a full report, a staffer may, and your critics surely will.

5. Values

At one time or another, the policy analyst will likely find him- or herself in a value conflict over an assigned task. What do you do when you are "asked" to look at a problem too narrowly and to overlook some downside risk? Or, you sense "cooked" or even no results might be welcome? What is the work of the policy analyst when outcomes are "purchased" and the system is highly resistant to change?

Although corruption is not common in the United States, it is hardly an unknown phenomenon (Segal 2002). Corruption remains a persistent problem, especially in many lower-income nations. Although it is hardly the most problematic aspect of corruption, the policy analyst faces the challenge of identifying the powers with an interest in having "truth" spoken to them.

One of us recently taught a short course on policy analysis to public and nonprofit leaders and university faculty in Honduras. The question of greatest interest to these professionals was how to conduct policy analysis in the presence of corruption. This is not an abstract question. A World Bank Institute survey in Honduras reported that, among public-sector managers, nearly 70 percent believed that judicial authorities receive bribes, nearly 60 percent believed their colleagues accept bribes, and almost that same number believed parliamentarians do so (Kaufman 2001). The advice we provide here does not adequately respond to a situation such as this. The issue of state capture faced in developing countries does put in perspective the values-related issues faced by analysts in the developed world.

What does the compleat policy analyst do when confronted by pressures to alter or mute the results of one's analysis? Updating Albert Hirschman's (1970) observations, Weimer and Vining (1999) describe three broad options that are available: exit, voice, and disloyalty. They pose questions that may help analysts think their way through the options: "What are the ethical implications of your action?… Why do you find the policy so objectionable while others approve of it?… Is it good for society in the long run to have people such as yourself leave important analytical positions?" (51). Weimer and Vining suggest that, in the end, the professional ethics of the policy analyst "belong in the general hierarchy of values governing moral behavior" (57).

The analyst might take a page from Ronald Heifetz's (1994) notion of adaptive leadership. The adaptive leader raises difficult questions and, as a result of doing so, equips his or her public to deal with the challenges arising from changed circumstances. Beyond the choices considered by Hirschman and rearticulated by Weimer and Vining (resign, leak, speak out until silenced, issue an ultimatum, etc.), the analyst also has the option of acting as a leader, attempting to educate his or her reporting structure through insightful yet respectful questions. This approach requires the long view and may be less satisfying than the dramatic gesture.

No one may have asked the policy analyst to act as a leader. The compleat policy analyst recognizes that the best defense is a good offense: Situational leadership may be preferable to continuing to wrestle with value conflicts created by someone in a position of formal authority.

4. Numbers

The compleat policy analyst both interprets and communicates quantitative information. Edward Gramlich

(1998) expresses a view of benefit–cost analysis that may be applied equally to other quantitative methods. Gramlich observes, "[B]enefit cost analyses and supporting studies … will usually be an input to a policy decision, and the world will be better off if it is an important input. But benefit-cost analyses are not policy decisions. The role of benefit cost analysis is to aid in decisions, not to actually make them" (6). Gramlich sustains the policy analyst's hope that quantitative methods might actually make a difference, observing, "The only hope is to continue doing the benefit-cost analysis … today's sacred cows can easily become tomorrow's sacrificial lambs if budgets get tight or if other circumstances change" (7).

People love numbers in policy analysis but always argue over them and offer alternatives and critiques—fights over the numbers end up distracting everyone from the fight over the fundamental issues involved. The analyst sometimes wonders if the quantitative estimates of potential impacts really contribute to an effective decision-making process.

One of the authors was involved in the debate over the potential impact of new forest management policies on the economies of the Pacific Northwest during the early 1990s. His estimates of the potential impacts led environmental and industry groups to produce their own estimates. Environmental groups said the costs of protecting owl and murrelet habitats would be negligible, whereas industry sources said they would be unreasonably high. Because the analysts working for these different parties used different models and assumptions, the debate over potential impacts transmuted into one over estimation methodologies. This left decision makers free to believe whatever they were predisposed to think about the situation.

The compleat analyst aims to get out there first with the most defensible piece of analysis possible. Given that all analysts confront limitations of resources, time, and data, no one is beyond attack. The compleat analyst is not afraid of being the target and may even find that preferable to aiming critiques at others who produced their analyses sooner.

3. Generalists

One of the compleat analyst's greatest satisfactions is how much he or she gets to learn about such a wide and unexpected range of topics. The analyst starts by working in the field of regional economic development and discovers that an understanding of the employment potential of biotechnology-related manufacturing would be helpful. In turn, this leads him or her to acquire background on urban trolley systems that may be needed to transport the employees. And this may lead to some study of the marketing of public transit options, and so on.

Volumes in the policy areas mirror the rainbow of issues one may encounter. What disciplines will help the analyst who is working on regulating tobacco? In their edited volume, Rabin and Sugarman (2001) include chapters on politics (tobacco regulation), economics (price elasticity of smoking by age), marketing, health (methods of reducing harm), control policies (reducing youth smoking), law (tort litigation), and public health (indoor air quality). In his essay on the homeless, Christopher Jencks (1994) deals with the methodology of estimating their numbers, deinstitutionalization, crack and other drug use, urban policy and the low-rent market, the sociology of the family, and the shelter system.

Because problems rather than disciplines define the work, the compleat analyst must become a generalist, independent of his or her preferences.

2. Politics

A measure of successful policy analysis is its contribution, whether the analysis moved along a policy it supported or slowed down a policy it did not support. The temptation is present to push one's policy analysis to assure its impact. Some policy organizations do small "p" or even big "P" politics as a matter of business, whereas others aim for neutrality, emphasizing their analytical rigor.

Kelman takes issue with Woodrow Wilson's classic brief on the separation of politics and administration, contending that "political choices" are made throughout the policy process, from the "idea" through "the production process" to "real-world outcomes" (1987, 6–7). The work of many policy analysts supports implementation, "where important decisions are made after the political shouting has stopped" (9). Although the shouting may have stopped, political choices are nonetheless made, and the analyst's role intersects with this process.

Some observers of the political process have criticized it for slighting policy analysis and for its consequent inefficiency. For at least 20 years, Seattle-area leaders have debated strategies for improving traffic flow and creating a high-tech neighborhood in the area between Lake Union and downtown. No action has been taken to relieve congestion to date, and public efforts to revitalize the area have not moved forward. Analysts who prepared a very competent feasibility study of infrastructure improvements for high-tech development in 1985 may well contend their work was slighted (City of Seattle 1985). The earlier analysis was set aside for nearly two decades until a private developer emerged with plans and clients. After a decade of investing in land in the neighborhood, in 2004, Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen's private development company began investing in new buildings. This development firm has begun to push the city to move ahead on infrastructure issues. Was the earlier analysis unnecessary or even useless? Would the compleat analyst have advocated timelier and

less costly public infrastructure investment? Our belief is that, although it may be the role of the analyst's client, it is not the analyst's role.

The analyst has an important role in the policy process, with limits that the analyst should try to respect or, at the very least, understand. The roles matrix assembled by Weimer and Vining (1992, 18) is a good place to start. The analyst may emphasize analytical integrity, the needs of one's clients, or one's own concept of good. Clarity in the understanding of the analyst's role will make for more trustworthy analysis, though such clarity may remove a prop from one's advocacy.

1. Uncertainty

We can never know everything about a policy, and perhaps some of what we know may be wrong. What is one to do?

Probably one of the clearest arguments on behalf of acknowledging uncertainty and accommodating it in policy is found in Charles Lindblom (1959) who wrote,

> Ideally rational-comprehensive analysis leaves out nothing important. But it is impossible to take everything important into consideration unless "important" is so narrowly defined that analysis is in fact quite limited. Limits on human intellectual capacities and on available information set definite limits to man's capacity to be comprehensive. In actual fact, therefore, no one can practice the rational comprehensive method for really complex problems, and every administrator faced with a sufficiently complex problem must find ways to drastically simplify. (182)

Lindblom argues for a method he terms *successive limited comparison*, more generally known as *incrementalism*. The notion is that successive, modest steps are more likely to be successful than a single giant leap.

The intellectual historian Louis Menand (2001) suggests that uncertainty is irresolvable, and this is a consequence of when and how we live. He wrote, "Modernity is the condition a society reaches when life is no longer conceived as cyclical.… Modern societies do not simply repeat and extend themselves. They change in unforeseeable directions, and the individual's contribution to these changes is unspecifiable in advance" (399).

Policy is never really done. A problem may be as fully addressed as circumstances permit, but by the time it is completed, the context may have changed and some new fix may be more appropriate. The word "perfecting" is used in connection with legislation, and there is a sense that, for a time at least, it is an appropriate term. However, the result of "perfected policy" is inevitably imperfect. Fiorino (2001, 323–24) suggests the goal should be learning rather than a "fix." Each successive, imperfect attempt to fix a public policy problem, followed by an observation of the consequences, enables a skilled policy analyst to improve the next attempt to create better public policy.

In the end, we learn to live with uncertainty, and we muddle our way to better future, which, as Lindblom told us decades ago, may be the most rational approach of all.

Notes

1. Weimer and Vining's book *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice* (1999) offers a useful typology of analytic roles and styles. Academic research and policy research appear at the top in terms of the depth and sophistication of the analysis. Both have the least well-defined clients (for example, "truth" or "the disciplines") Policy analysis is listed at the bottom of this typology, evidencing "Myopia resulting from client orientation and time pressure" (30).
2. See three intriguing commentaries on the first year of a budget analyst in city, state, and national government budget offices in Bardach (2005).

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