Writing for Publication

General Writing Advice:

Papers maximize their impact when they present a short, focused message with a few key tables or figures to support the analysis and results. Sentences should be short and to the point, avoiding unnecessary descriptors (e.g., very statistically significant). Jargon, acronyms and unnecessary technical language should be avoided. Writing should be in active voice. As a tip for finding passive voice, if you can add the phrase "by zombies" after a verb, the sentence is in passive voice (for more details, see this blog post). For additional grammar tips, a good source is Grammar Girl.

The introduction should clearly state the research question, the importance of the research question or issue in general, and how the paper contributes to advancing knowledge. Any assumptions underlying the results should be fully disclosed, and the implications of these assumptions for the results should be discussed.

Public Policy Articles:

In contrast to scientific articles, public policy articles are generally not aimed at specialists. Instead, their primary audience is the educated lay reader - the public, politicians, public servants, and academics in different disciplines. These groups undoubtedly have expertise, but not necessarily in the topic addressed by the policy paper. This means it is especially important for writers to avoid jargon and acronyms. Detailed explanations of technical concepts may be in order, but should be provided in a footnote unless the concept is key to the policy issue addressed in the paper. Manuscripts should generally present policy options, and lay out the pros and cons of those options based on the data available. Advancing a policy position may require a value judgement; this should be explicitly identified for readers.

Scientific Articles:

Scientific articles are generally oriented to experts in the particular field of research. This means writers can be comfortable using scientific terms that may be unclear to lay readers, and can avoid unnecessary simplification and defining common concepts. However, writers should avoid unnecessarily technical terminology and jargon. This guide from Nature is quite useful, as it contains links to other guides and advice on how to write a scientific paper. Of particular note is the Nature guide to writing abstracts; this guide is a useful format for all disciplines.