The ABC of checking the storyline of your issue paper

A. CHECKING YOUR STORYLINE FOR KEY REQUIREMENTS

A good issue paper needs a convincing storyline. A good storyline is clear, based on logical reasoning, specific, complete and interesting. If these elements are present, a storyline is more likely to be convincing. Therefore, check if your storyline meets the following requirements:

Is your storyline **clear**? Does it have a clear and simple yet interesting message for your client? A clear message is easy to grasp and remember. It is simple, but *not* simplistic.

Is the **logic** in your storyline sound? Are the final conclusions the logical outcome of the sum of intermediate reasoning steps and results of presented analyses? Are there elements in your analyses that are not necessary to reach these conclusions? If so, can this be improved by either changing the way you present these elements of your analyses, or the final conclusions?

Is your storyline sufficiently **specific**? The more specific you are, the more convincing you will be to your client. Use numbers to indicate the size or importance of problems and solutions, give examples, refer to specific actors and factors, and to specific locations.

Is your storyline **complete**? Does it cover the main dimensions for an exploratory policy analysis: the system that describes how a problem came about, and what could be done to address it, the actors who are part of problems or solutions, and relevant future developments that influence actors, problems and (the effects of) solutions.

Is your storyline **interesting**? A good storyline presents information that interests your client. It helps if there are some counterintuitive findings, but most of all, make sure that you present information that is relevant, credible and, at least partly, new.

- Your problem analysis should add something *new* to existing sources, showing the value of your broad but systematic problem exploration. The problem analysis presented in your issue paper should add something worthwhile to the dilemma as sketched in the introduction of the paper.

- In order to be *credible*, your storyline should be based on your analysis and backed-up by authoritative source materials.

- Your conclusions should be *relevant* for your client, meaning that they should help your client to reach a decision on future actions to deal with his problems. Knowledge gaps and research plans are relevant, if they clearly provide information needed to make such decisions.

Furthermore, it helps a great deal if your storyline is also **exciting** and keeps the attention of its readers. There are four classic ingredients for exciting stories.

- One, the reader identifies with the protagonist (in our case, the client or problem owner).
- Two, the protagonist finds himself in a difficult situation and the reader can not directly see the way out.
- Three, the reader follows along in the search for solutions, and discovers that the situation is even more complicated!
- Four, eventually a solution is discovered.

Are all these elements present in your storyline?

B. CHECKING THE RESULTING STORYLINE FOR ITS EFFECTIVENESS

If all elements are covered, you should have a convincing storyline. You could check your storyline by summarizing it in an elevator pitch. Summarize your storyline in two to three minutes based on the four main questions you need to address in an issue paper:

1. Who was you main client, and what was their problem?
2. What are your main findings in response to this problem?
3. Based on these findings, what knowledge gaps remain? Some of the pressing questions your clients would need to see answered to be able to decide on future actions in response to their problems
4. And, what kind of policy analysis research would you propose to formulate answers to some of the remaining questions?

How good is this story? Would it convince a client to invest money in a further investigation of the problem as presented by the analysts? Would it help to acquire the funds for the proposed policy research?

C. SOME PITFALLS AND COMMON MISTAKES (OR: HOW *NOT* TO DO IT)

The following list contains some mistakes that you should avoid. Your storyline is *not*, or should *not* feature:

Sequence of analysis
A good storyline is *not* a sequence of analyses. Your client is *not* interested in your causal relations diagrams and actor tables. Give him an objectives tree or describe a set of future scenarios and he might ask: "So what?". He wants to know what he could do to address his problems.

Jumps in reasoning
Eventually, you are going to propose further research to address certain knowledge gaps. Knowledge that your client currently lacks to make a well-informed decision. Make sure that the reader of your issue paper recognizes the knowledge gaps very clearly from your problem analysis. They should connect well.

Devoid of facts and figures
Your issue paper should tell a *story*, but it should not be a fairy tale! It should be based on facts and evidence. You should use key facts and figures to support your arguments. How big

is the problem, really? Are your actors and their characteristics real, or are they the result of your own imagination and assumptions? Back up your "facts" by making good use of references.

Too shallow
Almost any issue paper for a truly complex public policy problem could follow the same basic logic. For instance: "*We can conclude that indeed this is a complex problem, many actors are involved, and therefore it is important to secure support and consult with the other parties. This requires research to find out what these other actors want / prefer / value*".
Or: "*Our analysis shows that there are different options, with different outcomes, to address the problem, but that it is not yet clear what is to be preferred. Therefore, we recommend that costs and benefits are analyzed further using cost-benefit analysis.*"
The logic makes sense, but it hardly adds anything to your starting point. If this is all that you can tell to your client, you will convince your client that you are a convincing and good analyst. After all, you merely confirmed what he already suspected or knew. And why would your client want to hire someone who needs a few weeks to tell him what he already knew?

Detailed table of contents
Note that a storyline is *not* the same as a detailed table of contents. A table of contents will simply announce the main elements to be covered. A storyline shows the contents of these elements, it shows what is *in* the paper, the actual message that will be told.

Extended problem introduction
A storyline *is not* an extensive problem introduction! A problem sketch with a dilemma is suitable for the Introduction part of your issue paper. In the remainder of your paper, you should show that you are helping to tackle the dilemma, or at least, make it more tractable and understandable.

Nothing new, no contribution of own analysis
And of course, these knowledge gaps are now more detailed, focused on your findings. They should be more specific, or at least different, from the questions with which you started your analysis. Otherwise, your client could have saved his time reading your findings, and could go directly to your research proposal!