

# Writing for a Better World

## Communications That Shape Public Policy

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A special presentation for

**Dr. Ethan Joella's English 101 class**  
**New England College**

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**Figure 1: Top 10 think tank concentrations worldwide.** “2011 Global Go To Think Tank Rankings.” Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, University of Pennsylvania. [http://www.gotothinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/2011-Global-Go-To-Think-Tanks-Report\\_FINAL-VERSION.pdf](http://www.gotothinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/2011-Global-Go-To-Think-Tanks-Report_FINAL-VERSION.pdf).

**Figure 2: Three types of public policy research institutes (“think tanks”) in the U.S.** Mahmood Ahbad. “US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact.” *Political Quarterly* 79.4 (Oct. 2008): 529-555.

**Figure 3: Actors in the policy-making process.** Catherine Smith. “Communicating in the Policy Process: Introduction.” [http://core.ecu.edu/engl/smithcath/ppolicy\\_book/communicate.htm](http://core.ecu.edu/engl/smithcath/ppolicy_book/communicate.htm).

**Figure 4: The communication analyst’s unique authority.** Laura Zakaras (RAND Corporation). Interview. 18 Sept. 2012.

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## Abstract

*Communications analysts make a direct and profound impact on public policy by collaborating with experts to write documents that convey vital information to legislators and the public. As the “think tanks” that employ them grow in number and influence, communications analysts will continue to be in high demand for the foreseeable future. This position demands outstanding analytical, writing, interpersonal, and technological skills and is open to students with a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences. Pay is typically commensurate with experience, ranging from approximately \$50,000 to \$120,000+ per year.*

## INTRODUCTION

## What Do You Care About Most?



Our world is volatile, fast changing, and increasingly complex. Here at home and abroad, we face enormous challenges that defy easy solutions.

- Fighting poverty
- Expanding access to health care
- Reforming immigration policy
- Making college more affordable
- Improving public schools
- Reducing government debt
- Achieving energy independence
- Confronting terrorism
- Finding cures for disease
- Promoting government transparency
- Preserving Internet freedom
- Enforcing fair trade
- Strengthening public safety standards
- Protecting the environment
- Ensuring fairness in the criminal justice system
- Responding to global unrest

When you exercise your right to vote, you're giving state and federal legislators the power and responsibility to tackle these issues. To make your voice heard beyond Election Day, you have the freedom to stage protests, write letters to your representatives and the media, or join an advocacy group to sway public opinion and compel legislative action.

But there's another, more profound way you can influence public policy—and get paid while doing it. Imagine a writing career that allows you to make cutting-edge research accessible to the public, help frame policy debates, and make direct recommendations to legislators. This is the crucial role of the **communications analyst**.

Communications analysts can be found at government agencies or serving as government relations personnel for private-sector organizations. Many more reside at public policy institutes (often referred to as “think tanks”), which specialize in research and policy analysis. From state legislatures to Capitol Hill, think tanks are highly respected sources of information and influence. They provide lawmakers with the latest research findings and help them interpret the meaning and impact of data.

The John Q. Public Policy Institute (JQP), founded in 1985, is among a fast-growing number of think tanks in the U.S. JQP maintains strong working relationships with our elected officials and has a direct hand in legislative affairs. And it needs skilled, passionate writers to help carry out its mission.

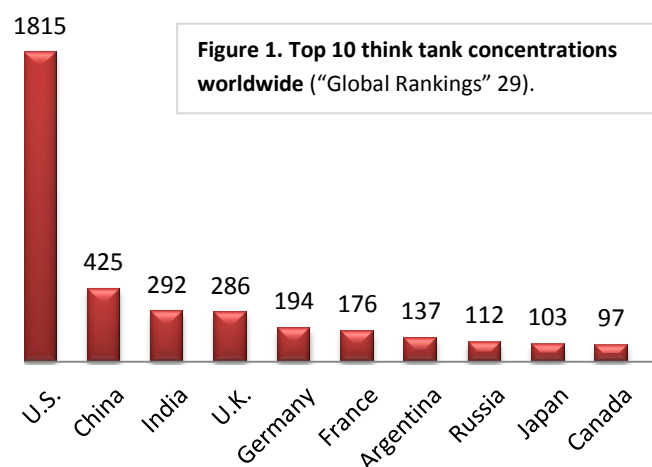
On the pages that follow, you'll learn about the history of think tanks, the communications analyst's responsibilities, and what you can do now to pave the way for a fulfilling public policy writing career.

## BACKGROUND

**“Think Tanks”: on the Front Lines of Debate**

The U.S. is home to the largest number of think tanks in the world (“Global Rankings” 29), with China ranking a distant second (see figure 1). Although the vast majority of think tanks are concentrated in North America and Western Europe, they can be found in every region on earth. Today, there are over 5,000 policy research institutes worldwide (Ahmad 531).

American think tanks don’t just outnumber their overseas counterparts. They also have a significantly greater impact on the legislative process, thanks to “their ability to participate directly and indirectly in policy making and...the willingness of policy makers to turn to them for policy advice” (Ahmad 530).

**History of Think Tanks in the U.S.**

Public policy research institutes first appeared in the U.S. in the early 20th century. The earliest think tanks were academic, functioning primarily as gathering places that would allow thought leaders to research, discuss, and debate foreign policy matters (Ahmad 530). Among the nation’s oldest and best known academic think tanks are the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ([carnegieendowment.org](http://carnegieendowment.org)); the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace ([hoover.org](http://hoover.org)); and the Council on Foreign Relations ([cfr.org](http://cfr.org)).

The academic think tank, one of three types now operating in the U.S. (see figure 2), is deeply committed to intellectual integrity and political independence. Thus it tends to steer clear of policy debates, opting instead to provide long-term vision and guidance on defense policy and foreign affairs in an increasingly perilous world.



**Figure 2. Three types of public policy research institutes (“think tanks”) in the U.S. (Ahmad 531-540)**

Following World War II, a new kind of think tank was born: the “contract” think tank. The RAND Corporation ([rand.org](http://rand.org)), founded in 1948, was the first to become a largely government-funded research institute, tailoring its work to fit policy makers’ needs. In the tradition of RAND, the government went on to sponsor a number of other policy institutes throughout the 1960s, including the Hudson Institute ([hudson.org](http://hudson.org)) in 1961 and the Urban Institute ([urban.org](http://urban.org)) in 1968 (Ahmad 532).

We read, we write, we  
argue, we debate, and we  
produce all manner of  
publications on government  
policy issues....

[. . .] We are reformers,  
earnest reformers. We want  
to improve our world.

—Christopher DeMuth, American  
Enterprise Institute  
(DeMuth, par. 11)

In the 1970s, advocacy think tanks began to emerge, charging headlong into policy debates to advance their ideological agendas. One such organization is the Heritage Foundation ([heritage.org](http://heritage.org)). Since 1973, its mission has been “to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” ([heritage.org](http://heritage.org), “About”). Meanwhile, the Center for American Progress ([americanprogress.org](http://americanprogress.org)), established in 2003, is “dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through progressive ideas and action” ([americanprogress.org](http://americanprogress.org), “About”).

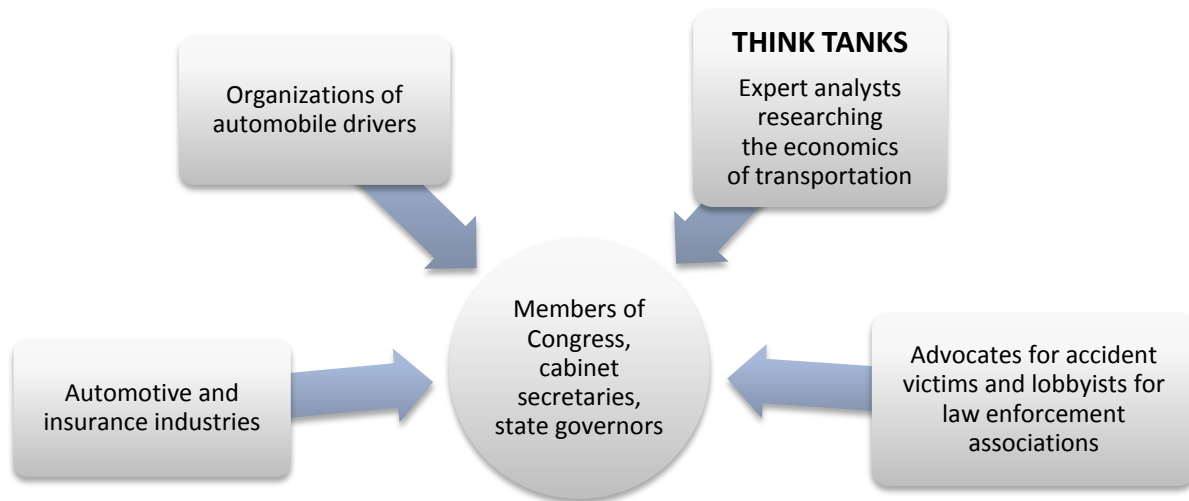
With overtly political objectives and an intense focus on marketing their ideas in the public arena, advocacy think tanks operate much like lobbying groups. Still, they remain respected centers of research and continue to hold powerful sway over government decision makers and the public (Ahmad 547).

The 1970s also witnessed the beginning of the think tanks’ reign here in America and around the world. Nearly 70 percent of existing think tanks were established after 1970, and more than 50 percent appeared after 1980 (Ahmad 530). In the decades since, policy institutes of all kinds—academic, contract, and advocacy in particular—have grown enormously in number, prominence, and influence.

### A Key Player in the Policy-Making Process

The power and impact of think tanks may be tough to measure, given the broad range of actors involved in the policy-making process (see figure 3), but they’re also hard to overstate. Some observers have asked whether think tanks have or will become the “fifth branch of government”—rivaling the authority of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches as well as the “fourth estate,” or news media—given the key role think tanks play in shaping public opinion and legislative policy (DeMuth, par. 54).

Think tanks operate on multiple fronts, disseminating information, providing expert insight, and forging relationships with academics, journalists, legislators, and the public in a variety of ways (Ahmad 544):



**Figure 3. Actors in the policy-making process.** *In this case, highway safety legislation is up for debate (Smith, par. 18).*

- **Meetings and Forums**—Think tanks promote their work and reaffirm their authority and expertise by conducting numerous group meetings and presentations, including seminars, conferences, lectures, and expert roundtables.
- **Publications**—In addition to full-scale research reports, many think tanks publish their own journals, magazines, newsletters, brochures, and multimedia presentations. Members of the public can access a number of these publications online.
- **Media Appearances**—Policy experts are in high demand among television and print journalists. Think tank experts regularly appear on talk shows and news program panels, write op-ed essays, and provide expert analysis for print news stories.
- **Consultations with Policy Makers**—Officials charged with making policy decisions rely heavily on think tanks’ research findings and their analysts’ expertise. Think tanks’ resident policy experts are frequently called to testify before congressional committees and brief individual lawmakers on the issues of the day.

Today, think tanks are more active, invested, and engaged in the policy-making process than they’ve ever been. Not only do they serve to broaden the knowledge base of elected officials, media outlets, and the voting public, but they also build networks to “help create alignments and form coalitions that feed into policy currents” (Ahmad 552)—powerful currents that drive key decision makers toward meaningful solutions.



## STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

**Needed: Writers Who Want to Make a Difference**

To build bridges with people outside the research community, think tanks depend on writers to produce clear and effective documents for a variety of audiences and purposes. As a result, the communications analyst has become an invaluable member of the team. In fact, demand for communications analysts will continue to grow as think tanks multiply and expand their objectives, operations, and reach.

If you are passionate about helping the legislative process work better and about making a change in the world, few careers are more rewarding. But to become a communications analyst, you must first understand what the job entails, what it requires, and what you can do to develop the necessary skills.



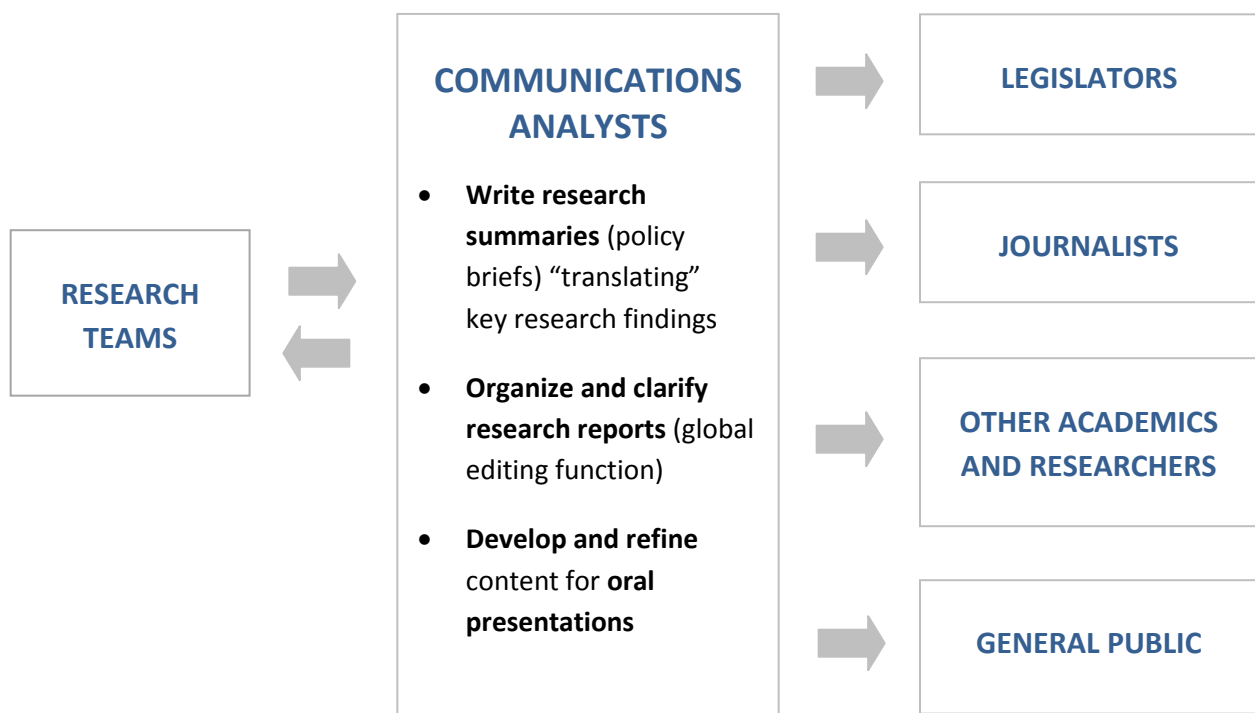
## CAREER PROFILE

## The Communications Analyst's Role and Impact

Communications analysts are far more than writers or editors. They are the user-friendly interface between technical research data and the various non-specialists who need to use the data to make decisions—whether those users are congressional representatives, journalists and pundits, advocacy groups, or individual voters (see figure 4). Communications analysts serve users in two ways: they “translate” data so that it’s clear and well organized, and they frame the data in terms of current policy concerns.

As such, communications analysts must understand the *context* in which they are operating: the policy-making process, the key players, and the needs and expectations of all prospective audiences. They must also anticipate how their work might be used and interpreted. For every document they produce, public policy writers start by answering these five basic questions (Smith, par. 4-7):

*To whom is this information relevant? | How will it help solve the problem?  
What do I want this information to do? | What impact might this information have?  
How will this information reach the public?*



**Figure 4. The communications analyst's unique authority.** *The communications analyst builds bridges of understanding, collaborating with world-class researchers—leaders in their respective fields—to draft documents that are clear, compelling, and relevant to current policy debates (Zakaras).*



## What the Job Demands

First and foremost, communications analysts must demonstrate “analytic intelligence” (Zakaras). This means they must be able to read lengthy, sometimes highly technical texts; understand the key points; and summarize them fluidly and intelligibly. And they must be able to draw larger connections to ongoing policy debates—*What does this information mean, and what are its full implications?*—in order to write documents with practical value and the power to shape policy.

In addition, because they must collaborate with experienced researchers, academic experts, policy analysts, and other high-level professionals, communications analysts must approach their work with both confidence and sensitivity. As designated communications experts, they must know when to defend their writing and recommendations, when to defer to others, and how to achieve compromise that will satisfy all parties to the process.

Technology is becoming increasingly important to communications analysts as well. Many are required to use desktop publishing and multimedia software to create documents and presentations that combine elegant language with effective visuals.

## The Ideal Candidate

Fortunately, there are many possible paths to a public policy writing career. Leaders in the field are looking for the following qualifications and traits among today’s job candidates (Zakaras):

<i>Undergraduate degree in English, public policy, journalism, or communications</i>	<i>Ability to process and summarize long, highly technical reports</i>	<i>Clear, concise, fluid writing style</i>
<i>Graduate degree in English, public policy, communications, or journalism</i>	<i>Ability to “shape the story” (i.e., frame research findings in terms of policy debates)</i>	<i>Outstanding interpersonal skills</i>
<i>Public policy writing or technical writing experience (paid work or internship)</i>	<i>Working knowledge of desktop publishing, presentation, and multimedia software</i>	<i>Passion for public policy issues and process</i>

## The Communications Analyst’s Career Path

Entry-level communications analysts with the right credentials but little or no experience can reasonably expect to earn \$50,000-\$60,000 annually (Zakaras). As they acquire more experience, they can look forward to more challenging and rewarding opportunities to participate in the policy-making process. Some may even be asked to assist with research projects in their areas of interest. Senior communications analysts can earn as much as \$120,000 per year or more.

## CONCLUSION

## A Rewarding Career Awaits You

As Americans living in a democratic society, each one of us must live with our representatives' policy decisions. Some decisions may impact us more than others, and some may frustrate, energize, or mobilize us more than others. No matter what our life experiences are or where we fall on the political spectrum, we all have the means to effect change.

Communications analysts are uniquely poised to shape public policy in a very direct and powerful way. By building bridges of understanding between thought leaders and decision makers, they make specialized information and technical data accessible to all and applicable to real-world problems.

If you are passionate about the issues, want to contribute meaningfully to the policy-making process, and have the right mix of writing, analytical, and technological skills, then you will find many doors open to you in the realm of public policy writing.

### Start Paving the Way—Today

I encourage you to visit the John Q. Public Policy Center website at [www.jqp.org](http://www.jqp.org). There, you'll find communications analyst job postings and an "Internships" tab with information about the hands-on experiential learning opportunities we offer forward-looking college students and graduates.

If you're interested in pursuing other internship opportunities or evaluating job requirements in the nonprofit or public sector, I recommend the following websites:

- [www.usajobs.gov/studentsandgrads](http://www.usajobs.gov/studentsandgrads)
- [www.policyjobs.net](http://www.policyjobs.net)
- [www.publicservicecareers.org](http://www.publicservicecareers.org)
- [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)
- [www.campuscareercenter.org](http://www.campuscareercenter.org)
- [www.nonprofit-jobs.org](http://www.nonprofit-jobs.org)

*Want to learn more about the public policy writing process? UCLA's Graduate Writing Center offers an outstanding collection of how-to guides and other resources:*

<http://gsrc.ucla.edu/gwc/resources/writing-in-public-affairs.html>

Feel free to contact me directly with any questions you might have about the material presented here or other possible paths to a communications analyst career. Best of luck in your future pursuits!

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