How to win readers & influence policy

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Topics for discussion

- General tips for public-facing writing

- Structure pieces around strong titles/headers

- Storytelling with data

- Incorporating evidence without getting bogged down

- Politically neutral but policy relevant

Examples

- Translating technical material for general audience
  - Larrimore & Troland: [Improving Housing Payment Projections](#)
  - Schuetz: [How many households can't pay next month's rent](#)
- Long report & short summary
  - Boston Indicators & Brookings Metro: [Zoned Out](#)
  - Brookings Metro: [Fixing Greater Boston's housing crisis](#)
- Short, non-data-intensive pieces
  - [Four reasons why more public housing isn't the solution to affordability concerns](#)
  - [Three lessons 21st century housing policy could learn from Little Women](#)

General tips

- Attention spans are short! Public-facing writing should be too.
  - Break up big ideas into [series](#) of multiple [short pieces](#) (ideally under 1000 words).
  - Write one long piece for other researchers & short summary for non-experts.
- Don't assume potential readers are already interested in your topic.
- It's not a murder mystery. Lead with your key finding or recommendation.
- Use minimal jargon & define specialized terms clearly.

General tips, part 2

- Who is your target audience?
  - All voters or handful of decision-makers?
  - What's their existing knowledge of the topic? Level of technical expertise?
- What do you want to achieve with the piece?
  - Ex: raise general awareness of an issue, counter an existing narrative, nudge an ongoing debate
- Hot topic of the moment or evergreen?
  - Pros and cons to framing within immediate news cycle versus longer-term issue

Structure pieces around strong titles

- Overall titles should:
  - Summarize key results or questions
  - Include key terms that will show up in Google searches (e.g. "search engine optimized")
- Break up piece into short sections with strong sub-heads
  - Sentence or phrase summarizing main point
- Each graph/figure should tell self-contained story
  - Graph titles summarize substantive conclusion
  - Subtitles detail variables, geography, etc.
  - Footnote lists data sources & technical notes

Figure 3. Townhouses and condos offer substantial cost savings over new single-family homes

Development costs for new housing, by structure type
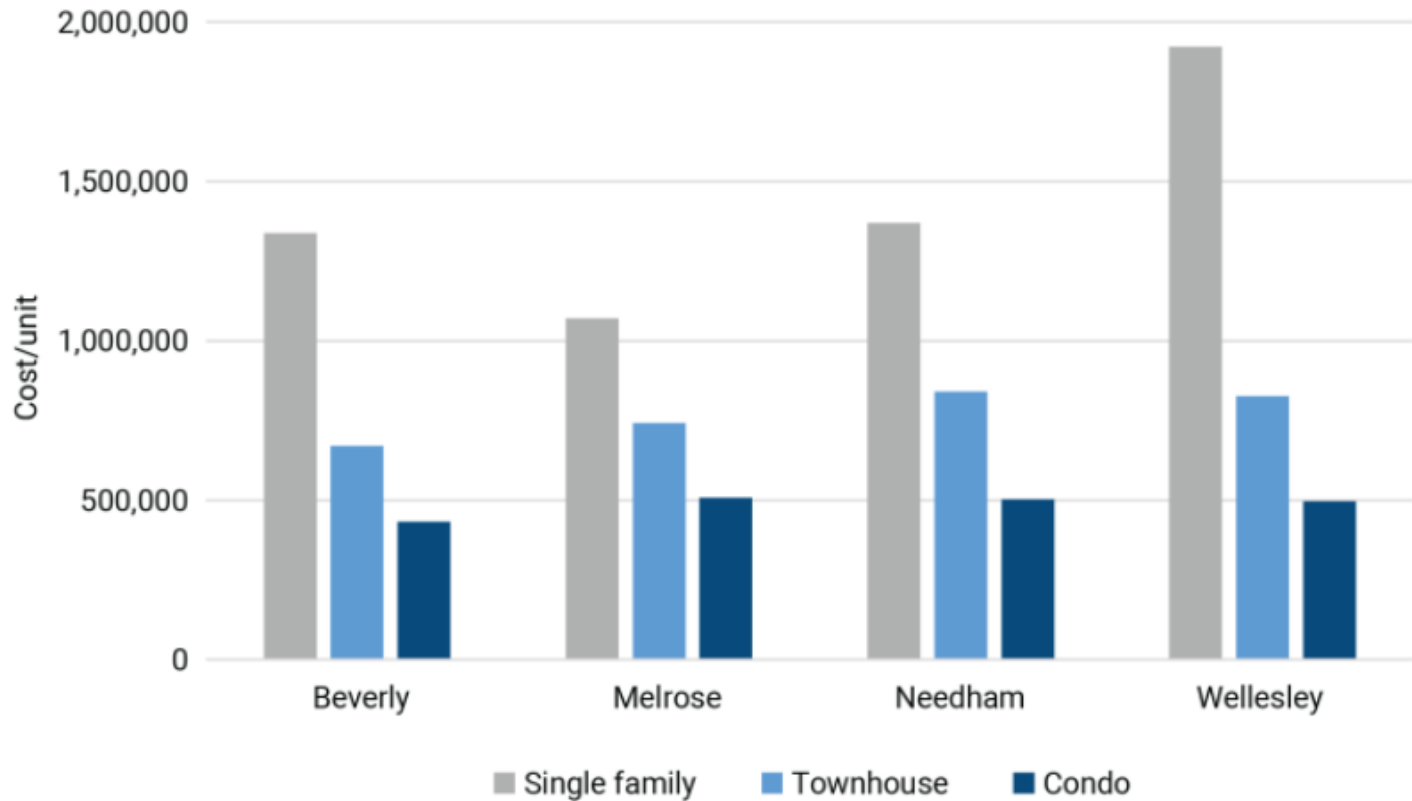
Source: Full details of the calculations, including underlying data and assumptions, are available in Crump, Mattos, Schuetz and Schuster (2020). Names refer to station areas listed above.

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Storytelling with data

- Use graphs or charts instead of tables whenever possible.
  - Cost estimates in "Fixing Greater Boston" are backed by complex pro forma spreadsheets
- Descriptive statistics can convey most information from regressions & are less scary.
  - Avoid Greek letters & mathematical notation
  - See: Larrimore & Troland vs Schuetz
- Focus on results, not data & methods
  - If methodology section is unavoidable, make it an appendix at the end.

Pictures are worth 1,000 words

Figure 2. Less yard, more homes
Schematics of single-family lots converted to townhouses or low-rise multifamily condos

Melrose Cedar Park | Average lot size - 6,995 sq ft

One single-family   Two townhouses   Three condos

Needham Heights | Average lot size - 12,930 sq ft

One single-family   Two townhouses   Six condos

Wellesley Hills | Average lot size - 24,506 sq ft

One single-family   Five townhouses   11 condos

Incorporating evidence

- Formal lit reviews generally don't fit in public-facing pieces
- Focus on key results of previous research, not data & methods (or authors)
- Use hyperlinks instead of footnotes or internal citations
- From "4 reasons why public housing...":

"Public housing developed from the 1950s through 1970s was largely built in [poor, racially segregated neighborhoods](#)..."

"Where people live—and especially where [children grow up](#)—is critical to long-term well-being, including life expectancy, health, and income."

Staying politically neutral

- Almost every policy topic is political, but not necessarily partisan
  - Land use policy pits homeowners against renters
  - Transit policy: drivers versus transit riders, cyclists, & pedestrians
- Concrete recommendations are an important part of public-facing writing
  - Policymakers needs better real-time data on renters' well-being
  - Zoning reforms should be paired with increased vouchers
- Comment on [policy substance](#), avoid partisan (or intra-partisan) endorsements
- Be transparent about value judgments & priorities

1% inspiration, 99% perspiration

- Writing well is hard work! Practice helps.

- It's much easier to see the flaws in other people's writing. Find someone who will read your drafts & provide honest constructive feedback.

Comments & questions welcome!

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