

Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief

Policy Brief versus Research Paper

(Tsai, 2006)

Some might say that a policy brief is more “professional” because it is geared towards readers who have a limited amount of time to make a practical decision, while a research paper is more “academic” because it pays more attention to the scholarly roots of particular arguments and judges their merit on intellectual and logical criteria.

Front-loaded!

Policy briefs are front-loaded: **the conclusions are on the front page!** The front page needs an executive summary, providing a concise (1 or 2 paragraphs) overview of the brief’s aim and core recommendations (Kopenski, 2010).

What is a Policy Brief?

The Policy Brief is a “**short, neutral summary** of what is known about a particular issue or problem. Policy briefs are a form of report **designed to facilitate policy-making**” (Eisele, 2006). The main purpose is to “**succinctly evaluate policy options** regarding a specific issue, for a specific policy-maker audience” (Eisele, n.d.). Policy-makers need to make practical decisions under time-constraints, so the brief should provide evidence and actionable recommendations (Eisele, n.d.).

The issue brief distils or synthesizes a large amount of complex detail, so the reader can easily understand the heart of the issue, its background, the players (“stakeholders”) and any recommendations, or even educated guesses about the future of the issue. It may have tables and graphs; usually, it has a short list of references, so the reader knows something about the sources on which it is based, and where to go for more information. Most of the time, the brief has its own “brief”--a one page “executive summary,” allowing the reader to quickly grasp the essence of the report (Eisele, n.d.).

In short, “***the purpose of the policy brief is to convince the target audience of the urgency of the current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action outlined and therefore, serve as an impetus for action***” (Young & Quinn, n.d.).

What are the components of a Policy Brief? (Lifted from Tsai, 2006)

Executive summary

The executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a 1 to 2 paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

1. A description of the problem addressed;
2. A statement on why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed;
3. Your recommendations for action.

Context and importance of the problem

The purpose of this element of the brief is to convince the target audience that a current and urgent problem exists which requires them to take action. The context and importance of the problem is both the introductory and first building block of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

1. A clear statement of the problem or issue in focus.
2. A short overview of the root causes of the problem
3. A clear statement of the policy implications of the problem that clearly establishes the current importance and policy relevance of the issue.

It is worth noting that the length of the problem description may vary considerably from brief to brief depending on the stage on the policy process in focus, e.g. there may be a need to have a much more extensive problem description for policy at the evaluation stage than for one at the option choosing stage.

Do's and Don'ts (Kopenski, 2010)

Avoid technical, legalistic, economic or academic jargon!

Presentation needs to be professional as suits a public document.

Use correct grammar and spelling, and appropriate spacing, font, point, headings and sub-headings.

Facilitate readability through images, catch-phrases, layout choices, and the provision of data as graphs or charts.

Critique of policy option(s)

The aim of this element is to detail shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented and therefore, illustrate both the need for change and focus of where change needs to occur. In doing so, the critique of policy options usually includes the following:

1. A short overview of the policy option(s) in focus
2. An argument illustrating why and how the current or proposed approach is failing. It is important for the sake of credibility to recognize all opinions in the debate of the issue.

Policy recommendations

The aim of the policy recommendations element is to provide a detailed and convincing proposal of how the failings of the current policy approach need to change. As such this is achieved by including:

1. A breakdown of the specific practical steps or measures that need to be implemented
2. Sometimes also includes a closing paragraph re-emphasizing the importance of action.

Appendices

Although the brief is a short and targeted document, authors sometimes decide that their argument needs further support and so include an appendix. **Appendices should be included only when absolutely necessary.**

What a persuasive Policy Brief should be (Lifted from Young and Quinn, n.d.)

As with all good marketing tools, the key to success is targeting the particular audience for your message. The most common audience for a policy brief is the decision-maker but, it is also not unusual to use the document to support broader advocacy initiatives targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience (e.g. decision makers, journalists, diplomats, administrators, researchers). In constructing a policy brief that can effectively serve its intended purpose, it is common for a brief to be:

FOCUSED All aspects of the policy brief (from the message to the layout) need to be strategically focused on achieving the intended goal of convincing the target audience. For example, the argument provided must build on what they do know about the problem, provide insight about what they don't know about the problem and be presented in language that reflects their values, i.e. using ideas, evidence and language that will convince them.

PROFESSIONAL, NOT ACADEMIC The common audience for a policy brief is not interested in the research/analysis procedures conducted to produce the evidence, but are very interested to know the writer's perspective on the problem and potential solutions based on the new evidence.

EVIDENCED-BASED The policy brief is a communication tool produced by policy analysts and therefore all potential audiences not only expect a rational argument but will only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives.

LIMITED To provide adequately comprehensive but targeted argument within a limited space, the focus of the brief needs to be limited to a particular problem or area of a problem.

SUCCINT The type of audiences targeted commonly do not have the time or inclination to read an in-depth 20 page argument on a policy problem. Therefore, it is common that policy briefs do not exceed 6 – 8 pages in length (i.e. usually not longer than 3,000 words).

UNDERSTANDABLE This not only refers to using clear and simple language (i.e. not the jargon and concepts of an academic discipline) but also to providing a well explained and easy to follow argument targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience.

ACCESSIBLE The writer of the policy brief should facilitate the ease of use of the document by the target audience and therefore, should subdivide the text using clear descriptive titles to guide the reader.

PROMOTIONAL The policy brief should catch the eye of the potential audience in order to create a favourable impression (e.g. professional, innovative etc) In this way many brief writers many of the features of the promotional leaflet (use of colour, use of logos, photographs, slogans, illustrative quotes etc).

PRACTICAL AND FEASIBLE The policy brief is an action-oriented tool targeting policy practitioners. As such the brief must provide arguments based on what is actually happening in practice with a particular policy and propose recommendations which seem realistic to the target audience

6 Steps for a compelling Policy Brief (*Lifted from Young and Quinn, n.d.*)

1. **Issue:** examine the issue you will be dealing with. Answer these questions: is the issue general or specific? How general/specific?
2. **Audience:** take your primary audience into serious consideration. Your brief should be tailored to the needs of your audience. It makes a fundamental difference for how you must frame your analysis and your recommendation. Is your audience an individual (i.e. Prime Minister) or an organization (i.e. the Government as a whole)?
3. **Actors:** identify the relevant actors for the issue you are dealing with. This is an essential step, since you will have to analyze their interests in order to make sensible and viable policy recommendations. Identifying the relevant actors is also essential to produce a good assessment of the context and of the interests that are plug into the issue.
4. **Interests:** once you have identified the relevant actors, it is necessary to analyze their interests. What are the actors' interests? Which of the relevant actors have similar interests to your audience? Which ones have different interests? How different? This step is important both for the context part of your brief and for the critique of policy options/policy recommendations. Without a clear identification of the actors involved in the issue and their interests, your brief will result vague, and therefore not useful.
5. **Recommendations:** your policy recommendations should reflect the above analysis. Remember that, according to the issue and the audience, your recommendation(s) might not suggest the best policy, but instead the most viable one. This should not limit your recommendation to just compromise policies. If you want to recommend radical change, you can; remember though that such radical action has to be implemented in some ways.
6. **How-To:** the last step is to suggest your audience the way to 'sell' the policy to its public (the public could be other members of the organizations, voters, other parties, etc.). This last step helps your audience build support/consensus to implement the policy you recommended.

Online Resources

You can check the following policy briefs online to serve as your guides in writing your own policy briefs:

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Policy Brief on the 2007-08 Rice Price Crisis: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am172e/am172e00.pdf>

The Poverty and Economic Policy Policy Briefs on Food and Fuel Crises on Cambodia, Ghana and the Philippines: <http://portal.pep-net.org/documents/download/id/16735>
<http://portal.pep-net.org/documents/download/id/16736>
<http://portal.pep-net.org/documents/download/id/16737>

The Poverty and Economic Policy Brief on Effects of the GFC in the Philippines:
<http://portal.pep-net.org/documents/download/id/16739>

The Royal Children's Hospital Policy Brief on Evidence-Based Practice:
http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/Policy_Brief_21_-_Evidence_based_practice_final_web.pdf

Submission Guidelines:

1. All submissions should be in **MS Word Format** (.doc, .docx), **2 pages in length** and should be in a **2-column form**.
2. Images, tables, charts and graphs present in the layout of the Policy Brief should be submitted separately, i.e., all .jpg, .png, .bmp, .gif, .psd, etc., should be submitted individually.
3. Check policy briefs from the Poverty and Economic Policy (PEP) Website (www.pep-net.org), particularly those from the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) to serve as guides in preparing your policy briefs.

References:

Eisele, F (n.d.). Preparing a Policy Brief Issue [PDF Document]. Retrieved from https://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301_fre1/1BInstructions_fa02.PDF

Kopinski, Marc (March 2010). Policy Briefs. Retrieved from the Richmond University Website <http://www.richmond.ac.uk/content/library/subjects/politics/policy-briefs.aspx>

Tsai (May 2006). Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief [PDF Document]. Retrieved from <http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~ktsai/policybrief.html>.

Young, E. and Quinn, L (n.d.). The Policy Brief [PDF Document]. Retrieved from <http://www.policy.hu/ipf/fel-pubs/samples/PolicyBrief-described.pdf>

Young, E. and Quinn, L (n.d.). The Policy Brief: Instructions [PDF Document]. Retrieved from http://sobek.colorado.edu/~salucci/teaching/teaching_portfolio/assets/Policy_Brief_instructions.pdf

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