



Writing Policy Briefs

What are policy briefs?

- It is a concise summary of a particular issue.
- It presents the policy options to deal with it.
- *It offers a recommendation on the best option.

Who are Policy Briefs aimed at?

- Policy makers and those interested in formulating policies.

How long should a policy brief be?

- Policy briefs for specialist policy audiences should ideally be between 6-12 pages long, or 2000-3000 words, but it is best for briefs to be concise.
- Policy briefs for more generalist policy audiences need to be much shorter – typically 1-2 pages maximum. They may however link to a longer version or online resources.

What are the two basic types of policy brief?

- Advocacy Brief: Argues for a particular action.
- Objective Brief: gives balanced information, this allows the policy maker to make their own decision.

What should a policy brief do?

- Provide enough **background** for the reader to understand the problem.
- Convince the reader that the problem must be addressed **urgently**.
- Provide information about **alternatives** (in an **objective** brief).
- Provide **evidence** to support one alternative (in an **advocacy** brief).
- Stimulate the reader to make a **decision**.

When writing a policy brief how should I start?

- **Identify the audience**
- Members of specific Government agencies, who are likely to have a relatively focussed interest in the topic, with a relatively high degree of technical competence.
- Policy analysts within Government departments who advise Ministers. These people should be targeted in a focused manner and briefs should include some technical detail.
- Politicians and Government Ministers are often generalists who are unlikely to have a high degree of technical competence in the area of research, and will be interested in links to wider issues of political significance.

What should a brief contain?

- **Be short and to the point.** It should focus on a particular problem or issue.
- **Be based on firm evidence,** not just one or two experiments or a single year's experience. It should draw evidence from various sources – preferably from several different areas or organizations.
- **Focus on meanings, not methods.** Readers are interested in what you found and what you recommend. They do not need to know the details of your methodology.
- **Relate to the big picture.** The policy brief may build on context-specific findings, but it should draw conclusions that are more generally applicable.

Identify key messages

- rather than just taking the key points from the conclusion of a published paper, it is necessary to think about what the key messages of the research are *from the perspective of policy makers*.

Be specific and practical

- try to formulate specific recommendations or actions that could arise from the research findings, and avoid vague, theoretical or methodological conclusions. Avoid dictatorial language such as telling a policy maker they 'must' or 'need' to change policy as they will view the brief as a lobbying document; impartiality can be important to gain credibility.



Think beyond the facts

- don't just present statistics and facts – think about what they mean for policy makers, put them in context and interpret them for readers.



Don't overstretch the findings

- there can be a temptation to try to make concrete recommendations for the purpose of a policy brief that link only tenuously to the research findings.

Language points

- **Be precise:** avoid terms such as 'large' and 'mostly' without qualification (e.g. offer easy to understand statistical evidence and cite sources of information).
- **Avoid jargon when possible:** Where jargon is unavoidable, make sure terms are defined using simple language. Of course, distinguishing what is, and what is not, jargon can be difficult for researchers. So it is important to get someone who is not familiar with the field to proof-read the document.

Don't waffle

- **Don't put in too much:** 'less is more' in policy briefs so as not to overwhelm the readership with peripheral details – edit the text down, and then edit it down again, cutting it back to only the most important points. Make sure there is plenty of white space and photos. People are far more likely to read something that looks attractive

Final points

- **Get feedback:** from colleagues and if possible from contacts in the policy community, especially advisers who have plenty of experience of writing briefs for the national policy-makers.
- **Get the timing right:** find out if there are key policy processes, decisions, events or debates coming up that the policy brief could be linked to, or launched at.
- **Provide links:** make sure those who read the policy brief can get in touch with the researchers, and can easily get access to the evidence that underpins the arguments in the policy brief, such as via a 'further reading' section at the end of the brief with links to a project website

Sources

- <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>
- https://www.udsm.ac.tz/sites/default/files/how-to-write-a-policy-brief_o.pdf
- Biodiversa (2014) Annex 1, practical method note 4. How to write a policy brief.