

TOP TIPS: WRITING A POLICY BRIEF

Aims

A Policy Brief aims to provide a quick but thorough briefing of your research together with the policy-relevant findings or policy implications. Readers will want to know the author's perspective on the problem and potential solutions based on the evidence.

The aim is to provide an overview of your findings on the subject. What can you say that is new or different and how does your work support findings from other studies? How do your findings contribute to broader policy debates? Other studies may provide useful contextual information in the introduction, for example, but the focus should be on your own research.

A Policy Brief can be considered to be your 'calling card'. If you have a meeting with a policymaker (or policymakers), they will want to have an in-depth discussion of your work. You can leave your Brief with them as a reminder and summary of your evidence. They are also a useful tool to disseminate a summary of your findings and their implications to a wider audience (but should not be treated as a general research summary).

Audience

As with all communications, it's important to know your audience. Parliamentarians and civil servants are busy people. Be clear and concise – they will not have time to read anything more than 2 or 4 pages.

There are many routes in to reach policymakers. Your Brief will be just as useful for the researchers and other staff who support members of parliament, as well as the civil servants in ministries and government departments, who provide specialist advice and implement policies. Also, don't forget the many specialist organisations who will be trying to influence government – getting them to use your evidence and analysis is a good indirect way to reach policymakers.

There are similar support structures in other Parliaments such as the African Union, European Parliament, etc. It is important to research your target audience/organisation, and where possible reach out to a named person.

Format and content

- Readers should find your Brief:
 - Accessible and easy to read from cover to cover without noticing that you have done so
 - easy to skim
 - interesting, thought-provoking and fresh
 - written in language that is as non-specialist as possible (for an audience of generalists).
- If this is the only document they have read on this subject, readers should come away feeling they have enough background information to hold a sensible conversation about it.
- It needs to come over as being reliable and trustworthy, and backed up by solid research.
- It should express clear conclusions – framed in a way that allows readers to understand the policy or practical implications for them.
- It should aim to be decisive without being opinionated or using emotive language – it is not a campaigning leaflet.

Drafting/structure

- There needs to be a simple and logical line running through the Brief, so one argument or piece of information flows to the next, culminating in a last section that draws it together and answers the 'So what?' question.
- Use good, real world examples – they are one of the best ways of conveying a message.
- Keep the language as simple and direct as possible – steer clear of jargon and acronyms, use bullet points, keep sentences short.
- Use clear short sub-headings to help your reader find their way through your evidence. Headings are a good way of highlighting key arguments.
- "Pull-quotes" are useful to draw the reader's attention to a key point you wish to make. Pick one or two key points from your text to highlight if you have space available.
- Don't forget to add your contact details. And a date (month and year).
- Total word count: about 1500 words max for a 4-page brief, depending on how many pictures and diagrams you have.

For a 4-page brief, a good structure to follow would be:

Page 1	<p>Title: Make it as simple and direct as possible. Don't try and be too clever.</p> <p>Summary: Up to 150 words (max). This needs to capture the main ideas of your Brief in a clear and direct way and catch the reader's attention.</p> <p>Picture: A good clear photo with a pithy caption relevant to your message.</p> <p>Overview: Up to 200 words, that will draw the reader into the subject, raising some key questions that will make your reader want to turn the page</p> <p>Key Points or Facts and Figures box.</p>
Page 2 – 3	<p>Total of up to 800 words developing the main evidence/arguments</p> <p>Include figures, charts or diagrams if appropriate to help make your Brief more eye-catching and appealing (but make sure they are clear and easy for non-specialists to read/use). Or use one or two text boxes giving examples or a case study (100-150 words each).</p>
Page 4	<p>Policy implications: Up to 300 words wrapping up your Brief and tackling the "so what?" question. Make recommendations for practical actions that could be taken.</p> <p>References and further reading: Up to 4 key references giving a broad representation of research on the topic and links to key information sources. This could be a mixture of your own most relevant paper and other sources.</p> <p>Acknowledgements and credits: Keep it short, e.g. This Policy Brief was written by xx, based on a longer research paper '<i>Title</i>'. Don't forget to include acknowledgement of your funder and research partners if appropriate (you can send the Brief to them to help disseminate).</p> <p>Date (month and year) and your Contact details, including website for further info.</p>

Further reading/advice

UK Parliament (2018) [Why Engage with Parliament: A Guide for Researchers](#)

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (undated) [Writing a Policy Brief](#), POST

Laura ffrench-Constant (2014) [How to Plan, Write and Communicate an Effective Policy Brief: Three Steps to Success](#), Research to Action

Chris Tyler (2013) ['Top 20 things scientists need to know about policy-making'](#), *The Guardian*, 2 Dec 2013

Oliver Milman (2013) ['Top 20 things politicians need to know about science'](#), *The Guardian*, 20 Nov 2013

The Overseas Development Institute has produced a [note on policy briefs as a communication tool](#) for development research, which reports on a survey of what policymakers find useful.