

How to Produce a Policy Brief

Policy briefs are useful influencing tools for think tanks and research institutions. Along with other short items, such as blogs and newspaper articles, they may be the only items from your organisation that busy policymakers will read.

This quick guide is aimed at researchers and communications staff who are planning policy briefs for the first time, or want to review their approach. It sets out a tried and tested approach and suggested structure for policy briefs.

What is a policy brief?

“A policy brief is a concise summary of a particular issue, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option. It is aimed at government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.”

[*Preparing policy briefs, Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)*](#)

A policy brief:

- is topical - explains and conveys the urgency of an issue
- presents policy recommendations or implications around an issue
- provides supporting evidence for your recommendations
- points the reader to additional resources on the issue
- helps to bridge the gap between the research and policy community (e.g. between academic specialists and stakeholders with less detailed knowledge).

Your target audiences are:

- decision makers with varying levels of expertise, such as: policy makers; media; lobbyists; pressure groups; CSOs
- short of time
- often non-academic and non-specialist
- not the general public.

Planning your policy brief – key questions to ask

- What issue(s) does it discuss?
- Why is it important – to your audiences, to you?
- What recommendations are you making?
- Is a policy brief the right vehicle for your argument?
- Who writes it? The author is usually a researcher, but may be the director, an advisory group member, or occasionally another expert.

Put yourself in the shoes of your audience:

- Where are your main audiences? In your country? In the wider region? Or global?
- How much do they know (or not) about the issue? The brief needs to be in clear simple language, with no jargon, and with any essential technical terms or acronyms explained on first use in the text
- How receptive is your audience likely to be to your arguments?

- What questions do they want answered?

Planning your policy brief

Policy briefs are short, probably four A4 pages at most. Aim for a **maximum of 2000 words**, fewer if infographics or other visuals are included.

There are two main types of policy brief:

- an **advocacy brief**, which argues in favour of a particular course of action
- an **objective brief**, which sets out balanced information for the reader to make up his or her own mind.

This guide focuses on the 'advocacy brief' approach in mind, although some donors are shifting preference towards the 'objective brief' approach.

Structure

- **Executive statement:** (100-150 words). Gives an overview of the purpose and main message of the policy brief, catches the attention of the reader (and is usually written last). Here or in the introduction, establish the author's credentials
- **Introduction:** (up to 200 words). Explains why this issue is urgent and/or important. This section should make your audience want to continue reading
- **Key messages (box, optional):** usually a maximum of three, one brief sentence for each
- **Methodology:** not always needed, but use if:
 - there was something unusual or even unique about your approach, and/ or
 - you need to establish a credible base for the recommendations that follow
- **Results and conclusions:**
 - Have you constructed a logical line of argument that leads to your recommendations (see next section)?
 - Objectivity – the author should feel free to express opinions but must identify those components that are opinion-based
 - Key evidence – focus on research or results that support your main argument
- **Recommendations or implications:**
 - identify up to three key policy recommendations or implications
 - offer clear, strong and co-ordinated recommendations
 - ensure these are actionable (i.e. linked to specific policy processes, feasible in terms of policy steps to be taken)
- **References and useful links:** provide a brief list of links to seminal work that's directly relevant. This is also a good opportunity to link to relevant material from your organisation
- **Author:** in the introduction or a footnote, the brief should show why the author is credible (e.g. qualifications, relevant experience, links to prestigious organisations or other evidence).

Design and layout

Policy briefs need to be visually engaging. Authors and colleagues can help by:

- proposing titles, headings, and a 'standfirst' (a standfirst is the one line message that often acts as a subtitle for the brief and generates interest)
- indicating material for text boxes (eg for a brief case study, a checklist etc)
- providing quotes (check if you need approval to use particular quotes)
- infographics, such as maps or charts: these should illustrate a key point in the policy brief argument and if they are from an outside source you will need to include © and credits
- photographs (again, you will need © and credits for external images)

Editorial process and approval

Each organisation will have its own editorial review process. Since policy briefs are intended to be topical and high profile, you may need to move very quickly, and/or involve staff at a more senior level than normal. Possible stages:

- Email the policy brief for review and agreement by senior staff at a late draft stage
- Discussing the level of internal approval needed
- Get another researcher to fact-check the text and any visuals
- Final draft to third parties – usually your director and if relevant, partner organisation - for written approval, with a deadline for response
- Final version then needs to be approved – usually by your director before publication.
- You may need a disclaimer: typically something like: 'The views expressed in this publication are those of the author/s and should not be attributed to [your organisation] and/or its funders.' **NOTE:** A disclaimer offers only limited protection. Always check with more senior staff or even a legal expert if your policy brief includes negative opinions about organisations or individuals or is in other ways controversial
- **If the author is from outside your organisation**, check their organisation's sign-off procedures – you may need written approval from them to publish or to agree use of their name and brand.

Additional Reading

Policy briefs as a tool for development communication, Jeff Knezovich, ODI, April 2009:
http://www.slideshare.net/ODI_Webmaster/policy-briefs-as-a-tool-for-communicating-development-research

Preparing policy briefs, FAO, part of *Writing effective reports*, FAO's Food Security Communications Toolkit: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>