



WOTRO Science for global development

Writing a policy brief

What is a policy brief?

A policy brief is a short document that presents findings and recommendations of a research project to a predefined (policy) audience. A recent survey among UK policy makers concluded that policy briefs/research reports are the most widely consulted source of research information. A policy brief provides time-pressed policy makers with easy access to knowledge on a specific topic.¹

Main reasons to write a policy brief are:

- to provide balanced information which can help the policy maker make up his/her mind about a particular topic (an objective brief);
- to give an informed choice on a certain topic, arguing in favor of a particular course of action (an advocacy brief).

The policy brief can target governmental policymakers, but may also target others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.²

The policy brief itself can help you distill lessons learned from your project, and provides a 'vehicle' to present this as advice to policy makers. In this digital age, the policy brief is preferably part of a diversified research communication strategy (e.g. complementary to articles, infographics and youtube films).

Reaching your target audience

The brief should be a short stand-alone document which focuses on a single topic. The policy brief has to be written in a concise, convincing and targeted manner, taking into account that the targeted policy maker is not necessarily specialised in the topic at hand. Key questions to keep in mind are: Who are my readers? How can I reach these readers?

No more than
4 pages or 1500 words

The power of persuasion

The target audience of your policy brief – often a particular policy maker – probably has limited time, and will not be immediately inclined to read a policy brief which comes to hand.³ Therefore, the policy brief should be designed and written in such a way that it immediately captures the attention of the reader.

Content

Speak in terms of benefits and advantages! Make it enticing to read for the policy maker: describe the urgency of the situation addressed in the brief, and adapt to the situation of to the policy maker.

Design

With an attractive design your policy brief will capture the attention of the reader. Use catchy titles and subtitles. Use short, descriptive, stimulating sidebars that add information and are focused on action. Other design choices may include callouts, bulleted lists, charts, photos, or graphics.

³ This document is largely based on an IDRC power point - www.idrc.ca/en/resources/researchdbs/tools_and_training/documents/how-to-write-a-policy-brief.pdf

¹ L. F. Constant, 'Is the age of policy brief over?', 30 October 2014 - www.researchtoaction.org/2014/10/age-policy-brief
² FAO, 'Preparing Policy briefs' - www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf



POLICY BRIEF TEMPLATE

Preparation

- Audience research – who am I writing for and why?
- Decide on key message and approach
- Keep in mind: **no more than 4 pages or 1500 words**

Questions?

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Teaser

- A one or two sentence overview of the brief that entices readers to read further

- Distills the essence of the brief in a few catchy lines
- Start with your recommendations

Introduction

- Answer the question why is the topic important, why should people care
- Answer the question what were the goals of the research and overall findings
- Create curiosity about the rest of the brief

- Explains the significance/urgency of the letter

Approaches and Results

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- Summarize facts, issues and context
- Reduce detail to only what reader needs to know
- Provide concrete facts or examples to support assertions

- Highlights benefits and opportunities
- Is not be overly technical

Conclusion

- Base conclusions on results
- Aim for concrete conclusions and strong assertions

- Interprets data
- Presents balanced and defensible ideas

Implications and Recommendations

- State clearly what could or should happen next

- Flows from conclusions
- Is based on evidence

Afterwards: Check your work!

Conduct the following test after you finished writing the policy brief. Ask someone to take look at your policy brief for 20 seconds, and then take it away. Ask this person: what stood out? What do you remember of the policy brief? On the basis of the results of the test, think about how you can make the policy brief more to-the-point. Finally, check your text for jargon and make sure you do not overuse statistical information. Check your arguments, your proof, and your persuasiveness.