

5 step policy brief writing guide

A policy brief is a short and to the point document focused on a single topic. It explains the urgency of an issue, presents findings and provides recommendations. A good policy brief is an effective tool for reaching and influencing policy makers.

This 5 step guide will show you:

- 01 What to think about before you start writing
- 02 How to choose the right audience
- 03 How to write to the point and make it reader-friendly
- 04 How to build the document
- 05 How to share it with the right audience

What's most important?

- Have a clear purpose and argument
- Write to address a specific topic/challenge
- Target a specific audience. The information provided should address the needs of this specific audience.
- Include recommendations that are supported by research/evidence
- Write in a clear and jargon-free language

1. Plan ahead for a great result

BEFORE YOU START WRITING:

- 01 Decide on your overarching message.
- 02 Choose an angle/entry point to get your readers interested.
- 03 Decide on your recommendations.
- 04 Build a logical line of arguments that lead up to these recommendations.

REMEMBER THROUGHOUT THE WRITING PROCESS:

- Keep reminding yourself of your overarching message
- Clearly explain the subject matter and why it's urgent.
- Never lose sight of your governing idea. Stick to your topic and state your arguments clearly.
- Present your arguments in a logical way. Don't be afraid to use connectors to guide your audience through the text. This can be words like therefore, with this in mind, in contrast.
- Your readers are not necessarily interested in the issue at hand and need to understand the problem quickly. It's up to you to ignite the spark and keep them engaged.

2. Choose your target audience

Before you start writing, decide on who you want to address. Choose your target group carefully. Is it an NGO working on a particular issue? The local authorities in a specific region? Writing with your audience in mind is not only a matter of using the right words and tone of voice. It should also influence your angle/perspective.

3. Keep it short and simple

Now you know who your audience will be. Put yourself in their shoes, and ask: What is it within this topic/field of research that they are the most interested in? What is of more relevance to them? Choose this as your entry point.

Remember:

- A policy brief is always better if you keep it simple.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Start each paragraph with the most important information.
- Never assume that the readers know as much about the topic as you do.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. Use familiar words. Don't be afraid to explain an issue in layman's terms.
- Use short, informative subtitles throughout your brief

Subtitles – a navigation tool

Good subtitles are an important tool to help guide your reader through the brief. A subtitle can be descriptive, a statement or even phrased as a question. Either way, it should say something specific about what your reader will learn from the paragraph.

Example:

Ten lessons learnt from case studies in India and Nepal

4. Build a good policy brief

The clear structure of a policy briefs makes the job easier for both you and your readers. Include all the right components and build it in the right order.

POLICY BRIEF RECIPE:

- 01 **Title**
- 02 **Introduction**
- 03 **Main points**
- 04 **Context**
- 05 **Approaches and findings**
- 06 **Conclusion**
- 07 **Policy recommendations**
- 08 **References**

Remember:

- A policy brief should have between 1800-2000 words.
- Use photos, illustrations and graphs for a more visually appealing publication. They can help convey the message, but only if they are relevant and have a purpose.

Title:

A good title is crucial to capture the interest of your readers. It should immediately communicate the content of the brief in a memorable way. Base it on the main idea and include key words.

Example:

Counter-mobilization against child marriage reform in Africa

Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions

Tip:

Could one of your main points or recommendations be used as a title?

Introduction:

A good introduction identifies your topic and indicates your particular focus. It needs to engage your readers' interest. Your readers are looking for information, so make it short and understandable. Writing effective introductions takes time and practice.

- Explain why your topic is important.
- Provide essential context.
- Give the reader a sense of urgency.
- Explain what the reader will get from reading your brief.
- Don't repeat the title.
- Write between 60-70 words.

Example:

Ten years ago a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti. The country was left in shambles. So was the women's movement. Three of its most prominent leaders lost their lives in the earthquake, and the implementation of gender policies came to a halt. What are the current challenges facing the women's cause in Haiti and how can it get back on track?

Example:

Natural gas discoveries have pushed Tanzania into the international spotlight as a new petroleum producer. By resolving gaps and conflicts within the existing legislative framework, Tanzania can ensure that its newfound wealth is translated into economic development.

Tip:

*Read your introduction out loud to a person who is not familiar with the topic you're writing about. The person should then be able to repeat the main purpose of the brief - **what is this brief about and why is it important.***

Main points:

The main points provide a useful summary for your reader. They list key information and lessons learnt. Help your readers by making a bullet list of three to seven main points.

Example:

- It may be difficult to get children back to school following long-term school closures. Economic reasons are important.
- Young girls are particularly vulnerable. School closures may lead to increases in teenage pregnancies and school dropouts.
- Maintaining learning and links to schools during closures are crucial.
- The benefits of school closures should be balanced against the strong adverse effects.

Context:

Describe the issue at hand and place it in a context. Explain factors related to your topic and the dynamics that influence it. What are we talking about? Which developments have caused this issue to be of particular relevance right now?

Approaches and findings:

This is the part of the brief where you present the research/project and its findings. Before you present your findings, describe the methods that were used to collect the data or to arrive at your conclusion.

- Highlight challenges and restraints, or benefits and opportunities that your research/project findings offer to this particular issue.
- Focus on your line of argument and the findings that lead to your conclusion and recommendations.
- Stick to your question/topic. Avoid adding unrelated elements into the discussion.

Conclusion:

This is part of the brief where you gather the pieces from your 'Approaches and findings' section and present your conclusion. Use this part of the brief to interpret your data.

Policy recommendations:

- The recommendations should be clear statements with concrete advice to policy makers.
- Present the recommendations as a list of bullet points.
- The recommendations should be supported by research findings/evidence.

Sometimes concrete policy recommendations are outside the scope of the brief. This should not prevent you from providing a clear conclusion. Even if you do not have clear policy recommendations, you need to tell the reader what your findings imply. Also, implications must be supported by evidence.

References:

Policy briefs are short and are supposed to be a quick and easy read. Try to avoid elements that ‘clutter’ the text. Many references in the text itself can interrupt the reader’s flow. Instead, create a reference list.

5. Get it out there

A policy brief doesn’t go anywhere on its own. You have to expose it to/share it with your chosen audience. You have several options. The best thing is to do all of them.

- Use your policy brief as a basis for making short and catchy snippets to be used in different social media.
- Is there a personal story hidden somewhere in the brief? Or is the topic something you feel particularly strongly about? Use this personal angle to write a short text for Facebook and link to the brief. Use your personal Facebook accounts to post it, and remember to ask partners, colleagues and the institution you work for to share on their Facebook too.
- Are there any surprising elements? A key recommendation that will contribute towards solving a problem? Use this to make a tweet. Again; inform partners and colleagues and ask them to retweet. And don’t forget to map and mention particularly relevant people/actors in your tweet so it pops up in their notifications.
- Is there someone who would appreciate a personal email informing them about the brief? Does your institution or project partners have a mailing list that your brief could be included in?