

Preparing and using policy briefs to support evidence-informed policymaking

Template for Writing a Policy Brief

Work within parameters:

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- Stand-alone document
 - Focused on a single topic
 - Relevant for target audience
 - Short and concise
 - Maximum 4 pages (1.500 words)
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Before to start

Before to start writing your policy brief it's critically important to focus your thinking by answering to a number of questions:

- Who am I writing this brief for (the audience)?

(One of the key elements to success is to target the particular audience for your message. Conduct an audience research: who are you writing for? Who are your readers? What is their sphere of influence and what change can they implement?)

- How can I reach readers?

(To reach your audience your policy brief must quickly and cogently relay the important policy facts, questions, and arguments about the issue of interest. What questions need answers? What are their interests?)

- What your main message is?

(Decide on key message and approach. Speak in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats surrounding the issue. Where is this policy failing? Why is this policy failing? What are you recommending (what policy action)? How can your recommendations improve the status quo?)

Answering to this questions will help you to better understand the characteristics and needs of those you are trying to reach and what tone to use: how knowledgeable or familiar are they about the subject, how open they will be to your message.

General structure of a Policy Brief

- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Critique of policy option(s)
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

Title

The title should catch the attention of the reader. It has to be descriptive, relevant, and impactful. Keep it short, catchy and at the point.

Running head

Shows the title of the policy brief, date & other useful information.

Make it attractive!

- *Short: no more than 12 words*
- *Catchy: include relevant key words; consider that questions can pique curiosity and capture the reader's attention*
- *To the point: relevant to the issue drawn to attention*

Subtitle

- What is your statement?
- What will catch busy readers?

(Frame your issue in one sentence, a concise statement of what the policy brief will tell your audience. It will provide an overview for busy readers. It should be written last)

Executive summary

The executive summary is supposed to create curiosity about the rest of the brief and entices readers to go further. Write the summary for an audience that is short of time. The summary must highlight the relevance and importance of the brief. Your audience must be able to understand the main points of the policy brief without reading nothing else.

Write 1 or 2 paragraphs including a brief overview of all parts of the policy brief (it should be written last):

- Why is the problem important? Why should people care?

(Describe the problem addressed and why the issue is relevant for the audience)

- What were the goals of the research and overall findings?
- Why the current policy needs changes? What are your recommendations for action?

(Outline why the current policy doesn't work as it supposed and prescribe a new course of action)

Key points

Use this space to ensure that the main facts can be caught at a quick look.

The main points of your policy brief:

- *What is the problem addressed?*
- *What prompt action can be undertake to solve the issue?*
- *What are the main advantages and disadvantages of these actions?*

Introduction

The introduction usually represents 10-15% of the main body of the text. In this section you will have to convince your audience that there is a current and urgent problem that requires immediate action. Try to start your introduction with a "bang" - an attention-grabbing fact, a question or something similar.

The problem

- What is the problem? Why is the problem important?

(Introduce your topic: State clearly the problem in focus and/or objectives and highlight the urgency of the problem. This will capture the readers' attention and motivate them to read the rest of the text)

Background, context

- What happens, where, who is involved?

(Based on the literature in the field, provide an outline of the background that is relevant for the issue. Summarize facts, issues and context)

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Continuation of introduction

Causes of the current situation

- Why?

(Provide a short overview of the root causes of the problem. Base your arguments on evidence and give examples.)

Effects of the current situation

- What effects does it have?
- What are the policy implications of the problem? Why the reader should do something about it?

(Make a clear statement of the policy implications of the problem. Use evidence from literature and other reliable sources to support your assertions. Try to give some examples)

Make the transition to the main body of the text.
(Advance your recommendations to deal with the problem – the preferred policy)

Continuation of critique of policy option(s)

Presentation of selected options and policy implications

In this section you have to present an overview of the selected policy option(s) with focus on their implications (what could happen).

- What are the courses of action that may be undertake?

(Point out which policies are the most appropriate to tackle the problem. A number of three policy options is a feasible choice)

- What effects will have the policy/policies?
(Discuss the effects of the proposed policy option(s). Provide concrete facts supported by strong evidence and/or examples to support your assertions)

- What are the advantages of each policy option(s)? What are the disadvantages?
- What are the potential benefits?
- What are the costs?
- What grade of uncertainty presents related to the costs and consequences?

(For each policy option selected state the advantages and disadvantages)

Critique of policy option(s)

This section usually represents 25-30% of the main body of the text. Offer details on the shortcomings of the current approach and present the selected options. The aim is to inform the audience of policy options that have been already pursued.

Approaches and results

- What is the current approach?

(Provide a short overview of the policy being currently implemented)

- How the study was conducted?

(Explain how the study was conducted, methods used to collect data, describe research and analysis without being too technical)

- What are your main findings?

(Present the main results of your research or study and the key findings that are relevant for your audience)

- Why there is a need for change?
- Where changes need to occur?

(Present the main policy implications of the research findings. Formulate a strong argument to illustrate the need for change explaining why and how the current approach is failing)

Recommendations

This section usually represents 30% of the policy brief. You have to call for action – include direct and clear suggestions for action! Provide a detailed and convincing list of recommendations of how policy approach need to change (what should happen). Re-emphasize the importance of action (repeat your message of what action needs to be taken).

- What are your recommendations?
- What are the specific practical steps/measures that need to be implemented?

(Describe clearly what should happen next, including a breakdown of precise steps. A number of five to six recommendations is a feasible choice. Try to keep your recommendations as short as possible.)

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Continuation of recommendations

Consider to choose three recommendations most practical and relevant for your target audience and elaborate on these:

- What are the specific needs that need to be changed?
- How will this change come out?
- What resources will be needed?
- Where will these resources come from?
- What is the overall benefit to both the policy maker and society in general?

(Clearly describe your main recommendations by including these components. Make sure that they are relevant, credible and feasible and present them in a way that is easy to understand. As much as possible, try to support your assertions on research and other evidence.)

After drafting your recommendation list ask yourself:

- Are my recommendations viable?
- Does the recommendations seem feasible?
- Are my recommendations realistic?

(Keep in mind that policy makers are looking for recommendations that can be easily implemented. Make sure that they are feasible from political, economic, social and technical point of view)

Tips

- Keep your recommendations short
- Make your recommendations and evidence visible
- Use sidebars or boxes, but avoid overuse
- Boldfacing the key words

(It will be easier for the reader to find them and will ensure that your recommendations are visible for the audience without reading the rest of the text.)

- Base your recommendations on significant evidence
- Base your recommendations on relevance to your audience
- Repeat your message

Conclusions

This section is not specifically required in a policy brief. If you choose to include conclusions section in your policy brief, try to keep it short (1-2 paragraphs).

- How urgent the situation is?
- How important is to choose the policy option recommended?

(Base your conclusions on results and construct the idea around the argument behind the policy recommendations. Conclude your brief as a logic, relevant and complete response to the problem)

References and useful resources

- Help readers to find out more information on the issues if interested
- Include a brief list of references
- You may choose 1-2 resources that you find the most useful and provide in depth and detail information about

Acknowledgments

- If part of a project, include the background, aim and objectives.
- Consider to include those who made a significant contribution to the content of the policy brief.
- Include an address where audience can find more information.

Information on the copyright

- In what conditions the material can be reproduce without permission?

After you have drafted the policy brief, consider to answer to the following questions (source):

Running head

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- Is the purpose of the briefing note clear?
- Is the language simple, clear and jargon free?
- Is everything there that needs to be there?
- Is anything there that isn't essential to the purpose?
- Is the policy brief easy to read, understand and remember?
- Do the sections lead logically from one to another?
- Is the policy brief designed so that it is inviting to the reader?
- Does the brief contain concrete policy recommendations that are derived logically from the arguments?
- Is there a good balance between white spaces and text?
- Has the briefing note been carefully edited and proofread?
- The brief has no more than 1500 words?

Keep in mind to reduce the details to only what the audience needs to know!

Resources used to develop this document:

Guidelines for writing policy briefs. Prepared for the Global HIV/AIDS Initiatives Network meeting in London September 22nd-24th 2008. Retrieved September 18, 2014, from <http://communication-resources.wikispaces.com/file/view/Guidelines+for+writing+policybriefs.pdf>.

International Development Research Centre, *How to Write a Policy Brief*, Canada. Retrieved September 18, 2014, from http://www.idrc.ca/en/resources/tools_and_training/documents/how-to-write-a-policy-brief.pdf.

Lavis N. John et al. *SUPPORT Tools for evidence-informed health Policymaking (STP) 13: Preparing and using policy briefs to support evidence-informed policymaking.* Health Research Policy and Systems, 2009, 7(Suppl. I): S13.

Marie José van der Werff ten Bosch et al. *DESIRE guidelines to writing a policy brief*, DESIRE project, January 2011. Retrieved September 20, 2014, from <http://www.desire-his.eu/it/disseminating-results/guidance/506-guidelines-to-writing-a-policy-brief>.