

The Policy Brief¹

Overview

The policy brief is a document which **outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate**. It is commonly produced in response to a request directly from a decision-maker or within an organisation that intends to advocate for the position detailed in the brief. Depending on the role of the writer or organisation producing the document, the brief may only provide a targeted discussion of the current alternatives without arguing for a particular one (i.e. those who adopt the role of 'objective' researcher). On the other end of the scale, i.e. advocates, the brief may focus directly on providing an argument for the adoption of a particular alternative. Nevertheless for any case, as any policy debate is a market-place of competing ideas, **the purpose of the policy brief is to convince the target audience of the urgency of the current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action outlined and therefore, serve as an impetus for action**.

As with all good marketing tools, **the key to success is targeting the particular audience for your message**. The most common audience for a policy brief is the decision-maker but, it is also not unusual to use the document to support broader advocacy initiatives targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience (e.g. decision makers, journalists, diplomats, administrators, researchers). In constructing a policy brief that can effectively serve its intended purpose, it is common for a brief to be:

- **Focused** – all aspects of the policy brief (from the message to the layout) need to strategically focus on achieving the intended goal of convincing the target audience. For example, the argument provided must build on what they do know about the problem, provide insight about what they don't know about the problem and be presented in language that reflects their values, i.e. using ideas, evidence and language that will convince them.
- **Professional, not academic** – The common audience for a policy brief is not interested in the research/analysis procedures conducted to produce the evidence, but are very interested to know the writer's perspective on the problem and potential solutions based on the new evidence.
- **Evidence-based** – The policy brief is a communication tool produced by policy analysts and therefore all potential audiences not only expect a rational argument but will only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives.
- **Limited** – to provide an adequately comprehensive but targeted argument within a limited space, the focus of the brief needs to be limited to a particular problem or area of a problem.
- **Succinct** – The type of audiences targeted commonly do not have the time or inclination to read an in-depth 20 page argument on a policy problem. Therefore,

¹ This description of the policy brief was developed by Eoin Young and Lisa Quinn as LGI training materials and based on the analysis of samples and from a number of guidelines such as:
David Dickson. *Guidelines for SciDev.Net Opinion articles*. Available on the World Wide Web. URL: <http://www.scidev.net/ms/entebbe/index.cfm?pageid=134> [29 Feb. 2004].
Hong Kong University. *Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief*. Available on the World Wide Web. URL: <http://www.hku.hk/psychodp/P2/PSYC0036B/Tut1note.doc> [29 Feb. 2004].
Richards. *The policy options brief*. Available on the World Wide Web. URL: http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/Fas/Jacobson/629/webnotes/policy_brief.htm [29 Feb. 2004].
Prof. Tsai. *Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief*. Available on the World Wide Web. URL: <http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~ktsai/policybrief.html> [29 Feb. 2004].

it is common that policy briefs do not exceed 6 – 8 pages in length (i.e. usually not longer than 3,000 words).

- **Understandable** – This not only refers to using clear and simple language (i.e. not the jargon and concepts of an academic discipline) but also to providing a well explained and easy to follow argument targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience.
- **Accessible** – the writer of the policy brief should facilitate the ease of use of the document by the target audience and therefore, should subdivide the text using clear descriptive titles to guide the reader.
- **Promotional** – the policy brief should catch the eye of the potential audience in order to create a favourable impression (e.g. professional, innovative etc) In this way many brief writers many of the features of the promotional leaflet (use of colour, use of logos, photographs, slogans, illustrative quotes etc).
- **Practical and feasible** – the policy brief is an action-oriented tool targeting policy practitioners. As such the brief must provide arguments based on what is actually happening in practice with a particular policy and propose recommendations which seem realistic to the target audience

The policy brief is usually said to be the most common and effective written communication tool in a policy campaign. However, in balancing all of the criteria above, many analysts also find the brief the most difficult policy tool to write.

Common Structural Elements of a Policy Brief

As discussed above, policy briefs directly reflect the different roles that the policy analyst commonly plays, i.e. from researcher to advocate. The type of brief that we are focusing on is one from the more action-oriented, advocacy end of the continuum. Although there is much variation even at this end of the scale, the most common elements of the policy brief are as follows:

- Title of the paper
- Executive summary
- Context and importance of the problem
- Critique of policy option(s)
- Policy recommendations
- Appendices
- Sources consulted or recommended

More specifically,

- **Title of the paper**

The title aims to catch the attention of the reader and compel him/her to read on and so needs to be **descriptive, punchy and relevant**.

- **Executive summary**

The executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a 1 to 2 paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

- A **description of the problem** addressed;
- A statement on **why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed**;
- Your **recommendations for action**.

▪ **Context and importance of the problem**

The purpose of this element of the brief is to convince the target audience that a current and urgent problem exists which requires them to take action. The context and importance of the problem is both the introductory and first building block of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

- A clear **statement of the problem or issue** in focus.
- A short **overview of the root causes of the problem**
- A clear statement of the **policy implications of the problem** which clearly establishes the current importance and policy relevance of the issue.

It is worth noting that the length of the problem description may vary considerably from brief to brief depending on the stage on the policy process in focus, e.g. there may be a need to have a much more extensive problem description for policy at the evaluation stage than for one at the option choosing stage.

▪ **Critique of policy option(s)**

The aim of this element is to detail shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented and therefore, illustrate both the need for change and focus of where change needs to occur. In doing so, the critique of policy options usually includes the following:

- A short **overview of the policy option(s)** in focus
- An argument illustrating **why and how the current or proposed approach is failing**.

It is important for the sake of credibility to recognise all opinions in the debate of the issue.

▪ **Policy recommendations**

The aim of the policy recommendations element is to provide a detailed and convincing proposal of how the failings of the current policy approach need to be changed. As such this is achieved by including;

- A breakdown of the **specific practical steps or measures** that need to be implemented
- Sometimes also includes **a closing paragraph** re-emphasising the importance of action.

▪ **Appendices**

Although the brief is a short and targeted document, authors sometimes decide that their argument needs further support and so include an appendix. **Appendices should be included only when absolutely necessary.**

▪ **Sources consulted or recommended**

Many writers of the policy brief decide not to include any sourcing of their evidence as their focus is not on an academic audience. However, if you decide to include a short bibliography then place it at the end. Many writers prefer to lead their readers to further reading and so, include a recommended readings section. Not surprisingly, many of the recommended readings are other related policy documents produced by their organisations!