

Policy Briefs

**An important note: Different fields and subfields have very specific expectations, structures and purposes for policy briefing. Ask your instructor/manager/etc. about the particular expectations, norms and uses of the policy brief in your discipline before writing one!*

What's the difference? Professional and Academic Audiences

In a word, "more." Academic audiences require far more explanation than a professional audience might. In the academic world, we are required to demonstrate or methods or processes as well present our references and source material in tandem with our results. But a professional audience requires an approach that is much more "user friendly."

The Policy Brief

A policy brief is a summary of policy alternatives with minimum context. Furthermore, the expected audience of a policy brief is typically someone who does not necessarily have time to do further research. The goal of a policy brief is to outline the "rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate."¹ Thus, citation and description of the processes by which data has been collected are secondary considerations. Essentially, a policy brief is not intended for publication. Instead, its sole purpose is to create easy to follow (non-specialized) arguments to describe a particular policy issue to a reader and recommend a course of action.

What to remember:

- *Policy briefs are short*
 - Typically 2-4 pages, but sometimes as short as a single page. Not to exceed 6-8 pages. Typically about 1,500 words. Not to exceed 3,000.
- *The writing style is concise and clear*
- *They are standalone and singular in focus.*
 - Policy briefs should be comprehensible and complete without outside reading as well as contained to a **single issue**.
- *They do not use much or any "jargon" (field specific language).*
- *Their primary purpose is to summarize an existing policy debate and present alternatives.*
- *They are audience specific, and so must take the reader heavily into consideration.*
 - How much do they already know about the topic?
 - How sympathetic are they to certain recommendations?

Sections of the Brief

Infographics

¹ "AAA Policy Brief #1." PsycEXTRA Dataset (n.d.): n. pag. IFP. International Policy Fellowships. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.

Data should be used sparingly in a policy brief. However, when the strongest arguments (especially for urgency/significance) are data trends, a good way to represent them is by using an easy-to-read infographic. Remember: an infographic is a visual tool. Bar graphs and pie charts give more (spatial and comparative) information at first glance than a table, thus prefer them.

**Protip: Do not use too many infographics in a brief, or it may look cluttered*

Title

The title of a brief, much like the title of a headline, ought to be more than just descriptive.² Your title should:

- *Convey the urgency of the problem*
- *Be specific to the particular issue, rather than generally related to the field or concern*
- *Be eye-catching*

Bad title example—*Vending Machines on High School Campuses: Nutritional Concerns*

Better title example—*Food For Thought? Eating Choices and High School Academic Performance: Vending Machines, a Symptom of Wage Disparity*

**Protip: Use dynamic verbs rather than adjectives.*

Executive Summary

If there is no time to read the rest of a brief, The Executive Summary ought to “distill the essence.”³ A summary should run through all the most salient and important parts of the brief, including:

- *Identification and brief description of the issue*
- *Notes on the policy “gap” (what still needs to be solved/discussed/addressed)*
- *Key research/strategies that already exist/should be expanded upon for dealing with the issue*

Protip: Write the executive summary **last, after compressing the information summarizing the data/findings.*

Context and Importance of the Problem (or the Introduction, or Scope)

This section is in short, a problem statement—it should include the root causes of the issue, the significance of the issue, and the best steps to take in order to solve it. The sections is the first “building block” in the persuasive structure of the brief,⁴ because in order to convince an audience to take action, it is crucial to describe what is going on and to convince your audience that the issue to which you have drawn their attention matters. The Context Section ought to include:

- *The significance of the issue*
 - *Why is this issue important? If we do nothing about it, what will happen?)*⁵
- *The stakeholders*
 - *Who does this group affect?*
 - *Is this issue more relevant to some groups than others?*
- *The research goals*
 - *What research questions have been or still need to be answered?*
- *Overview of findings and conclusion*

Critique of Policy Options (or Policy Alternatives)

² Zerbe, Lauren, and JH Bloomberg School of Public Health. "WCHPC - Writing Policy Briefs." Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Feb. 2017.

³ "How to Write a Policy Brief." (2012): n. pag. International Development and Research Centre. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.

⁴ "AAA Policy Brief 1." p.p.1

⁵ Ibid. p.p.1

This section describes the existing policy measures that attempt to deal with the problem discussed and makes a recommendation as to the best course of action.⁶ While it is important not to dismiss other policy options out of hand, this section's primary goal is to set up your recommendation as the best policy option. The parts of this section are:

- *Discussion of what is being done to address this problem*
- *Evaluation each alternative*

**Protip: Do not leave out any major existing policies/perspective in the debate, or it will damage your credibility*

Recommendation(s)

Make the primary recommendation(s) here. The creed for this section is: "Relevant, credible, feasible."⁷ This section proposes an accomplishable *policy solution* to the brief's single issue. The solution ought to be described in specific steps (implementation, costs, likelihood of support, how soon it will have an impact, etc.). The Recommendations Section should describe:

- *Opportunities and benefits of the prescribed policy option*
- *Explicit answers to the questions:*
 - How is this better than what has been done before?
 - What specific steps must be taken in order this policy to become reality?

**Protip: Some fields break this section into two: Conclusion/Implications and Recommendations⁸*

Appendices (optional)

If there are other considerations that are necessary/useful, they can be included in an appendices section. However, *appendices should be included only when they are extremely necessary*. Keep in mind that including appendices does not mean other sources will realistically be sought out by the intended audience. Do not rely solely or heavily on the appendices to relay information crucial to your argument.

Sources Consulted or Recommended (optional)

A short bibliography featuring sources consulted or recommendations for further reading (usually other relevant policy documents) may also be included. It is not necessary, however, as this is not a document intended for academic audience or publication.

⁶ "Policy Brief." The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d. Web. 09 Feb. 2017.

⁷ "How to Write a Policy Brief." p.p. 7

⁸ Ibid. p.p. 2