

## BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

# Writing a policy brief

## Aims

A Policy Brief aims to provide a quick but thorough briefing of your research together with the policy-relevant findings or policy implications. Readers will want to know the author's perspective on the problem and potential solutions ('policy recommendations') based on the evidence.

The aim is to provide a persuasive case that supports your policy recommendations. What can you say that is new or different? Is there evidence from other studies that supports your argument? Are there other references – perhaps from policymakers themselves, think tanks, the media or campaign groups – that also lend weight to your points?

A Policy Brief can be considered to be your 'calling card', and a route into dialogue with policymakers. If you have a meeting with a policymaker (or policymakers), they may want to have a more in-depth discussion of your work. They are also a useful tool to disseminate a summary of your findings and their implications to a wider audience (but should not be treated as a general research summary).

## Audience

As with all communications, it's important to know your audience. Parliamentarians and civil servants are busy people. Be clear and concise – they will not have time to read anything more than two pages.

There are many routes in to reach policymakers. Your Brief will be just as useful for the researchers and other staff who support members of parliament, as well as the civil servants in government departments and agencies, who provide specialist advice and implement policies. Also, don't forget the many specialist organisations who will be trying to influence government – getting them to use your evidence and analysis is a good indirect way to reach policymakers.

There are similar support structures in other Parliaments such as the African Union, European Parliament, etc. It is important to research your target audience/organisation, and where possible reach out to a named person.

### **Format and content**

- Readers should find your Brief:
  - Accessible and easy to read (written in a language that is non-specialist and suitable for a general audience)
  - easy to skim
  - easy to navigate to the sections they are most interested in
  - interesting, thought-provoking and fresh
  - persuasive, making clear policy recommendations with supporting evidence.
- If this is the only document they have read on this subject, readers should come away feeling they have enough background information to hold a sensible conversation about it.
- It needs to come over as being reliable and trustworthy, and backed up by solid research.
- It should express clear conclusions – framed in a way that allows readers to understand the policy or practical implications for them.
- It should aim to be decisive without being opinionated or using emotive language – it is not a campaigning leaflet.

For more information, contact [research@reading.ac.uk](mailto:research@reading.ac.uk)

## Drafting/structure

- The Brief's heading should convey the key message – it should clearly reflect the key insight or takeaway you want your audience to remember.
- The Brief should open with a short summary of under 100 words, which outlines what the Brief is about and answers the 'so what?' question.
- There needs to be a simple and logical line running through the Brief, so one argument or piece of information flows to the next.
- Use good, real-world examples – they are one of the best ways of conveying a message.
- Keep the language as simple and direct as possible – steer clear of jargon and acronyms, use bullet points, keep sections, sentences and paragraphs short.
- Use clear short sub-headings to help your reader find their way through your evidence. Headings are a good way of highlighting key messages.
- "Pull-quotes" are useful to draw the reader's attention to a key point you wish to make. Pick one or two key points, statistics or quotes from others to highlight if you have space available.
- Don't forget to add your contact details. And a date (month and year).

Keep your brief to a maximum of two pages. The word count will depend on how many pictures and diagrams you have. For a two-page brief, a good structure to follow would be:

**Title:** Make it as simple and direct as possible. Don't try and be too clever.

**Summary:** This needs to capture the main ideas of your Brief in a clear and direct way and catch the reader's attention.

**Picture:** A good clear photo with a pithy caption relevant to your message.

**Policy recommendations:** Policymakers need to be reassured you have solutions. So, present practical, actionable recommendations (on the first

For more information, contact [research@reading.ac.uk](mailto:research@reading.ac.uk)

page if possible). Recommendations should be clear about

a) what should be done b) who should do it and c) by when it should be done.

**Facts and figures** box or **case study** box.

**Main evidence/arguments:** Include figures, charts or diagrams if appropriate to help make your Brief more eye-catching and appealing (but make sure they are clear and easy for non-specialists to read/use). Try to title these with a key message, so the audience can take away your point without having to study the figure/chart/diagram.

**References and further reading:** If available, a hyperlinked reference that can give a broader representation of your research on the topic, or a link to a relevant web page.

**Date** (month and year) and your **contact details**, including website for further info.

Any **acknowledgements or credits** if they are necessary (such as funder name or logo).