Continue

Example of a policy brief

A policy brief is a tool to present research and recommendations to a non-specialised audience. Policy briefs distil relevant research evidence and bring important findings to the attention of policy makers. They draw out implications and recommendations for policy. It is a standalone document that usually focuses on a single topic of interest. A policy brief is not a summary of research. It is an interpretation of the research for policy. Policy makers are often busy and may not have time to read every academic paper. Policy briefs can be read or scanned quickly so that policy makers become aware of key issues. Policy briefs do not replace journal articles or research reports – they supplement them. Through suggested further reading and links to journal articles, they can be a gateway for policy makers to access and (hopefully) act on relevant research. Because policy briefs are succinct, they are accessible and easy to share. We know that a good policy brief will get passed around. A policy brief may therefore reach a wider audience than an academic article alone. Policy makers may use policy briefs in several ways: When they need rapid access to key points (e.g. for briefing up) To share with stakeholders For background/ to inform a discussion paper or briefing note To inform a presentation To respond to media We understand that factors improving the chance research will be used by policy include: Interaction with researchers Timeliness Relevance Highlighting key information Allows rapid scanning for relevance Graded entry to research – succinct key messages; brief executive summary; full report or journal article Why are you writing this policy brief? Your purpose could be: To inform the audience of a new issue Canvas different policy options Make recommendations Provide evidence on a specific problem or issue you know they are tackling Tip: Write down your purpose and refer back to it often. Only include information in the policy brief that serves this purpose. The nature of your policy brief depends on the audience. Knowing who you are targeting will shape your language, the information you include and the purpose of writing the brief. There may be different policy briefs for different audiences. For example, a research finding about active travel may need to be expressed differently for policy makers working in transport to those working in population health. Considering your audience, what information needs to be included in the policy brief? What is their role in changing policy? The information should be targeted according to what the policy maker can realistically act upon How much do they already know about the issue? What new information would give them greater insight? What evidence do they need to make a decision or change their behaviour? A policy brief should have a clear and specific purpose, supported by the evidence. It is best to concentrate on just one issue or argument. Considering the evidence: Is there a specific action you would like this audience to take? Is there something new and important you would like them to know? What do you want them to do with your findings? Now consider your policy recommendations. Use your research and other data to formulate your advice for policy. While you may feel strongly about your recommendations, make sure your advice is based on evidence. Your role is to inform rather than persuade. Think about the benefits that your recommendations will have for the policy maker, the system and society. Use this to describe why should the policy maker should act. Recommendations should be: Concise Relevant Precise and easy to understand Credible (backed by your evidence) Achievable There are different ways of structuring a policy brief. The main consideration is that it should take the audience from a problem to a solution. Make sure the most important information is displayed prominently on the first page. The length can vary, but generally try to keep a policy brief to two pages and no more than four pages. Tip: Don't try to cut down an existing report – write from scratch. Download template [Microsoft Word] Key messages are the first thing the reader sees. The purpose of the key messages is to impart the most important information even if the reader doesn't read anything else. Summarise your main findings and their implications in three to four dot points. Try to make these messages accessible to everyone. If you must use technical terms, define them. Don't forget to target the key messages to the audience. Tip: Consider writing the key messages last. They may become clear as you write the rest of the brief. The aim of this section is to give the reader a clear sense of why they should continue reading. It sets up the problem and promises them a solution. In one or two paragraphs, define the policy issue. Express the urgency and importance of the topic to your audience. Explain the purpose of this policy brief – what is the context for telling policy about your research? Why are you providing the audience with this policy brief now? Present your findings in a way that is accessible for non-experts. Limit the description of your research methods, unless these are particularly relevant to your recommendations. Write just a sentence or two to indicate to the policy maker that your recommendations are robust and based on evidence. Briefly include limitations of the research, if relevant. Summarise the implications of the research. How does your research relate to the realities your audience is facing? Avoid theoretical or abstract concepts. Clearly link the research findings to the policy advice you are giving. List your policy recommendation/s. Often a policy brief will only have one policy recommendation. If you have more, list them as bullet points and keep them very succinct. The purpose of this section is to provide the evidence base for your recommendations and direct your reader to extra reading. Not every statement needs to be referenced. Stick to important and timely papers. It is OK to include grey literature as well as academic literature. A very brief summary to support your credentials, with contact details for more information. Include here any acknowledgements, author details and disclaimers. Make sure you write succinctly and in plain English (no jargon, regardless of the audience). Use catchy headings and sub-headings to break up the text. These help when the reader is scanning the document and entice them to read on. Consider making the headings active sentences with verbs, so they are more compelling. Or make the headings questions, to spark the reader's curiosity. Use short, active sentences. Make sure every sentence is succinct and relevant to the audience. Use terms your reader will be familiar with. Write in a clear, logical way that is easy to follow – break up the text into short paragraphs for easier reading. Avoid acronyms and abbreviations. Define any technical terms (or avoid them altogether if possible). Make sure the policy brief is presented professionally. Be consistent with fonts and headings. Consider your organisation's branding requirements (ask your communication team for a template, logo and style guide). Consider boxes, figures, charts or diagrams to help illustrate main points or key messages (and save on words). Consider dot points/ lists to highlight key information. Proofread carefully for spelling and grammar. The Collaboration for Enhanced Research Impact (CERI) is a joint initiative between the Prevention Centre and several NHMRC Centres of Research Excellence, established in June 2020 to enhance the profile and impact of chronic disease prevention in Australia. We are working together to find alignment in the policy and practice implications of our work and to develop shared communications across our various projects and participating centres. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to writing policy briefs because the topic and audience will shape each one. However, effective policy briefs tend to contain the same key elements and therefore have similar structures: an executive summary, an introduction, an overview of the research or problem, an examination of the findings, and a concluding section that explains the policy recommendations and implications of the research.Review the elements of an effective structure (in detail below) before writing your policy brief. Examples drawn from IDRC's GrOW policy briefs are included throughout to help you gain a better understanding of layout and the content requirements of each section.Executive SummaryEvery policy brief should open with a short summary. This overview should be engaging and help busy readers quickly understand your argument. Most summaries take the form of a short paragraph or two, but some authors prefer to structure theirs as a few bullet points. Regardless of which style you choose, an effective executive summary should condense the essence of the brief down to a few sentences.Tips:The executive summary should always appear on the cover of the brief or at the top of the first page so that it is the first thing a reader will see.It can be helpful to write the executive summary last because you will gain clarity on its content as you draft the other sections.Increasing women's support for democracy in Africa includes both a written overview and a bulleted list of key results (an executive summary does not need to include both, but each is effective). The overview provides a brief summary of the research while the key results present the findings at a glance.IntroductionThe introduction should set up the rest of the document and clearly convey your argument. In one or two paragraphs, define why you are writing the brief and express the urgency and importance of the topic to your audience. A good introduction should contain all of the relevant information for your argument. Describe the key questions of your analysis and your conclusions. The goal is to leave your readers with a clear sense of what your research is about while enticing them to continue reading."What's at Stake?", the introduction for Increasing women's support for democracy in Africa, vividly presents the issues and relevance of the research in only a few short paragraphs. A succinct summary of the brief's goals gives the reader a firm understanding of the shape of the rest of the paper.Research overviewThis is one of the most important sections of the brief because it explains the reasoning behind your policy recommendations. In effect, this section describes the problem that your policy recommendations intend to solve.Provide a summary of the facts to describe the issues, contexts, and research methods. Focus on two main elements: the research approach and the research results.Research approach: explain how the study was conducted, who conducted it, how the data was collected, and any other relevant background information.Research results: paint a general picture of the research findings before moving on to the specifics. Present the results in a way that lends them to your analysis and argument, but do not interpret them yet. By the end of this section, the reader should have a firm understanding of the research and be primed for your argument. The goal is to take them on a journey that ends with them seeing the facts from your perspective.Tips:Avoid jargon and overly technical language.Focus on highlighting the benefits and opportunities stemming from the research. The research overview (entitled "Research approach") in Reducing child marriage and increasing girls' schooling in Bangladesh provides an explanation of the research methodology without becoming mired in too much detail. The author favours simple language and a straightforward overview of the numbers instead of using jargon or complex statistics. The research results are discussed in the following section, an effective choice for research that requires a good deal of data analysis to contextualize the findings.Discussion/analysis of research findingsThis section should interpret the data in a way that is accessible and clearly connected to your policy advice. Express ideas using active language and strong assertions. The goal is to be convincing, but ensure that your analysis is balanced and defensible. Explain the findings and limitations of the research clearly and comprehensively. For example, if the original hypothesis was abandoned, explain why.Tip:Express research findings in terms of how they relate to concrete realities (instead of theoretical abstractions) so the reader will have a clear idea of the potential effects of policy initiatives.The "Key findings" section of How to grow women-owned businesses provides a brief overview of the findings before breaking down the results. Each research finding is presented independently and with clear headings. Even if a reader only skims the document, the headings provide a general understanding of the research findings. The graphics in this section quickly convey information from the research findings and they help to visually break up the text on the page.Conclusion or recommendationThis final section of the policy brief should detail the actions recommended by the research findings. Draw the link for your readers between the research findings and your recommendations. Use persuasive language to present your recommendations, but ensure that all arguments are rooted firmly and clearly in evidence produced by the research. You want your readers to be completely convinced that yours is the best advice.Examine the implications and the recommendations produced by the research. Implications are the effects that the research could have in the future. They are a soft but persuasive approach to describe the potential consequences of particular policies. This is a good opportunity to provide an overview of policy alternatives by presenting your reader with the full range of policy options.Follow up the implications with your recommendations. Beyond being descriptive, your recommendations should act as a call to action by stating precise, relevant, credible, and feasible next steps. It may strengthen your argument to demonstrate why other policies are not as effective as your recommendations.Tip:Think of the conclusion as a mirror to your introduction: you are once again providing an overview of your argument, but this time you are underlining its strength rather than introducing it."Lessons for policy and practice", the conclusion of Unpaid care and women's empowerment: Lessons from research and practice, presents a series of broad policy recommendations that are clearly linked back to the research. Each recommendation has its own section and heading to make them easy to identify and understand. Answered By: APUS Librarians Last Updated: Sep 15, 2022 Views: 37646 writing tutor Useful Links Writing@APUS In the APUS Library's comprehensive writing center, you'll find guidance on all aspects of academic writing. Citation Hub Sharpen your citing skills and learn how to avoid plagiarism. Includes style guides for APA, Bluebook, Chicago/Turabian and MLA styles. This handout will offer tips for writing effective policy briefs. Be sure to check with your instructor about their specific expectations for your assignment. What are policy briefs? Imagine that you're an elected official serving on a committee that sets the standards cars must meet to pass a state inspection. You know that this is a complex issue, and you'd like to learn more about existing policies, the effects of emissions on the environment and on public health, the economic consequences of different possible approaches, and more–you want to make an informed decision. But you don't have time to research all of these issues! You need a policy brief. A policy brief presents a concise summary of information that can help readers understand, and likely make decisions about, government policies. Policy briefs may give objective summaries of relevant research, suggest possible policy options, or go even further and argue for particular courses of action. How do policy briefs differ from other kinds of writing assignments? You may encounter policy brief assignments in many different academic disciplines, from public health and environmental science to education and social work. If you're reading this handout because you're having your first encounter with such an assignment, don't worry–many of your existing skills and strategies, like using evidence, being concise, and organizing your information effectively, will help you succeed at this form of writing. However, policy briefs are distinctive in several ways. Audience In some of your college writing, you've addressed your peers, your professors, or other members of your academic field. Policy briefs are usually created for a more general reader or policy maker who has a stake in the issue that you're discussing. Tone and terminology Many academic disciplines discourage using unnecessary jargon, but clear language is especially important in policy briefs. If you find yourself using jargon, try to replace it with more direct language that a non-specialist reader would be more likely to understand. When specialized terminology is necessary, explain it quickly and clearly to ensure that your reader doesn't get confused. Purpose Policy briefs are distinctive in their focus on communicating the practical implications of research to a specific audience. Suppose that you and your roommate both write research-based papers about global warming. Your roommate is writing a research paper for an environmental science course, and you are writing a policy brief for a course on public policy. You might both use the exact same sources in writing your papers. So, how might those papers differ? Your roommate's research paper is likely to present the findings of previous studies and synthesize them in order to present an argument about what we know. It might also discuss the methods and processes used in the research. Your policy brief might synthesize the same scientific findings, but it will deploy them for a very specific purpose: to help readers decide what they should do. It will relate the findings to current policy debates, with an emphasis on applying the research outcomes rather than assessing the research procedures. A research paper might also suggest practical actions, but a policy brief is likely to emphasize them more strongly and develop them more fully. Format To support these changes in audience, tone, and purpose, policy briefs have a distinctive format. You should consult your assignment prompt and/or your professor for instructions about the specific requirements of your assignment, but most policy briefs have several features in common. They tend to use lots of headings and have relatively short sections. This structure differs from many short papers in the humanities that may have a title but no further headings, and from reports in the sciences that may follow the "IMRAD" structure of introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Your brief might include graphs, charts, or other visual aids that make it easier to digest the most important information within sections. Policy briefs often include some of these sections: Title: A good title quickly communicates the contents of the brief in a memorable way. Executive Summary: This section is often one to two paragraphs long; it includes an overview of the problem and the proposed policy action. Context or Scope of Problem: This section communicates the importance of the problem and aims to convince the reader of the necessity of policy action. Policy Alternatives: This section discusses the current policy approach and explains proposed options. It should be fair and accurate while convincing the reader why the policy action proposed in the brief is the most desirable. Policy Recommendations: This section contains the most detailed explanation of the concrete steps to be taken to address the policy issue. Appendices: If some readers might need further support in order to accept your argument but doing so in the brief itself might derail the conversation for other readers, you might include the extra information in an appendix. Consulted or Recommended Sources: These should be reliable sources that you have used throughout your brief to guide your policy discussion and recommendations. Depending on your specific topic and assignment, you might combine sections or break them down into several more specific ones. How do I identify a problem for my policy brief? An effective policy brief must propose a solution to a well-defined problem that can be addressed at the level of policy. This may sound easy, but it can take a lot of work to think of a problem in a way that is open to policy action. For example, "bad spending habits in young adults" might be a problem that you feel strongly about, but you can't simply implement a policy to "make better financial decisions." In order to make it the subject of a policy brief, you'll need to look for research on the topic and narrow it down. Is the problem a lack of financial education, predatory lending practices, dishonest advertising, or something else? Narrowing to one of these (and perhaps further) would allow you to write a brief that can propose concrete policy action. For another example, let's say that you wanted to address children's health. This is a big issue, and too broad to serve as the focus of a policy brief, but it could serve as a starting point for research. As you begin to research studies on children's health, you might decide to zoom in on the more specific issue of childhood obesity. You'll need to consult the research further to decide what factors contribute to it in order to propose policy changes. Is it lack of exercise, nutritional deficiencies, a combination of these, or something else? Choosing one or another of these issues, your brief would zoom in even further to specific proposals that might include exercise initiatives, nutritional guidelines, or school lunch programs. The key is that you define the problem and its contributing factors as specifically as possible so that some sort of concrete policy action (at the local, state, or national level) is feasible. Framing the issue Once you've identified the problem for yourself, you need to decide how you will present it to your reader. Your own process of identifying the problem likely had some stops, starts, and dead-ends, but your goal in framing the issue for your reader is to provide the most direct path to understanding the problem and the proposed policy change. It can be helpful to think of some of the most pressing questions your audience will have and attempt to preemptively answer those questions. Here are some questions you might want to consider: What is the problem? Understanding what the problem is, in the clearest terms possible, will give your reader a reference point. Later, when you're discussing complex information, your reader can refer back to the initial problem. This will help to 'anchor' them throughout the course of your argument. Every piece of information in the brief should be clearly and easily connected to the problem. What is the scope of the problem? Knowing the extent of the problem helps to frame the policy issue for your reader. Is the problem statewide, national, or international? How many people does this issue affect? Daily? Annually? This is a great place for any statistical information you may have gathered through your research. Who are the stakeholders? Who does this issue affect? Adult women? College-educated men? Children from bilingual homes? The primary group being affected is important, and knowing who this group is allows the reader to assign a face to the policy issue. Policy issues can include a complex network of stakeholders. Double check whether you have inadvertently excluded any of them from your analysis. For example, a policy about children's nutrition obviously involves the children, but it might also include food producers, distributors, parents, and nutritionists (and other experts). Some stakeholders might be reluctant to accept your policy change or even acknowledge the existence of the problem, which is why your brief must be convincing in its use of evidence and clear in its communication. Effective policy-writing This handout has emphasized that good policy briefs are clear, concise, and focused on applying credible research to policy problems. Let's take a look at two versions of the introduction to a policy brief to see how someone might write and revise to achieve these qualities: A "not-so-good" policy brief Adolescents' Dermatologic Health in Outlandia: A Call to Action The Report on Adolescents' Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010), issued by Secretary of Health Dr. Polly Galver, served as a platform to increase public awareness on the importance of dermatologic health for adolescents. Among the major themes of the report are that dermatologic health is essential to general health and well-being and that profound and consequential dermatologic health disparities exist in the state of Outlandia. Dr. Galver stated that what amounts to a silent epidemic of acne is affecting some population groups–restricting activities as schools, work, and home–and often significantly diminishing the quality of life. Dr. Galver issued the Report on Adolescents' Dermatologic Health as a wake-up call to policymakers and health professionals on issues regarding the state's dermatologic health. ("Not so good policy brief," Reproduced with permission of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.) This paragraph introduces a relevant and credible source, but it fails to use that source to explain a problem and propose policy action. The reader is likely to be confused because the word "acne" does not appear until the middle of the paragraph, and the brief never states what action should be taken to address it. In addition to this lack of focus, the paragraph also includes unnecessary phrases like "among the major themes" that could be removed to make it more concise. A better policy brief Seeing Spots: Addressing the Silent Epidemic of Acne in Outlandia's Youth Acne is the most common chronic disease among adolescents in Outlandia (Outlandia Department of Health, 2010). Long considered a benign rite of passage, acne actually has far-reaching effects on the health and well being of adolescents, significantly affecting success in school, social relationships, and general quality of life. Yet large portions of the state's population are unable to access treatment for acne. The Secretary of Health's Report on Adolescents' Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010) is a call to action for policymakers and health professionals to improve the health and wellbeing of Outlandia's youth by increasing access to dermatologic care ("A Better Policy Brief", Reproduced with permission of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.) This paragraph is far more focused and concise than the first version. The opening sentence is straightforward; instead of focusing on the source, it makes a clear and memorable point that is supported by the source. Additionally, though the first version was titled "a call to action," it did not actually say what that action might be. In this version, it is clear that the call is for increased access to dermatologic care. Keep in mind that clarity, conciseness, and consistent focus are rarely easy to achieve in a first draft. Careful editing and revision are key parts of writing policy briefs. Works consulted We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find additional publications. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial. We revise these tips periodically and welcome feedback. Smith, Catherine F. 2016. Writing Public Policy, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press. Young, Eoin, and Lisa Quinn. n.d. "The Policy Brief." University of Delaware. Accessed April 15, 2025.