Tool 6: How to write a policy brief

Time: ½ day to write; ½ day to edit; 2 days to design; 1 week to print professionally.

Resources: Human resources; potential costs for copywriting, editing, proofreading, design and printing; access to MS Word for policy brief template.

Purpose: Policy briefs help to get your policy relevant messages to policy-makers in a concise document with a structured argument and clear evidence.

What is a policy brief? [15]

A policy brief is a concise summary presenting research or project findings that addresses an urgent and relevant problem and offers evidence-based recommendations. It is a practical, rather than academic, document targeting a specific audience – usually policymakers or those interested in formulating or influencing policy - and aiming to prompt change. It is usually two to eight sides long and written in accessible language.

A policy brief should:

- Provide enough background for the reader to understand the problem
- Convince the reader that the problem must be addressed urgently
- Provide information about an alternative
- Stimulate the reader to make a decision
- Be evidence-based
- Be easy to read
- Include infographics, photos or charts (optional)
- Provide an opinion piece (optional)

Policy briefs can take different formats, from internal memos to presentations. In this toolkit we focus on an externally focussed publication for a wide audience which argues in favour of a particular course of action. You can use the impact summary (Tool 3) as the basis for your policy brief evidence and an infographic (Tool 5) to visually communicate the evidence in your policy brief.

How and when is a policy brief used?

Write a policy brief soon after publishing your research or at a fitting time, e.g. mental health is in the news.

Tips: [16, 17]

- Leave as a reminder after a meeting
- Distribute at conferences and events
- Send out via email
- **Combine with other communications methods**, such as presentations
- **Target the movers and shakers**: people with high influence are more likely to pass on a policy brief.
- **Target those without prior opinions on mental health:** policy briefs are most effective in creating evidence accurate beliefs amongst those with no prior opinions.
- **Write the policy brief with your stakeholders** so you can shape it to their needs.

---

[15] References: Policy brief definition
http://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf (accessed July 2015)
and http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/GDNet/Guia-02-serie-3-ingles.pdf (accessed July 2015)
[16] Reference: http://www.researchtoaction.org/2012/08/what-makes-a-policy-brief-stick-lessons-from-a-pioneer-experiment/ (accessed July 2015)
[17] Reference: http://www.3ieimpact.org/media/filer_public/2012/08/22/fullreport_what_difference_does_a_policy_brief_make__2pdf_-_adobe_acrobat_pro.pdf (accessed July 2015)

Why use a policy brief?

Policy briefs have been shown to be the preferred form of communication by those making policy decisions or aiming to influence policy. They can help change policy for the better and help make sure policies are based on evidence. Research shows 79% of policy actors from both developing and developed countries rated policy briefs as a 'key tool'. [18] A survey of UK policy makers showed the policy brief was the most widely consulted source of research information and concluded that policy makers need concise or 'pre-digested' information.[19]

Before starting

Write down the aim of your policy brief to keep you on track when writing:

This policy brief is for [stakeholder] to get them to [behaviour outcome you would like to see]. It will contribute to our [project communications or policy objective].

Policy brief structure

This is a suggested structure. Please use the headings and sections most appropriate for your policy brief. You can use this tool with the MS Word policy brief template (download).

Title (less than 12 words)

Your title should be informative, engaging, short, snappy and catchy, e.g. "mental health education is cost-effective" is better than "including mental health into national, regional and local education policies ", and avoid technical language and jargon. The reader should know what the brief is about and be compelled to read it from the title. If it is too long, consider breaking it up into a title and subtitle.

Author

Cite the author and their affiliation in a small font under the title.

Executive statement/Summary/Aim (100-150 words)

Outline your aim and main message - what you want to say and to whom - in two sentences. The aim should address your policy objective and in a large font size. This section should catch the reader's attention. Ask yourself: What are the main points you want your audience to get – even if they read nothing else?

Key messages and recommendations

State the problem and recommendations addressing your problem (see recommendations subheading below).

Introduction/Problem/Context (200 words)

Introduce the problem and state why this issue is urgent and important, using evidence and infographics (Tool 5) to back up your points. This section should make the reader want do something about the problem. Suggested structure:

- The problem (what is the problem? Why is it important?)
- Background, context (What happens, where, who is involved?)
- Causes of current situation (Why? Give evidence or examples)
- Effects of current situation (What effects does it have? Give evidence or examples)
- Outline of what has been tried before (optional)

About this study/project (Two short paragraphs)

How did your project or study aim to address the problem? What did you do? Keep this very brief and only include methodologies you feel will strengthen your argument, e.g. the study had a large sample size.

---

[18] References: http://www.researchtoaction.org/2014/10/age-policy-brief/ (accessed July 2015) and http://www.policy.manchester.ac.uk/media/projects/policymanchester/1008_Policy@Manchester_Senior_Civil_Servants_Survey_v4(1).pdf (accessed July 2015)

[19] Reference: Talbot and Talbot "What does Whitehall want from academics?" University of Manchester Report, April 2014; and http://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf (accessed July 2015)

Study results, conclusions and recommendations

What did your study or project find? Include evidence that links directly to and provides convincing arguments for the recommendations. Tell the reader what you want them to do about the problem using subheadings for each recommendation. Make sure the recommendations are:

- Short
- Practical and realistic
- Concrete – avoid generic recommendations
- Based on evidence from your study/project
- Clear and easy to understand
- Written so they start with a verb, e.g. Use…, Engage….

It is advised not to phrase your recommendations as "you should do xxxx". No one likes being told what to do! Instead use language that presents recommended options that the reader can choose from.

Authoritative opinion-piece and quotes

Including an opinion-piece from an authoritative voice has been shown to increase the likelihood of the policy brief being shared.[20] Use pull-out quotes to highlight opinions or particular points within your argument. Highlight your opinion piece by using a different colour or a box to clearly differentiate it from other evidence.

Limitations (optional)

List any limitations your study or the evidence may have.

Author and acknowledgements

Acknowledge funders, other organisations and individuals who have supported your study/project.

References and useful links

Only include a maximum of four sources where readers can find further information. Give the web addresses of publications and dates for when they were last accessed if possible.

Publication details and disclaimer (disclaimer is optional)

Include the name of the publisher, the date, and the copyright owner.

Example disclaimer (optional but useful if the brief contains negative statements): "The views expressed in this publication are those of the author/s and should not be attributed to [your project] and/or its funders".

Boxes

Use boxes to define technical terms if you need to use them (though try to avoid this), and to highlight case studies. Boxes should be clearly labelled and have a maximum of two short paragraphs.

Data

Try to avoid using tables as the information takes longer to digest than a chart, but if you do, keep the number of rows and columns to a minimum. Keep charts simple – one or two colours - and get rid of any unnecessary information such as chart guides, legends and labels. Provide sources for your data in the references section.

See more tips on presenting data in Tool 5: How to create an infographic.

Photos

High quality photos can bring a personal story to life or illustrate the solutions to the highlighted problem.

Perfect communications product checklist

- ✓ Is the **most important information** at the top?
- ✓ Have you used clear, concise and appropriate **language**?
- ✓ Have you **edited** your text so it is easy to read and does not contain jargon?
- ✓ Have you **proof read** your text so that all spellings, facts and grammar are correct?

---

[20] Reference: http://www.3ieimpact.org/media/filer_public/2012/08/24/3ie_policy_brief_experiment_summary.pdf (accessed July 2015)

✓ Is your product **branded** correctly with the right logos, font styles, addresses and web links?
✓ Have you made sure your product is well **designed** so it looks professional?
✓ How will you make sure your product is **printed** to a professional standard?
✓ Are your **photos** of high quality and at least 300dpi?
✓ Do you have **copyright** to use all the content?
✓ Has it been **approved** for release by your team and your collaborators?

Example: Screening for common perinatal mental disorders in low-resource, primary care, antenatal settings in South Africa policy brief

Strengths of the policy brief

- Obvious executive summary on the front in bright colour and larger font
- Clear key messages and recommendations on the front
- Lays out the problem, illustrated with pictures
- Short summary of study
- Results of study outline (evidence for recommendations)
- Recommendations
- References included
- Clear branding and logos included

Read the policy brief on the Mental Health Innovation Network website