

A Guide to Writing a CEPS Policy Brief

Purpose

A policy brief should present the rationale for choosing a particular policy option in a current policy debate. It requires **succinct consideration of policy options for a particular audience, such as** officials, politicians, development practitioners, journalists, advocates and researchers.

A policy brief is said to be a ‘professional’ communication tool because it is geared towards readers with a limited amount of time. A research paper is more ‘academic’ in that it pays more attention to the scholarly roots of particular arguments and judges their merit on intellectual and logical criteria.

As any policy debate is a market place of competing ideas, the purpose of a policy brief is to convince the target audience of the relevance or urgency of an issue and the need to adopt the proposed policy or course of action outlined, thereby serving as an impetus for change.

Characteristics of a policy brief

An effective policy brief should be:

- **Focused** – all aspects of the document need to focus on achieving the intended goal of convincing the target audience. For example, the argument should build on what readers might already know about the issue in question, and provide insight into what they probably don’t know. The scope of the brief should be restricted to a particular problem or area of a problem.
- **Evidence-based** – audiences will only be convinced by argumentation, supported by evidence, that the problem exists and what the consequences are to adopting particular alternatives.
- **Succinct** – the type of audiences targeted usually do not have the time or inclination to read an in-depth 20-page argument on a policy problem. It is common that policy briefs are 6–8 pages in length.
- **Understandable** – authors should use clear language, avoid jargon and obscure terms, and provide a well explained argument for a broad but knowledgeable audience.
- **Accessible** – readability will be enhanced by the use of clear, descriptive titles.
- **Practical and feasible** – the brief should provide arguments based on what is actually happening within a particular policy area and propose recommendations that 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 debate. However, in balancing all of the criteria above, many analysts also find the brief the most difficult policy tool to write.

Common elements of a policy brief

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Title of the paper: descriptive and punchy | 5. Policy recommendations |
| 2. Summary (circa 200 words) | 6. Appendices (only if necessary) |
| 3. Context and importance of the issue | 7. Sources consulted or recommended |
| 4. Critique of policy option(s) | |

More specifically,

Summary (or abstract) of approximately 200 words

- A description of the problem addressed;
- A statement on why the current approach/policy option is inadequate;
- Your policy recommendations for change or action.

Context and importance of the problem

The context and importance of the problem is the first building block of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

- A clear statement of the issue in focus that establishes its current importance and policy relevance,
- A short overview of the root causes of the problem; background.

Include only the essential facts that a decision-maker ‘needs to know’ to understand the context of the problem. Assume that you have been hired to filter through reams of information on behalf of a very busy and sleep-deprived person!

Critique of policy option(s)

The aim of this element is to detail the shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented and thus illustrate both the need for change and focus on where change needs to occur. 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 addressed. It sometimes also includes a closing paragraph re-emphasising the importance of action.

Appendices

Authors sometimes decide that their argument needs further support and include an appendix, but they should only be used 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 primarily on an academic audience. If you decide to include a short bibliography, then place it at the end. Some authors prefer to include a recommended readings section. Not surprisingly, many of the recommended readings are other related policy documents produced by their own organisations!

Sources of these guidelines

These guidelines are a synthesis of other guidelines produced by:

Eoin Young and Lisa Quinn, available at:

(<http://www.policy.hu/ipf/fel-pubs/samples/PolicyBrief-described.pdf>)

David Dickson. Guidelines for SciDev.Net Opinion articles:

(<http://www.scidev.net/ms/entebbe/index.cfm?pageid=134>)

Hong Kong University. Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief.

(<http://www.hku.hk/psychodp/P2/PSYC0036B/Tut1note.doc>)

Prof. Tsai. Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief:

(<http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~ktsai/policybrief.html>)