Rules for writing a Policy Brief (or most anything else)

Your paper should be clearly organized. Each section should have its own objective/purpose. Here's an example framework:

1. A short introduction that tells the reader why they should care. Perhaps appealing to others charged with setting societal goals –a noble laureate, a presidential speech, a UN development goal, or just a big frickin budget line item.
2. Describe the policy with care. This is a place where you can easily make a contribution. The world is full of rules, regulations, laws, taxes, programs, grants, legal precedents/judgements, tax-rules. Think tanks, advocates and politicians are constantly introducing new ones. Most of us are only vaguely familiar with them at best. What is the IRS rule on generation skipping transfer taxes (Form 706)? I have no idea, but I bet there's a reason it's there and also, I bet there's a number of ways it could distort incentives or be gamed.
3. Review existing theory and explain why it might justify the policy or why it might lead to unintended consequences. Ideas that could come into play include: social welfare, poverty alleviation, horizontal equity, vertical equity, inter-generational equity, externalities, asymmetric information, moral hazard, statutory tax vs tax incidence, distortions in behavior, dead weight loss, paternalism, public health/mortality, administrative/enforcement/monitoring costs.
4. Then assemble existing evidence by discussing findings from similar laws/rules/programs in another country, federal department, state or local government. Is there existing research on your exact policy? –summarize all work on it without plagiarizing or simply re-writing their paper. Combine this existing stock of knowledge to inform your understanding of the question at hand.
5. Conclude quickly, with perhaps a short call out for limitations of our existing understanding. Highlight the tradeoffs with policy. If you're confident, make a recommendation. Then go back to intro and make sure it's up there too.

Style guide:

1. Don't waste the reader's time.
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3. This isn't your fault. You've regularly been assigned 10-page, 20-page writing assignments; so you've picked up a bunch of padding techniques that stretch limited content to fill the page, but it's made your writing flaccid, boring, dull. Follow the dictum of Norman Mclean: "good writing is thrift." After university, no one will ever count the pages of your work to decide its merit. There is no staircase grading. Indeed, you will find the challenge is flipped. How do I say everything I want to say given an exogenous word constraint? Even in the absence of hard limits, a reader can always put down your work and decide it isn't worth their time. A single wasted sentence can be enough to lose them, so if it doesn't need to be in there, take it out.
4. Don't waste your own time. There's infinite space to share your work: white papers, Medium, blogs, reddit, twitter threads, your own website. At a minimum, a writing sample for would-be employers. Take this seriously, so you get more out of it than an A (if you're lucky). Then put it out there. Also, if you start thinking you really are writing for a discretionary reader, you'll write better and thus be more likely to get that A.

5. Remember, your objective is to inform and persuade. You gain authority and increase your persuasive power by clearly articulating the problem and wrestling with competing theories or findings. Many good white papers, not intended for a journal, do just that.
6. Your method to persuade, in this exercise, is to marshal evidence. You're not going to sway anyone with your soaring rhetoric. Also, your rhetoric won't soar.
7. Don't rely on clear partisans/interested parties/professional advocates for your citations. No one is going to be swayed by the nutrition research of the Texas Cattleman's Beef Association. At most, you can cite a few (competing partisans) in the intro to motivate your rigorous review of the evidence in the heart of the paper.
8. Don't simply re-write someone else's paper. Even with citation, this borders on plagiarism. It's also a waste of your time and violates the first two rules. No work exists in a vacuum. We all build on each other and in response to one another. Even if you've decide one paper is basically correct, tell the reader about the other works and why you agree with a particular researcher. Tell us how our understanding evolved. Your contribution in this case is to summarize, condense. Your job is to interpret more scholarly work for a smart, but uninformed audience, or combine disparate evidence to justify your own conclusions.
9. Each idea warrants its own paragraph. Don't smoosh ideas together in one mega paragraph, even if one idea is building on or in contrast to the previous one.
10. Avoid:
    a. Excessive

        ii. subheadings,

                IV. and associated notation.
11. Avoid hyperbole. Be passionate about your subject. But you must convince the reader you've earnestly engaged with evidence or arguments that go against your findings. If the reader thinks you're a closed-minded ideologue, they're going to discount everything else you have to say.
12. If you discover a motivating fact, or a piece of soaring rhetoric happens to occur to you while you're writing the heart of the paper, go up to the introduction and drop it in there or put it in the conclusion, don't just stick it in where the cursor happens to rest.
13. Don't paste in (even cited) someone else's table or figure. It took that person a whole paper to set up that table, specification, figure. Just summarize the point they're trying to make or the key parameter estimate and perhaps their identification scheme or theoretical insight.
14. If you've done your own statistical or econometric exercise, don't paste in stata/r output. Make custom tables and think hard about what you include in the table. Your goal with any table is that you should be able to read it without actually having to read the text (I know this contradicts the claim above, it's aspirational.)
15. No throat clearing phrases like "To be sure", "it is clearly known", "Certainly,"
16. Don't cite the author's host institution, just drop their name and date of publication in as you discuss the evidence they found or the model they developed.
17. Don't use "since" in place of "because."
18. Don't use big words in place of small words: "many" > "plethora." Only use big words if they in fact convey more meaning, or make your point more concisely (see rules 1 and 2.)
19. Don't reference "critics" without actually providing citations.

20. If you're discussing a model then you're talking about parameters or coefficients. If you're discussing regression results, these are coefficient estimates or parameter estimates.
21. Are you done? Go back and read it from the beginning and purge every word or sentence that doesn't need to be there.
22. Use the Chicago manual of style unless directed otherwise.
23. Every citation should be in the bibliography, and nothing should be in the bibliography that isn't cited.
24. Now set it down. Come back and re-read it with fresh eyes after 3 days. Does it still make sense to you? No? Then it won't to your reader. Rewrite.
25. Did you cover the same thing in multiple spots? Consolidate and rewrite.
26. Is the body of the paper a restatement of the introduction? Add content to the body and slim the intro. Rewrite.
27. Now exchange the paper with a friend or classmate and read each other's. Does it make sense to them? If not, rewrite.
28. Criticism, of any kind, is useful feedback. Do not get offended. The world will mostly just ignore you. Your friends, your mom, your disorganized teacher, they can all still offer useful criticism, because you can't easily escape your own head and read what's actually on the page.