POLICY BRIEF GUIDELINES[1]

These guidelines provide a synopsis of the policy brief which is broadly recognised as a core communication tool in the dissemination of policy advice[2]. To support writers of policy briefs, we've developed the guidelines in Q&A format and they focus on the purpose, core qualities and structure of the brief, as well as addressing three key questions which commonly arise when writing a policy brief.

a. What is the purpose & target audience for the policy brief?

The policy brief is a document produced to support an advocacy campaign with the intention to engage informed, non-specialist audiences. These are people who work regularly on the issue addressed in the brief, but will mostly never do research or read expert texts (e.g. policymakers, politicians, NGO staff, journalists)[3]. This circle of people is a highly important audience, as they are often decision makers and opinion leaders.

Audiences ***Tools:***	**Experts**	**Informed non-specialists**	**The public**
Advocacy tool 1	Policy Study	Policy Brief	Press Release
Advocacy tool 2	Meetings	Meetings	Lobbying Associations
Advocacy tool 3	Conference	Conference	Press Conference & Social Media

Table 1 – The policy brief in an example advocacy plan

As the table above illustrates, the policy brief is normally used as one tool in a broader advocacy campaign. Being such a short document, it is not normally enough on its own to convince an audience to act on the proposals put forward; rather the more realistic aim is for people to become interested and want to find out more about the analysis. You are really hoping they call you to meet them, invite you to present more or even ask their own experts to investigate further (e.g. in a government department).

To summarise, the writer/advocate's purpose in producing a policy brief is:

> To engage and convince your informed, non-specialist target audiences that your policy proposals are credible, relevant and a realistic possibility for an upcoming discussion and decision on the target issue.

b. What are the core qualities of the policy brief?

In constructing a policy brief that effectively serves the intended purpose, it is common for a brief to be:

- ***Engaging*** – as an advocacy tool trying to gain the attention and interest of your target audience, it is best to foreground the unexpected or striking facts/insights that you found in the research or analysis, e.g. a trend or story that challenges a commonly held point of view on the issue. Leading with something surprising or challenging can create the cognitive dissonance[4] needed for these audiences to really want further clarification, thereby serving the purpose of the brief.

[1] © ICPA 2015
[2] http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/594.pdf
[3] Of course, you can meet policymakers, politicians, NGO staff, journalists who are specialists/experts, but basically in most campaigns, this is the circle of people who depend on getting expert input from others.
[4] "*Cognitive dissonance* refers to a situation involving *conflicting attitudes*, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a *feeling of discomfort* leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance." http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html

- ***Policy relevant & focused*** – all aspects of the policy brief need to be framed in the discussion that the target audience is currently having on the issue and the questions *they* are asking, i.e. be policy relevant. This is often challenging when you come from discussing the issue in a research or expert circle.
- ***Professional, not academic*** –The audience for the policy brief is not normally interested in the research/analysis procedures conducted to produce the evidence (beyond being assured they are reliable), but are very interested to know the writer's new insights on the problem and potential solutions, based on the new evidence.
- ***Succinct*** – audiences for policy briefs commonly do not have the time or inclination to read an in-depth 20+ page argument on a policy problem. Therefore, it is common that policy briefs do not exceed six to eight pages, but are more commonly shorter at no more than four pages. Succinct also refers to expression, or put more simply, the reader expects short sentences with an easy clarity and flow.
- ***Limited*** – to provide a targeted argument within four pages, the focus of the brief needs to be limited to specific aspects of the broader problem considered. This focus is normally chosen based on a consideration of what would be important or striking for the intended audience. In only presenting the tip of the iceberg, many researchers worry about this reduction in complexity of the argument, but it's important to remember that the brief is only intended to open the argument, not complete it.
- ***Understandable*** – This not only refers to using clear and simple language (i.e. not the jargon and concepts of an academic discipline) but also to providing a well-explained and easy to follow argument targeting your broad, but knowledgeable audience.
- ***Accessible*** – the writer of the policy brief should facilitate the ease of use of the whole document and allow multiple points of entry to the main message for the skim reader. Therefore, layout, subtitles, visuals/tables/graphs and other ways to highlight the key messages are all very important. In fact, a small accessibility test for the brief is to see if the main message is clear without reading any of the main text.
- ***Branded & promotional*** – Organisations that produce briefs present them using many promotional or marketing features, e.g. designed layout, use of colour, logos, photographs, slogans, and illustrative quotes. The idea is not only to improve the access or to look professional, but also to brand them, i.e. all briefs from the organisation will look the same, which is important as you are trying to build recognition for and the reputation of your products and advice.
- ***Practical & feasible*** – the policy brief is an action-oriented tool targeting policy practitioners. As such, the brief must provide arguments based on what is actually happening in practice and propose recommendations that seem realistic to the target audience.

c. How is a policy brief structured?

As a short, advocacy-focused document used to engage target audiences in a dialogue on a pressing policy issue, the key structural elements commonly found in the policy brief are as follows:

The Policy Brief	
1. Title	
2. Executive summary	
3. Rationale for action	The Policy Logic
4. Proposed policy option(s)	
5. Policy recommendations	
6. Sources consulted or recommended	
7. Link to original research/analysis	
8. Contact details	

Table 2 – Common structural elements of the policy brief

At the core of the policy brief and highlighted in the red box are three elements that are core to any policy argument and what we call 'the policy logic'. This logic represents a movement in the argument as follows:

Policy brief elements	Focus	Key questions answered
3. Rationale for action	Problem	Why do something different?
4. Proposed policy option(s)	Solution	What to do? (And what not?)
5. Policy Recommendations	Application	How?

Table 3 – The elements of the policy logic

A clarification before going into the structural elements in more detail: these suggested elements are not a set of handcuffs or a blueprint that you *must* follow. They outline a set of common reader expectations, but there is still space for you to be creative in how you use them to suit your purpose. In fact, writers play around with writing approaches all the time.

1. Title Make it 'sticky'!

As an advocacy tool, the title of the brief is an important opening element in grabbing the attention of the reader and may also be used to start communicating the essence of your message. Beware of just cutting and pasting more academic titles, but rather try to make your title 'sticky' or memorable. For example, "An equal chance for local self government" rather than "An analysis of the effects of fiscal equalisation formula on public service delivery at municipal level in BiH". While this second title may be suitable for a policy study, it focuses on reporting the research, not communicating your message.

2. Executive summary Grab the readers attention!

Even though the brief is short, most include a one or maximum two-paragraph summary, with the aim of clearly stating the core findings and recommendations in the paper and further grabbing the reader's attention. It normally includes clear statements on the following issues:

- The specific issue or problem addressed in the brief;
- The most striking policy failures or insights identified;
- The shape or main focus of your recommendations.

Remember this may be the only thing some readers read, so make it punchy and memorable. If effective, it will hopefully entice your audience to read further.

3. Rationale for action *Key question*: why do something different?

This part of the policy brief is focused on the policy problem. The aim in this section is to present the most striking facts or elements of your analysis in order to convince your audiences that they should rethink the issue and ultimately, may need to change the current policy approach, i.e. you provide a reason to act differently. This element of the brief normally includes sections which:

- Frame the paper, by detailing the policy problem in the local context;
- Develop the core issues or striking facts that have lead to current policy failures;
- End with the impact of these policy failures.

In our research, we have found that most writers include no more than four or five most striking points of policy failure or interest in this section and develop on those, rather than trying to summarise the whole research project they have done.

4. Proposed policy option(s) *Key questions* - What to do? And what not?

In this element, you get to the choice of strategic policy alternatives you have identified to fix the identified failure. Depending on the focus of your brief, this element can be quite developed or shorter - those wanting to open a discussion of options will make this a main element of the paper, whereas someone wanting to focus on suggesting a specific new solution may only mention the strategic options and then develop the recommendations section more (see 'dealing with space' question below). For those interested in developing the section, your aim is to present a convincing argument for the option you have chosen. The element normally includes sections on the following:

- The options or alternatives considered;
- The principles and evaluation criteria you have used to weigh up the options;
- An argument on why you have chosen one option over the others available.

It is important to remember that the level of discussion in this element is at the *strategic* level, e.g. papers focused on regulatory change often weigh options where the government is playing the lead role versus those where the market does the job. The specifics of how you propose to implement this approach will come in the next section.

5. Policy recommendations *Key question* - How?

Next comes the specifics of how to implement the option you have chosen. The aim is to put forward a feasible and practical set of recommendations that could deliver the chosen option and convince the reader you understand how policy systems and government programmes work. This element normally includes sections on the following:

- The specific sets of actions that various actors should take to deliver your chosen option;
- Sometimes also includes a closing paragraph re-emphasising the importance of action.

The issue of space in the brief is often a challenge in this section, i.e. how much to include? The test is to demonstrate the feasibility and fit of the option, but not to present a full action plan. This section often features recommendations divided by actor (e.g. what local governments should do) and the series of actions presented using bullet points or numbers.

6. Sources consulted or recommended

This element can be one of two things:

Sources consulted –
It can simply be a list of the sources referenced in the paper. As in an academic paper, you are trying to support the key points of the argument with strong sources. It is worth noting that policy briefs normally do not have an extensive list of sources – just the key ones.

Sources recommended -
Alternatively, it may be other readings that you or your organisations have produced that can further inform the discussion in the brief. The intention is to show you have a reputation and a track record of commentary and analysis in this area. This approach is normally taken by more established think tanks or commentators and also means that you feel that you have the reputation to make a credible argument without the need to reference others.

7. Link to original research/analysis *Key question* - Where's the full argument?

As mentioned above, the policy brief is an advocacy tool targeting a broad non-specialist audience and realistically, can only aspire to raise interest in the issue, rather than try to answer all questions. However, as you can see in Table 1, you also need to develop communication tools for experts that do answer all the questions and give the full argument, e.g. longer research-oriented policy papers like

the policy study[5]. With this need in mind, it is important to connect this shorter argument in the brief to the full version, or as we say connect the tip of the iceberg to the actual iceberg. If the brief is presented in a PDF, you can also include a hyperlink to the full study. The following example of a link to the original is taken from a policy brief[6] and appears at the bottom of the first page:

> This policy brief is based on the PREM Working Papers, 'Pastureland degradation and poverty within herder communities in Mongolia: data analysis and game estimation' by Wietze Lise, Sebastiaan Hess and Byamba Purev, and 'Carrying capacity dynamics, livestock commercialisation and land degradation in Mongolia's free market era' by Ton Dietz, Enkh-Amgalan, Tumur Erdenechuluun and Sebastiaan Hess. The full reports are available online at: www.prem-online.org

8. Contact details *Key question* – Who wrote this?

In the policy brief, the focus is not just on the message in the paper, but on who is presenting the analysis, i.e. the messenger. Building your credibility is important in policy communities and so, clearly stating who you are and how you can be contacted is important. On a more practical note, you are hoping that stakeholders will want to ask you more questions and follow up on the brief, so making it easy for them to do so is important.

d. Isn't the policy brief just a summary of the longer policy paper or study?

As mentioned above, the starting point for a brief is not the idea of presenting your research or analysis in a shortened format, but rather the intention is to engage a broader less expert audience and get them interested in what you have to say. As an advocacy tool, the point is to choose those things that would interest or surprise that audience and then provide more opportunities though different tools/events/meetings to find out more about the analysis you are presenting. So, the policy brief is not just a 'sexy version' of the executive summary of a longer paper. If you think about the process of summarising, you are usually instructed to remove the detail and collect the main points of the argument as an overview. This works as part of a longer paper so you can go deeper, but as a stand alone document, it is not that accessible, especially for those who are not experts. When people try to summarise a longer paper in four pages, you often see a lot of text in tiny fonts that makes it even less accessible. Remember, you are trying to present the tip of the iceberg that would interest the audience, not squeeze in a summary version of the whole iceberg!

e. Are we not just reducing the complexity and therefore, value of our argument by presenting it in a brief?

Simply put, this question emerges from an academic expectation of the role of any paper, i.e. that they should contain all elements of justification to support the positions put forward. There is simply no way to view the policy brief outside of the advocacy context in which it has evolved and the advocacy purpose it is used for. Further, there is a clear relationship between the brief and expert discussions presented in longer, more developed expert papers. To put this point another way: the complexity will follow the discussion started in the brief. Further, another assumption behind the question is that the more accessible you make the argument for non-experts, the more you simplify and reduce the quality of the argument. Again we would challenge this position, and suggest a 'translation' process of communicating complicated ideas in simple language that goes by the maxim of 'making simple, but not simplifying[7]'.

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5 http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/writing_effective_public_policy_papers_young_quinn.pdf

6 Poverty Reduction and Environmental Management (2005) ***Herder Communities in Mongolia's Free Market Era***. Available on the World Wide Web. URL: http://www.prem-online.org/archive/2/doc/uitgave9.pdf [4 July, 2006].

7 Einstein cited in Kingdon, John (1984) *Agendas, Alternatives & Public Policy*. Boston: Little, Brown.

f. How do we deal with the issue of limited space?

One of the great challenges of the brief is how to put something meaningful in four pages. This is often more difficult for researchers than writing the 50 page expert paper! In our analysis, we can see that the advocate's purpose and the type of discussion they are targeting lead them to make decisions on how to lengthen and shorten the various elements. Three common examples are provided in the example below:

1. Setting new policy goals/agendas
Rationale
Recommendations at the goal level

2. Arguing Options
Rationale
Options
Recommendations

3. Putting forward a new solution
Rationale
Recommendations at a detailed programme proposal level

About the guidelines

These guidelines were developed by ICPA drawing on experience training & mentoring researchers and activists over a decade in the production of policy briefs (http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/training), from our guidebooks on policy paper writing (http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/publications) and policy advocacy (http://advocacyguide.icpolicyadvocacy.org/) and research into various policy genres. Many use the term 'policy brief' and produce something different than we have described here. We approached these guidelines by studying multiple examples of policy briefs and also other existing descriptions of this type of policy communication tool and then tried to describe the most commonly held purpose, focus and structural elements of the brief. This "genre analysis" approach allows us a guide based on description, rather than prescription.