

A photograph of a person from behind, standing in a grassy, rocky field. They are wearing a blue jacket, dark pants, and a beanie, and have a black backpack. They are looking down at an open map. In the background, there are mountains under a clear sky.

# Find Your Creative Direction: How to write a great creative brief

## *Only 25% of new projects start with a creative brief.*

Everybody seems to agree that creative briefs are important. It makes you wonder why they're used so infrequently. New projects start with a creative brief only about a quarter of the time, according to the [2017 In-House Creative Industry Report](#).

It's probably because they can be a pain in the neck. It's intimidating to look at a blank sheet of paper knowing people are going to rely on it to create an ad that could be viewed by millions, and then point the finger at you if it doesn't work. They're also hard to get right. Lots of briefs are simply data dumps for customer research and product information. In a recent survey of 1,200 ad execs, 53% say creative briefs lack focus. A good brief takes deliberation and discipline. When Blaise Pascal remarked, "I would have written you a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time," he could have been describing a creative brief.

But an effective brief is worth the effort. Great creative briefs set off creative explosions that can result in work that alters the trajectory of a good business or brand. They accelerate the creative process by putting teams on a more direct path to breakthrough solutions. Successful briefs clarify the purpose of the project and inspire creative thinking so teams can deliver their best work.

Review and approval processes also move faster. It's easier to determine which executions hit the mark when there is an objective tool everyone has agreed to for evaluating success. You simply can't afford not to start every new creative project with a sound briefing document. The trick is to make the process for creating one as manageable and consistent as possible.



# Creative Brief and to the Point

Great briefs keep creative teams working in the right direction. Like a compass that points steadily north, they keep teams on the shortest route to their destination. They provide direction about where you're going and how to recognize when you've successfully arrived. They need to be focused to get to on-target creative. There are just a few rules to live by.

## Get to the point

They're called briefs, after all. A creative director I know likes to say, "a creative brief is just that." If it doesn't fit on one to two pages, it's probably too long. Brevity makes a briefing document easy to read and absorb. It forces disciplined thinking. It's easy to write a long brief. A shorter one takes more discipline in order to be clear and direct.

## Provide inspiration

One of the biggest tests when you're writing a brief is to find a way to bring the creative challenge to life. It helps to use lively, conversational language that informs but also inspires. Inspiration often results when you get project stakeholders involved in discussion and debate about answers to the key briefing questions (more on that below). This helps to strengthen thinking and align participants in the process.

## Be adaptable

Many sections of a creative brief are consistently required. But some content may need to shift from one brief to the next according to the nature of the project. Forms are great and help standardize successful briefing practices, but you can't be a slave to a form if it isn't the best way to serve the project.

## Avoid Wrong Turns

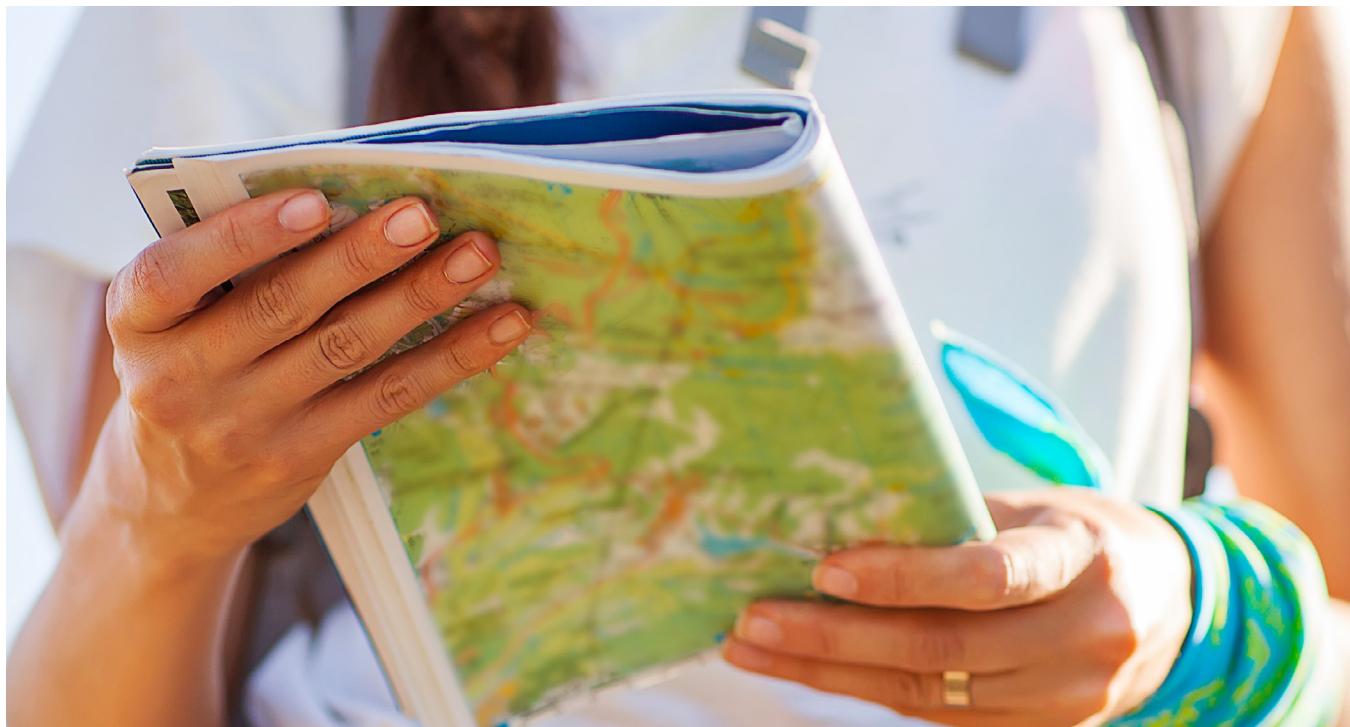
A weak creative brief can doom projects to failure. At best, they're ignored and simply waste time. At worst, they steer a creative project to the wrong answer. Maybe the biggest mistake you can make in a creative brief is getting the goals wrong. Great creative work that solves the wrong problem doesn't do any good. Goals focus creative work, and make it very clear what the project is trying to achieve.

The most frequent mistakes are providing either unnecessary detail or not enough information. Briefs are meant to propel the creative process forward and focus it on ideas that will deliver the biggest business impact. Unnecessary detail just slows the process with distracting detours, while a lack of specificity leaves the creative team with too much ground to explore. Like they say, if you don't know where you're going then any road will take you there.



Insights from analysis or customer research can be the fuel that drives creative innovation. They can also be the distracting roadside attractions that keep you from getting anywhere. An insight is much more than simply restating the obvious or a fact everyone already knows. An insight is a glimmering piece of information that sparks ideas, gives you a peek into what your audience really cares about or a problem you can solve for them. It's not a made-up sentence from a fictitious persona that doesn't sound like anything anyone would actually say.

Creative briefs do not need to impress anyone with the latest jargon. Keep the language clear and easy to read. If you're working with freelancers or a new team, it can be useful to define terms and industry-specific acronyms.



## The Essential Brief

Although a creative brief must adapt to suit the requirements of a particular assignment, there are questions that have to be answered every time. These can be used to create a flexible template for all your creative projects.

# Objectives

This is the most important part of the brief. The team has to understand what they're trying to accomplish before they can get started. One way to write a good objective is to articulate what the audience should feel, think or know after exposure to the communication. No matter the approach, the goal should be clear and measurable.

## Target audience

Your audience description should bring the target to life. Demographics are a good place to start, but don't provide much useful color to work with. Details about attitudes and behaviors unique to your audience can be the spark that lights a creative fire. Include details about the ways they will interact with the communication.

## Promise and support

What is the single most important thing the audience should get from the experience? This isn't a description of the product or offering, but a focused expression of how it will benefit them. This should be concise to keep executions focused and on target. Provide support for your promise. The promise can be the emotional driver that affects behavior. The support is the rational reason that provides justification for the emotional response. These are the features and details that back up the benefits.

## Competition

Include an overview of your competitors, their positioning, key benefits and claims. Share an interpretation of their marketing efforts. Try to reverse engineer their strategy and positioning so the team understands the territory being claimed by the competition. These details can really help inform creative direction and ensure you're aiming for fertile territory.

## Creative requirements

The team needs to know about any specific requirements driven by media or environment. What are the ad formats or creative units planned? Is there anything the team should know about the environment where the communication will appear? Are there any rules or restrictions they should be aware of? If you have a brand style guide, examples of past campaigns or related projects, this is the place to share them.

## Budget and timing

Money and deadlines are reality. They put boundaries on your project that everyone needs to understand. Be clear about what the team has to work with. This can also be a good section to describe the overall creative process for development, edits, reviews and approvals.





# Keep Exploring

The perfect creative brief hasn't been written yet. There is always room to improve. It's a good practice to take a look back after assignments are complete to examine where briefs succeeded and failed. There's no limit on ways to put creative teams on the path to killer creative. Get the basics right, and keep exploring for ways to inform and inspire.

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