

# The Policy Brief

## Assignment 5

The following notes are about writing briefs in general. Apply these guidelines to your brief when they apply – most, but not all these points are likely to assist in writing your brief.

I suggest an 800 word count. Three choices are detailed near the end of this discussion – on page three.

The assignment (A5) is due on March 30. Handing in class on this date is preferred but my mailbox is an option.

I assume/hope this assignment will be good practice for future endeavours.

The policy brief is a document which **outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate**. It is commonly produced in response to a request directly from a decision-maker or within an organisation that intends to advocate for the position detailed in the brief.

Depending on the role of the writer or organisation producing the document, the brief may only provide a targeted discussion of the current alternatives without arguing for a particular one. On the other end of the scale the brief may advocate and provide an argument for the adoption of a particular alternative. In any case, **the purpose of the policy brief is to convince the target audience of the urgency of the current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action outlined and therefore, serve as an impetus for action**.

As with all good marketing tools, **the key to success is targeting the particular audience for your message**. The most common audience for a policy brief is the decision-maker but, it is also not unusual to use the document to support broader advocacy initiatives targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience (e.g. decision makers, journalists, diplomats, administrators, researchers).

In constructing a policy brief that can effectively serve its intended purpose, it must be: **Focused** – all aspects of the policy brief (from the message to the layout) need to be strategically focused on the intended goal of convincing the target audience. For example, the argument provided must build on what they do know about the problem and provide insight about what they do not know about the problem. It should be presented in language that reflects their values, i.e. using ideas, evidence and language that will convince them.

**Professional, not academic** –The common audience for a policy brief is generally not interested in the research/analysis procedures conducted to produce the evidence, but

interested in the writer's perspective on the problem and potential solutions based on the new evidence.

**Evidence-based** – The policy brief is a communication tool produced by policy analysts and therefore potential audiences not only expect a rational argument but will only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives.

**Limited** – to provide an adequately comprehensive and targeted argument within a limited space, the focus needs to be limited to a particular problem or area of a problem.

**Succinct** – The type of audiences targeted 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 4– 6 pages in length (i.e. usually not longer than 2,000 words). In this assignment 1000 words is the maximum

**Understandable** – This not only refers to using clear and simple language (i.e. not the jargon of an academic discipline) but also to providing a well-explained and easy to follow argument targeting a knowledgeable audience.

**Accessible** – the writer of the policy brief should facilitate use of the Brief for the target audience and therefore, subdivide the text using clear descriptive titles to guide the reader.

**Promotional** – the policy brief should catch the eye of the potential audience in order to create a favourable impression (e.g. professional, innovative etc.) Many brief writers use features of the promotional leaflet (use of colour, use of logos, photographs, illustrative quotes etc.).

**Practical and feasible** – the policy brief is an action-oriented tool targeting policy.

Makers and provide arguments based on what is actually happening in practice and propose recommendations realistic to the target audience. The policy brief is usually said to be the most common and effective written communication tool in a policy campaign. However, in balancing all of the criteria above, many analysts also find the brief the most difficult policy tool to write.

Policy briefs directly reflect the different roles that the policy analyst commonly plays, i.e. from researcher to advocate. The type of brief that we are focusing on in Assignment 5 is one from the more action-oriented, advocacy end of the continuum. Although there is much variation, the most common elements of the policy brief are as follows:

### **Title of the paper**

The title aims to catch the attention of the reader and compel him/her to read on and so needs to be **descriptive and relevant**.

### **Executive summary**

The executive summary aims to convince the reader that the brief is worth in depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a 1 to 2 paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

- A ***description of the problem*** addressed;
- A statement on ***why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed***;
- Your ***recommendations for action***.

### **Sources consulted or recommended**

Include a short bibliography at the end. Many writers prefer to lead their readers to further reading and include a recommended readings section. Not surprisingly, many of the recommended readings are other related policy documents produced by their organisations!

### **Sources for the above guidelines**

This description and suggestions was developed based on samples and guidelines including:

David Dickson. *Guidelines for SciDev.Net Opinion articles*. Available on the World Wide Web.

URL:<http://www.scidev.net/ms/entebbe/index.cfm?pageid=134> [6 Oct. 2014].

Richards. The policy options brief. Available on the World Wide Web. URL:

[http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/Fas/Jacobson/629/webnotes/policy\\_brief.htm](http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/Fas/Jacobson/629/webnotes/policy_brief.htm) [6 October 2014].

Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief. Available on the World Wide Web. URL:

<http://gdppc.idebate.org/content/writing-guidelines-policy-brief> [6 Oct. 2014].

### **Choose one of the following:**

1) The mayor of a city in northern Ontario has asked you to prepare a brief about a proposal by Trans-Canada Pipeline to use an existing gas pipeline to carry “dilbit” from the Alberta Oil Sands to St. John, New Brunswick. The mayor is concerned about risk to water because the pipeline crosses several hundred streams and some major rivers that flow into the Great Lakes. The mayor spoke against the proposal at meetings held by the Northern Ontario Municipal Association (NOMA). Your information will be part of the review process.

2) Mayor Hobbes of Thunder Bay, whom you met and exchanged cards with in a meeting about Waukasha diverting water, has asked you to comment and suggest policy about the American budget item that reduces their Great Lakes funding from \$300 million to \$10 million. He wants to note concerns and warn of the implications of

such a budget decision for various Great Lakes cities (and their mayors and local governments).

3) A member of parliament in northern Ontario has asked you to prepare a policy brief on mining in the riding. Current projects include exploratory drilling near a river that empties into Lake Superior and a barite mining project on a Lake Superior island located 5 km off-shore.

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