



The Policy Brief as a Master's Thesis Format

Translating research into actionable policy advice

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Overview

- 1** **Intro & Background (~5min)**
- 2** **Key Elements of a Policy Brief (~20min)**
- 3** **Individual Exercise & Peer Feedback (~30min)**
- 4** **Review of Real-Life Examples (~20min)**
- 5** **Wrap up & References (~15min)**

Personal Intro

- PhD Economist with International Monetary Fund
- Partner with McKinsey & Company
- CEO of CGAP, housed at the World Bank
- Co-founder and Managing Partner of a FinTech Venture Capital Firm with Purpose



Alternative master thesis formats/sessions:

1. Policy brief
2. Consulting project report
3. (Social enterprise) business plan

Drawing on Experience Working on Financial Inclusion

Emerging markets (~2010)

- Half of working-age adults completely outside of formal financial system
- Small, costly & ineffective banking system; branch & cash-based
- Mobile money and microcredit as important proof points

Some results since then

- Share of working-age adults with account: **51%** (2011) → **79%** (2024)
- Gender gap: **9 %**-points (2011) → **4 %**-points (2024)
- Share of adults with digital payments: **60%+** (2024)
- Formal savings participation in emerging markets: **40%+** (2024)

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Why a Policy Brief?

- Traditional academic papers $\neq$ always actionable
- Policymakers want concise, solution-oriented advice
- Policy briefs translate research into real-world actions

Policy Brief vs Research Paper

	Policy Brief	Research Paper
Audience	Policymakers, practitioners	Scholars, academics
Goal	Influence decisions	Contribute to science
Length	4–10 pages (+ appendix)	20-40 pages
Tone	Clear, persuasive	Technical, more formal
Structure	Front-loaded (summary first)	Rear-loaded (methods first)
Evidence	Synthesized, multiple sources	Detailed, original data

Based on: Ndiokubwayo. K. (2023), “*Know How to Write an Influential Policy Brief: A Systematic Guide to Writers and Readers*,” *Journal of Classroom Practices*, Vol. 2(2), pp. 1-10.

Why the Policy Brief Matters for a Master's Thesis

- Aligns research with **real-world application**
- Builds skills in **knowledge translation** and **policy communication**
- Encourages **results-oriented** thinking



- *Thesis-as-brief = evidence-based argument + actionable recommendations*

Question: "What topics that you are interested in could be re-framed as a policy brief?"

Mapping Traditional Thesis to Policy Brief Equivalent

Thesis Component

Literature review

Data & analysis

Discussion

Conclusion

Policy Brief Equivalent

Context & problem statement

Evidence synthesis

Policy options

Recommendations & implications

Logic of Policy Brief: From Research to Action



- Generate insights

- Synthesize & interpret

- Present alternatives

- Propose solutions

- Influence & implement

Typical Structure of a Policy Brief

- Executive summary
- Context & problem statement
- Synthesis of analysis & evidence
- Policy options
- Recommendations
- (Implementation strategies – not always)
- Key references
- (Appendix with more research detail – necessary for you)

Writing for a Policy Audience

- Plain language, no academic jargon
- Use short paragraphs & headings
- Lead with key messages
- Visualize data where you can (tables, graphs)
- Keep tone persuasive yet neutral

Comments from Actual Policy-Makers

“Briefs should be inspiring. They should be practical, realistic and relevant to the local context.”

(Head of local government body, Kerala State, India)

“When I read policy briefs, I look for concise information that takes into account the policy process, and provides information relevant to the problems at hand.”

(State-level policy-maker, Brazil)

From: Jones, N. & C. Walsh (2008), *“Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research,”* ODI Background Note.

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Example topic: Financial Inclusion

- 1.4 billion, working age adults remain unbanked
- More people have mobile phones than bank accounts
- Digital IDs and non-traditional access points would reduce barriers to initial on-boarding of previously unbanked
- Banking policy reforms—like eKYC (digital means to verify customer identity) and mobile agent banking —enable inclusion while protecting consumers and integrity of the financial system

Example Problem Statement and Recommendations

- **Problem Statement:**

“Only 40 % of rural women in Country X have bank accounts because KYC rules exclude citizens without national IDs”

- **Recommendations:**

- Introduce tiered eKYC allowing mobile or digital-ID verification for lower-value banking purposes
- Allow mobile phone agent-banking networks through simplified licensing as alternative to traditional branches
- Mandate interoperability across digital wallets and variety of access points.

Exercise: Draft Your Own Policy Snapshot (~10–15min)

- **Goal:** Practice translating research into policy language
- **Instructions:**
 - Pick a real policy or development issue (ideally in an area of your interest or even thesis topic)
 - Write one clear problem sentence
 - Identify a policy lever
 - Draft three short, actionable recommendations
- **Tips:** Focus on audience and clarity, not technical detail (for today, ok to assume evidence)

Pair-wise Peer Feedback (~5min each)

Sample questions for each other:

- Is the **problem statement** clear?
- Is a **policy lever** identified?
- Are recommendations **feasible** and within policymaker's **authority**?
- Are recommendations **specific** and **measurable**?

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Review of Real-World, Policy Brief Examples

- *“How to Prioritize Women for Financial Equality and Inclusive Economies,”* UNDP Global Policy Network Brief, 2023.
(6– pages: Well-rounded example)
- *“Deposit Insurance and Digital Financial Inclusion,”* CGAP Brief, 2016.
(4–pages: Not so good, e.g., some policy options, but tentative, no recommendations)
- *“The Future of Small Business Entrepreneurship: Job Generator for the US Economy,”* Brookings Policy Brief No. 175, 2010.
(8–pages: Also, not so good: Process intro, policy goals linked to recommendations?)
- *“Digital Service Delivery for Stronger Communities: Can Increased 311 Usage Improve Civic Engagement?”* Harvard Kennedy School PAE Brief, 2025.
(9 pages: Very good. Tangible issue, context & challenge, why it matters, root cause analysis, recommendations, data visualization, endnotes. **Actual Master Thesis!**)

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Key Takeaways

- Define a precise problem and identify target audience
- Present issue → evidence → policy → impact logic
- Write clearly, briefly, persuasively
- Link research to real policy decisions

References and further resources

Guides:

- Antonopoulou, V. et al (2021), "Research engagement with policy makers: a practical guide to writing policy briefs," *National Institute for Health Research, Policy Paper*.
- Jones, N. & C. Walsh (2008), "Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research," *ODI Background Note*.
- Ndiokubwayo, K. (2023), "Know How to Write an Influential Policy Brief: A Systematic Guide to Writers and Readers," *Journal of Classroom Practices, Vol. 2(2), pp. 1-10*.
- Ochoa-Tocachi, B. (n.d.), "Developing Policy Briefs, Informing Policies with Ecosystem and Landscape Assessment Results," *World Bank Global Program on Sustainability*.

Further examples:

- Brookings Institution, Policy Briefs
- Center for Global Development, Notes
- Harvard Kennedy School, Policy Briefs
- World Bank, Policy Briefs