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Know How to Write an Influential Policy Brief: A Systematic Guide to Writers and Readers.

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Summary

A policy brief is a concise document that summarizes a policy issue, provides analysis and offers specific recommendations to policymakers and decision-makers. Its purpose is to inform and influence policy decisions by providing evidence-based arguments and practical suggestions for addressing a particular problem or achieving a desired outcome. Policy briefs are typically written by researchers, analysts, or experts in a particular field and are aimed at policymakers, government officials, or organizations responsible for shaping and implementing policies. They are often used to communicate complex information clearly and concisely, helping decision-makers understand the issue at hand and make informed choices. Since many scientists, writers, and readers give little attention, I thoroughly reviewed what it is, how it is written, and why it matters. A well-written policy brief typically includes the following elements: (a) Executive Summary: A brief overview of the main problem, recommendations, and policy implications. (b) Introduction: Provides background information on the policy issue and its relevance, including its social, economic, or environmental impact. (c) Problem Statement: Clearly defines the problem or issue being addressed, including its causes, scope, and implications. It identifies any existing gaps or challenges in the current policy framework. (d) Analysis: Presents a thorough analysis of the issue, including relevant data, research findings, and supporting evidence. It explores different perspectives, underlying factors, and potential consequences of different policy options. (e) Recommendations: Offers specific and actionable recommendations for policy actions or interventions. These recommendations should be feasible, practical, and aligned with the objectives of the policy brief. (f) Implementation Strategies: Provides guidance on implementing the recommended policies or actions effectively. This may include suggested timelines, stakeholder engagement strategies, or considerations for monitoring and evaluation. (g) Conclusion: Summarizes the key points discussed in the policy brief and reinforces the importance of the recommendations.

Keywords: policy brief, research article, report, reader, writer

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1. Why write a policy brief?

Policy briefs are powerful tools for informing, influencing, and guiding policy decisions. They enable concise communication of complex issues, provide evidence-based recommendations, and contribute to evidence-driven policymaking. Writing a policy brief serves several important purposes. Here are some reasons why writing a policy brief is valuable (Jones and Walsh, 2008; Harvard Kennedy School, 2023):

Influence policy decisions: Policy briefs are designed to influence policymakers and decision-makers. Policy briefs can inform policy discussions and shape decision-making by presenting well-reasoned arguments, evidence, and recommendations. They provide a platform to advocate for specific policy changes or interventions that can address societal challenges or achieve desired outcomes.

Communicate complex issues concisely: Policy issues are often complex and multifaceted, involving various stakeholders, factors, and implications. Policy briefs condense this complexity into a concise and accessible format. They present information clearly, straightforwardly, allowing policymakers to grasp key points quickly and make informed decisions.

Bridge the gap between research and policy: Policy briefs bridge research and policy by translating academic or technical knowledge into practical policy recommendations. They draw on existing research, data, and evidence to provide policymakers with actionable insights. Policy briefs help ensure that research findings are translated into policy actions and have a real-world impact.

Raise awareness and create a sense of urgency: Policy briefs can raise awareness about specific issues by presenting compelling evidence and highlighting their importance. They can draw attention to emerging trends, critical problems, or missed opportunities, creating a sense of urgency for policymakers to address these issues and take appropriate action.

Provide solutions and recommendations: Policy briefs go beyond highlighting problems; they offer specific recommendations for addressing the identified issues. By providing evidence-based solutions, policy briefs offer policymakers tangible options for policy actions or interventions. Evidence, expert opinions, and lessons learned from successful interventions often support recommendations.

Foster evidence-based decision-making: Policy briefs emphasize the importance of evidence-based decision-making. Policy briefs promote informed and evidence-driven policy choices by providing reliable data, research findings, and analysis. They encourage policymakers to base their decisions on objective information rather than subjective opinions or political considerations.

Facilitate stakeholder engagement: Policy briefs can be shared with various stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, civil society organizations, and the general public. They facilitate dialogue, collaboration, and engagement among stakeholders interested in the policy issue. Policy briefs can serve as a starting point for discussions, debates, and consultations on policy options and potential solutions.

In summary, the absence of policy briefs can lead to uninformed decision-making, limited awareness of critical issues, missed opportunities for evidence-based policies, reduced stakeholder engagement, and diminished transparency in the policymaking process. Policy briefs play a crucial role in shaping effective and informed policy decisions, and their absence can have significant consequences for society.

2. When are policy briefs written?

It is important to note that the timing of policy brief writing may vary depending on the specific context and needs. Policy briefs can be prepared in advance to inform policy discussions or may be written in response to emerging issues or policy debates. The ultimate goal is to provide timely and relevant information to support evidence-based decision-making and policy development. Policy briefs are typically written and utilized in various stages of the policymaking process. Here are some common scenarios when policy briefs are written (Haddad, 2005; Goe and Stickler, 2008; Stowe and Note, 2021; PACE, 2023):

Policy development: Policy briefs are often written when there is a need to develop new policies or modify existing ones. They can be used to inform policymakers about emerging issues, provide evidence-based recommendations, and offer potential policy options to address specific challenges or achieve desired outcomes.

Policy analysis and evaluation: Policy briefs can be written to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies. They can assess the impact of policies, identify gaps or shortcomings, and propose recommendations for improvement or adjustment. Policy briefs in this context aim to inform policymakers about the outcomes and consequences of implemented policies.

Decision-making processes: Policy briefs play a crucial role during decision-making processes. They provide concise information, analysis, and recommendations that enable policymakers to make informed choices. Policy briefs help decision-makers understand the problem at hand, explore different options, and assess the potential implications and trade-offs associated with different policy choices.

Advocacy and influence: Policy briefs are often used to influence policymakers and stakeholders. They are written to raise awareness about specific issues, present compelling evidence, and advocate for particular policy positions or interventions. Policy briefs can be disseminated to decision-makers, government officials, organizations, and the public to promote policy changes and garner support.

Communication and dialogue: Policy briefs facilitate communication and dialogue among stakeholders. They can be a starting point for discussions, consultations, and policy collaboration. Policy briefs are shared with policymakers, experts, civil society organizations, and the public to foster engagement, solicit feedback, and promote participatory decision-making processes.

3. Difference between policy briefs and other scientific writing, such as research articles and reports

Policy briefs, research articles, and reports are all different forms of scientific writing, each serving distinct purposes and audiences. Here are some key differences between these types of scientific

writing (University of Illinois Library, no date; Young and Quinn, 2002; Perneger and Hudelson, 2004; Stowe and Note, 2021; IISD, 2023):

Purpose and Audience

Policy briefs are concise documents designed to inform and influence policymakers and decision-makers. They aim to provide actionable recommendations and insights to address specific policy issues.

Research articles are in-depth and comprehensive papers that contribute to the body of knowledge within a specific academic field. They are typically written for an audience of fellow researchers, scholars, and experts.

Reports provide detailed information about a specific topic, problem, or research study. They can be written for various audiences, such as government agencies, organizations, or the general public.

Length and Format

Policy briefs are typically short and succinct, ranging from two to ten pages. They are structured to present key information, analysis, and recommendations in a concise and accessible format. They often use bullet points, headings, and subheadings for easy navigation.

Research articles are more extensive and can range from ten to 30 or more pages, depending on the journal's requirements or publication. They typically follow a specific structure, including an abstract, introduction, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Reports can vary in length and format depending on the purpose and target audience. They can be short or lengthy and may include sections such as an executive summary, introduction, methodology, findings, recommendations, and appendices.

Content and Focus

Policy briefs focus on a specific policy issue, providing a concise overview of the problem, analysis of potential solutions, and clear recommendations for policymakers. They aim to provide practical guidance and policy options.

Research articles present original research findings, including methodology, data analysis, and interpretation of results. They contribute to the academic or scientific understanding of a topic, often aiming to fill gaps in knowledge or propose new theories.

Reports can have various focuses, such as summarizing research findings, evaluating programs or projects, or providing comprehensive information on a specific subject. They often aim to present a detailed and comprehensive account of the topic under investigation.

Tone and Language

Policy briefs use clear and concise language, avoiding jargon and technical terms. They are written in a more accessible style to communicate complex information to policymakers and decision-makers effectively.

Research articles are written in a formal and scholarly tone, using technical language and terminology specific to the field of study. They are targeted at an audience with subject expertise and knowledge.

Reports can vary in tone and language depending on the intended audience. They can be written in a formal or more accessible style, depending on the requirements and preferences of the readers.

While policy briefs, research articles, and reports are distinct forms of scientific writing, they all serve important purposes in disseminating knowledge, informing decision-making, and advancing understanding within their respective contexts.

3.1 Differences between policy brief and research article in terms of data collection

Policy briefs and research articles differ in their approach to data collection. While policy briefs may not involve primary data collection to the same extent as research articles, they still require a thorough understanding of existing data sources and the ability to interpret and synthesize information effectively. The emphasis is on presenting compelling evidence and analysis to inform policy decisions rather than generating new data through extensive data collection methods. Here's a comparison of how data collection is typically approached in each type of writing (University of Illinois Library, no date; Perneger and Hudelson, 2004; Haddad, 2005; Goe and Stickler, 2008; FAO, 2023; NIHR, 2023; PACE, 2023):

Research Articles

Primary data collection: Research articles often involve the collection of primary data through surveys, experiments, interviews, or observations. Researchers gather new data specifically for their study, employing rigorous methodologies to ensure data validity and reliability.

Sample design: Research articles often include a detailed description of the sample design, including sample size, sampling technique, and criteria for participant selection. Researchers may conduct statistical analyses on the collected data to draw conclusions and make generalizations.

Data analysis: Research articles employ various statistical or qualitative analysis techniques to analyze the collected data. This may involve descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, regression analysis, content analysis, or thematic analysis.

Policy Briefs

Existing data sources: Policy briefs primarily rely on existing data sources, such as government reports, academic studies, surveys, or publicly available data sets. These sources support arguments, provide context, or demonstrate trends.

Data review and synthesis: Writers of policy briefs review and synthesize relevant data from multiple sources to build a coherent narrative and support their recommendations. They assess the quality, reliability, and relevance of the available data to ensure the credibility of their brief.

Data interpretation: Policy briefs focus on interpreting and presenting data that is accessible to policymakers and decision-makers. Writers may use data visualization techniques like graphs or charts to effectively communicate key findings and trends.

3.2 Differences between policy brief and research article in terms of author's opinion

Policy briefs and research articles differ in their approach to incorporating author opinions. While research articles tend to present findings objectively and impartially, policy briefs may include some degree of author opinion or interpretation. Here's an explanation of the difference (Young and Quinn, 2002; Perneger and Hudelson, 2004; Jones and Walsh, 2008; Stowe and Note, 2021; FAO, 2023; NIHR, 2023):

Research Articles

Objectivity and impartiality: Research articles strive for objectivity and impartiality by presenting data, analysis, and findings unbiasedly. The focus is on providing evidence-based conclusions without personal opinions or interpretations from the authors.

Peer review process: Research articles typically undergo a rigorous peer review process where experts in the field evaluate the study's methodology, data analysis, and validity. This process helps ensure the scientific rigor and objectivity of the article.

Emphasis on methodology and results: Research articles prioritize detailing the methodology used, data collection procedures, and statistical analysis. The focus is on presenting factual information and drawing conclusions based on empirical findings.

Policy Briefs

Analysis and interpretation: Policy briefs involve analyzing and interpreting data and evidence to provide policy recommendations. Authors may offer their perspectives, insights, and interpretations of the information presented.

Contextualization and framing: Policy briefs often contextualize the problem, policy options, and recommendations within a broader socio-political and economic context. Authors may provide their expert opinion on the potential implications or consequences of specific policy choices.

Transparent presentation: While policy briefs may include author opinions, they are typically presented transparently and clearly distinguished from evidence-based analysis. Authors should clearly indicate when they are presenting their interpretation or opinion separate from the objective data and evidence.

Influencing policy decisions: Policy briefs are meant to inform and influence policy decisions, and including author's opinions can help provide valuable insights and perspectives to policymakers. However, it is important to maintain the brief's integrity and credibility by differentiating opinions from evidence-based analysis.

4. Who writes policy briefs?

Policy briefs are typically written by individuals or teams with expertise in a particular policy area or issue. Here are some common groups of people who write policy briefs (Young and Quinn, 2002; Haddad, 2005; Goe and Stickler, 2008; Jones and Walsh, 2008; Lavis and Panisset, 2010; FAO, 2023):

Researchers and Academics: Researchers and academics specializing in a specific field or policy area often write policy briefs. They possess in-depth knowledge and expertise and can provide evidence-based analysis and recommendations to inform policy decisions.

Policy analysts: Policy analysts, whether working in government agencies, think tanks, or research organizations, are often responsible for writing policy briefs. They have the skills to analyze policy issues, gather relevant data, and present findings in a concise and accessible manner.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): NGOs focused on policy advocacy often produce policy briefs to influence decision-makers and raise awareness about specific issues. Their staff members, including policy experts and researchers, write policy briefs to articulate their organization's position and recommendations.

Consultants and Policy Experts: Independent consultants or policy experts may be hired to write policy briefs for organizations or institutions. These experts bring specialized knowledge and experience in a particular policy area and can offer objective analysis and recommendations.

Government officials: Within government bodies, policymakers, and government officials may be responsible for writing policy briefs. They compile information, analyze data, and present policy options and recommendations to decision-makers within the government.

International Organizations: International organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, or regional development banks often produce policy briefs to address global or regional policy challenges. Their staff members or experts write these briefs to provide guidance and recommendations to member countries or stakeholders.

It is worth noting that the specific individuals or groups responsible for writing policy briefs may vary depending on the brief's organization, context, and purpose. The common thread is that policy briefs are typically written by individuals or teams with expertise in the subject matter, to provide relevant and actionable insights to inform policy discussions and decisions.

5. How to write a policy brief - Methodology to conduct a policy brief

Writing a policy brief is an effective way to communicate concise and focused information to policymakers and decision-makers. Remember, the primary goal of a policy brief is to influence policy decisions. You can contribute to the policy discourse and drive positive change by providing evidence-based analysis and actionable recommendations. Here is a step-by-step guide on how to write a policy brief (University of Illinois Library, no date; Young and Quinn, 2002; Perneger and Hudelson, 2004; Haddad, 2005; Goe and Stickler, 2008; Jones and Walsh, 2008; Lavis and Panisset, 2010; Stowe and Note, 2021; FAO, 2023; Harvard Kennedy School, 2023; IISD, 2023; NIHR, 2023; PACE, 2023):

Understand the context: Begin by thoroughly understanding the policy issue or problem you want to address. Identify the target audience, such as policymakers, government officials, or organizations, and consider their interests and knowledge level.

Define the objective: Clarify the purpose of your policy brief. State the specific problem or issue you aim to address and the desired outcome or policy change you are advocating for.

Conduct research: Gather relevant data, facts, and evidence to support your arguments. Use reputable sources like government reports, academic studies, and expert opinions. Ensure your information is up-to-date and reliable.

Structure your Brief: A policy brief typically consists of the following sections (Table 1):

Table 1. Structure of policy brief

	Section	Content
1	Executive Summary	Provide a concise overview of the key points, recommendations, and policy implications.
2	Introduction	Introduce the policy issue, its significance, and the context in which it arises. Clearly state your objective and the target audience.
3	Problem Statement	Describe the issue in detail, including its causes, effects, and any existing challenges or gaps in the current policy framework.
4	Policy Options	Present possible solutions or approaches to address the problem. Analyze their pros, cons, and potential impacts.
5	Recommendations	Based on your analysis, provide clear and actionable recommendations for policymakers. Explain why these recommendations are appropriate and beneficial.
6	Implementation Strategies	Describe how the proposed recommendations can be implemented effectively. Highlight any potential barriers or challenges and suggest ways to overcome them.
7	Conclusion	Summarize the main points and reiterate the importance of your recommendations.
8	References	Include a list of the sources you used for your research

Use clear and concise language: Write straightforwardly and jargon-free to ensure your policy brief is accessible and easily understandable. Use bullet points, headings, and subheadings to organize information and make it more digestible.

Present data and evidence: Incorporate relevant statistics, case studies, and examples to support your arguments. Use graphs, charts, and visuals where appropriate to enhance clarity and readability.

Provide policy implications: Discuss the potential impacts and consequences of implementing the proposed recommendations. Highlight the benefits and risks associated with each option and consider the economic, social, and environmental implications.

Review and revise: Proofread your policy brief carefully to eliminate errors and inconsistencies. Ensure that your arguments are logical, supported by evidence, and aligned with your objective.

Seek feedback: Share your policy brief with colleagues, experts, or mentors and ask for their feedback. Incorporate constructive suggestions and make necessary revisions to improve the clarity and effectiveness of your brief.

Disseminate the Policy Brief: Distribute your policy brief to the intended audience through appropriate channels, such as email, official websites, or personal meetings. Consider engaging in advocacy efforts to ensure the brief reaches the relevant policymakers and stakeholders.

6. Where to publish or read policy briefs - Example of policy brief publishers

Policy briefs are typically disseminated through various channels to reach the intended audience and influence policy decisions. While specific journals may not be dedicated solely to publishing policy

briefs, there are several avenues for sharing and publishing policy briefs. Here are a few examples of platforms and outlets where policy briefs can be published or read:

World Bank Policy Research Briefs: The World Bank produces policy research briefs that focus on various global development challenges. These briefs provide evidence-based insights and recommendations to inform policy discussions and decisions. Link: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/brief/policy-research-brief>

Brookings Institution: Brookings Institution is a renowned think tank that publishes policy briefs on a wide range of topics. Their website has a dedicated section for policy briefs, offering a platform to share research and analysis with policymakers, experts, and the public. Link: <https://www.brookings.edu/>

RAND Corporation: RAND Corporation is a non-profit research organization that publishes policy briefs on critical policy issues. Their briefs provide objective analysis and recommendations for policymakers and decision-makers. Link: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs.html

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI): IFPRI produces policy briefs focusing on agriculture, food security, and nutrition issues. Their briefs provide evidence-based policy recommendations to address global food-related challenges. Link: <https://www.ifpri.org/publications>

Institute for Government: The Institute for Government in the United Kingdom publishes policy briefings and reports on various topics related to government and public administration. Their briefings aim to inform policy debates and improve government effectiveness. Link: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications>

Journal of Classroom Practices: Journal of Classroom Practices publishes research related to education. It reports quantitative and qualitative findings that test students' academic achievement, conceptual understanding, interest in learning, teacher development, and classroom observation. It welcomes all original and review reports. It publishes policy briefs, data articles, research articles, review articles, and short communications progressively. Link: <https://parabolpublishing.com/journal-of-classroom-practices/>

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