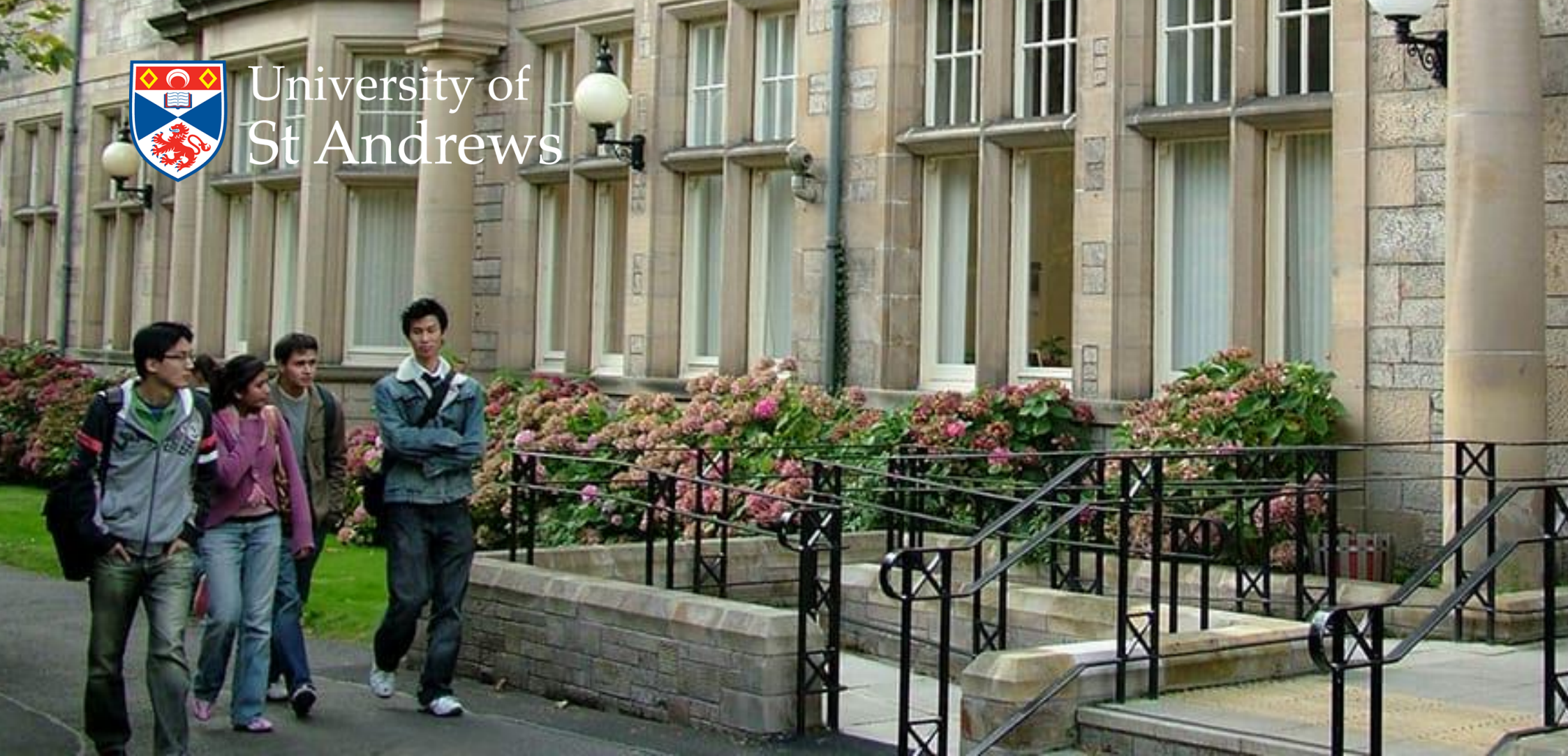




University of
St Andrews



Policy Briefs – Student Guide

Graduate School for Interdisciplinary Studies

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For further information about the Graduate School for Interdisciplinary Studies and its programmes please email gradschool@st-andrews.ac.uk

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Introduction

This guide is for Graduate School for Interdisciplinary Studies students who are asked to produce a policy brief as part of their degree programme. In this guide you will find advice on things to consider when planning and designing your policy brief. You will also find links to real examples which you can use as a starting point in thinking about how to present your own policy brief.

This guide is not intended to be comprehensive and, in particular, you should seek advice from the module coordinator on any specific requirements if you are asked to produce a policy brief for a module assessment.

We welcome ideas for improving future editions of this student guide – please send your suggestions to:

✉ gradschool@st-andrews.ac.uk

Using Policy Briefs

A policy brief is a specialised form of written communication designed to inform and influence thinking on a specific policy issue.

Purpose of Policy Briefs

Policy briefs are used to bring research and academic thinking to the attention of policy influencers and decision makers and, on the basis of that information, to articulate a need for policy development.

Policy briefs are most commonly used by charities, non-governmental organisation, think-tanks, and universities to try to shape the thinking of local, regional, or national governments, public bodies, or inter-governmental organisations. The private sector is also making more use of policy briefs, particularly to inform the decision making of boards of directors.

Policy Brief Characteristics

Policy briefs are sometimes referred to by different names and may instead be known as policy analyses, policy memos, position papers, or discussion papers.

Policy briefs can also vary in their purpose. Policy briefs are sometimes used to present information without making recommendations for specific policy developments – instead it is for the target audience to decide the form of any policy developments that are needed. This type of policy brief is referred to as an “objective” policy brief.

More commonly though policy briefs are used to recommend specific policy developments. This type of policy brief is referred to as an “advocacy” policy brief.

Regardless of the name used or nature of the policy recommendations that they contain, all policy briefs share certain characteristics.

Policy briefs must be:

- focused – policy briefs focus on a specific policy issue and specific target audience
- practical and evidence-based – policy briefs present an evidence-based case for change; policy recommendations must also be achievable and realistic
- concise – policy briefs should be as concise as possible; they must function as a standalone document and are usually no more than three or four pages long (1,000 words)
- engaging – policy briefs must be relevant to the target audience, provide insights that will be of interest to them, and be written in a way that is appropriate for people who are not researchers or professional practitioners

Policy Briefs and Communication Plans

Policy briefs are rarely sufficient on their own to achieve a specific policy outcome. They are an effective tool for drawing the attention of policy influencers and decision makers to a specific issue and suggesting opportunities for policy development. But, in practice, a policy brief usually marks only the start of an influencing process.

Accordingly, policy briefs are normally used as part of a wider communications plan. A communications plan of this type will normally target multiple stakeholders using a number of different communication channels.

It is important to note though that, even if a policy brief is part of a wider communication plan, it must function as a standalone document. If the policy brief is to be effective in at least starting the process of influencing its target audience, it must contain sufficient information to engage them and persuade them that there is a policy issue that merits further consideration.

Planning a Policy Brief

Imagine that you work for an advocacy organisation and that you have been asked to produce a policy brief on an issue that you have been researching. Where would you start?

If you are lucky, the organisation that you work for will have its own policy brief template and style guide to give you an idea of what your policy brief should look like. However, in this case, assume it is a new organisation and this will be the first policy brief that it has issued. What now?

There is no “right” way to plan, structure, and design your policy brief. Taking a look at real examples of policy briefs from other organisations may give you some ideas – but it will also show you how much variety there is. You will need to decide what type of approach best suits your purposes. The advice contained in this student guide is not intended to steer you towards any particular approach and there is nothing to stop you from being creative and trying your own ideas.

Instead, the advice that follows is intended to highlight things that you should consider before starting work on your policy brief and to suggest techniques that you can apply to make your policy brief more effective – in particular, to make sure that your policy brief is focussed, practical, concise, and engaging.

Planning Process

Before starting work on your policy brief you may find it helpful to put together a plan to help make sure your policy brief will be effective. You can do this by asking yourself questions about what you want to do and how you will do it.

A contextual matrix can provide a framework for doing this. Laura ffrench-Constant, in her guide *How to Plan, Write, and Communicate an Effective Policy Brief: Three Steps to Success*, has a matrix that you can use; a version of this is included overleaf.

	What You Need to Know	What You Need to Do	How to Do It
Policy Context	What level of application would your recommendations have?	Identify the policy level: local/ regional/ national/ private	Ask yourself who will be affected by the policy change
	What is the process for changing policy?	Understand the policy process, the key players, and timelines	Research similar examples, explore the policy process from start to finish
	Who has power to influence or change policy?	Know who the policy actors are and how to contact them	Map out the key actors; look for missing links/ connections you can use or create
	If there is a problem with the current policy/demand for change?	Identify gaps in current policy, look for windows of opportunity	Familiarise yourself with current policy on the issue/ drivers for change
Knowledge Landscape	Are there competing narratives?	Establish why your policy option is different and better	Identify alternate proposals from research institutions or policy makers
	Are there obstacles to your recommendations being adopted?	Identify cultural practises or widely held views that may oppose your recommendations	List reasons the public, groups, or businesses may reject your proposals
	Why is the issue significant?	Establish credibility, timeliness, and legitimacy	Search the news, policy committees, and current government reviews
Networks and Links	Locate similar campaigns or recommendations around the policy issue	Work through existing networks	Build partnerships
		Learn from successful actors	Use informal contacts

Example of a contextual matrix – after Laura French-Constant (2014), *How to Plan, Write, and Communicate an Effective Policy Brief: Three Steps to Success*. Work your way from left to right for each row to guide your thinking on things to consider before starting work on your policy brief.

Alternatively, you might want to frame your own planning questions. In particular, you might find it helpful to think about your policy brief's focus, whether it will be engaging, and whether it will have a clear overall message.

The International Centre for Policy Advocacy has a worksheet that you can use to do this:

➡ www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_brief_outline.docx

The following questions cover the key points.

Focus

Policy briefs are focussed documents – they focus on a specific policy issue and a specific target audience. In the case of an advocacy policy brief there will also be a specific policy outcome that it is hoped the policy brief will help to achieve. Ask yourself:

- what is the policy issue that your policy brief will address?
- what is the policy outcome you hope to achieve?
- who is your target audience?

The answer to the last of these questions may already be known if you are producing a policy brief in response to a specific invitation. Otherwise, your answers to the first two questions should help you identify who the right target audience is.

Engagement

Your policy brief must engage your target audience. To make sure that your policy brief is engaging it is helpful to have an understanding of the needs of your target audience:

- why is this policy issue relevant to your target audience?
- what understanding of the policy issue will your target audience have and what additional information are they likely to want?
- what are the opinions of your target audience on the policy issue and are they likely to be receptive to the overall message of your policy brief?
- what is the significance/ urgency of the policy issue?
- what new insights/ ideas can your policy brief provide?
- are the recommendations made in your policy brief relevant to the interests/ competencies of your target audience?

Overall Message

Having answered these questions you should be in a position to answer one final question:

- what is the overall message of your policy brief?

Try to keep your answer to this question as brief as possible – no more than two sentences. Being able to summarise your overall message in this way is a good test to make sure that your policy brief has a clear focus and will engage your target audience.

In particular, think about the alignment between the overall message of your policy brief and the position of your target audience in relation to the policy issue that the policy brief will address. This will give you some insight as to the types of questions and, possibly, objections that your policy brief will need to address.

Clarity on the overall message of your policy brief will also provide you with a point of reference as you put your policy brief together – as you complete each part of the policy brief you can refer back to this summary to check that each section contributes to communicating your overall message.

Structure and Contents

Having planned what you want your policy brief to do and how you hope to do it, you can start thinking about the structure and contents of your policy brief. Again, there is no “right” way to structure your policy brief. The structure suggested here is typical, but you may wish to try something different.

The structure suggested here has five main parts:

1. Executive Summary
2. Policy Analysis
 - a. Context and Need for Change
 - b. Options
3. Recommendations for Policy Development
4. References and Acknowledgements
5. Contact Information

Each of these component parts is described in more detail below.

This suggested model is most appropriate for an advocacy policy brief. In an objective policy brief there would not be any specific recommendations for policy development and the options section of the policy analysis would be more expansive.

Executive Summary

The executive summary might be the most important part of your policy brief. The executive summary must engage your target audience and persuade them that your policy brief provides new insights/ ideas that are worthy of their time and consideration. As concisely and compellingly as possible the executive summary must:

- describe the policy issue addressed by your policy brief
- highlight new insights/ ideas provided by your policy brief
- describe the focus of the recommendations for policy development made in your policy brief

Effectively, the executive summary is an abstract or outline of your policy brief. It is therefore often the last part of the policy brief to be written.

The executive summary is likely to account for around 10% of the word count of your policy brief.

Policy Analysis

As a researcher or professional practitioner, you might assume that the policy analysis is the real heart of your policy brief. In fact, your target audience may well be more interested in the recommendations for policy development.

Nevertheless, your target audience will expect to see a well-reasoned policy analysis which presents credible evidence for the policy outcome you hope to achieve.

The policy analysis is where you present your case that there is a need for policy development. It needs to set out what the policy issue is and why there is a need for change. The new insights/ ideas provided by your policy brief are what connects these two things.

As you draft the policy analysis try to ensure that you:

- focus on findings rather than theoretical understanding or research methodologies
- anticipate questions/ objections that your target audience might have
- are clear as to what are the new insights/ ideas provided by your policy brief – they should be noted early on in the policy analysis

You may find it helpful to divide the policy analysis into two sub-sections – context and options.

Context and Need for Change

This section should:

- describe the policy issue in context and in sufficient detail that your target audience will be able to understand the need for change
- use the insights/ ideas provided by your policy brief to make a case for change
- be clear as to the significance of the issue/ the urgency of the need for change

In describing the need for change you should not attempt to describe every problem arising from the current policy context. It will be more effective if you focus on the three or four that best illustrate the need for change. It can be helpful to illustrate this need for change by means of real examples or brief case studies.

The context part of the policy analysis is likely to account for around 25% of the word count of your policy brief.

Options

This section should:

- describe the options available to address the need for change
- provide an evaluation of each option and a description of the criteria used to do this
- identify the best option and the benefits/ opportunities associated with this

You do not need to present all of the possible options. For an objective policy brief you should present at least three options and provide a more expanded evaluation of each one. For an advocacy policy brief this section might be much briefer and might provide only as much information as is needed to show which option is best.

The options part of the policy analysis is likely to account for around 25% of the word count of your policy brief (advocacy policy brief) or up to 40% (objective policy brief).

Policy Recommendations

In the policy analysis section of your policy brief you described what the policy issue is and why there is a need for change. Your policy brief now needs to describe how that change can be achieved. After the executive summary, it is likely that the policy recommendations is the part of your policy brief that will be of most interest to your target audience.

The policy recommendations will be more effective if you focus on no more than three key recommendation. As you draft the policy recommendations try to ensure that you:

- present recommendations that are relevant to the interests/ competencies of your target audience and that are achievable and realistic – make your recommendations SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timed)
- provide clear evidence in support of each recommendation
- are clear as to who would be involved in delivering each recommendation
- avoid phrasing recommendations as directives – instead of “policy makers must...” try “policy makers should consider...”

Although it is essential that the recommendations presented in your policy brief are achievable and realistic – technically, politically, and financially – there can still be scope to propose more radical changes. However, making the case for radical change requires a substantial and compelling evidence base and a clear imperative for action.

You may wish to close this part of your policy brief with a brief paragraph that serves as a final call to action. This could again highlight the need for change evidenced through your policy brief and recap the benefits/ opportunities associated with the proposed approach.

The policy recommendations are likely to account for around 30% of the word count of your policy brief. However, an objective policy brief may not include any specific policy recommendations.

References and Acknowledgements

As with any document that presents research/ academic thinking, your policy brief should include references to source materials used. However, owing to the space constraints in a policy brief, you will only be able to note three or four of the most important references.

It can be helpful for your target audience if you indicate where they can find further information on the policy issue addressed in your policy brief. This might be a fuller research report/ academic paper on which your policy brief is based or a website with relevant information.

Alongside these references you may want to acknowledge organisations/ individuals who contributed to your policy brief. In the interests of transparency you should normally acknowledge any organisations/ individuals who have funded your work. When acknowledging others who have contributed to your policy brief you may need to include a disclaimer noting that the views expressed in your policy brief are your own and may not represent the views of those organisations/ individuals.

The references and acknowledgements are likely to account for around 10% of the word count of your policy brief.

Contact Details

It was noted earlier that, if your policy brief is to be effective, it must engage your target audience and persuade them that there is a policy issue that merits further consideration. For that to happen your target audience needs to know how to contact you.

Your policy brief should include your name – and the names of any co-authors – as well as at least an email address at which you can be contacted. This information might be presented in a side bar on either the first or last page of your policy brief.

Including a professional headshot photo of each named author can help to personalise your policy brief and allows your target audience to associate it with a real person.

Design and Presentation

In addition to being focussed, practical, and concise, your policy brief must be engaging.

An engaging policy brief is one that is relevant to its target audience and which provides insights/ ideas that persuade them that the policy issue merits further consideration. However, the look and design of the policy brief is important also. No matter how persuasive a case your policy brief makes, it needs to look professional and visually striking if it is to engage your target audience.

If you are producing a policy brief on behalf of an organisation, they may well have a template or style guide that you are required to follow.

If there is no specified format for your policy brief the following guidance will help you give your policy brief a professional look:

Branding

If you are producing your policy brief on behalf of an organisation it may have its own policy brief template and style guide to give you an idea of what your policy brief should look like.

If there is a policy brief template this is likely to reflect the organisation's corporate identity. In particular, it may feature branding elements such as logo and masthead. These help to make it clear who has produced the policy brief and distinguish its policy briefs from those issued by other organisations.

If there is no policy brief template you can easily design your own. Take a look at some real example to give you an idea of the branding elements they include and how these are used. If you are producing your policy brief on behalf of an organisation you should include the organisation's logo at the top of the front page of your policy brief.

Title

Finding the right title for your policy brief is not easy. It needs to immediately engage the interest of your target audience as well as provide a concise statement of the purpose of your policy brief. Titles that use short, punchy words are often very effective.

Avoid puns in your title. Unless it is an exceptionally clever pun the likelihood is that it will detract from the professional tone you are trying to convey.

Length

Policy briefs are usually three or four pages long – around 1,000 words. Occasionally they can be as many as seven or eight pages, but it is better if you can keep to no more than four pages.

Your policy brief should be as concise as you can make it. That means removing any content that is not strictly necessary for the purpose of the policy brief as well as making sure your phrasing is economical as possible without losing precision or clarity.

Layout

Your policy brief should have a layout that helps to make it easy to read. In particular, use columns, paragraphs, and separating space to make your policy brief visually attractive and easier to navigate. Most policy briefs have a portrait orientation and a two or three column format.

Language

The language you use in your policy brief plays an important part in the way that it will be received. The policy brief should present evidence in a way that is precise, accurate, and fair. Your language should be professional but not pompous.

Your language should be appropriate for people who are not researchers/ professional practitioners. Take particular care to avoid technical terms that are not in general use; if you must use a technical term include a brief definition. You may also want to think about what technical terms your target audience might use – do they use specific terms when speaking about the policy issue addressed in your policy brief? If so, should you use the same terms?

Do not use acronyms unless they are in general use. Similarly, you should avoid colloquialisms and idioms that others may not understand, but there is no need to make things more complicated than they need to be – it is okay to “use” something, you do not need to “utilise” it.

Headings

Use a hierarchy of headings and sub-headings to break your policy brief into sections and make it easier to read. Use different font sizes to distinguish between each level of your heading hierarchy.

You can also use different fonts and colours to help make headings stand out – for example, this guide uses Palatino Linotype for headings and Myriad Pro Light for sub-headings and the section headings are in colour.

Remember that people receiving your policy brief may only scan it rather than read it in full. Your headings and sub-headings should help to communicate your key messages even if the body text itself is not read.

Fonts

Use a font type and size that is easy to read. Most documents use a sans serif font – such as Calibri or Tahoma – for body text, but a serif font such as Palatino can work well for headings. The body text should have a font size of 11 pt. or 12 pt. but you can use a smaller size for footnotes and captions.

Avoid italicised and underlined text. You can use bold text to highlight key messages within the body text, but it should be used sparingly.

Colour Scheme

A simple colour scheme can give your policy brief a more professional look. The body text should always be black but colour can be used for headings and for other elements – for example, the bar used in the footer on each page in this student guide.

Try to keep to just one or two colours and avoid colours that are particularly sharp.

Illustrations

Use graphical elements to illustrate key messages. These might be charts or tables, diagrams, or a photo. Position graphical elements in a way that does not make your policy brief harder to read and use captions. If you need a photo to illustrate your policy brief make sure this copyright friendly – you can source copyright friendly images from repositories such as www.pexels.com or www.pixabay.com and usually you can use these without attribution.

"Call-outs are an effective way to break up blocks of text and to highlight key messages"

As in the example above, call-outs – short quotes or statements in a larger font relative to the body text – can also be an effective way to highlight important points.

Graphical elements should be consistent with the overall colour scheme for your policy brief.

Sidebars/Text Boxes

Sidebars and text boxes can be used to distinguish content which is not part of the main body text. Short case studies or examples that illustrate the policy issue are often presented in this way. They can also be used for subordinate content such as author contact details.

Proof Reading and Feedback

Finally, make sure you leave time to proof read your policy brief. A lot of hard work can be undone by errors in spelling and grammar.

You may also want to ask someone to give you feedback on your policy brief before it is given to the target audience. Feedback is useful for making sure that your policy brief does clearly communicate the overall message you want it to have. If you are producing a policy brief on behalf of an organisation there may be a formal process for reviewing and approving policy briefs before they are issued.

Delivery Methods

Your target audience must receive your policy brief if it is to have any effect. You therefore need to have a plan for delivering your policy brief.

As noted above, a policy brief may be just one part of a wider communication plan. That communication plan would normally include details for when and how the policy brief would be delivered. There are though some general points that you should consider when thinking about how your policy brief will be delivered:

- timeliness is important – normally a policy brief would be sent to coincide with the publication of a fuller research report/ academic paper, an event on the topic addressed by the policy brief, or related media coverage
- send the policy brief electronically and as a printed copy and, in both cases, include a covering message that invites the recipient to contact you should they have any questions

- if you are not producing a policy brief in response to a specific invitation you should first contact your target audience and ask whether they would accept an unsolicited policy brief
- the policy brief should always be sent to a named person – if you are not sure who the right person is, check before you send your policy brief
- do not send the policy brief to multiple people in the same organisation or as a mass mailing to multiple organisations

You should allow some time after sending your policy brief before sending a follow-up message to your target audience. This might be simply to invite them to contact you should they have any questions or wish to discuss your policy brief further or it might be to invite them to discuss your policy brief at a meeting or related event.

You may want to identify relevant events being hosted by others but at which you might be able to draw attention to the policy issue addressed by your policy brief. In particular, try to identify any events which your target audience is likely to attend. It may be possible to have an exhibit at the event, to give a talk on the policy issue, or to include a copy of your policy brief in delegate packs.

Finally, you should also think about ways to draw wider attention to your policy brief. Social media can be effective as a way to bring your policy brief to the attention of others with an interest in the topic addressed. Social media allows others to share your work and, potentially, help to give it a wider audience. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn can all be effective in this respect. You might also upload a copy to a website or create a blog post based on your policy brief.

Example Policy Briefs

Here you can find links to real policy briefs which you can use as a starting point in thinking about how to present your own policy brief.

BiodivERsA

- ➔ www.biodiversa.org/policybriefs

International Association of Public Transport

- ➔ www.uitp.org/policy-briefs

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

- ➔ www.oecd.org/policy-briefs/

National Council on Family Relations

- ➔ www.ncfr.org/resources/research-and-policy-briefs

Science With and For Society

- ➔ www.sisnetwork.eu/about/policy-briefs/

UN Women

- ➔ www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/un-women-policy-brief-series

University of Birmingham, International Development Department

- ➔ www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/departments/international-development/research/IDD-Research.aspx

University of Warwick, Centre for Law, Regulation, and Governance of the Global Economy

- ➔ www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/centres/globe/policybriefs/

Skills Demonstrated

If you are asked to produce a policy brief as part of your degree programme you will demonstrate a number of important skills:

- effective written communication skills
- creativity and visual design skills
- ability to make coherent arguments and to influence others
- ability to communicate academic concepts to mixed audiences
- understanding of policy contexts and policy development processes

You will also gain some experience of creating impact from academic work, academic outreach, and policy development.

Finally, policy briefs are also a way to help you build your profile in your academic discipline/ professional field.

Remember to add these skills your curriculum vitae. You may also wish to keep a copy of your policy brief as part of a portfolio of work that you can share with prospective employers and others.

Acknowledgements and References

In preparing this student guide we have made use of resources from a number of organisations. In particular, we acknowledge the following publications and encourage students to consult these for further advice:

Laura ffrench-Constant, Research to Action (2014), How to Plan, Write, and Communicate an Effective Policy Brief: Three Steps to Success

➔ www.researchtoaction.org/2014/10/plan-write-communicate-effective-policy-brief-three-steps-success/

Eóin Young and Lisa Quinn, International Centre for Policy Advocacy (2017), An Essential Guide to Writing Policy Briefs

➔ www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/resources/policy-brief-resource-page

Students may also wish to consult the following resources:

Rosanna DeMarco and Kimberly Tufts, Nursing Outlook 62(3):219–224 (2014), The Mechanics of Writing a Policy Brief

➔ [www.nursingoutlook.org/article/S0029-6554\(14\)00057-8/pdf](http://www.nursingoutlook.org/article/S0029-6554(14)00057-8/pdf)

Nicola Jones and Cora Walsh, Overseas Development Institute (2008), Policy Briefs as a Communication Tool for Development Research

➔ www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/594.pdf

Rebecca Wolfe, Resilient and Responsive Health Systems (2013), A Guide to Writing Policy Briefs for Research Uptake

➡ www.blogs.lshtm.ac.uk/griphealth/files/2017/01/Policy-briefs-guide_2015.pdf

International Development Research Centre (2013), How to Write a Policy Brief

➡ www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf

Research to Action (2014), Five Top Policy Brief Resources

➡ www.researchtoaction.org/2014/10/top-five-policy-brief-posts-yesteryear/

How to Write a Policy Brief, UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology

➡ www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/about-post/writing-a-policy-brief/



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