# UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATING POLICY BRIEFS

A policy brief is a tool to present research insights to a non-specialised audience. Policy briefs distil relevant research evidence and bring important findings to the attention of policy makers, drawing out the potential implications for the policy challenge at hand. While often used as a 'call to action', a policy brief may be providing background detail rather than explicit recommendations (see *Types of Policy Briefs* for more information of the different purposes of a policy brief).

While the actual format varies considerably, there is a standard 'template' for a policy brief. But do policy briefs have to be text based, short form, with a title, exec summary, problem statement etc in order to be effective? Are there other ways of giving a concise account of the findings and recommendations of a research project? For example, 'The Conversation' (*https://theconversation.com/au*) provides articles which often give a research summary and then a link to follow up, as further described below.

The growth in the production and use of policy briefs is recognition that too often it is lengthy expert-oriented policy analysis/reports that are produced and what is missing are **shorter, more practical communication tools that can engage** informed, non-specialist audiences. **What are some alternative formats and options emerging and how could we best use them?**

STANDARD FORM OF A POLICY BRIEF:
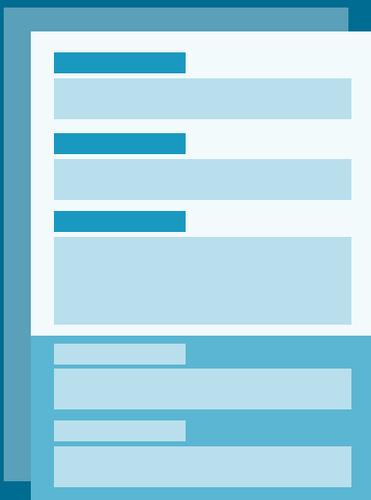
Executive summary
provide an overview of the issue/topic

Introduction
explain the significance of the issue

Approach and results
provide a summary of the facts, describe the issue and context, outline research, describe the current study

Conclusion
interpretation of data

Implications and recommendations
discuss what could happen, make recommendations about what should happen, use evidence to support recommendations

EXAMPLES

Policy Brief:	Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development
Policy Brief:	A New Strategy for the Environment

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO POLICY BRIEFS

There are a number of alternative approaches to your policy brief design, with new approaches constantly being tested by different types of policy advocates as they seek to be noticed in the barrage of information that policy-makers and other policy influencers are exposed to.

These alternative forms of policy briefs include, but are not limited to:

Creative framing of the traditional short-format policy brief

NARRATIVE-DRIVEN POLICY BRIEF

Purpose:
Engage decision-makers emotionally while still presenting evidence.

Structure:

- Human Story – Start with a short, real-world case study or personal account illustrating the policy issue.

- Evidence Snapshot – Present key statistics and trends in a concise, visual way.

- Policy Implications – Explain why the issue matters now.

- Action Pathway – Offer clear, actionable recommendations.

Example:
A brief on youth homelessness starting with a day-in-the-life story, followed by data on housing shortages, then outlining urgent policy shifts.

SCENARIO-BASED POLICY BRIEF
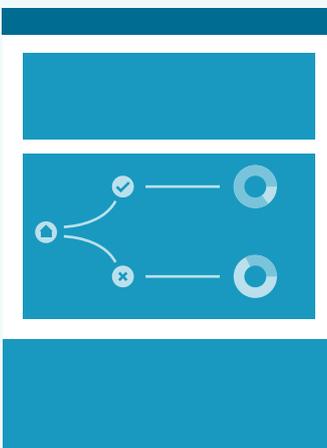
Purpose:
Show possible futures to highlight urgency and trade-offs.

Structure:

- Current State – Where we are now.

- Scenario A – "If nothing changes" projection.

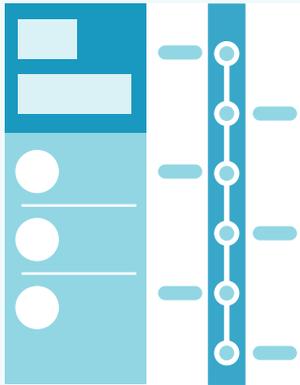- Scenario B – "If recommended policy is adopted" projection.

- Comparative Analysis – Costs, benefits, and risks of each path.

Example:
Climate adaptation policy brief showing the difference between a "business-as-usual" drought impact scenario and a "proactive water management" scenario.

Creative framing of the traditional short-format policy brief

VISUAL-FIRST POLICY BRIEF

Purpose:
Prioritise quick comprehension for time-poor decision-makers.

Structure:

▌ Infographic Summary – One-page visual with key facts, charts, and icons.
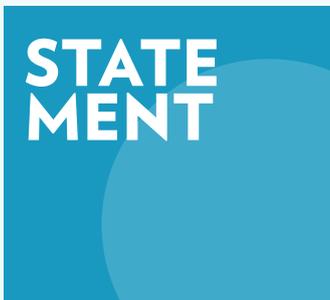
Example:
Bullet points with short explanations.

Policy Levers – Highlight 2–3 specific actions.

Impact Forecast – Visual projection of expected outcomes

Marketing based graphics to enhance engagement and hence impact

STATEMENT

Making yourself stand out is critical. There is a lot of information out there on what captures your audiences eye, and what detracts.

▌ Check out Dev Intelligence Lab's website for a bold look that makes them stand out. Dev Intelligence Lab is a think tank working on development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and hence there is a lot of competition for views

What is impactful here:
Bold block colour, contrast – see https://www.devintelligencelab.com/

Contemporary communications approaches – video, podcasts, radio
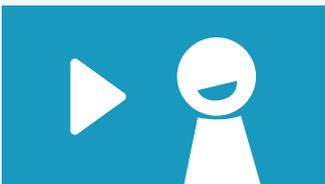
Acknowledging that policy-makers have limited time to read lengthy technical reports or even shorter policy briefs, audio presents a new opportunity.

Video offers a new way to share information in an engaging and visual manner – although the quality needs to be good! This could be various forms of social media, YouTube etc that create an interest in your policy brief and send those interested to it (whether it be a longer video or a traditional short-form report).
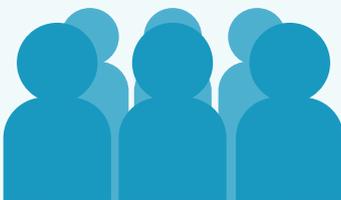
A lot of people like to multi-task, listening to podcasts while commuting to work for example. Audio based policy briefs, when marketed well, could capture their attention during this passive productive period. Take a look at this podcast series: policy brief podcasts | Ivy.fm

Alternatively, radio media offers an opportunity to share your policy brief, especially if you get a chance to provide contact details. You would be amazed at who is listening!

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATING POLICY BRIEFS

Alternative media channels

There are a range of alternative media channels that may be useful to share your research, and potentially direct readers to more traditional policy briefs or technical reports.

For example, The Conversation (https://theconversation.com/au) can reach a large scale broad audience, alternatively The Mandarin (https://www.themandarin.com.au/) may be relevant if you are directly targeting public servants on matters of public service or public administration.

In addition, some newspapers publish op-eds, for example the Financial Review if you are researching economics, or perhaps The Canberra Times if it is about the ACT region.

The Conversation provides articles which often give a research summary and then a link to follow up. The Conversation is an online publication billed as "the world's leading publisher of research-based news and analysis". Depending on the nature of the research, you may want to publish it either as a policy brief, or an article for The Conversation, or both. The limitations of a Conversation article are that it needs to be brief - typically up to 700 words - and the article needs to avoid qualifications and detail which you may consider essential for the integrity of the work. The strengths of writing a Conversation article are it's wide readership, both directly and through reprinting elsewhere. Conversations articles are published under a Creative Commons licence and hence may be edited and repurposed by journalists who will strip out jargon and technical writing to make articles accessible for a general audience.

Policy Brief 'repositories'
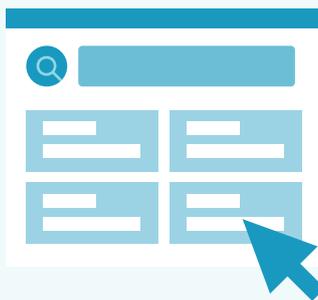
Finding exactly what you want in a short amount of time on the internet is like winning the lottery – your chances are slim! However, using an online policy brief repository for your research institution can help focus policy-makers and others looking for information. Be mindful to design the repository carefully to enable ready navigation and searching (bring out those bold marketing skills here too!)

Take a look at the Parliamentary Briefing Book as an example of a repository: Briefing Book – Parliament of Australia and this policy forum 'pod' at the ANU Policy Forum Pod - ANU Policy Brief

Vox Pops
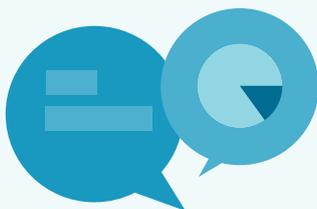
A vox pop "voice of the people," refers to short, recorded interviews with members of the public to gauge popular opinion – the 'voice of the people'.

Vox pops blend the concise, evidence-driven style of a policy document with the human voice of short public interviews, and easily shareable formats. Here they are engaging, accessible and compelling – bringing to life the often dry technical information in a policy brief.

Social media tiles
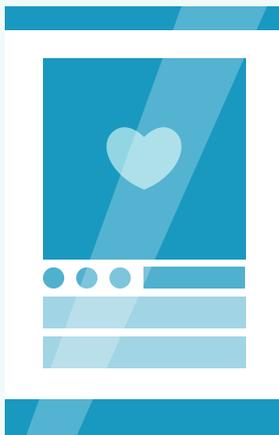
A social media tile is a single, visually appealing image (often square or vertical) designed to convey a short, impactful message. For a policy brief, the goal is to distil complex information into a quick, shareable format that sparks interest and encourages further reading.

Key Elements

Headline – Short, bold, and action-oriented (max 6–8 words).

**Core Message –** 1–2 sentences summarising the policy's main point or benefit.

Visuals – Icons, illustrations, or photos that reinforce the message.

Branding – Organisation logo, colours, and fonts for credibility.

Call to Action (CTA) – e.g., "Learn more at [website]" or "Read the full policy brief."

Design Tips

- Keep text minimal – Aim for 20–30 words total.
- High contrast – Ensure readability on mobile devices.
- Consistent style – Match your organisation's visual identity.
- Accessibility – Use alt text and avoid colour combinations that are hard to read
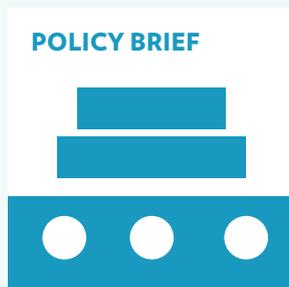
INSTAGRAM-OPTIMISED TILE (1:1 SQUARE)

Instagram favours bold titles and minimal text.

Recommended Layout

[SQUARE 1080×1080]

Top Bar (thick, eye-catching) - Logo on the left and "POLICY BRIEF" on the right

Main Title (centre) - Large point size, no more than 6–8 words

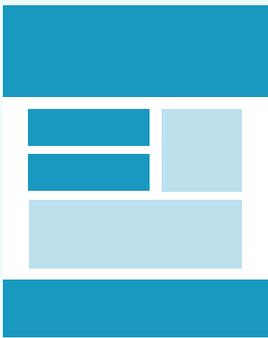**Key Takeaway Cluster** - Three bullets max, use icons for faster scan

Bottom Panel - QR code (preferred on IG) and a short call to action (e.g., "Full brief ➜ link in bio")

Design Notes

- Prioritise big type, minimal words, and contrast.
- Instagram doesn't support clickable links — use QR or "link in bio."

Social media tiles

LINKEDIN-OPTIMISED TILE (4:5 OR 1200×1500)

LinkedIn rewards professional layouts and slightly more text.

Recommended Layout

[VERTICAL TILE 1200×1500)

Header Strip - Organisation name + logo, publication date

Title Section - Multi-line title allowed, add subheading in smaller text

Policy Summary Box - 3–4 key insights, use subtle icons or dividers

Footer - URL (clickable in LinkedIn), Department or school name, Optional QR code

Design Notes

- LinkedIn tolerates more detail, so include a subheading.
- Ensure the URL is short (Bitly or institutional shortlink).

X (Twitter) Optimised Tile (16:9 Landscape)

Landscape images get the best crop in the home feed.

Recommended Layout

LANDSCAPE 1600×900

Left Side (60%) - Title (big), 1 sentence summary

Right Side (40%) - Iconography or simple graphic, Tiny QR code or miniature URL

Bottom Bar - "Policy Brief" label

Design Notes

- Keep it **high contrast** so it stands out in scrolling feeds.
- Limit text — X crops aggressively on some views.

For more tips on how to write your policy brief, no matter which approach you use, check out the BGL Policy Brief Toolkit guides:

- Understanding Policy Briefs
- Types of Policy Briefs
- Knowing your Audience
- Sharing your Policy Brief

FURTHER READING

See these case studies of policy briefs in various formats including videos and infographics

Policy Briefs and Information Documents — ScienceSplained

Easy guides for how to write a policy brief can be found at -

icpa-policy-briefs-essential-guide.pdf

How to write policy briefs - The Prevention Centre