



KNOW YOUR READERS

THE AUDIENCE FOR A POLICY BRIEF

THE POLICY BRIEF AUDIENCE(S)

A policy brief is only worth writing if it is read – or possibly watched or listened to - and then influences policy. You need to think about how your audience will react to your brief and what use they will make of it.

You may have a particular reader in mind (for example, a Commonwealth or State/Territory Minister) or many different potential readers. You may be writing for an audience with no background knowledge of the field in which you are writing, or one that is well informed about the policy concerned - except for your recent research.

GENERAL PRINCIPLE - KEEP IT RELEVANT, NEW AND EASY TO UNDERSTAND

You need to give your audience ideas from your research in a form that is relevant and useful.

To be relevant to your audience the policy idea(s) in your brief should help solve a pressing problem or create a new opportunity. A contribution to theory is unlikely to be a promising subject for a policy brief - although there can be exceptions if new theory changes the way policy makers view the world. Mostly though a policy brief will have a direct practical application.

An ideal policy brief will relate to an important concern for your audience. Examples might be:

- cost of living or housing affordability for a government audience.
- improving supply chains or understanding new accounting standards for a business audience.
- social cohesion or democratic participation, for some not-for-profit audiences.

A useful policy brief contains new ideas that are easily understood and applied. A restatement of existing knowledge (for example, a literature review) does not make a good policy brief.

Your policy brief should give your audience ideas and information they cannot find easily for themselves through a Google search or an AI assistant.

In most cases you cannot assume a high level of technical expertise on the part of your audience. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and references to previous writers in your field, no matter how famous. A non-expert audience is unlikely to be familiar with them.

DECIDE WHO YOU WANT AS YOUR AUDIENCE

Who you want as an audience will depend on the purpose and type of the policy brief (see *Types of Policy Briefs* in the Policy Brief Toolkit). Your objective determines who you write for and how you write.

If you are trying to change government policy, then Ministers and senior public servants could be your audience. A better strategy however could be to change government policy through indirect means, in which case you might want to pick journalists or influential lobby groups as your target audience. Or if you think the most likely timing for a policy change is after a change of government, your target audience might be the Opposition and minor parties.

Perhaps you want to change how the law is practiced. In that case your audience could be partners in law firms or members of the judiciary. Note that your style of writing should be different depending on how senior the audience is.

Or you may want to change business practices. Then your audience could be senior managers in businesses, of the boards of major corporations, or peak business representative organisations.

In all these cases, the important thing is to research the audience, find out what they already know and what they are interested in. Avoid using terms that you know will antagonise your readers. For example, November 2025 might not be a good time to write a brief for a National Party audience recommending ways to get to net zero emissions.

A few pointers on how to write for different types of audience are set out below. The list of possible audiences is not exhaustive – you may have others you want to influence with your policy brief.



GOVERNMENT

Ministers, ministers' offices and public servants often use policy briefs in their consideration of policy proposals. These can include introduction of new government programs or changing existing programs. Many policies under consideration relate not only to spending but also regulation, and sometimes revenue (tax settings).

MINISTERS

If writing for a Minister, remember their available time to consider a policy brief is generally very limited – it may be only a few seconds. You must include the key message in the first paragraph – preferably the first sentence. Keep your policy brief to only one key message. If there is more than one message arising from your research, write more policy briefs.

Most Ministers want policy briefs to be on one piece of paper – at most, two pages (double sided), better yet a page and a half. There are exceptions. Some Ministers prefer a long and detailed policy with graphs, charts and references. If possible, call the relevant Minister's office to find out their preferences for briefs.

If your policy brief has conclusions and recommendations, put them at the start. This is the opposite to most academic articles, which slowly lead up to a conclusion at the end. That does not work with Ministers. It is essential to reverse that order if you want to catch their attention. Begin with a recommendation or conclusion, then the most important argument for that recommendation, then - if you must - include one or two supplementary arguments. If you still have space, include likely opposition and risks, especially those that might lose the government the next election.

Your policy brief might not have recommendations or conclusions – it could be drawing the Minister's attention to new and interesting data. It must be something important for the Minister's own portfolio and about which their own office and policy department are unaware.



SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

As for Ministers but can be longer than two pages if you want to present more information. Starting with the key message or conclusions is still good practice.

With policy briefs for officials, avoid partisan political commentary.

Also avoid imperative language (e.g. “the department must draft legislation to protect endangered species”, “the department must change the way it administers debts...”). Officials will react negatively to being told they must do anything. It is generally best to outline data and findings, which leaves room for officials to decide on the appropriate course of action themselves; or provide recommendations in general terms about what government should do rather than phrase the recommendations as an instruction to a department.

ADVOCACY GROUPS

These can include industry bodies (national farmers’ federation, mining council etc.), social justice advocates (ACOSS, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence), aid bodies (CARE, Oxfam), unions, business and employer groups, and many others.

Do not assume every non-government organisation (NGO) is part of your audience. There are more than 600,000 community groups in Australia, of which more than 60,000 are charities. Only a select few of these will be interested in a policy brief.

If your audience is an advocacy group, you need to provide information based on your research from which they can take extracts to use to advocate for the cause the group supports. For this audience, charts, graphs and tables can be the most useful element of your policy brief – especially if that material can explain a complex issue clearly and simply.

Advocacy groups can have an international reach – for example, Greenpeace may want to influence decisions of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (which itself may want to prepare a policy brief); Amnesty International may seek to influence the United Nations; and so on. An international advocacy group requires well researched and thoroughly reliable information which - if possible - draws on multi-country data. If they are your target audience, consider including links in your policy brief to sources of additional data and corroboration of policy findings.

THINK TANKS

These are also in many cases community based, and some will be registered as charities. They are avid consumers of policy briefs, which they will often repackage and use in their own publications (generally with attribution). A think tank can be an effective way to amplify the reach of the policy brief – they can disseminate the findings to a wider audience.

The think tank environment is competitive, with different think tanks seeking to be first to go public on an issue and lead the debate. A policy brief thus will have more influence if you send it to only one think tank which then runs with it. There are however significant risks to this approach: the think tank concerned may not use your material or misquote/misinterpret it; other think tanks could be offended; your name might be associated in the public’s eye with that think tank, which may not be your intent. On balance, it is probably best to circulate your policy brief to all think tanks you know will have an interest in it.

JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA OUTLETS

Their preferred source of information on new research is a media release. You could consider issuing a media release as a covering document with a policy brief or pitch your findings as an article to *The Conversation* which will frequently generate media interest and republication.

Journalists will however come across your policy brief if it is handed to them by a Minister's office, advocacy group or think tank. It will be likely to be covered in any subsequent media story if your policy brief also has the basics elements of a media release – headings and sub-headings, key point in the first paragraph, short paragraphs, author's name and contact details. The contact details should be prominent (bold and larger font) at the bottom of the final page – that is where journalists look for them.

BUSINESSES

Policy briefs can be useful for businesses when they provide information on issues such as economic trends, changing consumer preferences, the global trading environment, impending shortages of raw materials, new regulations, social licence to operate, or other matters that affect viability and profitability.

Depending on the issue, your target audience might include all types of businesses, ranging from major listed companies through to sole traders. If your audience is likely to be large companies, they will have capacity to process more information. If you are targeting any type of business, including small and medium businesses, you need to keep the policy brief very brief and punchy.

If your research concerns corporate strategy or governance, your audience is likely to be company directors; writing for this audience is like the style you would use for Ministers. Directors will be particularly receptive to a policy brief that addresses directors' duties and obligations.

PROFESSIONS

A policy brief can have a professional audience – for example, legal and accounting firms. These audiences may rely on your policy brief in providing advice to clients. This means the brief must be accurate and include all the essential information required to explain the policy.

For these audiences, your brief should include references, sources, and essential background information – so they are likely to longer and more detailed than a policy brief for a government audience.

They may also include quotes from relevant authorities. For example, if your brief is about implications of a recent High Court case you might include extracts from one or more of the judgements – and from a dissenting judgement if there is one. If it is about a change to international accounting standards, you could include comments from the International Accounting Standards Board.

ACADEMICS

Specialist academic colleagues in your field are likely to read a journal article in preference to a policy brief. However, the timetables for article publication can be lengthy. You may want to summarise your research findings in a more timely and accessible policy brief format, particularly in a fast-moving field where you seek to have an influence on thinking in the academic community.

It may be simply a way of communicating your latest findings quickly and easily. You could also have an academic audience outside your own specialisation – researchers in other fields or disciplines who have a general interest.

The academic audience is likely to be more tolerant of references, footnotes, and discussion of methodology than other policy brief audiences.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE IN MIND?

You may not have picked a target audience. You may feel there are likely to be many different users of your work, so multiple audiences. In these cases, you will not be able to research your audience's preferences or write in a style tailored to those preferences.

If this is your situation, the best approach is to keep your policy brief simple. Write for the audience with the least amount of time and lowest level of background knowledge - the style recommended for writing a policy brief for ministers.

That way you know you have covered all your potential audiences, even if some will be left wanting additional information. Include your contact details – at least an email address or website - in your brief. This allows readers who want more information to request it from you or find it online.

