



UNDERSTANDING POLICY BRIEFS

WHAT IS A POLICY BRIEF?

A policy brief is a concise presentation (usually but not always in documentary form) of research findings or proposals expressly to inform and influence policy decisions for a non-academic audience such as policymakers, government officials or other decision-makers.

A policy brief summarises complex information on a specific issue in a sharp and accessible format, usually of 2-8 pages in length, depending on the type of the policy brief and its key audience. The primary goal of a policy brief is to inform and influence policy decisions by providing clear, actionable evidence-based recommendations.

Policy briefs can take many forms which are often not labelled 'policy brief', such as articles in the media or on websites, presentations to interest groups or officials, blog posts or even multimedia productions. The defining characteristics are the intent, the context and the audience, not the medium (see *Alternative Approaches to Communicating Policy Briefs*).

WHY ARE POLICY BRIEFS IMPORTANT FOR RESEARCHERS?

Policy briefs can help bridge the gap between academic research and real-world policy decisions. By clearly outlining the problem at hand, providing evidence-based insights, and proposing actionable recommendations, policy briefs can influence policy development and implementation both directly and indirectly. For example, a well-written policy brief can help researchers gain a 'seat at the table', by being invited to discussions around a given policy issue. It can also distil discussion and debate into a manageable form.

Policy briefs distil often complex research findings into information that is easy to understand and act upon, making it accessible for decision-makers who need to make decisions quickly and may not have the time or expertise to delve into detailed technical reports or lengthy academic papers that often face delays in publishing and can remain hidden behind paywalls. Often, the discipline of writing a short piece for a lay audience can help researchers clarify their understanding of their area of expertise, forcing them to focus on what matters most in policy terms.

Additional benefits of policy briefs include:



KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION

Policy briefs translate complex research findings into accessible language, making it easier for decision-makers to understand and apply the information.



INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

Policy briefs help decision-makers create more effective policies by providing evidence-based recommendations.



TIME EFFICIENCY

Policy briefs offer a quick, comprehensive overview of key issues and potential solutions.



ADVOCACY TOOL

Researchers can use policy briefs to advocate for specific policy changes based on their findings.



IMPACT ENHANCEMENT

Policy briefs can help extend the reach and impact of academic research beyond scholarly circles, potentially influencing real-world outcomes.

WHO USES POLICY BRIEFS?

Policy briefs are primarily used by policymakers, government officials, policy advocates, and other decision-makers who need to understand complex issues quickly. They are also used by a wide range of stakeholders, including:



1. Policymakers

Government officials (ministers and public servants) use policy briefs to gain a quick understanding of research insights relevant to policy development and/or to stay informed about current issues and potential solutions.



2. Advocacy groups, industry peak bodies and politically active charities

These organisations use policy briefs to influence policy decisions by advocating for policy changes or raising awareness about specific issues.



3. Think tanks

Non-academic research institutions often produce policy briefs to share their findings and recommendations with decision-makers and the public, influencing public policy and contributing to public debate.



4. Business leaders

Businesses may use policy briefs to understand how potential policy changes might affect their industries, using research evidence to inform strategic business decisions.



5. Media professionals

Journalists and commentators may refer to policy briefs when reporting on complex policy issues.



6. Academics and researchers

Academics use policy briefs to communicate their findings to a broader audience and demonstrate the real-world impact of their work, while simultaneously using other's policy briefs to stay informed about policy-relevant research in their field.



7. International organisations

International organisations use policy briefs to inform global policy agendas, such as those of the United Nations or World Bank.

[see Policy Brief Audiences guide in the BGL Policy Brief Toolkit for more detail on these users]

WHO WRITES POLICY BRIEFS?

Policy briefs are typically written by researchers, academics, government officials and experts who have in-depth knowledge of a particular issue. They are often written in collaboration with policy experts or communication specialists to ensure the content is accessible and relevant to policymakers. In fact, policy briefs can have more impact when collaboratively developed with the policy-makers they intend to guide, bringing together the research and policy experts to ensure the brief scope, target and messaging will have the most impact on policy outcomes.

Policy briefs authors may include:

- 1. Academic researchers:**
 Researchers write policy briefs to translate their findings into actionable recommendations, sharing their research findings with policymakers and other decision-makers.
- 2. Think tank analysts:**
 Researchers at policy institutes regularly produce policy briefs on a wide range of topics to influence public policy and contribute to public debate.
- 3. Government researchers and policy makers:**
 Analysts and policy makers working in government agencies may prepare policy briefs for internal use or public dissemination, informing internal decision-making or communicate policy positions.
- 4. Advocacy group staff:**
 Experts working in advocacy organisations often write policy briefs to advocate for specific policy changes or raise awareness about issues.
- 5. Consultants:**
 Policy consultants may be hired to research and write briefs on specific topics, providing evidence-based advice to policymakers.



KEY FEATURES OF A POLICY BRIEF

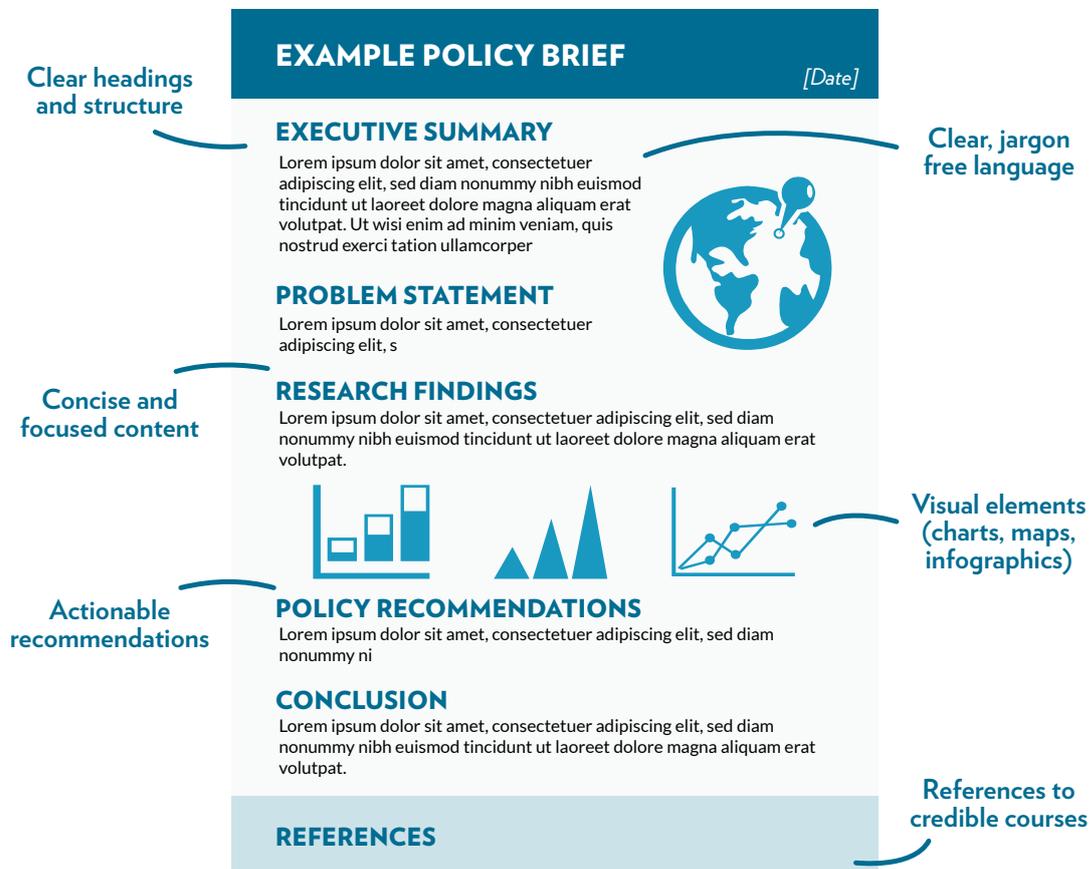
Basically, a policy brief needs to answer three questions:



In answering these three questions, a policy brief combines elements of both informative and persuasive writing to engage policymakers, stakeholders, and the public, often using visual aids to enhance clarity. Key parts of the policy brief usually include:

The nature and extent of each of these elements of a policy brief depends on a range of factors, including:

- How well defined the problem is
- How much agreement there is about the problem
- How much evidence and data there is about the problem
- How much agreement there is about the significance of that evidence and data
- Whether there are clear and broadly agreed solutions, or conversely whether there is debate and discord about possible solutions
- Whether the author(s) are seeking to champion specific solutions, or to inform/influence the debate more broadly.



WRITING YOUR POLICY BRIEF

While there is no single approach to writing a policy brief, the following tips and tricks will help focus on developing a clear and impactful policy brief:



1. Establish what you are writing and for whom

- a. Identify what type of policy brief you are writing so you know what is ahead of you (see *Types of Policy Briefs* for guidance)
- b. Identify your key audience so as you can tailor the policy brief tone, depth, and evidence for maximum influence (see *Policy Brief Audiences* guide)
- c. Understand the context: is it a highly contentious area of policy? Has it arisen as a matter of public concern? Conversely, is it a 'sleeper', an emerging but not yet fully publicly realised issue?



2. Start with a bang!

- a. Use a strong title that is specific and action-oriented and that is likely to be picked up in web searches and the like (e.g., Solving intergenerational housing inequity using tax reform)
- b. Lead with a clear, single message in one sentence at the top so busy readers grasp the aim immediately.
- c. Open with the problem and its significance — explain who is affected, why it matters now, the degree of agreement, and the scale or urgency in plain language.



3. Keep the messages clear and succinct

- a. Use plain language, avoid jargon and acronyms. Define unavoidable technical terms in one line.
- b. Keep it short and scannable. Aim for 1–4 pages, use short paragraphs, headings, bullet lists and visuals so readers can skim.
- c. Use visual aids for impact, not to overwhelm. Include one or two simple figures, tables, or infographics to summarize evidence or comparisons. Ensure there are clear links between the visuals and the text.
- d. End with a clear call to action. What do you want them to do next and by when (e.g., “Introducing tax reform in the immediate future is critical for equitable housing access for all Australians.”).
- e. Be prepared to revise. The process of writing a policy brief can be clarifying for the author, helping you develop and hone your thinking and your writing.
- f. Edit ruthlessly and test with critical readers.



4. Drive clear actions

- a. Briefly outline expected impacts, resources required, timelines, and potential downsides.
- b. Present 2–4 specific evidence-based recommendations that are feasible and actionable.
- c. Include practical implementation steps that clearly identify responsible actors, next steps, pilot ideas, or timelines to make action easier.
- d. If the issue warrants it, or if you are not certain of the best policy direction, then make the action one of exploring a range of options and/or gathering further evidence—but only as a last resort.



5. Maintain credibility

- Stay within your area of expertise. It can be tempting to offer opinions on adjacent matters. Do so with caution, as passing an ill-considered judgement on an area not within your expertise can undermine the rest of the policy brief.
- Anticipate objections by addressing the top 1-2 counterarguments or risks with concise rebuttals or mitigation approaches.
- Simply list author affiliations and funders but do not provide biographies.
- Include a one-line methods summary or confidence level for the evidence presented.
- Offer options for further detail such as a link to the full report, data appendix, or contact person.

EXAMPLE POLICY BRIEFS:

To better understand the structure and content of policy briefs, it's helpful to review examples from reputable sources. Here are a few places where you can find sample policy briefs:

Centre for Employment and Labour Relations Law's policy brief series:

<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/celrl/research/publications/policy-briefs>

ANU Policy Brief:

<https://policybrief.anu.edu.au/>

United Nations Economist Network:

<https://www.un.org/en/desa/unen/policy-briefs>

UN Environment Program Sustainable Development Goals Policy Briefs:

<https://www.unep.org/topics/sustainable-development-goals/monitoring-progress/policy-briefs>

When examining these examples, pay attention to the following aspects to help guide the development of your policy briefs:

- The overall structure and formatting
- How complex information is simplified without losing veracity
- The use of visual elements
- The tone and language used
- How recommendations are presented.



DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS IN WRITING POLICY BRIEFS

To develop your skills in writing effective policy briefs, consider the following resources:

Practice: Regularly writing policy briefs on your research topics will help you refine your technique and arguments.

Feedback: Seek input from colleagues, mentors, or policymakers on your policy briefs to improve your writing.

Networking with policymakers: Engage with policymakers to understand their needs and preferences, enhancing the relevance and impact of your briefs.

Workshops and webinars: Many universities and professional organisations offer workshops on writing policy briefs.

Online courses: Platforms like Coursera and edX offer courses on policy writing and communication.

Guidelines and Templates: For example, the "Plain Language Guidelines" from <https://digital.gov/guides/plain-language> can help you write a clear, accessible policy brief.

For those interested in learning more about writing policy briefs, the following resources may be helpful:

1. **International Centre for Policy Advocacy, An Essential Guide to Writing Policy Briefs (2017):**

<https://icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/icpa-policy-briefs-essential-guide.pdf>

2. **World Health Organisation, Policy brief template-How to write an effective policy brief (2024):**

<https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/9789292741907-eng.pdf>

3. **The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre, The Sax Institute, Writing a policy brief (2026):**

<https://preventioncentre.org.au/resources/writing-a-policy-brief/>

