



**Policy Brief**  
Week

# How To plan, write and communicate an effective Policy Brief

## *Three Steps to Success*

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This guide outlines how to make the most of your policy brief, by using strategic planning and targeted engagement with policy actors, to help you achieve positive policy influence.

It is intended for use by researchers, knowledge brokers and communications professionals.

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# Policy Briefs Explained

## WHAT?

A policy brief is a short, to the point, jargon free document written for non-specialists.

It presents research or project findings to

policy actors, highlighting the relevance of the specific research to policy and offering recommendations for change.

## WHO?

Policy briefs are written for a variety of policy actors. Exactly who a policy brief should be written for depends on the aim of the specific policy brief and the level of its application, for example, local, national, regional or private. Finding the right policy actor to target is crucial to ensuring that it will be read.

National policy actors are individuals who make or change government legislation. Examples include: national Members of Parliament, local politicians, heads of state and civil servants.

Regional and international policy actors include: regional parliamentary representatives or delegates (eg European Union, African Union) and individuals or groups forming international institutions (eg United Nations, World Health Organisation).

Policy actors are also individuals or groups who have access to either public or private policy making processes. This includes: lobbyists, advisers to government, trade unions, NGOs, Think Tanks, the media, CEOs/CFOs of business and professionals within industry.

## WHY?

Policy briefs are the preferred form of communication favoured by policy actors. **79% of policy actors from both developing and developed countries rated policy briefs as a 'key tool'** (Jones & Walsh 2008: 3).

Policy briefs act like a business card for researchers, presenting important research findings and a researcher's background in a short and appealing way, the first step to establishing a good reputation and repeat consultations with policy actors. Policy actors consult known

experts a significant amount of the time. A recent research paper found that policy actors utilise existing relationships with academics around 50% of the time when starting to research an issue (Talbot & Talbot 2014: 12).

Writing a policy brief evidences outreach and displays awareness of the impact of research, an increasingly necessary stage in securing grant funding. Most importantly, writing a policy brief can help change policy for the better!

## HOW effective are they?

Policy actors are busy and do not have time to read full length academic papers. On average, policy actors spend 30-60 minutes reading a policy brief (Jones & Walsh 2008: 6). Thus policy briefs are an effective way of bringing important research to the attention of policy actors because they can be read in a short amount of time. **Making research findings easily digestible increases the likelihood of research being read and acted upon.** Condensing findings into policy briefs reduces the potential for important research to be lost because the research is in a format that policy actors do not have time to access.

Policy briefs have the potential to reach large audiences through different networks because of their condensed format. Research has found that a policy actor will pass a policy brief on to colleagues if they perceive themselves to be important (Benyon et al. 2012: 76). This snowball effect, where a policy brief travels to an expanding circle of recipients, is only made possible because the research findings are in an accessible and transferable format.

# STEP ONE

## Planning and Understanding your Audience

### The first question to answer is: what is the aim of my policy brief?

The aim of a policy brief can range from changing policy to raising awareness of an issue. The aim will determine who the correct policy actors to target are. Figuring out who to target will shape

everything from your choice of language to whether or not you present preferred policy options.

### The second question to address is: what does a policy actor want from a policy brief?

Policy actors want relevant solutions to policy problems. A policy brief should clearly lay out evidence informed solutions to a problem that the specific actor is interested in. These solutions should be realistic, feasible within the current political climate and cost-effective. Understanding what a given policy actor wants, by putting yourself

in their shoes, will help you write a more attractive policy brief.

A good aim for any policy brief is to pass the 'breakfast test'. A policy brief should be read and understood in the length of time it takes to drink a coffee over breakfast.

***Before starting to write a policy brief it is crucial to appreciate political realities, and any competing policy narratives, to ensure the best chance of achieving influence.***

***Work through the 3 stage grid on the following page from left to right, to help you decide upon specific policy actors to target and the best way to navigate your chosen policy area.***



|                            | <b>What you need to know</b>  | <b>What you need to do</b>   | <b>How to do it</b>   |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>The Policy Context</b>  | <p>What level of application your recommendations have</p> <p>How policy is made within the chosen issue area</p> <p>Who has power to change or influence policy</p> <p>If there is a problem with the current policy/demand for change</p> | <p>Pick a policy level: Local/National/Regional/Private</p> <p>Understand the policy process, the key players and timelines</p> <p>Know the powerful policy actors and how to contact them</p> <p>Pinpoint the gaps in current policy, look for windows of opportunity</p> | <p>Ask yourself who will be affected by the policy change</p> <p>Research similar examples, explore the policy process from start to finish</p> <p>Map out the key players. Look for missing link/connections you can use or create</p> <p>Read through current policy on the issue</p> |
| <b>Knowledge Landscape</b> | <p>If there are competing narratives</p> <p>If there are obstacles to the uptake of your recommendations</p> <p>Why the issue is particularly pertinent</p>   | <p>Establish why your policy option is different and better</p> <p>Identify cultural practises or widely held views that may oppose your recommendations</p> <p>Establish credibility, timeliness and legitimacy</p>   | <p>Identify alternate proposals from research institutions or policy makers</p> <p>List reasons the public, groups or business may reject your proposals</p> <p>Search the news, policy committees and current government reviews</p>   |
| <b>Networks and Links</b>  | <p>Locate similar campaigns or recommendations around the policy issue</p>  | <p>Work through existing networks</p> <p>Learn from successful actors</p>  | <p>Build partnerships</p> <p>Use informal contacts</p>  |

# STEP TWO

## Writing a Policy Brief

A policy brief must be easy to read. Structure is important to get right. **Ensure that everything the reader really needs to know is on the first page.**

The length of a policy brief can vary depending on the discipline and content. A policy brief can be 1, 2 or 4 pages but no longer.



**The format of a policy brief should be logical and easy to follow. It should include:**

**A) Title-** keep it snappy, short and informative.

**B) Executive Summary-** two to three sentences summing up the entire brief. Use recognisable buzzwords and emphasise the relevance of the research to policy to draw the policy actor's attention to read on.

**C) Introduction/Summary of the Problem-** explain the policy issue and why it is particularly important or current. Put the research into context.

**D) Methods, Approaches and Results/Body-** present the research/project findings in an accessible way for a non-specialist. Explain the methodology used to reach the results, such as a synthesis of existing research/literature or new research data. A policy actor wants to see robust results that are repeatable or corroborated by others.

**E) Conclusions-** reinforce the key message to take away from the policy brief. Remember the executive summary is where typical conclusion content is, do not simply repeat it.

**F) Policy Recommendations-** try and make only one feasible policy recommendation. If you are making more than one recommendation, differentiate them clearly e.g. in bullet points and keep it to three maximum.

**G) References and Suggested Sources-** use references sparingly and suggest a few additional sources at the end to give either background or more detail to the policy issue.

**H) Acknowledgements, Author Details and Disclaimers-** detail any funding used for the research, note down the author's current positions and contact details, if the policy brief is being produced by an institution a disclaimer may be needed.



### Tips on language use and framing your message:

- Be concise and very clear
- Use active not passive language (Musandu 2013).
- Highlight the benefits that your recommendations will have, to the policy system, to those affected by the policy and more generally e.g. economically or environmentally.
- Anticipate questions that the reader may have throughout the brief. For example, why should I carry on reading this? What relevance does this have? How did they come to these conclusions and recommendations? (Aldous-Grant 2012).
- Do not present evidence in a manner that is confrontational to the beliefs of the chosen policy actors, information will be acted upon if it is salient to the policy actors' viewpoint. Distinguish between personal opinion and evidence based opinion.

### Tips for styling a policy brief:

- If you have a Communications Department within your institution ask for a template or the expected masthead and layout.
- Make sure the masthead is bold and eye-catching. If you are from a well-regarded institution, the masthead should emphasise this, opinions from well-regarded institutions are more likely to be acted upon (Jones & Walsh 2008: 5).
- Break up the text into short paragraphs. Use boxes, subheading and bullet points as long as the text still makes sense. Consider diagrams and tables to save on words.
- Put important points in bold or italics but do not overuse them or the brief will appear cluttered and confusing.

### WHEN

Write a policy brief soon after research has been published to capitalise on momentum and the novelty of the research. Policy briefs can even be written after initial findings are corroborated, to prime policy actors.

Try to write a policy brief at a fitting time, for example, if the issue has gained news coverage or policy makers' attention, if there is an obvious shortfall in the current policy or if there is a crisis.

# STEP THREE

## How to get your Policy Brief Out There

Have you ever heard a policy brief referred to as a stand-alone document? This does not mean that all effort should stop after the brief has been written.

**Targeted distribution of your policy brief is the difference between it being read or unread.**



**Be cautious** when selecting policy actors to send it to. Dos and Don'ts to keep in mind:

- ✓ Do send it in paper form as well as via email.
- ✗ Don't send it a department or company without researching who to send it to, always send it to a named person.
- ✗ Don't send it to unrelated or very senior policy actors who are unlikely to read it.



**Follow up** the policy brief. Personal contact with a policy actor can make a real difference, especially due to policy actors' reliance on informal contacts for advice. Practical tips on engaging with policy actors:

- Make a telephone call to the policy actor to see if they require any extra resources or research reports after reading the policy brief.
- If they are not the most relevant policy actor, ask if they can send it on to a more appropriate colleague.
- Invite them to an event or seminar so that the issue can be clarified or discussed in more depth.



**Be proactive and seek out existing opportunities** to work with policy actors directly.

- Hold a public seminar in a series designed for policy actors.
- Apply to a pairing scheme with a politician.
- Look at funded knowledge exchange secondments and policy placements for researchers.



**Improvise and seize windows of opportunity.**

- Have copies of your policy brief to hand out at related events and seminars.
- Capitalise on public support or press coverage of the issue. Do not forget that the press and public shape the atmosphere in which policy is made.
- Learn from, and link up with, similar campaigns or examples of research based policy change that have cleverly exploited gaps in existing policy.

## Using social media and the internet to promote a policy brief

The internet is an often overlooked tool that can help your recommendations travel to wider audiences. Build an online presence by:

- Uploading the policy brief to your website
- Writing a blog about the research findings/recommendations
- Advertising the brief via Twitter or other social media sites

Policy makers within government are being advised to widen their network of informal contacts within academia, and are being directed to social media as a ‘valuable’ way of sourcing new expertise (Government Office for Science 2013: 22). Building an online presence, especially using social media, is a key way to develop your profile as a valued expert by increasing your accessibility to policy makers.

Research suggests that, in general, Universities’ engagement with social media and online communications demonstrates under-utilisation and that they have yet to fulfil their potential. The findings suggest that building a ‘web presence’ will become ever more important in bridging the gap between research and policy (Talbot & Talbot 2014: 12). **If you belong to a research institution, ask your Communications Department to blog, report and share your policy brief through their official channels.**

## What Ifs...

Still hesitant about writing a policy brief? Here are a few common barriers researchers may face accompanied by some solutions.

If you have more questions about policy briefs or research communications, ask the HelpDesk for expert advice from CommsConsult at <http://www.researchtoaction.org/helpdesk/>

**Q. *What if I am not a respected expert within my field? I thought experts with a reputation were more likely to be listened to.***

**A.** The evidence is unclear, some studies do report an ‘authority effect’ (Jones & Walsh 2008: 4) whilst others discredit it, arguing that expert opinion only makes the policy brief more memorable not more persuasive (Benyon et al. 2012: 73). Use a policy brief as a way to build a profile, acting like a business card.

**Q. *What if I am not currently attached to a well-known institution? I thought work from well-known institutions was more likely to be read.***

**A.** Above all policy makers are looking for timely, engaging and feasible policy briefs. Evidence from analysis of civil servants does suggest an over-reliance on certain research institutions (Talbot & Talbot 2014: 23), however, think about sending your policy brief to other policy actors such as advisers and lobbyists to compensate. Make the policy brief visible online, use Twitter, post it on your website and consider listing it on [Policy Library](#) which directly reaches a large number of policy actors.

**Q. *What if all I want to do is bring attention to the issue instead of change policy immediately?***

**A.** Policy is unlikely to change immediately; the process of change is long and complex. Raising awareness of an issue can be done using multiple channels of communication, think about making the press aware of the issue to increase leverage over the general policy climate.

**Q. *What if I do not have time to do all this research about my audience and the policy climate?***

**A.** Write a research briefing instead. A policy brief should be carefully planned and followed up. A research briefing is based on the findings of a research paper and aims to give a fuller understanding of the issue. The two can however work hand in hand with a research briefing being sent upon request after the policy brief to give a more advanced insight into the research. Alternatively, if you have a Communications Department ask for help planning and writing a policy brief.

**Q. *What if there is no clear takeaway message from the research I am presenting in the policy brief?***

**A.** Be clear that there is no decisive answer to the issue your research addresses, *that* is the takeaway message. There should be no room for misinterpretation. There is a difference between concluding that no takeaway message can be extracted from the research and that the takeaway message is that no decisive answer is apparent.

**Q. *What if I am attached to an NGO who are known for being powerful advocates, will this undermine the credibility of the research I am presenting?***

**A.** Opinion is valued by policy actors (Jones & Walsh 2008: 6); policy actors want clear evidence based recommendations, which can be opinionated. Be sure to distinguish personal opinion from evidence based opinion. Remember that policy actors are looking for research that furthers their own agenda and legitimates their views; therefore, sending a policy brief to a staunchly opposed policy actor is not the best use of your time as they are unlikely to change their views as a result.

**Q. *What if the policy actor I want to send my policy brief to has opposite views to the policy recommendations that I am proposing?***

**A.** Frame your message carefully and remember that policy actors are unlikely to

change their predisposed values and beliefs on the basis of one policy brief (Benyon et al. 2012: 34), this means extra follow up work will be necessary. Style the brief in an objective manner, an advocacy style brief with strong policy recommendations may be discarded due to its' contentious recommendations. Provide a number of policy options and do not recommend one policy option overall, if the evidence is clear enough then your chosen policy option should be apparent to the policy actor as well as to you. Follow up the brief with an invite to public seminar or with a phone call to capitalise on momentum. Consider other methods of influencing the policy context the actor works within, generate public or press awareness, and utilise moments of opportunity such as news coverage or a crisis.

**Q. *What if I cannot find a named person to send the policy brief to?***

**A.** If you cannot find a relevant policy actor ask for advice from your communications department or from colleagues who have experience in contacting policy actors. Contact your local MP who may be useful in finding the right policy maker with relevant interests and expertise. When dealing with private industry or business, send the brief to the Chief Security Officer or Chief Executive Officer. Avoid appearing like spam when emailing policy actors, this will be counterproductive.

## SOURCES

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### **Tools for understanding your audience and mapping the policy context/ knowledge landscape:**

Influence Matrix: <http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp/tool/importance-against-influence-matrix>

Netmapping: <http://netmap.wordpress.com/about/>

### **Opportunities to engage with policy makers (mainly UK based):**

ESRC Public Policy Seminar Series <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration/public-sector/seminars/>

Knowledge Exchange Secondments available through Individual University funded by ESRC or NERC <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration/knowledge-exchange/opportunities/ImpactAccelerationAccounts.aspx>

Policy Placements NERC <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/funding/available/schemes/placements/>

Pairing Scheme RCUK <https://royalsociety.org/training/pairing-scheme/>

Pairing Scheme trialled in Uganda <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/africa/>

Policy Library <http://www.policylibrary.com/>

### Additional Resources:

Research to Action collection on Policy Briefs: <http://www.researchtoaction.org/tasks/writing-policy-briefs/>

Chandrika Nath, 'How to tell policymakers about scientific uncertainty', SciDev : <http://www.scidev.net/global/policy/practical-guide/how-to-tell-policymakers-about-scientific-uncertainty-1.html>

Chandrika Nath, 'How do I brief policymakers on science-related issues?', SciDev: <http://www.scidev.net/global/communication/practical-guide/how-do-i-brief-policymakers-on-science-related-iss.html>

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement on Policy Engagement, 'Policymakers': <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/plan-it/who-engage-with/policymakers>

Wellcome Trust, 'Getting Research into Policy': <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Education-resources/Engagement-with-your-research/Public-engagement-opportunities/Government-and-science-policy/WTS040403.htm>

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