



3.1 Policy Briefs: Introduction and Guidelines

Structure of the Policy Brief Module of GovTalk

3. Policy Briefs

3.1 Introduction

3.2 IDRC Training Package

3.3 Quick Reference:

What is a Policy Brief?

Think of a Policy Brief as a snapshot. A Policy Brief can:

Provide the reader with an overview of a specific policy issue, define the current state of development, debate or policy reviews, provide a summary of recommended actions from the writer's perspective.

Provide the reader with a background history of the policy issue, giving them the current state of play of the issue.

Provide a historical review of a policy issue to bring the reader up to date.

Policy Briefs can come from different sources:

From government officials, a briefing summary for readers new to the topic, e.g., a new Minister or manager.

From government

From outside government, advocacy groups, be they NGOs, lobbyist, public policy institutes or research leaders, frequently use policy briefs to:

- Summarize a policy applying their analytical perspective,
- Point out needed calls for actions taken from their view of government action or otherwise to date,
- Make specific recommendations for government action.

What is the Difference Between A Briefing Note and a Policy Brief?

You will find that practice varies considerably among governments and even within larger governments. The same can be said for how instructors in public policy and administration use such terms. It pays to ask about expected formats in specific assignments.

Policy Briefs are different from Briefing Notes in that they are intended to provide a synthesis of a policy issue for general use and information of the reader. A briefing note can be seen as more transactional within government processes. A policy brief may well be part of providing advice to a decision-maker, but it may also be intended to provide the public with an overview of a specific policy issue, update a reader on the state of play of a policy issue or summarize recent developments.

Policy Briefs are often written by advocacy groups trying to influence government policy. An NGO or an industry representative lobbyist may produce a Policy Brief that summarizes their take on a policy issue, advocating for either a specific decision or a policy shift in government. These become communication tools as well, summarizing a particular perspective on the policy issue as a legitimate part of the advocacy and policy influencing process of government.

General Description

Think Purpose and Audience

A Policy Brief creates an overview of a policy issue of concern to either inform the reader or convince them. The reader may be a course instructor who has assigned the student to bring together material on a specific policy matter, and, depending on the nature of the assignment, also summarize and analyze the material and proposed policy outcomes on the basis of that assignment. The reader in this situation may be a decision-maker but it may also be a broader audience that the writer of the Brief is either trying to inform of their perspective or ensure that their understanding of the issue is appreciated. All of this will depend on who the writer is and what is their purpose. For instance, a policy analyst in a government unit may be asked to bring a new member of the executive team up to date on a specific policy matter within the unit. If the executive is new to the area, the Brief becomes a summary of the issue, a statement of the current state of play on the issue and, potentially, commentary on future steps. However, if the writer is part of an advocacy group wishing to affect a decision-maker's thinking on a pressing policy issue, the Brief becomes a summary of how the advocacy group understands the issues at play and a statement of their position on them, proposing that the decision-maker consider its position in making

Course Assignment

- Instructor sets format
- Looking for overview of policy area
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What does this mean for the writer? If the Brief is indeed a backgrounder as outlined above, there will be a presentation of facts without necessarily proposing policy alternatives or actions. If it is for advocacy, the Brief will focus more precisely on the desired policy outcome. Discussion of alternatives is certainly possible, given time and space limitations, but the goal is to get the perspective of the advocates in front of the target reader. Between these two can also lie a Policy Brief that outlines the state of play on a particular policy issue at a point in time. This can certainly outline alternative courses of action.

Key here is that none of this can be in too much depth. Detailed arguments for various courses of action are left for longer analytical pieces that provide background. The Policy Brief should have the following characteristics to be effective:

On target: What is the problem?

To the point: Limit the area covered to the problem at hand. Everything is linked and relevant in some areas and side issues, distractions or meaningless references only distract from the problem being addressed.

Time relevant: Why is this a problem now?

Contextual: How did we get here? The policy history, the event that brought the issue forward, the urgency and pressures in the near and medium term.

Professional, even in academic briefs: Work of research, detailed analysis and related studies should be evident but not cited, except where required. Even there, complex quotations should be avoided, and citations contained at the end.

Addresses the Evidence: Even when there is debate on the evidence to be used in the policy issues, what it means and what is left out, needlessly included, the Brief has to present its take on the evidence. Just saying something is evidence-based is meaningless unless you can point to the evidence.

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Structural Elements of a Policy Brief

The Outline presented in the graph is typical of Policy Briefs written for academic assignments, used in within government and by advocacy groups. There is not one format, but they all should address the requirements of this outline.

Title Page	Be Brief Focus on Use
Summary/ Overview	Why read this now? What is the problem? What this Brief does: informs, synthesizes, recommends. What next? Informed, direction, recommendations.
Context/Considerations	How did we get here? Clear statement of the problem and its roots Clear statement of the policy implications of the problem Statement of the context in which the policy is being considered and managed: risks, interests, past efforts, present positions
Quick Review of Policy Options	Analysis of current approach and gaps Argument for changing options Short overview of policy options
Recommendations	