MISTRA
ENVIRONMENTAL
COMMUNICATION

How to write a policy brief

A practical guide



Why write a policy brief?

Writing a policy brief is a way of presenting research and policy options to decision-makers. It can help support evidence-based policies by providing relevant research in a concise and accessible format, enabling informed decisions at different levels of governance.

A policy brief is not a fact sheet: it goes beyond presenting research by making policy recommendations. Nor is it an opinion piece: it does not contain personal opinions and values. To be impactful, the message needs to be clear and the topic considered relevant by the intended target audience. A policy brief should:

1. **Describe** a specific problem or challenge
2. **Explain** why policy action is needed
3. **Recommend** concrete and actionable solutions

Who are you writing for?

Identify your primary audience before you start writing. A policy brief aimed at national policymakers may need a different focus and level of detail than one aimed at municipal officials, civil servants or practitioners. Ask yourself:

- Who can act on these recommendations?
- What do they already know about the issue?
- What information do they need to act on it?

Characteristics of an effective policy brief

- Keep the content clear, concise, and focused on one main issue.
- Write in plain, non-technical language. This makes the brief easier to understand and more engaging.
- Adjust the language and level of detail to your audience's level of knowledge. A rule of thumb is to assume that the readers know less about the topic than you do. It's usually possible to go deeper, but it's more difficult to broaden oneself.
- Avoid jargon and technical terms. When technical terms are essential, briefly explain them.

Suggested structure

Title and headings

- Choose a title that quickly communicates the topic of the brief. Keep it short, specific and relevant.

- If you're stuck, identify 2-3 key words and experiment with combining them in different ways using function words as *and, but, or, if...*

- Break up the main body text with subheadings to make the brief easier to scan and navigate. Use clear, informative headings to help the reader understand the main message of each section. Where appropriate, use action-oriented language and calls to action (proposing, adjust, reform, use...).
    - Example: Instead of *Background*, try *Why current policies fall short.*

Key messages

- Briefly summarise the problem, why it matters and what should be done. If the reader is short of time, they should be able to understand the relevance and importance of the brief from the key messages alone.

- Use 3–5 short bullet points or a short paragraph. Aim for approximately 50–100 words. It can be helpful to write the summary last, once you have drafted the other sections and gained clarity on the main points of the brief.

The problem and context

- Explain the problem and why it's important to address it. Give the reader enough context to understand the issue but avoid an overload of background information.

- Make the case for why policy action is needed and, where relevant, highlight the potential benefits of addressing the issue.

What the research shows

- Explain what the research tells us about the problem. Focus on the findings that are most relevant to the policy issue and the recommendations that follow.

- Make the connection between research findings and policy recommendations clear. Avoid assuming that the implications of the research are self-evident to the reader.

Policy recommendations

- Help the reader understand what they should do to address the issue.

- A policy brief usually contains 3-5 recommendations, although more can be appropriate depending on the topic. Recommendation should be action-oriented, specific and feasible.

- Be clear about who should act and, where possible, what they should do. Recommendations may be updated in future editions if circumstances change.

Sources

- The references show what research the recommendations are based on and allow readers to explore it further. Prioritise the most relevant sources rather than trying to provide a complete literature review.

Authors and contact information

- Include the names of the authors or researchers involved and their organisations.
- Provide contact information for follow-up questions or further discussion. Include at least one contact person.

Length

- Aim for 2-4 pages (about 1 000-2 000 words).

Design matters

A well-designed brief is easier to read and more likely to be used. Please use the programme's graphic profile, which you can find here.

Sidebars and lists

- Use sidebars, bullet points and numbered lists to simplify complex and dense content. These elements make the brief easier to scan through and understand.

Graphics

- Use visuals such as photos, charts, diagrams and infographics when they help to communicate or reinforce your message. For example, you could use a chart to highlight key findings, a diagram to explain relationships between concepts, a timeline to illustrate how something has developed over time or a map to show geographical patterns. Choose visuals that support the content and make complex information easier to understand.
- Each visual should have a clear caption explaining its relevance/connection.

Further Reading and Resources

- Tips and tools – Policy briefs (The Writing Center, UNC Chapel Hill)
- Developing Policy Briefs (The World Bank)

Examples of policy briefs

- Stoppar rättviseargument Sveriges omställning till ett fossilfritt välfärdssamhälle? En analys av politiska debatter
- Så kan skogsbruket och renskötseln samexistera – tio rekommendationer från forsk arna
- India overtakes China as the world's most populous country