Writing Effective Reports

4.1

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify two types of policy briefs (advocacy and objective);
- describe the characteristics of a policy brief;
- describe the structure and contents of a policy brief; and
- conceptualize a policy brief about a food security issue.

Introduction

In this lesson we will take a close look at policy briefs and learn how to produce them.

What are policy briefs?

A policy brief is a concise summary of a particular issue, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option.

It is aimed at government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

Policy briefs can take different formats. A typical format is a single A4 sheet (210 x 297 mm), containing perhaps 700 words. It has an attractive design, and may have one or more photograph. Longer briefs (up to 8 pages, or 3,000 words) and other formats are also possible.

Examples of policy briefs

Here are some examples of policy briefs from different organizations:

Braun, J. von, and M. Torero. 2008. Physical and virtual global food reserves to protect the poor and prevent market failure. IFPRI Policy Brief 4. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC. www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/bp004.pdf

FAO. 2005. Strengthening sustainable agricultural and rural enterprises. SARD Brief 3. SARD-Farming Systems Evolution project. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome. www.fao.org/sard/common/ecg/2461/en/SARD_Brief_3.pdf

EC - FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme, Food Security in Protracted Crises: What can be done?, Policy Brief, December 2008 ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/011/ak057e/ak057e00.pdf

INMASP and FAO. 2006. Farmer field schools on land and water management: An extension approach that works. INMASP and FAO Pilot Project on Land and Water Management through Farmer Field Schools. Jinja, Uganda. www.mamud.com/Docs/ffslwm_policy_brief.pdf

NCCR North-South. 2009. Natural resources: The climate change challenge. Evidence for Policy 4. NCCR, University of Bern, Switzerland. www.cde.unibe.ch/userfiles/file/NCCR_Policy_Brief_Climate_Change.pdf

ODI. 2008. Rising food prices: A global crisis. Briefing paper 37. Overseas Development Institute, London. www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1009.pdf

	ODI. 2008. Rising food prices: Cause for concern. Natural Resource Perspectives 115. Overseas Development Institute, London. www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1896.pdf
	UNAIDS. 2008. HIV, food security and nutrition. UNAIDS Policy Brief. http://data.unaids.org/pub/Manual/2008/jc1515a_policybrief_nutrition_en.pdf \

Types of policy briefs

There are **two basic types** of policy briefs:

- an **advocacy brief** argues in favour of a particular course of action.
- an **objective brief** gives balanced information for the policymaker to make up his or her mind.

Advocacy brief

Argues in favour of a particular course of action

Objective brief

Gives balanced information for policy maker to make up his or her mind

Farmer field schools on land and water management: An extension approach that works
(INMASP and FAO 2006)
This policy brief urges Uganda's government to adopt a particular approach to farmers' education

Rising food prices: Cause for concern
(Overseas Development Institute, 2008)
This policy brief presents some problems caused by rising food prices, and suggests ways policymakers might respond

What should a policy brief do?

A policy brief should:

- Provide enough **background** for the reader to understand the problem.
- Convince the reader that the problem must be addressed **urgently**.
- Provide information about **alternatives** (in an **objective** brief).
- Provide **evidence** to support one alternative (in an **advocacy** brief).
- Stimulate the reader to make a **decision**.

What should a policy brief contain?

To achieve its objectives, a policy brief should:

- **Be short and to the point**. It should focus on a particular problem or issue. Do not go into all the details. Instead, provide enough information for the reader to understand the issue and come to a decision.
- **Be based on firm evidence**, not just one or two experiments or a single year's experience. It should draw evidence from various sources – preferably from several different areas or organizations.
- **Focus on meanings, not methods.** Readers are interested in what you found and what you recommend. They do not need to know the details of your methodology.
- **Relate to the big picture.** The policy brief may build on context-specific findings, but it should draw conclusions that are more generally applicable.

Remember that…

Policymakers are busy people, and are probably not specialists in your area.
They are likely to read only something that…

- *Looks attractive*
- *Appears interesting*
- *Is short and easy to read.*

Part of a series?

Many policy briefs are part of a **series**. Check with the series editor, or the head of the publications or public awareness unit in your organization, for any requirements:

- the total **number of words**;
- the **structure** of the text;
- whether you can include **graphics** and **photographs**, and whether you can use colour;
- the type and level of **language** to use; and
- **manuscript submission** and editing requirements.

Structuring your policy brief

There are many ways of structuring a policy brief. Here is one way:

- Title
- Summary
- Recommendations
- Introduction
- The body (the main text)
- Policy implications
- Conclusions

In addition, a policy brief may contain the following:

- Boxes and sidebars
- Cases
- Tables
- Graphics
- Photographs

You also need to include various additional items of information:

- The masthead (the series title)
- Authors
- Acknowledgements
- Publication details
- References

Let us look at each of these items in more detail.

Title

The title should be short, catchy, and to the point.

- **Short:** Try to keep it to less than 12 words. If that is not possible, consider breaking it into a title and subtitle.
- **Catchy:** It should grab the reader's attention. Try to include relevant key words, or find an unusual turn of phrase that sticks in the mind. Also consider using a question as a title.
- **To the point:** It should be relevant to the topic.

Example: Policy Brief Title

	Title	Comments
	**Food security in protracted crises:** What can be done?	Posing a question in the title is a good way to lure someone into reading the text.
	**HIV, food security and nutrition**	A simple title that brings together the three main subjects discussed in the policy brief.
	**Farmer field schools on land and water management:** An extension approach that works	The main title describes the content of the paper. The subtitle gives more explanations and invites the reader to find out why the approach works.
	**Rising food prices – A global crisis:** Action needed now to avoid poverty and hunger	The main title is only six words. The subtitle reinforces the urgency of the issue.
	**Natural resources:** The climate change challenge	"Climate change" is currently a hot topic, so is expected to attract attention. "Challenge" implies that the policy brief will show how to address this issue.

Summary

Some policy briefs include a brief **summary** or policy message at the beginning – sometimes printed in a box or in bigger type. This may contain three or four bullets giving the main points in the policy brief. Ask yourself, "What are the main points you want policymakers to get – even if they read nothing else?"

Example: Summaries

	Summary	Comments
	Soaring food prices pose problems for three groups. First, the poor whose ability to buy food is undermined. Second, governments of low-income countries facing higher import bills, soaring costs for safety net programmes and political unrest. Third, aid agencies juggling increased demands for food, cash and technical advice. High food prices threaten the gains made since the 1960s and highlight the long-term need for investment in, and better management of, the global food supply. This Paper examines the causes of rising food prices, expected trends, the likely impact, and possible policy responses.	92 words. Neatly shows how rising prices affect three groups, then describes what is in the paper.
	[illegible]	122 words. Describes the problem and outlines what is in the rest of the paper.

Recommendations

You do not have to put your recommendations at the end: a policy brief is not a detective story where the answer comes on the last page! There are various ways to present recommendations:

- on the **first page** – as part of the Summary, or immediately after it, or in a separate box or sidebar.
- at **the end** as a separate section.
- distributed **throughout the policy brief** where they best relate to the text, but with each recommendation highlighted in some way (e.g. with boldface type).

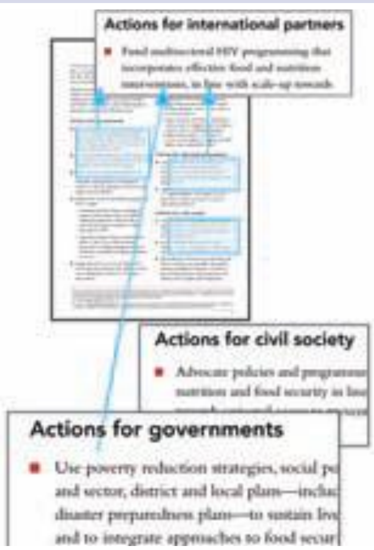
Wherever you put them:

- **State the recommendations clearly and in a way that is easy to understand**. You can do this by starting each recommendation with an action verb and boldfacing the key words.
- **Make them easy to find**. Print them in boldface, put them in a different colour, or put them in a box labelled "Recommendations". Many readers will skip straight to the recommendations without reading the rest of the text.
- **Keep them short**. Do not overwhelm the reader with a long list of recommendations. Five or six are enough. If you have more recommendations than this, drop some of them, combine them, or consider writing separate policy briefs on different aspects of the problem.
- **Make them realistic**. Policymakers will be more interested in recommendations that they can implement: that are politically, economically, socially and technically feasible.

Example: Recommendations

	Recommendations	Comments
	**Key points** • Food prices have been rising since 2000, spiked in early 2008, and may remain high for another ten years • Prompt action is needed to protect the poorest and support low-income countries faced by surging import bills • In the medium term, economic and agricultural growth can offset the damage, but this will require more determined efforts to boost food production	Three bulleted points placed in the sidebar on the front page – where the reader cannot fail to see them.

Four bullet points on the first page summarize the contents of the policy brief.



Most of the **last page** is taken up with a series of specific recommendations: 11 bullet points in all. This list is digestible because it is divided into recommendations for different sets of readers: governments, international partners and civil society.

Each recommendation begins with a verb: "**Use** poverty reduction strategies…", "**Incorporate** nutrition indicators…", "**Engage** the private sector…"

The recommendations appear in a box labelled "**Policy conclusions**" on the first page, immediately after the summary.

Introduction

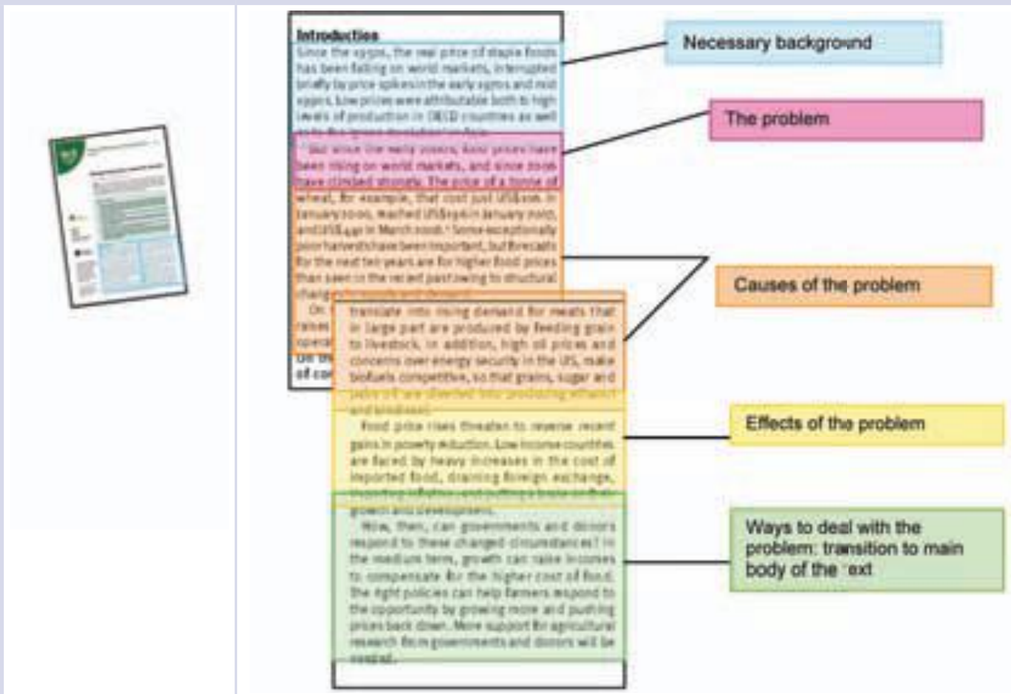
This is the first part of the main body of the text. Think of it as a statement of the issue or problem. The introduction does four things:

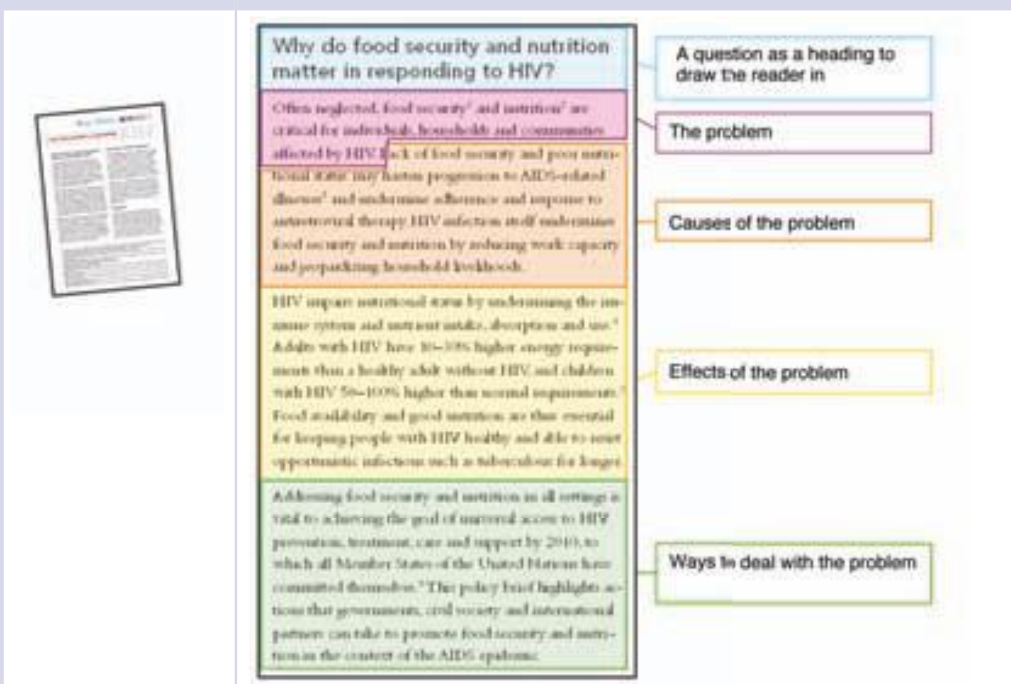
- It grabs the reader's attention.
- It introduces the topic.
- It says why it is important.
- It tells the reader why he/she should do something about it.

Here is one way to structure the introduction:

- **The problem** (What is the problem? Why is it important?)
- **Background, context** (What happens, where, who is involved?)
- **Causes of current situation** (Why? Give evidence or examples.)
- **Effects of current situation** (What effects does it have? Give evidence or examples.)

Example: Introduction





The body

Example: Various ways to structure the main body of the text

Paper	Structure	Comments
International Food Policy Research Institute	**Problem – effects – causes – solution** Begin by outlining the problem in more detail, then show what effects it has. Describe the causes, and finally offer some solutions (the policy implications).	This policy brief from the International Food Policy Research Institute discusses ways to prevent market failure in food supplies. It describes a malfunction in grain markets (the **problem**), and briefly mentions the impact of the problems (the **effects**). It then analyses why the problem has occurred (the **causes**), before considering various ways to overcome it (the **solution**).
Natural Resource Perspectives	**Subject 1 – subject 2 – subject 3 – policy implications** Divide the topic up into several subjects or subtopics and discuss each one in turn, before going into the policy implications.	This *Natural Resource Perspectives* paper from the Overseas Development Institute looks at three aspects of rising food prices: • Why have food prices risen so much in recent years? • What is the expected path for food prices? • What will be the impact on the poor? It then discusses various options for policymakers to consider.
UNAIDS policy brief – HIV, Food Security and Nutrition	**Subject 1 – subject 2 – subject 3 – policy implications** Divide the topic up into several subjects or subtopics and discuss each one in turn, before going into the policy implications.	This policy brief from UNAIDS discusses three aspects of HIV and food security: • Prevention of HIV transmission • Treatment • Care, support and impact mitigation It then reminds governments of their international treaty obligations, before listing policy actions for governments, international partners and civil society.
Swiss NCCR North–South Evidence for policy	**Example 1 – example 2 – example 3 – policy implications** Give one or more examples of the problem you want to address. Then generalize from these to derive policy recommendations.	This brief in the Swiss NCCR North–South *Evidence for policy* series focuses on how climate change affects land management. It draws on three examples – from Kenya, Central Asia and Ethiopia – and uses these as a basis for policy recommendations.
INMASP & FAO: Farmer schools on land and water management	**Problem – intervention – results – policy implications** Describe the problem, and show how an intervention overcame it. Then make some recommendations on how to implement the intervention more widely.	This advocacy brief by INMASP and FAO describes a **problem** (poor land and water management). It then outlines an **intervention** (farmer field schools) and shows how this can solve the problem (the **results**). It suggests how the government could spread the approach more widely.

Structuring the body

Make sure you structure the text in a **logical manner**. Do not force the reader to work to understand the logical flow. Some ways to do this:

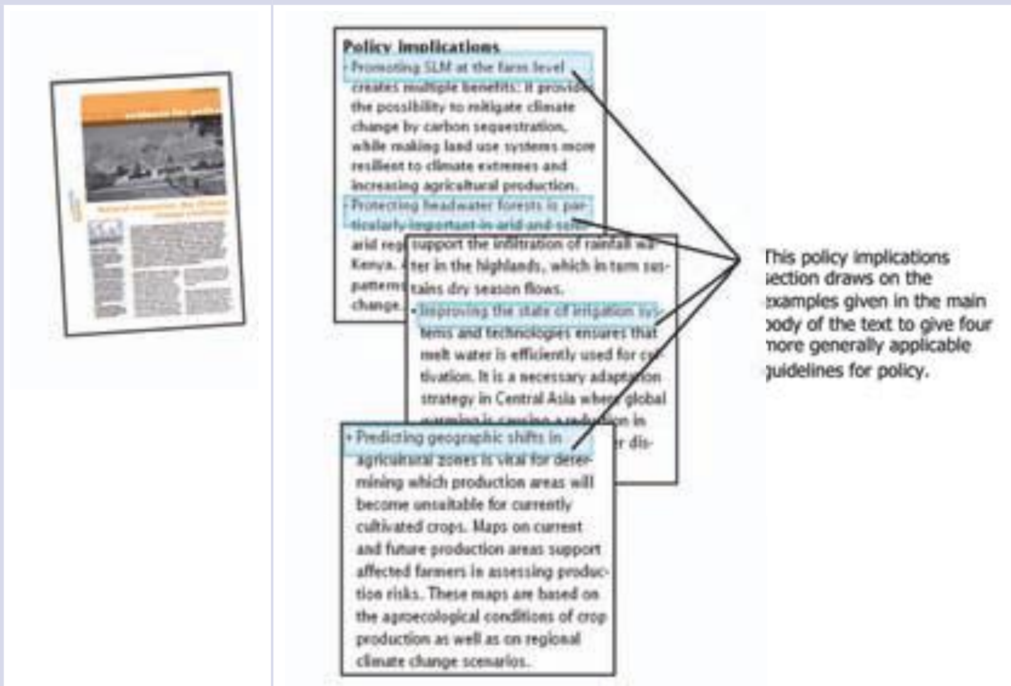
- **Keep the paragraphs short** and restricted to a **single idea**. Consider putting this idea into a single phrase or sentence and printing it in boldface at the beginning of the paragraph.
- **Use more headings** and subheadings than you would do normally. In a four-page policy brief, you should have at least six subheadings – one for every two to four paragraphs.
- Re-read each paragraph and ask yourself **"so what?"** If it is not obvious what the paragraph is trying to say, rewrite it or delete it.

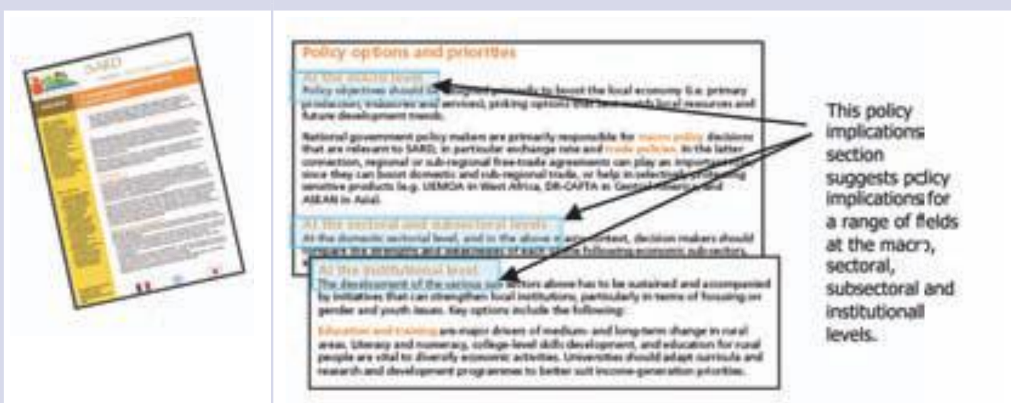
Policy implications

Here is where you focus on the policy options and implications. Some items to consider including:

- **Suggested revisions in policy.** What are the various options?
- **Effects of the revised policy or policies.** How will the policy changes improve the situation? Give evidence or examples if possible.
- **Advantages and disadvantages of each policy option.** What are the potential benefits? What will it cost? What side-effects might there be?
- If you have not given the **recommendations** at the beginning of the policy brief, you can put them here.

Example: Policy implications





Conclusions

A conclusion is not normally necessary in a policy brief. The Summary (at the beginning) and the Recommendations section (also probably at the beginning) often take over the role of the conclusions section in a policy brief.

If you do decide to include a Conclusions section:

- Keep it short – one paragraph is enough.
- Do not merely repeat what you have already stated. Instead, draw the text to a close by explaining how urgent the situation is, or how important it is to select the policy option you recommend.

Boxes and sidebars

You can use **boxes or sidebars** (small boxes positioned in the margin) to present various types of information that do not fit well in the flow of the text:

- cases;
- definitions or explanations;
- information that does not fit within the main flow of the text;
- lists; or
- examples to illustrate points in the text.

Boxes should be self-contained: the reader should be able to understand them without having to read the main text.

Give each box a title, and refer to it in the text.

Do not have too many boxes: one on each page is enough.

Example: Boxes and sidebars

Characteristics of Protracted Crisis

In recent years, the term 'protracted crises' has been used to emphasize the persistent nature of certain emergencies (Schafer, 2002). Elements that characterize protracted crises include:[3]

- non-existent or weak public institutions;
- weak informal institutions;
- state control is challenged by the lack of resources and institutional failure;
- external legitimacy of the state is contested;
- a strong parallel or extra-legal economy;
- existence of or a high susceptibility to violence;
- forced displacement;
- the deliberate exclusion of sectors of the population from enjoying basic rights;
- livelihoods are highly vulnerable to external shocks; and
- widespread poverty and food insecurity.

This box presents a bulleted list that would interrupt the flow if it were included in the main text.

Mitigation

"In the context of climate change, a human intervention to reduce the sources or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases. Examples include using fossil fuels more efficiently for industrial processes or electricity generation, switching to solar energy or wind power, improving the insulation of buildings, and expanding forests and other 'sinks' to remove greater amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere."

Adaptation

"Adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities."

Source: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) *http://unfccc.int/essential_background/glossary/items/3666.php*

An example of a box that contains definitions.

Cases

The text may contain one or more **cases**: particular examples or stories about what happened in a particular location at a certain time. You can include such cases as part of the main text or by putting them in a **box**.

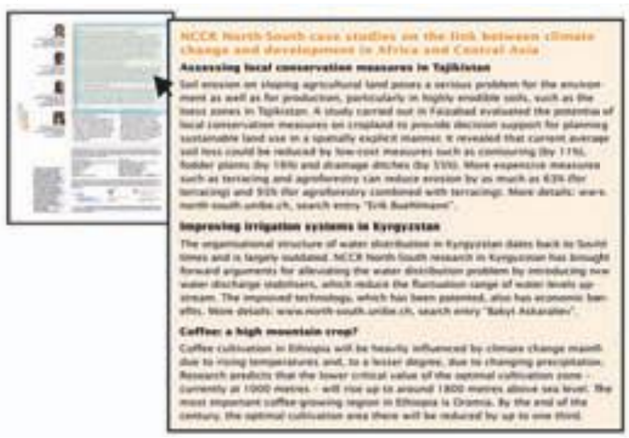
Cases should be short (one or two paragraphs only) and self-contained (readers should be able to understand them even if they do not read the rest of the text).

Focus on the subject, and avoid giving unnecessary details. Ask yourself: so what? What is the point of including this case in the policy brief?

Make sure that the case is relevant to the rest of the text. It may depict a particular point you are making, or provide the basis for the rest of the text, or show how reality is more complex than theory.

Example: Cases

The NCCR *Evidence for policy* series is based on case studies in various countries. A summary of the cases appears in a box: this one covers Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Ethiopia.



NCCR North-South case studies on the link between climate change and development in Africa and Central Asia

Accessing local conservation measures in Tajikistan

Soil erosion on sloping agricultural land poses a serious problem for the environment as well as for production, particularly in highly erodible soils, such as the loess zones in Tajikistan. A study carried out in Faizabad evaluated the potential of local conservation measures on cropland to provide decision support for planning sustainable land use in a spatially explicit manner. It revealed that current average soil loss could be reduced by low-cost measures such as contouring (by 11%), fodder plants (by 16%) and drainage ditches (by 55%). More expensive measures such as terracing and agroforestry can reduce erosion by as much as 63% (for terracing) and 93% (for agroforestry combined with terracing). More details: www.north-south.unibe.ch, search entry "Erik Buehlmann".

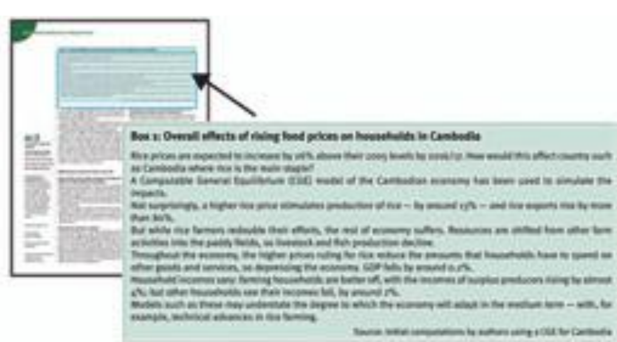
Improving irrigation systems in Kyrgyzstan

The organisational structure of water distribution in Kyrgyzstan dates back to Soviet times and is largely outdated. NCCR North-South research in Kyrgyzstan has brought forward arguments for alleviating the water distribution problem by introducing new water discharge stabilisers, which reduce the fluctuation range of water levels upstream. The improved technology, which has been patented, also has economic benefits. More details: www.north-south.unibe.ch, search entry "Bakyt Askaraliev".

Coffee: a high mountain crop?

Coffee cultivation in Ethiopia will be heavily influenced by climate change mainly due to rising temperatures and, to a lesser degree, due to changing precipitation. Research predicts that the lower critical value of the optimal cultivation zone – currently at 1000 metres – will rise up to around 1800 metres above sea level. The most important coffee-growing region in Ethiopia is Oromia. By the end of the century, the optimal cultivation area there will be reduced by up to one third.

The ODI *Natural Resource Perspective* series puts cases in coloured boxes. This one refers to a case in Cambodia.



Box 1: Overall effects of rising food prices on households in Cambodia

Tables

Tables are a good way to present certain types of information. But keep them simple. A table with too many rows and columns will confuse readers more than help them understand what you are trying to say. You can use tables to present either numbers of textual information.

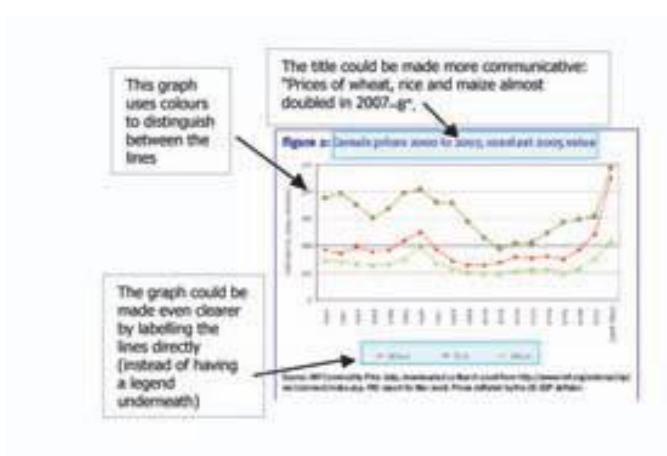
- Keep the **number of rows and columns** to a minimum – no more than four columns and six rows. Cut out those that you do not need.
- Put columns you want readers to compare **next to each other**.
- Put the rows in **a logical order**: by size or alphabetical order.
- **Highlight table cells** (using shading, labelling or boldface type) that you want to draw the readers' attention to. Make it easy for them to see the information you want to present.
- Consider **converting a table into a graph**. Would it make the information easier to read?
- **Give round numbers**: 25,000, not 24,567.23.
- Do not include **statistical significance levels** (such as $p < 0.05$): they are appropriate for a scientific paper, not a policy brief.
- **Make the title talk**: "Irrigation boosts yields" is better than "Comparison of yields on irrigated and non-irrigated land".
- Say where **the information comes from**: the date, place, project, etc. Put the details in a footnote if needed.

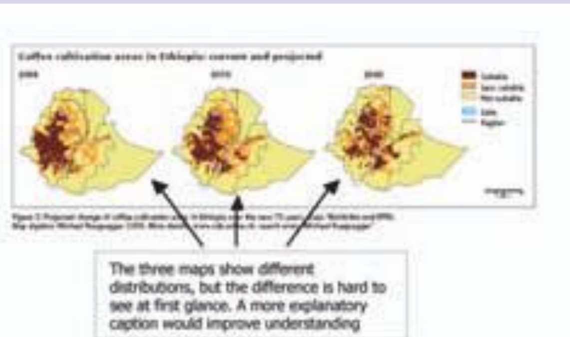
Graphics

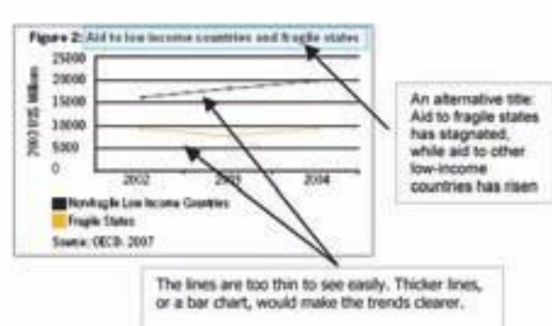
Graphics include **diagrams** (such as flow charts or schematic diagrams), **graphs** (such as bar charts, line graphs and pie charts) and **maps**.
Graphics are an important element in the design. Readers often look at them before reading the text. So make them clear and easy to understand.

- Choose the type of graphic that **best suits** the information you want to present.
- Use **bar charts** or **pie charts** to compare figures
- Use **line graphs** for time series.
- Keep it simple! Do not try to make a single graphic do too much work. For example, do not clutter a graph with too many lines: show only the most important variables.
- Make the labels legible.
- Give an explanatory title or caption.
- Finally, choose colours, shading patterns and symbols that are easy to distinguish from one other.

Example: Graphics







Photographs

Even more than graphics, photographs attract the reader's attention.

So if you use photos, select them carefully to **carry a message** as well as to make the page attractive.

Remember to:

- Use only **good-quality photos**: if you do not have one that is suitable, do not use one that is substandard.
- Make sure the photos have at least a 150 dpi (dots per inch) resolution (preferably 300 dpi), if the policy brief is to be printed. Try to keep a gender balance and avoid reinforcing stereotyped gender roles.
- Give a **descriptive caption** that helps carry your message. "Steep slopes and small land parcels limit agricultural production in Bagistan" is better than "Landscape in Bagistan".
- Make sure that you have **permission** to use the photographs, and give the photographer's name if necessary.

Example: Photographs

The masthead

The **masthead** goes at the top of the first page. It shows the title of the policy brief series, the issue number and date, and perhaps the organization’s logo.

If you are writing for an established series, you do not need to worry about this: the publications manager will put your text into the right format and add design elements such as the masthead.

If your policy brief is a one-off, or the start of a new series, you should design an attractive masthead.

Example: Masthead

Authors

Some organizations print the names of the **authors** prominently – just under the title. Others put them in a footnote, or at the end of the text. Still others do not name individuals as authors at all – since the policy brief is deemed to have come from the organization as a whole.

If you do name the authors, include their names, positions, institution, and email address for correspondence.

If you do not name the authors, at least give an email address where readers can write to for more information.

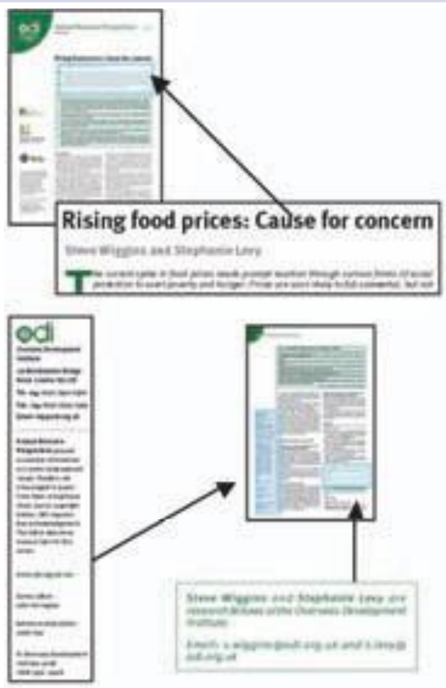
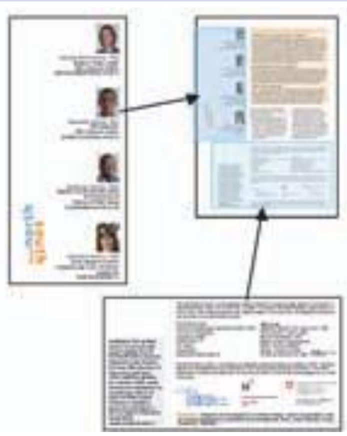
Acknowledgements and publication details

Remember to provide the following **additional information**:

- An **acknowledgement** of funding sponsors and organizations and individuals who made significant contributions to the content of the policy brief.
- An address where readers can find **more information**.
- The **publisher** and **date**.
- Information on the **copyright** – can others reproduce the material without permission?
- If necessary, a **disclaimer** stating that the views expressed in the policy brief do not necessarily reflect those of the publishing organization.

Example: Acknowledgement and publication details

	Example	Comments
	 © FAO 2008 Published by the EC - FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme **website:** www.foodsec.org **e-mail:** information-for-action@fao.org The EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.	No authors named – implying that the policy brief reflects the views of the publisher. The first section gives information about the publisher and tells the reader where to find more information. The final paragraph acknowledges the donor.

		No authors named. The only indication of where to go for more information is a web address on the last page. No date or information on the publisher – except the logos at the top of the front page.
		Authors' names printed prominently beneath the title on the first page. Their contact details are given on the last page. A sidebar on the last page gives the publication details.
		The authors are listed prominently on the last page – together with their photos and contact details. Clearly, this publisher hopes readers will contact the authors for more information. A section on the last page gives information about the publisher, sponsors and collaborators.

References and footnotes

It is not necessary (and there is often not enough space) to include a full list of references. Instead, just provide references to one to four sources where readers can find further information. Give the web addresses of publications if you can.

It is best to avoid footnotes if you can. Put vital information instead in the main text or in a box or sidebar. If you must use footnotes, keep them to a minimum.

Developing policy briefs

Tips for the preparation of a policy brief

- Prepare the brief in a word processing programme. Follow the guidelines set out by the series editor (number of words, structure of the text, etc.).
- Reread the draft several times to make sure that it is correct and easy to understand. Ask an editor or a colleague to go through the text and suggest changes.
- If you are writing for a policy brief series, do not try to put your draft in the design. Let the person in charge of producing publications do this.
- Make sure you get your boss's approval for the final draft before you submit it.

Using the right language

Policymakers come from a wide range of backgrounds. They are unlikely to be specialists in your area. So you must write in a way that they will find easy to understand.

- Make the language clear, simple and easy to understand.
- Do not use academic terms or development jargon.
- Keep the headings short and clear, and keep the paragraphs short.

You may have to rephrase the language so it does not sound like a project report.

Example:

Original report	Policy brief
"The project distinguished between agronomic, vegetative, structural and management measures."	There are four ways to conserve soil and water: • **By changing cropping practices:** For example, by planting crops along the contour. • **By planting trees and grass:** For example, by planting grass strips to slow down runoff. • **By building earth or stone barriers** such as terraces or drains to divert water. • **By improved management** – such as ploughing at different times of year.

Note that the policy brief replaces the jargon "agronomic", "vegetative" etc., with an explanation that readers are more likely to understand.

One policy brief	Several policy briefs on different topics at the same time
This method takes several hours to one day. • Bring together a small group of colleagues or people who are working on your topic. • Make a brief presentation about what a policy brief is and what it contains. • Brainstorm ideas for what to include in the policy brief. • Allocate each person a section to write. Give them a short time – say, one hour, to write some text. • Ask each person in turn to present what they have written. Ask the other participants to comment and suggest improvements. • Gather all the sections together in the right order, and edit into the final form.	This approach takes 2–5 days. • Bring together a group of people who want to write policy briefs on various subjects. • Make a brief presentation about what a policy brief is and what it contains. • Invite the participants to conceptualize their own policy briefs and discuss the outlines in small groups. • Get the participants to write their own policy briefs section by section, following the format presented in this Lesson. • Help the participants when necessary. • Invite the participants to present what they have written, and allow other participants to comment and suggest improvements. • Ask the participants to submit what they have written for final editing.

Turning a big report into a policy brief

Probably the hardest job is to edit a 300-page report down to 700 words.

If you try to edit the text, you will run into two problems:

- It is hard to throw things away
- What remains has no natural flow.

When you need to condense a big report into a small policy brief, try to:

- Think of the **big picture**
- Then, write **from scratch.**

Finding the big picture

Take a step back and look at the report from a distance, as if through a **telescope**. Ask yourself:

- What **problem** did the project address?
- What did the study try to find out?
- What **did** it find out?

Then, think of your **audience**:

- Who is your policy audience?
- What aspects are of interest to policymakers?
- What do you want them to do differently?

That will help you select those aspects of the report to focus on. Perhaps your report already has a section on policy, so you can start there, and think of what other bits of information you need to include to put your recommendations in context.

Writing from scratch

There are two main ways to write a policy brief from scratch:

Start at the beginning

Write the policy brief in the logical order:

- First, write the **introduction**.
- Then work out the **body structure**.
- Write the **body**.
- Put the **supporting material** together: the cases, boxes, tables, graphics, photos and other information.

- Write the **recommendations**.
- Then reorder the text so the recommendations come at the **beginning**.

Start at the end

Write the text in reverse order, starting with the recommendations:

- Write the **recommendations**.
- Work out the **body structure** that will lead up to these recommendations.
- Write the **body**.
- Put the **supporting material** together: the cases, boxes, tables, graphics, photos and other information.
- Write the **introduction**.
- Reorder the text so the recommendations come at the **beginning**.

In practice, you may want to use a combination of these approaches in order to come up with your final text.

Using policy briefs

Once you have prepared your policy briefs, you can use them in many ways:

- As printed hardcopies, you can give them to policymakers in person, mail them to policymakers and other stakeholders and distribute them at conferences and workshops.
- As softcopies, you may send them by email (but don't spam!), put them on your website and distribute them via email groups or professional social networking sites.

You can also combine them with other types of information materials, such as:

- A **presentation** to use in meetings and conferences.
- **Information sheets** with technical details.
- A **brochure** about your project or organization.
- A **video.**
- A **poster** or **exhibit** for exhibitions or meetings.
- Additional **handouts** and **photographs.**
- A **press release.**
- Statements to use in media **interviews.**
- Information on your **website.**
- A **report** or **book** with further details.

Summary

A policy brief is a concise summary of a particular issue, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option. It is aimed at government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

A policy brief can have the following structure: Title – Summary - Recommendations – Introduction – Body - Policy implications – Conclusions.

In addition, a policy brief may contain the following: Boxes and sidebars – Cases – Tables – Graphics – Photographs.

You also need to include various additional items of information: The masthead – Authors – Acknowledgements - Publication details – References.

Policy briefs are high-profile publications, and they go to important people. So it is important to get them right. You should get your boss's approval, consult with colleagues and do your own research carefully.

Writing Effective Reports

4.2

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify the major report types used to present food security information;
- understand the key features of these alternative report types; and
- structure a food security report for various contexts and purposes.

Introduction

In this lesson we will look at how to structure reports. You can draw on the examples and ideas presented in this lesson in developing your own reports.

Each report should be tailored to the needs of the primary audience: you will need to apply your own creative talent in developing your final report.

Reporting formats used in various food security contexts

Let's quickly review the main steps that you should follow to plan a report:

1. Defining the purpose for your report
2. Identifying the readers
3. Addressing a significant problem and answering the right questions
4. Providing readers with actionable recommendations

= REPORT OUTLINE

Once these steps have been completed, you can develop an outline of the report.

At that point you should already have ideas of what the report will need to contain. But exactly what format will you use? What sections or elements should it include? What will it look like? In short, what **type of report** will you produce?

Let's look at some of the major types of reports.

1. **Research Reports**

   You may need to report on a piece of research that you have conducted on food security in your country or region; for example a baseline report or a study on vulnerability.

   This type of report primarily presents and records your findings which may be used for **purposes that you cannot fully predict**.

   While preliminary recommendations may be made, especially on longer term food security interventions, the emphasis is on increasing understanding of the issue through analysis.

2. **Early Warning Bulletins**

   Early warning is about providing a glimpse of the future.

   These reports provide decision makers with an indication of **whether a food security problem is emerging**. It should show where and how quickly is it developing and the dimensions of the problem. It may recommend further in-depth assessments or immediate interventions.

3. **Needs Assessment Reports**

   Emergency Needs Assessments provide governments, relief organisations and the wider international community with **information to plan an immediate response** in the aftermath of a crisis. They establish the extent of a humanitarian emergency and the right response to reduce its impact.

   Needs Assessments reports communicate these findings and recommendations to programmers and planners.

4. **Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Reports**

   M&E is a process of assessing an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy.

   M&E assesses the design, implementation and results. A monitoring report checks progress and recommends remedial actions. An evaluation report looks at the impact and recommends whether to continue, modify or stop the project, programme or policy.

Selecting the best report type

The table below may help you to think about which is the most suitable report format to apply to a specific situation.

Table I: Summary of Report Types

Report Type	Frequency	Primary purposes
Baseline or Research Report	Infrequent	• Communicates an increased understanding of food security • Contributes to long-term development planning
Early Warning Bulletin	Continuous	• Informs decision makers of current levels and trends in food security • Activates and focuses needs assessment and mitigation plans
Emergency Needs Assessment	As needed	• Identifies the extent and impact of a humanitarian emergency • Recommends an appropriate emergency response • Mobilizes resources
Policy Papers or Briefs	Infrequent	• Defines an urgent policy issue • Identifies and evaluates policy options • Recommends a preferred alternative
Monitoring and Evaluation Reports (Programs and Policies)	Continuous (monitoring) Periodic (evaluation)	• Assesses progress against targets • Recommends changes to activities and design • Mobilizes resources

Different **report types** are **often used in combination.**

For example, you might see elements of policy recommendation combined with a research report; or an early warning bulletin that incorporates recommendations on emergency needs.

Remember that there are many other documents that you may be responsible for. However, we will concentrate on reporting food security information.

Now we will **define the outline** of each type of report. For each report type, you will learn what elements should be included, and analyze some examples. Please see the previous lesson for a discussion on policy briefs.

Formats for Research Reports

In the course of your work you may undertake research to better understand the nature of food security in a country or region.

Your research may be based on field work (primary sources) or on analysing previous surveys, other published research or talking to people (secondary sources).

The report presents your data and draws conclusions from it. It should provide information that meets a particular audience's specific needs.

This type of report may not provide systematic recommendations. While preliminary recommendations may be included, the emphasis is on analysis and **contributing to an increased understanding** of the issue.

The typical research report would loosely follow the same **chronological order** as your research:

Problem and objectives →	First, you discuss the issues that led to undertaking the research work,
Methodology →	then you would discuss the data collection methodology,
Data →	then you would discuss the data itself,
Conclusions →	and finally the conclusions based upon that data.

The length of each section may vary greatly between different reports. Section headings may be combined, separated or renamed according to the purpose of the report.

Let's have a look at these sections more in detail. Research type papers commonly include the following structural elements:

Title	The title is the first thing that readers will see. A well chosen title should give readers a quick overview of the subject and problem addressed in the report. A reader may use the title in deciding whether to read the full report or not.
Table of contents	The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the report. It shows the overall organization, the main sections and their sub-sections and page numbers to locate sections in the report. The table of contents leads readers through the whole report. It provides a quick overview of the focus and major issues addressed. The table of contents also helps readers find specific sections or information that they are particularly interested in.

Executive Summary	The executive summary represents the whole report by providing a synopsis of all the main parts and findings. The executive summary should make readers interested in reading the whole report. However, the main function of the executive summary is to satisfy the needs of those readers who do not have time to read the entire report and readers whose main interest is in the findings and conclusions of the study; especially decision-makers.
Introduction	The introduction to the research report also needs to get the readers ready to read the full report. Some of the other elements, such as the background or purpose, can be handled in the introduction. However, if these issues require a lot of discussion they may need their own sections. The introduction may conclude with a road map, showing how the report is organized.
Background and purpose	You will need to discuss the situation that led to the research. What is the problem that the research set out to address? You will need to discuss what you intended to do in the research project. What were your objectives? What was the scope of your work? What was not included?
Review of the literature	It is usual in a research report to summarize any relevant research to the study. What other reports or studies have been written about the issue? You should summarize this literature briefly. You should provide the full bibliographic citations at the end of your report so that readers can find these documents if they want to.
Method and procedures	One of the goals in writing this type of report is to allow the reader to visualize how you collected the data, so that they can judge the reliability or limits to the data. You may even want to enable the reader to replicate the survey. You should describe the conceptual framework of your research. You should also discuss the practical procedures used, possibly in some detail.
Presentation of the data	The heart of the research report is the data. These can go in the body of your report, or alternatively as appendixes if the data would interrupt the flow of your discussion. Future readers may want to utilize the original data in ways that you cannot always anticipate. In this section you should merely present the data, without trying to explain it.
Conclusions and recommendations	In a research report, it is useful to interpret or discuss your findings in a section separate from the one where you present the data. This section would explain your data and interpret it. This section, or area of the report, is also the place to make preliminary recommendations or state ideas for further research.
Appendices	Appendices can be useful for presenting the detailed data or additional information, where including it in the text would interrupt the flow of the main discussion. For example you may place a detailed methodology as an appendix.
Bibliography	The purpose of a research report is to build upon or add to the knowledge in a particular area. Your research report builds on the work done by other researchers on the same topic. For that reason, you must list the sources of information you used or consulted in your project.

Now, let's examine the different features of two kinds of reports:

1. Background reports

As part of developing a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) you may be asked to help prepare a **vulnerability and poverty analysis**. This report is used to increase understanding of local livelihoods, existing conditions, and capacities for dealing with risk.

As a food security analyst you will have an intimate understanding of these issues and may be asked to help research and write such a report. This background report is the starting point for developing the PRSP.

2. Baseline reports

Staff at a Food Security Information System (FSIS) may undertake **a baseline survey**.

A baseline report presents findings from this survey. It serves as a reference point for future assessments. You may want to assess whether the food security situation has gotten better or worse, perhaps due to an external shock.

Or maybe you need to capture the baseline to assess the impact of policies, programmes or projects.

As you develop your research paper you should also consider a series of questions. The most important one is:

Does your research report achieve its purpose and communicate an increased understanding of the topic to the target audience?

Checklist

Additional questions include:

- Is the title interesting, clear, succinct and descriptive?
- Are headings of sections and sub-sections chosen effectively, and do they provide a clear overview of your paper?
- Is the executive summary a good representation of the paper?
- Are the objectives and scope of your research clearly explained?
- Are the methods and procedures clearly described? Could the reader replicate your survey?
- Have any previous studies on the issue been summarized?
- Are the original data clearly presented to the user?
- Are your findings and conclusions clearly written?
- Are recommendations practical in nature? Are they easily identifiable in the text?
- Are all appendices relevant and appropriate in supporting the paper?

Formats for Early Warning Bulletins

An important function of most food security information systems is to provide early warning of an impending food security crisis.

Over the past two decades relatively elaborate Early Warning (EW) systems have been established in many Countries.

The critical questions that an early warning bulletin needs to answer include:

- Is there a problem emerging?
- What areas are affected and how quickly is the problem developing?
- What response is already underway?
- Are more in-depth assessments needed?

The EW bulletin will need to keep key decision makers informed of the situation.

The primary audience will include staff of national Governments, donors and other humanitarian agencies.

Depending on the situation the report may be used to stimulate further action. However, an EW bulletin would not normally be expected to support detailed programming decisions.

An early warning bulletin may include the following structural elements:

Title	The title can be used to communicate the main message of the bulletin. A one line title can provide a mini summary of the report. This can be very helpful to busy decision makers who need to know at a glance whether there is a problem that needs their attention or not.
Table of contents	Even though EW bulletins are usually very short – between one and four pages in length – a table of contents can still be appropriate. The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the report. It provides readers with a quick overview of the focus and major issues addressed. It helps readers to locate specific information that they may be particularly interested in.
Summary	The summary provides a synopsis of the whole bulletin. It may be the only part of the report that is read by busy decision makers, so it needs to represent all the key findings and recommendations of the report. It should be tightly drafted, short and focus on the main analytical points and recommendations.
Implications and recommendations	The section summarizes the current problem; what is the intensity, extent and duration of the problem and who is affected? This section provides recommendations for immediate response - practical steps that need to be implemented in the short term. As the bulletin may be reporting on a situation which is evolving quickly and/or where the data is incomplete, recommendations may include collecting further data. In contrast to many of the other report formats it is more common to find the recommendations presented close to the front of the bulletin. This serves to focus attention on urgently needed emergency actions.
Problem description	The problem description identifies the nature of the shock or crisis. The current status of the problem may be discussed in detail, including: impacts on food production; markets and access to food; and health and nutritional consequences. It should identify who has been affected and in what way. Impacts on infrastructure and institutions should be discussed – particularly as they affect the ability to respond to the crisis. Then it should look at what is already being done to respond to the problem and what is planned for the future.

As you develop your research paper you should also consider a series of questions. The following is the most important one:

Does your bulletin achieve its purpose of informing decision makers of current levels and trends in food security?

Additional questions include:

Checklist

- Does the title provide an effective one line summary of the bulletin?
- Is a short table of contents appropriate? If so, does this provide a clear overview to your paper?
- Is the summary a good representation of the main points included in the report?
- Are recommendations clearly written and practical in nature? Are they easily identifiable in the text?
- Is the problem (including the impacts) clearly and convincingly defined?
- If appropriate, does your problem description convince the readers that an urgent problem exists?

Formats for Needs Assessment Reports

An emerging food security problem may trigger a needs assessment exercise to establish the extent and the right response to the emergency.

The needs assessment should answer the following crucial questions:

- What is the nature and dimension of the problem?
- How long is it going to last?
- Who are the most vulnerable groups?
- What and how much is needed; what is the best response?
- To what extent are local coping capacity and provision of services overwhelmed?
- What are major logistical and resource considerations?

The assessment report will need to communicate these findings to a primary audience that includes planners and managers in government departments, donors and other humanitarian agencies.

The report may be used to support decision making on programming, resource mobilization and advocacy.

Needs Assessments would usually include the following structural elements:

Title	The title is important as it is the first part of the report read by the reader. A reader may use the title in deciding whether to read the report or not. At a minimum the title should clearly indicate the topic (a needs assessment) the geographical location and period. It may also be used to start to communicate your main message.
Table of contents	The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the report. It shows the overall organization, the main sections and their sub-sections and page numbers to locate specific sections. The table of contents leads readers through the whole report. It provides readers with a quick overview of the focus and major issues addressed.
Executive Summary	The executive summary represents the whole paper by providing a synopsis of the main findings and recommendations. The executive summary aims to interest readers in reading the whole report. However, the main function of the executive summary is to satisfy the needs of those readers who do not have time to read the entire report and readers whose main interest is in the findings and recommendations of the study; especially decision-makers.
Introduction	The introduction to the needs assessment report prepares the readers for the full report. Other elements such as the methodology, background and purpose, can be handled in the introduction. However if these issues require a lot of discussion they may need their own sections. The introduction may conclude with a road map, showing how the paper is organized.
Objectives and methodology	You will need to discuss what you intended to do in the needs assessment. What were your objectives? What is the scope of the study? This section should briefly outline the methods that were used. How was the primary data sampled and collected; and what secondary data sources were used? How was the data analyzed? This section should indicate the level of confidence in the data and consequent conclusions.
Background	To set the context for the recommended response, the report should discuss the background and pre-crisis conditions in the affected areas. This would summarize the livelihoods (including the economic, social and political dimensions) and their vulnerabilities and capacities.
Problem description	The problem description identifies the nature of the shock or crisis. This may include the history of the problem: its causes; and similar events in the past. The current status of the problem may be discussed in detail, including: impacts on food production; markets and access to food; and health and nutritional consequences. It should identify who has been affected and in what way. Impacts on infrastructure and institutions should be discussed – particularly as they affect the ability to respond to the crisis. Lastly, it would look at what is already being done to respond to the problem and how successful these efforts have been.

Conclusions and recommendations	This section provides a concise *synthesis* of the major findings - this is more than a *summary*. It presents a clear case to the decision makers and provides a call to action. The section summarizes the current situation; possible scenarios of how the problem may evolve and the number, level and duration of assistance required. This section outlines, evaluates and compares the possible response alternatives. Finally the reader is provided with recommendations for response - practical steps that need to be taken to implement the proposed policy option.
Appendices	Appendices can be useful for presenting the detailed data or additional information, where including it in the text would interrupt the flow of the main discussion. For example this may include maps, details of methodologies and background information on livelihoods.

As you develop your needs assessment report you should also consider a series of questions. The following is the most important one:

Does your paper achieve its purpose of presenting clear recommendations on the appropriate response(s) to the current crisis?

Other questions include:

Checklist

- Is the executive summary a good representation of the paper?
- Is the problem (including the impacts) clearly and convincingly defined? Are the immediate and underlying causes of the problem identified?
- If appropriate, does the problem description convince the readers that an urgent problem exists?
- Are the possible response alternatives presented and evaluated?
- Is the basis on which you evaluated each option, i.e. the framework of analysis, clearly outlined?
- Do you demonstrate that your chosen response alternative represents the best solution to the problem?
- Are recommendations clearly written and practical in nature? Are they easily identifiable in the text?
- Are all appendices relevant and appropriate in supporting the paper?

Formats for monitoring and evaluation

1. Monitoring

During the implementation of programmes and projects managers must **keep track of progress**. Managers need to monitor expenditure, resource use and the implementation of activities. Monitoring reports continuously provide information to support internal decision making to fine-tune activities. For example, a monitoring system might tell you how the delivery of food aid compares to the original plan.

2. Evaluation

In contrast, evaluations assess the worth of the project or programme. It will examine the impact and results, for instance:

Have the objectives been fulfilled?

Was the intervention efficient and sustainable?

Did food distribution lead to improved food security?

What lessons can be learned in designing future projects and programmes?

Just like programmes and projects, the **strategies and policies** themselves need to be continuously planned, reviewed, modified and re-planned.

Even if there may be dedicated M&E units responsible for supporting the implementation of specific programmes or policies, your food security information systems may be asked to assist in supporting these processes.

Policies, programmes and projects usually have some type of **design/planning framework**. These frameworks provide the basis for assessment.

They usually specify what was intended to be done - the activities, the results of these activities and the objectives. They may also show which indicators to use and where to collect the data. The most common planning framework is the *logical framework*.

An M&E process will report on what happened and how this compared to what was intended. On the basis of this analysis, **recommendations** will be made. For example, an evaluation might recommend continuing, modifying or stopping an intervention.

For monitoring reports the primary audience will be the internal managers and donors. Evaluation reports may target a broader number of external decision makers.

M&E reports commonly include the following structural elements:

Title	A reader sees the title first. They may use it to decide whether to continue reading the paper. A well chosen title gives readers a quick overview of the subject of the report and encourages them to look further at the report.
Table of contents	The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the paper. It shows the overall organization, the main sections and their sub-sections and page numbers to locate sections in the paper. The table of contents leads readers through the whole report. It provides a quick overview of the focus and major issues addressed. The table of contents helps readers to find specific sections or information that they are particularly interested in.
Executive Summary	The main function of the executive summary is to satisfy the needs of those readers who will not read the entire paper and readers whose main interest is in the conclusions and recommendations, especially decision-makers. It should be tightly drafted, and usable as a free-standing document. It should be short and focus on the main analytical points, indicate the main conclusions, lessons learned and specific recommendations.
Introduction	The introduction will describe the project, programme or policy to be monitored or evaluated. It will discuss the study objectives and the methodology used. The introduction may conclude with a road map, showing how the paper is organized.
Findings	The core section of the report will examine the performance of the policy, programme or project against its design criteria. This section should describe the facts and interpret or analyse them.
Conclusions and recommendations	The key points of the conclusions will vary in nature but will often cover aspects of the evaluation criteria. The ultimate value of an evaluation depends on the quality and credibility of the recommendations offered. Recommendations should therefore be as realistic, operational and pragmatic as possible. Recommendations should be carefully targeted to the appropriate audiences at all levels.
Appendices	Appendices should be used to present additional information which might otherwise interrupt the flow of the main discussion. This may include; terms of reference, methodology, planning documents (eg., logical framework matrices original and improved/updated), map of project area, list of persons/organisations consulted and literature and documentation consulted.

While all these elements should be included in the report, the headings may vary. Some sections may be combined, or expanded and subdivided.

As the audience of monitoring reports is familiar with the activity under discussion, the report may not require much introduction and may compress many of the elements.

The **Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Monitoring Report** is an important example of a monitoring report that a Food Security Information System (FSIS) might contribute to. In September 2000, world leaders adopted a set of development goals – the "Millennium Development Goals" or "MDGs". The first of these is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger - a topic of particular relevance to FSIS.

Each goal has a quantitative target to be achieved by the year 2015, and appropriate indicators have been selected to monitor progress. Every developing country has agreed to produce a MDG monitoring report by the end of 2005.

As you develop a monitoring or evaluation report you should also consider a series of questions. The following is the most important one:

Does your report achieve its purpose of summarizing progress and providing recommended actions?

Additional questions include:

Checklist

- Is the title interesting, clear, succinct and descriptive?
- Are headings of sections and sub-sections chosen effectively, and do they provide a clear overview of your paper?
- Is the executive summary a good representation of the report?
- Do you clearly state what the policy/programme/project sets out to do?
- Is the framework of analysis clearly outlined? What criteria are used in assessing progress?
- Are your conclusions supported by your findings?
- Are recommendations clearly written and practical in nature? Are they easily identifiable in the text?
- Is there a recommendation to match each conclusion?
- Are all appendices relevant and do they support the paper?

Writing Effective Reports

4.3

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- understand techniques for writing clear and concise sentences; and
- effectively edit your documents.

Introduction

This lesson will help you write in a way that engages your readers – easily, convincingly, and perhaps even pleasurably. It will also explain how to review your work to assure that is effective and error-free.

Writing clear and concise sentences

The kind of writing you will be doing needs to be clear, and to move along quickly and in an orderly way.

Clarity, economy and straightforwardness in your writing, especially at the sentence level, can help you establish a high level of **readability**.

Even if there is no ideal sentence construction, readability must be the overriding principle.

To "measure" readability, ask yourself the following questions:

- Will my reader be able to understand what I have just stated by reading the sentence quickly?
- Will my reader be able to understand what I have just stated without having to go back and re-read parts of it?
- Will my reader run out of breath in the middle of the sentence?
- Have I used a big word when a little word will suffice?
- Is there more than one idea in my sentence?
- Are there any words (particularly adjectives and adverbs) that I can remove?

Of course, the list of questions could be much longer, but these basic questions should help keep you on track. Here is an example of some common pitfalls:

Table I: Common pitfalls

Colloquialism (Don't use)	Alternative
In the year 2000	In 2000
During the period May-June	From May to June
In the areas of	In
In the event that	If
Until such time as	Until
Regarding	On, about
For the purpose of	To
Prior to	Before
Utilization	Use
In order to	To

A word of caution: many writers fear that shortening or simplifying their sentences will somehow compromise the professionalism of their document. This could not be further from the truth. Simplifying sentences merely makes them more readable. And your readers will be extremely grateful!

Moreover, often writers begin to write a sentence at the same time that the thought is evolving in their mind.

For example:

The area of communication that the focal points are interested in learning more about is along the line of technical reports used in agriculture and government.

The sentence mirrors the original thought, but thoughts usually are not concise. The sentence needs to be reviewed and tightened up:

The focal points would like to learn more about technical reports used in agriculture and government.

Don't you think the sentence is now more readable?

Editing your documents

Once you have completed a draft of your report, you will need to **review** it carefully. There are at least a dozen elements that you should be paying close attention to, when you review your document:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Format
- Unnecessary information
- Logical sequence of sentences
- Repetition of information
- Dense, heavy sentences
- Sequencing of paragraphs/ideas
- Clarity of the message
- Missing information
- Politically sensitive issues
- Paragraph coherence
- Unnecessary word repetition
- Grammatical mistakes

An optimal editing process has three stages:

1. Conceptual/structural stage

2. Linguistic stage

3. Proofreading/format stage

Let's consider each stage in more detail...

1. The conceptual/structural stage

In this first stage you are simply scanning the document, in much the same way a reader might do to get a sense of what the document is about.

You should only be focusing on the following elements:

- Clarity of message
- Sequencing of paragraphs/ideas
- Missing information
- Unnecessary information
- Repetition of information

During this stage you should not correct sentences or spelling mistakes. Try to keep a more global perspective. At the end of this stage, you will need to make your corrections – primarily rearranging paragraphs or sections, and eliminating and adding blocks of information.

2. The linguistic stage

The **linguistic editing** is the time-consuming stage, since you are carefully reading the document, word by word, and asking yourself, "Do I like the way that I have expressed this idea?" You will be focusing on the following elements:

- Dense, heavy sentences
- Clarity of the message
- Politically sensitive issues
- Unnecessary word fodder and repetition
- Logical sequence of sentences

Why fret over commas and spelling mistakes when you may end up changing the sentence entirely? At the end of this stage, make all corrections so that you have a perfectly clean copy (whether on screen or hard copy).

3. The proofreading/format stage

Proofreading is simply checking for mistakes. You will be focusing on the following elements:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Grammar

If you are following a house style, you will want to make sure that there are no violations of that style. Checking the format (paragraph indents, consistency in heading typefaces, justified paragraphs, etc.) should be saved for last. It is difficult to concentrate on spelling mistakes and formatting issues at the same time.

If you systematically edit your document, using the three stages described above, you should feel confident that your document is as effective as you are able to make it.

Editing tips:

- Allow some time to pass between the time you've completed the draft of the document and the time you begin the editing process. If you are under a very tight deadline, even five or ten minutes will help. The more time and "distance" you allow, the better your editing will be.
- For each editorial stage, start with a clean copy.
- If you are accustomed to editing directly on the screen, feel free to do so. If you are not, you may want to make the transition by editing short documents (one page) directly on the screen.
- Use your computer's spelling- and grammar-check programmes to support your proofreading.
- If you are editing a long document directly on the screen, it is always best to have a clean, hard copy of the document by your side. This is especially important for the first editorial stage when you need to easily see the sequence and flow of paragraphs and the overall structure of the document.

Summary

- Incorporating clarity into your writing, especially at the sentence level, can help you establish a high level of readability.
- An optimal editing process has three stages: conceptual/structural stage, linguistic stage and proofreading/format stage.