

# THE WRITING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## Policy Briefs

### What this handout is about

This handout will offer tips for writing effective policy briefs. Be sure to check with your instructor about his/her specific expectations for your assignment.

### What are policy briefs?

Imagine that you're an elected official serving on a committee that sets the standards cars must meet to pass a state inspection. You know that this is a complex issue, and you'd like to learn more about existing policies, the effects of emissions on the environment and on public health, the economic consequences of different possible approaches, and more—you want to make an informed decision. But you don't have time to research all of these issues! You need a policy brief.

A policy brief presents a concise summary of information that can help readers understand, and likely make decisions about, government policies. Policy briefs may give objective summaries of relevant research, suggest possible policy options, or go even further and argue for particular courses of action.

### How do policy briefs differ from other kinds of writing assignments?

You may encounter policy brief assignments in many different academic disciplines, from public health and environmental science to education and social work. If you're reading this handout because you're having your first encounter with such an assignment, don't worry—many of your existing skills and strategies, like using evidence, being concise, and organizing your information effectively, will help you succeed at this form of writing. However, policy briefs are distinctive in several ways.

#### Audience

In some of your college writing, you've addressed your peers, your professors, or other members of your academic field. Policy briefs are usually created for a more general reader or policy maker who has a stake in the issue that you're discussing.

#### Tone and terminology

Many academic disciplines discourage using unnecessary jargon, but clear language is especially important in policy briefs. If you find yourself using jargon, try to replace it with more direct language that a non-specialist reader would be more likely to understand. When specialized terminology is necessary, explain it quickly and clearly to ensure that your reader doesn't get confused.

#### Purpose

Policy briefs are distinctive in their focus on communicating the practical implications of research to a specific audience. Suppose that you and your roommate both write research-based papers about global warming. Your roommate is writing a research paper for an environmental science course, and you are writing a policy brief for a course on public policy. You might both use the exact same sources in writing your papers. So, how might those papers differ?

Your roommate's research paper is likely to present the findings of previous studies and synthesize them in order to present an argument about what we know. It might also discuss the methods and processes used in the research.

Your policy brief might synthesize the same scientific findings, but it will deploy them for a very specific purpose: to help readers decide what they should do. It will relate the findings to current policy debates, with an emphasis on applying the research outcomes rather than assessing the research procedures. A research paper might also suggest practical actions, but a policy brief is likely to emphasize them more strongly and develop them more fully.

#### Format

To support these changes in audience, tone, and purpose, policy briefs have a distinctive format. You should consult your assignment prompt and/or your professor for instructions about the specific requirements of your assignment, but most policy briefs have several features in common. They tend to use lots of headings and have relatively short sections. This structure differs from many short papers in the humanities that may have a title but no further headings, and from reports in the sciences that may follow the "IMRAD" structure of introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Your brief might include graphs, charts, or other visual aids that make it easier to digest the most important information within sections. **Policy briefs often include some of these sections:**

- **Title:** A good title quickly communicates the contents of the brief in a memorable way.
- **Executive Summary:** This section is often one to two paragraphs long; it includes an overview of the problem and the proposed policy action.
- **Context or Scope of Problem:** This section communicates the importance of the problem and aims to convince the reader of the necessity of policy action.
- **Policy Alternatives:** This section discusses the current policy approach and explains proposed options. It should be fair and accurate while convincing the reader why the policy action proposed in the brief is the most desirable.
- **Policy Recommendations:** This section contains the most detailed explanation of the concrete steps to be taken to address the policy issue.
- **Appendices:** If some readers might need further support in order to accept your argument but doing so in the brief itself might derail the conversation for other readers, you might include the extra information in an appendix.
- **Consulted or Recommended Sources:** These should be reliable sources that you have used throughout your brief to guide your policy discussion and recommendations.

Depending on your specific topic and assignment, you might combine sections or break them down into several more specific ones.

## How do I identify a problem for my policy brief?

An effective policy brief must propose a solution to a well-defined problem that can be addressed at the level of policy. This may sound easy, but it can take a lot of work to think of a problem in a way that is open to policy action.

For example, “bad spending habits in young adults” might be a problem that you feel strongly about, but you can’t simply implement a policy to “make better financial decisions.” In order to make it the subject of a policy brief, you’ll need to look for research on the topic and narrow it down. Is the problem a lack of financial education, predatory lending practices, dishonest advertising, or something else? Narrowing to one of these (and perhaps further) would allow you to write a brief that can propose concrete policy action.

For another example, let’s say that you wanted to address children’s health. This is a big issue, and too broad to serve as the focus of a policy brief, but it could serve as a starting point for research. As you begin to research studies on children’s health, you might decide to zoom in on the more specific issue of childhood obesity. You’ll need to consult the research further to decide what factors contribute to it in order to propose policy changes. Is it lack of exercise, nutritional deficiencies, a combination of these, or something else? Choosing one or another of these issues, your brief would zoom in even further to specific proposals that might include exercise initiatives, nutritional guidelines, or school lunch programs.

The key is that you define the problem and its contributing factors as specifically as possible so that some sort of concrete policy action (at the local, state, or national level) is feasible.

## Framing the issue

Once you’ve identified the problem for yourself, you need to decide how you will present it to your reader. Your own process of identifying the problem likely had some stops, starts, and dead ends, but your goal in framing the issue for your reader is to provide the most direct path to understanding the problem and the proposed policy change. It can be helpful to think of some of the most pressing questions your audience will have and attempt to preemptively answer those questions. Here are some questions you might want to consider:

### What is the problem?

Understanding what the problem is, in the clearest terms possible, will give your reader a reference point. Later, when you’re discussing complex information, your reader can refer back to the initial problem. This will help to ‘anchor’ them throughout the course of your argument. Every piece of information in the brief should be clearly and easily connected to the problem.

### What is the scope of the problem?

Knowing the extent of the problem helps to frame the policy issue for your reader. Is the problem statewide, national, or international? How many people does this issue affect? Daily? Annually? This is a great place for any statistical information you may have gathered through your research.

### Who are the stakeholders?

Who does this issue affect? Adult women? College-educated men? Children from bilingual homes? The primary group being affected is important, and knowing who this group is allows the reader to assign a face to the policy issue.

Policy issues can include a complex network of stakeholders. Double check whether you have inadvertently excluded any of them from your analysis. For example, a policy about children’s nutrition obviously involves the children, but it might also include food producers, distributors, parents, and nutritionists (and other experts). Some stakeholders might be reluctant to accept your policy change or even acknowledge the existence of the problem, which is why your brief must be convincing in its use of evidence and clear in its communication.

## Effective policy-writing

This handout has emphasized that good policy briefs are clear, concise, and focused on applying credible research to policy problems. Let’s take a look at two versions of the introduction to a policy brief to see how someone might write and revise to achieve these qualities:

### A “not-so-good” policy brief

#### Adolescents’ Dermatologic Health in Outlandia: A Call to Action

The Report on Adolescents’ Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010), issued by Secretary of Health Dr. Polly Galver, served as a platform to increase public awareness on the importance of dermatologic health for adolescents. Among the major themes of the report are that dermatologic health is essential to general health and well-being and that profound and consequential dermatologic health disparities exist in the state of Outlandia. Dr. Galver stated that what amounts to a silent epidemic of acne is affecting some population groups—restricting activities a

schools, work, and home—and often significantly diminishing the quality of life. Dr. Galver issued the Report on Adolescents’ Dermatologic Health as a wake-up call to policymakers and health professionals on issues regarding the state’s dermatologic health. (“[Not so good policy brief.](#)” Reproduced with permission of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.)

This paragraph introduces a relevant and credible source, but it fails to use that source to explain a problem and propose policy action. The reader is likely to be confused because the word “acne” does not appear until the middle of the paragraph, and the brief never states what action should be taken to address it. In addition to this lack of focus, the paragraph also includes unnecessary phrases like “among the major themes” that could be removed to make it more concise.

## A better policy brief

### Seeing Spots: Addressing the Silent Epidemic of Acne in Outlandia’s Youth

Acne is the most common chronic disease among adolescents in Outlandia (Outlandia Department of Health, 2010). Long considered a benign rite of passage, acne actually has far-reaching effects on the health and well being of adolescents, significantly affecting success in school, social relationships, and general quality of life. Yet large portions of the state’s population are unable to access treatment for acne. The Secretary of Health’s Report on Adolescents’ Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010) is a call to action for policymakers and health professionals to improve the health and wellbeing of Outlandia’s youth by increasing access to dermatologic care (“[A Better Policy Brief](#)”, Reproduced with permission of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.)

This paragraph is far more focused and concise than the first version. The opening sentence is straightforward; instead of focusing on the source, it makes a clear and memorable point that is supported by the source. Additionally, though the first version was titled “a call to action,” it did not actually say what that action might be. In this version, it is clear that the call is for increased access to dermatologic care.

Keep in mind that clarity, conciseness, and consistent focus are rarely easy to achieve in a first draft. Careful [editing](#) and [revision](#) are key parts of writing policy briefs.

## Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find additional publications. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#). We revise these tips periodically and welcome feedback.

Smith, Catherine F. 2016. *Writing Public Policy*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Young, Eoin, and Lisa Quinn. n.d. “The Policy Brief.” University of Delaware. Accessed June 24, 2019. <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blog.lrei.org/dist/c/104/files/2009/11/PolicyBrief-described.pdf>.



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