



WORKSHOP ON POLICY-FOCUSED WRITING: ART OF CONVEYING , COMMUNICATING AND CONVINCING

DR. MÜGE FINKEL

FORD INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN SECURITY & GENDER INEQUALITY RESEARCH LAB (GIRL)

OCTOBER 7, 2022

WHAT ABOUT WRITING FOR POLICY?



AUDIENCE



PURPOSE



FORMAT &
STRUCTURE



STYLE



AUDIENCE & PURPOSE

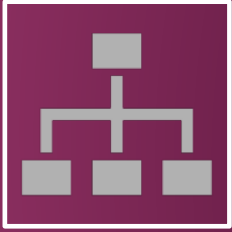


AUDIENCE

- Policymakers and practitioners who are responsible for and/or interested in formulating and/or influencing policy;
- International Affairs Practitioners (diplomats, intelligence officials, etc.);
- Development practitioners in international organizations and NGOs.
- All important people with limited time and attention span.

PURPOSE

- To stimulate the reader/receiver to make a decision;
- To summarize complex problems succinctly;
- To capture alternatives ;
- To provide evidence-based analyses/assessments on: what is happening, why it is happening, how it might change.
- They are stand-alone documents on a single topic.



FORMAT & STRUCTURE

FORMAT

- Short & succinct within required word/page limits (i.e., 1,500 words or two pages in length; or up to eight pages)
- Policy Memos; Policy Briefs & Intelligence Briefs; Policy Research Papers; Policy Concept Papers

STRUCTURE

- Executive Summary
- Overview of Policy Issue/Problem
- Evidence based analyses/assessments of policy options
- Policy recommendations and/or implications
 - **MAJOR DIFFERENCE:** between policy briefs and intelligence briefs!!!



SPECIFICALLY ON EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This is the **heart of any policy document**. Most policy documents include a **comprehensive summary**, with the aim to clearly state the core findings and recommendations in the paper and further grab the reader's attention. It normally includes clear statements on the following issues:
 - The specific issue or problem addressed in the brief; The most striking policy failures or insights identified; The shape or main focus of your recommendations.
- Most executive summaries take the form of a short paragraph (typically 100-200 words), could utilize bullet points. Remember this may be the only thing some readers read, so make it 'punchy' and memorable. If effective, it entices readers to read on.
- TIPS:
 - The executive summary should always appear on the cover of the brief or at the top of the first page so that it is the first thing a reader will see.
 - The executive summary is written last because you will gain clarity on its content as you draft the other sections.



SPECIFICALLY ON THE BODY OF YOUR WRITING: OVERVIEW AND POLICY OPTIONS

- **OVERVIEW:** This part of the policy writing is focused on the problem and focuses on the ‘rationale for action on the problem.’ The GOAL is to present the most striking elements of your analysis in order to convince your audiences that they may need to rethink the issue and ultimately **act differently**. In order to do that, this section :
 - Frames the paper, by detailing the policy problem in the local context;
 - Develops the core issues or striking facts that have led to current policy failures;
 - Ends with what the impact of these policy failures are having.
- **POLICY OPTIONS:** This sections informs the reader about the choice of strategic policy alternatives you have identified. Discussion of the options need to be **substantial in content and convincing** by way of providing facts and evidence, rather than simply stating them as options. In order to do that, this section includes:
 - The principles and evaluation criteria you have used to weigh up the options;
 - An argument on why you have chosen one option over the others available.
- **Throughout these two sections:** evidence should be specifically described **in the text of the assessment**, using language such as “according to press reports” or “according to an intercept of their communications.” Specific information about each source should then be included in a footnote, so the reader can look up specific reports if necessary.



SPECIFICALLY ON POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Difference between Policy Briefs (objective brief vs advocacy brief) and Intelligence Briefs
- The leading question in this section is **how to implement the best policy option** discussed in the previous section.
- The **GOAL** here is to put forward a feasible and practical set of recommendations that could deliver the chosen option and convince the reader you understand how policy systems and government programs work. In order to do that, this section includes:
 - The specific sets of actions that various actors should take to deliver your chosen option;
 - Sometimes, a closing paragraph re-emphasizing the importance of action.
- The issue of space in the brief is often a challenge in this section, i.e., how much detail to include? The balancing act lies in demonstrating the feasibility and fit of the option, but not presenting a full action plan. This section often features recommendations divided by actor (e.g., what local governments should do) and a synopsis of the series of actions presented using bullet points or numbers.



STYLE: BLUFF OR INVERTED PYRAMID

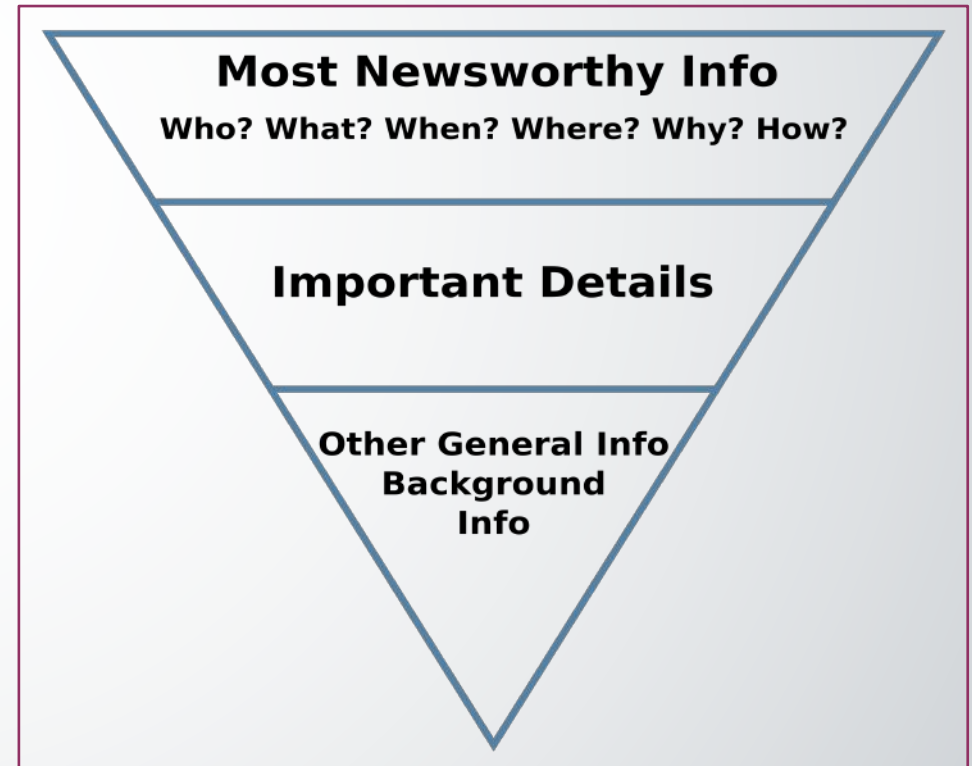
BLUFF

- Bottom Line Up Front First
- State the takeaway immediately; top-line messages – no surprises or suspense saved for later

Statistics are an important tool in the development-policymaking processes of countries and regional organizations.

They are needed for assessing the current development situation, setting objectives and targets for the future and measuring progress and development. However, a substantial gap still exists between the demand for information and the ability of most countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region to routinely provide it.

Inverted Pyramid









SPECIFICALLY ON YOUR WRITING VOICE

- Keep your sentences and paragraphs short; apply BLUFF to each paragraph.
- Keep your writing simple and jargon free: eliminate unnecessary words, clichés and avoid repetition; refrain from dramatic embellishment, hyperbole and emotional rhetoric.
- Write in the active voice. Avoid passive tense and personal pronouns; minimize the use of adjectives and adverbs.
- Avoid adopting a descriptive tone and remain analytical.
- Clearly separate facts from comments or hypotheses; avoid opinions to remain evidence/fact/research based.
- Have a title that immediately communicates the content of the brief in a memorable way. It should convey the subject of the assessment and, ideally, a shorted version of its bottom line judgment. If the reader only had time to read the assessment's title, s/he should understand its purpose.



SPECIFICALLY ON TITLES

	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.



KEEP YOUR LANGUAGE IS POLICY NEUTRAL

Quantify statements where possible, but avoid these words and phrases. A 50% increase may seem to be *surging* or *skyrocketing*, but let the reader make the quantifying judgment.

- Appropriate action
- Burgeoning
- Effective policy
- Enormous
- Gale
- Huge
- Obvious solution
- Skyrocketed
- Slashed
- Soar
- Spiked
- Surging

Neutral: Prices fell

Not neutral: Prices plummeted

Neutral: Production decreased, production dropped

Not neutral: Production was slashed

Neutral: Hydraulic fracturing requires large amounts of water

Not neutral: Hydraulic fracturing requires huge amounts of water

Neutral: Natural gas production reversed its downward trend

Not neutral: Natural gas production finally reversed its downward trend

DON'T JUST WRITE IT, DESIGN IT

- Appearance is important. Use appropriate font and margins; check for spelling; number the pages; use boxes and sidebars when appropriate.
- Bold key terms; or first sentences of each paragraph to provide easy access to central points (BLUFF).
- Use verbs to make headings more dynamic; and phrase headings as questions to spark a reader's curiosity.
- Use bullet points to highlight important information. They should be no longer than five to seven bullet points; each bullet point should express a complete thought and use a consistent structure.
- Use short, informative subtitles throughout your brief as navigational tools to say something specific about what your reader will learn from the section.
- Use charts and visuals only when they help convey a point without having to restate in writing.
- Avoid elements that 'clutter' the text. Many references in the text itself can interrupt the reader's flow. Avoid using in-text citations (i.e., APA style), instead, create a reference/endnotes list.

EDIT, EDIT AND EDIT AGAIN BEFORE YOU SHARE

THE ART OF WRITING
FOR POLICY IS IN
EDITING.

George Plimpton: “How much rewriting do you do?”

Ernest Hemingway: “It depends. I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.”

Plimpton: “Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?”

Hemingway: “Getting the words right.”²⁷

IN

SUMMARY



In your policy writing you are expected to

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**.



TO HAVE THE INFLUENCE IT SEEKS TO HAVE, YOUR POLICY WRITING MUST

1

be read: it needs to be interesting, relevant, concise.

Your first sentence is your most important. If your first sentence is boring, incoherent or irrelevant, if your first sentence contains nothing new, no one will read the rest.

2

be analytical and avoid description:

An effective policy writing is convincing because of the coherence of its underlying logic and because of the clarity of its presentation of that logic.

3

have a design:

Employ headings and subheadings, bullets and italics and white space too to impart the structure of your argument and to highlight your key points. Design your brief so that a reader can scan it quickly and grasp your message.

Resources



International Development Research Centre, Canada

<https://www.idrc.ca/en/how-write-policy-brief>

International Centre for Policy Advocacy

https://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf

Sociology Policy Briefs

<https://www.policybriefs.org/writing>

Research to Action

<https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf>

FAO (Policy Brief examples)

<https://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/resources/policy-briefs/en/>

DNI

<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Declassified-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf>

UN Women (Policy brief examples)

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/un-women-policy-brief-series>

Just Security

<https://www.justsecurity.org/75068/gender-and-right-wing-extremism-in-america-why-understanding-womens-roles-is-key-to-preventing-future-acts-of-domestic-terrorism/>



QUESTIONS?

PLEASE REMEMBER TO UTILIZE SERVICES OFFERED
[HTTPS://WWW.WRITINGCENTER.PITT.EDU](https://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu)