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# Writing for Policy Audiences

## Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief

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# Outline

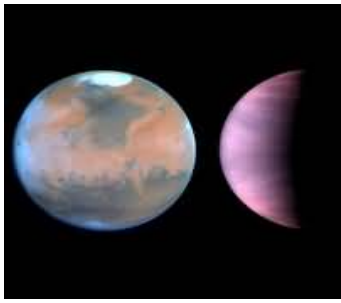
1. Writing for policy audiences
  - General overview of style and content
2. Writing a policy brief
  - Structure and unique content for policy briefs



# Forget Everything You Learned About Writing in University!

Policy writing is unlike academic writing:

- Different audience
- Different writing style
- Different structure (the end comes first)
- Shorter length
- Emphasis on interpretation, analysis, and proposed actions



## Researchers are from Mars; Policy-Makers are from Venus

- “Researchers and policy-makers do not speak the same professional language, e.g., independent/dependent/exogenous variables, selection bias, error, variance, interaction terms” etc, etc!
- Bridging organizations (like PRB) act as middlemen, identifying important policy issues and making them accessible to policy- makers and the general public

Source: P. Feldman, P. Nadash and M. Gursen, Improving Communication Between Researchers and Policy Makers in Long-Term Care, or Researchers are from Mars; Policy makers are from Venus, *The Gerontologist*, 41:312-321, 2001



# Poorly Translated Information is Not Used

- Translating research is an acquired skill
- Policy makers have information overload
- Policy makers prefer information that is:
  - Concise
  - Focuses on main points
  - Has unambiguous implications of findings
  - Provides clear guidance on how to proceed



# Planning – Be Strategic

Follow these steps before writing:

1. Identify your audience(s)
2. Decide on your objective: what do you want your audience to know and do?
3. Identify 2-3 main messages
  - Select only the information you need to get these messages across
  - Create an outline that best conveys your messages



# Style

- Use non-technical language
- Write in a conversational style, as in a newspaper article
- Use sub-headings to break up information
- Spell out acronyms and define terms
- Insert citations as numbered endnotes



# Headings and Sub-headings

- Rename the sections of your outline to avoid using dull and off-putting headings such as “Background” and “Findings”
- Descriptive phrases give a glimpse of the information and entice the reader to continue

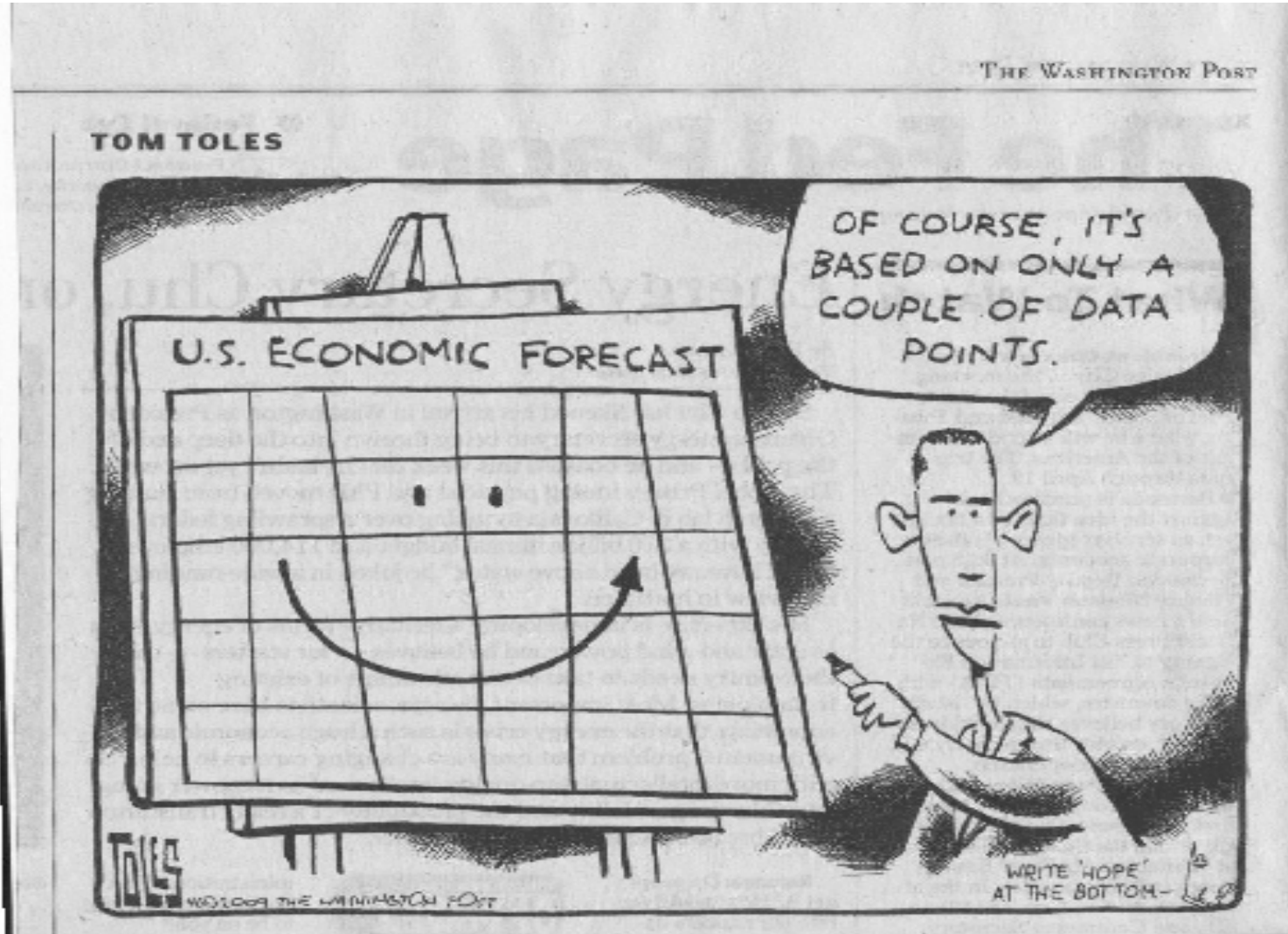




# Data and Graphics

- Graphs are visually better than tables
  - No more than 8-10 data points
  - Some graphs are effective with only 2-4 data points
  - Bar graphs should be two-dimensional only!
- Headings should be non-technical and convey the key findings
- Always include a caption describing the graphic

# Lead, but Don't Mislead





# Other Tips on Using Data

- Never use regression coefficients!!!
- Convert odds ratios to whole numbers or percentages
- Label clearly the x and y-axes
- Select the data necessary
- Use round numbers rather than decimals
- If you have qualitative findings, include some quotes



# Get Feedback

- When the written product is in good shape and you've reviewed it for errors, ask several people to review it
- Ask your “test audiences” to tell you:
  - Is it accessible and readable?
  - What are the key messages? Are they clear?
  - Are the arguments or recommendations persuasive?
- Respond to reviewer comments



# Policy Brief

- Concise overview of a specific issue
- Examines the context surrounding this issue for decisionmakers and policy advocates
  - Journalists, educators, and students may also use briefs to become informed about the latest research on a given topic



# Policy Brief

- Audience: Specific
  - May be narrow or broad
- Length: 4 pages or less (single-spaced)
  - Approximately 1,500 – 2,000 words
  - Some can be 6 or 8 pages
- Content: Include implications and recommended actions



# Policy Brief: Process

1. Identify your audience(s)
2. Decide on your objective: what do you want your audience to know and do?
3. Identify 2-3 main messages
4. Write 2-3 recommendations
5. Select only the information you need to get these messages across
6. Create an outline that best conveys your messages



# Policy Brief: Suggested Outline

- Introduction
  - Summary/Overview
  - Background
- Key Messages
  - Research findings
  - Implications
- Recommendations
- Conclusion





# Summary/Overview

- Summarize the contents, including conclusions and recommendations, in one or two short paragraphs
  - State why it is an important issue
  - Give highlights of findings
  - Indicate whether actions are recommended



# Background

- Explain why this issue is important
- Include background information/data on the country, area, issue or program presented
- State what previous research has shown or what previous policies/programs have achieved (or not)



# Key Findings

- Divide your findings into issue areas, presented in sub-sections
- Include tables or graphs to support your principal findings (embed in text)
- Number your figures and refer to them in the text, i.e.: (see Figure 1)



# Policy Implications

- Explain why the research findings are important for policies:
  - What policy issues arise from the findings?
  - Are there underlying causes to be addressed?
  - Is the evidence sufficient to support action now?
- Mention whether solutions have been tried, and whether they have been effective



# Recommendations

- Recommendations must flow from evidence presented
- Give **specific** interventions or actions needed, and **by whom**
- Support recommendations with your findings and other literature/ experience on the topic
- Start with an action verb and make them **SMART**



# Concluding Statements

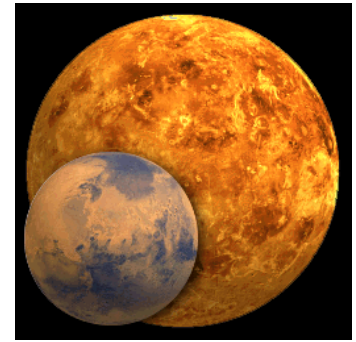
- Conclusions should be brief (because they should have appeared earlier)
- Remind the reader why action is needed, and the consequences of inaction
- Consider adding a positive note that looks toward the future

# Edit and Critique

- All good writing is improved with revision
- Use the Policy Brief Checklist to critique your brief

Policy Communication Fellows		
Policy Brief Checklist		
A Guide for Writing or Reviewing a Research-Based Policy Brief		
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>1. Title</b>	a. Is it short?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Is it engaging (action?)	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2. Summary Overview</b>	a. Does it clearly state the problem/issue to be discussed?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Does it summarize the main conclusion/main policy recommendation?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3. Background</b>	a. Are appropriate data used to demonstrate why the issue is important?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Is previous relevant research briefly summarized?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c. Are the strengths of the background research highlighted?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d. Does it provide an introduction to the research in the next section? (E.g., the source of the data and the methodology used?)	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4. Research Findings</b>	a. Do sub-headings convey key findings?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Does author explain how study contributes to knowledge?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c. Are graphs or tables easy to read and understand?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	i. No more than 10 data points on a graph	<input type="checkbox"/>
	ii. Bar graphs are two dimensional	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d. Are figures clearly identified in text, labeled and numbered?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	i. X and Y axes labeled	<input type="checkbox"/>
	ii. Numbers rounded rather than decimals	<input type="checkbox"/>
	iii. Figures are called out in text	<input type="checkbox"/>
	iv. Captions used to briefly summarize figures	<input type="checkbox"/>
	e. Does the brief share enough data to make a good argument, without excess data?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5. Policy Implications</b>	a. Is the connection between research and policy clearly explained?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Does it make the case for the benefit of a change in policy?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c. Do implications answer the 'so what' question about the findings?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6. Recommendations</b>	a. Are specific actions clearly stated?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Is responsibility for policy action specified? (E.g. by whom?)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c. Do recommendations build on data in the brief without introducing new topics?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d. Is need for further research specific (if applicable)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>7. Concluding Statements</b>	a. Are expected results of action stated? (E.g., if x change is made, y will improve.)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Does it end on a positive note looking toward the future?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>8. Overall</b>	a. Is it no more than 4 pages?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b. Are headings and sub-headings used to break text into smaller sections?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c. Is it easy for a non-technical audience to understand?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d. Does it use simple language in an active voice?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	e. Are acronyms spelled out when first used?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	f. Is there a logical flow to the information presented?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	g. Is the scientific literature to support facts properly cited?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	h. Does the brief encourage action rather than just present information?	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Get on the Same Planet



- Policymakers do not read academic journals
- Translating your research for policy makers is a more reliable route to “making a difference”



# Learn More

- Feldman, P., Nadash, P., and Gursen, M. Improving Communication Between Researchers and Policy Makers in Long-Term Care, or Researchers are from Mars; Policy makers are from Venus. *The Gerontologist*. 41:312-321, 2001.
- Hennink, M & Stephenson, R. Using research to inform health policy: Barriers and strategies in developing countries. *J of Health Comm* 2005; 10:2, 163-180.
- Proscio, T. Bad words for good: How foundations garble their message and lose their audience. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. 2001.