Writing for Policy Audiences

Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief
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

1. Title
   a. Is it short?
   b. Is it engaging?

2. Summary Overview
   a. Does it clearly state the problem/issue to be discussed?
   b. Does it summarize the main conclusion/main policy recommendation?

3. Background
   a. Are appropriate data used to demonstrate why the issue is important?
   b. Is previous relevant research briefly summarized?
   c. Are the strengths of the background research highlighted?
   d. Does it provide an introduction to the research in the next section? (E.g., the source of the data and the methodology used?)

4. Research Findings
   a. Do sub-headings convey key findings?
   b. Does the author explain how study contributes to knowledge?
   c. Are graphs or tables easy to read and understand?
      i. More than 10 data points on a graph
      ii. Bar graphs are two dimensional
   d. Are figures clearly identified in text, labeled and numbered?
      i. X and Y axes labeled
      ii. Numbers rounded rather than decimals
      iii. Figures are called out in text
      iv. Captions used to briefly summarize figures
   e. Does the brief share enough data to make a good argument, without excess data?

5. Policy Implications
   a. Is the connection between research and policy clearly explained?
   b. Does it make the case for the benefit of a change in policy?
   c. Do implications answer the “so what” question about the findings?

6. Recommendations
   a. Are specific actions clearly stated?
   b. Is responsibility for policy action specified? (E.g., by whom?)
   c. Do recommendations build on data in the brief without introducing new topics?
   d. Is there need for further research specific (if applicable)?

7. Concluding Statements
   a. Are expected results of action stated? (E.g., if a change is made, y will improve.)
   b. Does it end on a positive note looking toward the future?

8. Overall
   a. Is it no more than 4 pages?
   b. Are headings and sub-headings used to break text into smaller sections?
   c. Is it easy for a non-technical audience to understand?
   d. Does it use simple language in an active voice?
   e. Are acronyms spelled out when first used?
   f. Is there a logical flow to the information presented?
   g. Is the scientific literature to support facts properly cited?
   h. Does the brief encourage action rather than just present information?
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.