



How to Write a Policy Brief

This is a training tool developed by IDRC



Topics

- Planning your policy brief
- Policy brief template
- Designing the brief
- Checking your work

Planning Your Policy Brief





What is a policy brief?

- A short document that presents the findings and recommendations of a research project to a non-specialized audience
- A medium for exploring an issue and distilling lessons learned from the research
- A vehicle for providing policy advice.

Work Within Parameters



A policy brief is:

- A stand alone document
- Focused on a single topic
- No more than 2-4 pages
(1,500 words)

Writing for Your Audience



Who Are Your Readers?



Ask yourself

- Who am I writing this brief for?
- How knowledgeable are they about the topic?
- How open are they to the message?

How Can I Reach Readers?



- What questions need answers?
- What are their interests, concerns?
- What does it take to reach specific readers such as media, decision-makers?

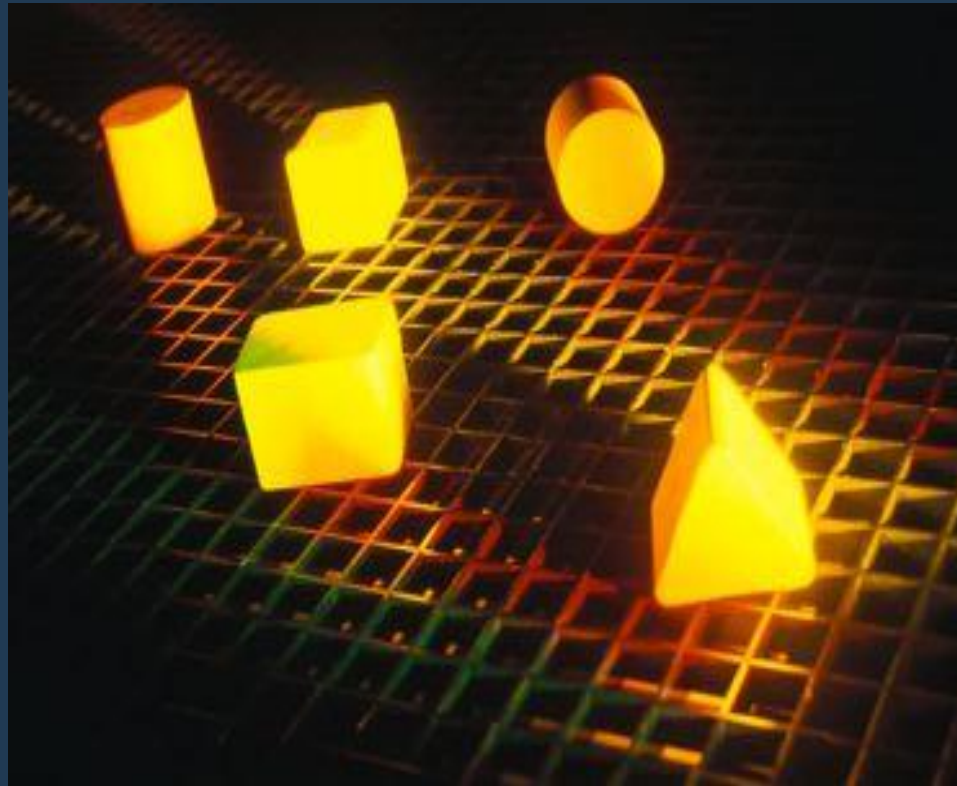
Use the Power of Persuasion



- Answer the question “What value does this have for me?”
- Describe the urgency of the situation
- Speak in terms of benefits and advantages



Choosing Your Content



Content: Apply a Laser Focus



- Focus on a single topic
- Define your purpose
- Identify salient points that support the aim
- Distil points to essential info
- Limit yourself to 1,500 words

Putting the Brief Together





Policy Brief Template

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Approaches and Results
- Conclusion
- Implications and Recommendations

Lead With a Short Statement



The executive statement will:

- Distil the essence of the brief
- Provide an overview for busy readers
- Entice readers to go further
- Appear on cover or top of first page
- Be written last



Example:

Elephants are one of the big five wildlife species; their survival is one of the holy grails of conservation. Unfortunately, because of their size and migratory behaviour, elephants often come in contact with people. This is especially true in densely populated southeast Asia. A new study from Sri Lanka looks at one strategy to address this problem – electric fences.

Elephants and Electric Fences. A study from Sri Lanka
EEPSEA 2005



Introduction

- Answers the question why
- Explains the significance/urgency of the issue
- Describes research objective
- Gives overview of findings, conclusions
- Creates curiosity for rest of brief

Approaches and Results



- Provides summary of the facts
- Describes issue and context
- Describes research and analysis
- Should not be overly technical
- Highlight benefits, opportunities



Approaches

- Explains how study conducted
- Relates who conducted study
- Describes relevant background
- Identifies method used to collect data

Results: What Did We Learn?



- Make content easy to follow
- Start by painting a general picture
- Move from general to specific
- Base conclusions on results



Example:

Do the Fences Work?

Overall it was found that although the electric fencing does help...it is not capable of completely eliminating conflict. In each...area...technical as well as socio-economic factors affect....success. Technical failures mainly affected the early fences...Other problems resulted from failure to take into account elephant behaviour and distribution patterns.

Elephants and Electric Fences: A Study from Sri Lanka
EEPSEA 2005

Conclusion: What Does It Mean?



- Use section to interpret data
- Aim for concrete conclusions
- Express ideas using strong assertions
- Ensure ideas are balanced and defensible
- If hypothesis abandoned, say why



Example:

Overall, it was found that although electric fencing does help mitigate human elephant conflict, it is not capable of completely eliminating the conflict. A social factor that affected the success of electric fences was whether the local community supported the project in their area. Community support was critical in several ways.

Elephants and Electric Fences: A Study from Sri Lanka
EEPSEA 2005

Implications and Recommendations



- Implications are what could happen
- Recommendations are what should happen
- Both flow from conclusions
- Both must be supported by evidence

Implications: If...Then...



- Describe what researcher thinks will be the consequences
- Less direct than recommendations
- Useful when advice not requested
- Softer approach but still can be persuasive

Recommendations: Call to Action



- Describe clearly what should happen next
- State as precise steps
- Ensure they are relevant, credible and feasible



Example:

A successful strategy to deal with the elephant problem must be much more far-reaching than it is at present. Such a strategy should include a comprehensive land use planning exercise where elephant habitats...are grouped and interconnected...The elephants' habitat should then be enriched and fenced.

Elephants and Electric Fences: A Study From Sri Lanka
EEPSEA

Designing the Policy Brief



Titles: Add a Little Jazz



- Titles are reference point
- Sub-titles break up text
- Both should entice readers
- Similar to headline writing
- Verbs make them more dynamic
- Questions can pique curiosity

Sidebars Add Extra Depth



- Is extra to main discussion
- Meant to “hook” reader
- Sidebars should be:
 - Short
 - Descriptive
 - Stimulating (ask questions)
 - Focused on action



Sidebar Example

Repair Bill Could Reach \$250 Million

The Mozambique government estimates that it will cost \$250 million to repair the damage from the cyclone and floods that struck Mozambique in February 2000. Early reports of the damage included the destruction of the following infrastructure: a key rail link used to bring in fuel and goods from Zimbabwe and South Africa; hundreds of kilometres of roads, which are fundamental to market reforms, among other things; electricity and telephone lines: more than 140 schools; and health centres.



Other Design Choices

Callouts

- Sentences or sentence fragments
- Printed in larger font
- Boxed or placed in margins



Example

Electric fences are not a "stand alone" solution.



Other Design Choices

Bulleted Lists

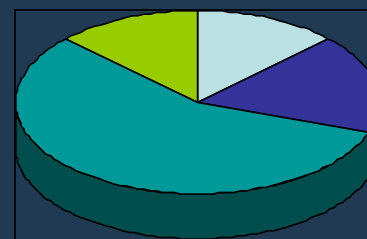
- Favour Groups of 5 or 7
- Express completed thoughts
- Avoid tags (one or two word bullets)



Other Design Choices

Charts, Photos, Graphics

- Pie charts/bar graphs better than tables
- Graphics can simplify understanding
- Use captions to explain content



■ Forest
■ Farm
■ Desert
■ Urban

Check Your Work



Think Ahead and Look Back



- Conduct a 20-second test – what stood out?
- Try to make more user friendly
- Go on a jargon hunt
- Don't overuse statistics
- Check arguments, proof, persuasion
- Build a Q and A package

Summary

Good luck with your Policy Briefs!



Checklist