



**UC DAVIS**

## Graduate Program of Environmental Policy and Management

### Guide for Writing Policy Briefs

*Clear, concise writing is a fundamental skill for policy analysts and managers*

#### **Policy Brief Overview**

Policy briefs may take many forms based on the type of content and the audience. Legislative bodies, research organizations, and business clients often adopt their own specific policy brief format. In any case, the policy brief should be well written (including clear illustrations or charts), concise, and well organized. A policy brief may summarize the results of policy-relevant research, current literature, surveys, evaluations of existing policy and programs, and interviews with experts or representatives of various relevant interest groups. The brief should give information in an objective manner and identify information that may be from a biased source. The implications of the research or policy options are what policymakers are most interested in. The brief should be front-loaded, meaning the policy implications and the most important messages are clearly stated up front.

Policymakers often make decisions under time constraints. Thus, the brief should efficiently communicate the key points and the most relevant evidence and information on the research or policy review. However, it is helpful to provide references for a deeper dive into the issue. Policymakers are more likely to read and understand a brief that is visually appealing, easy to read and concisely presents factual evidence. Keep in mind the policymakers are unlikely to be specialists on the issue. A good policy brief provides adequate context and background for the issue without overwhelming the audience with detail. It convinces the audience of the urgency of the problem as well as the need to make changes.

#### **Key Characteristics of a Good Policy Brief**

**CONCISE**—Usually two to three pages, the brief should be short and to the point. A clear, concise document will be most useful for policymakers. It should provide policymakers with enough information to fully grasp the issue, yet without including so much detail that the main points are lost.

**FOCUSED**—Keep the brief focused on topic: the problem, policy options, implications of research results or analysis, and recommendations. Emphasize key policy-related conclusions.

**PROVIDES NECESSARY CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**— This may be the most difficult challenge of writing a good brief. Efficiently summarize key background information necessary to understand the issue and assess the value of policy options, but don't waste time and space with extraneous information.



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**UNDERSTANDABLE**—Language should be simple and easily understood by the layperson. Replace academic jargon with explanations of concepts. Avoid using undefined acronyms. Emphasize key points.

**VISUALLY APPEALING**—The brief should catch the eye of the audience through the use of design elements such as photographs, graphs and charts. This creates a more professional and appealing document. Formatting elements such as bulleted lists, bolded sentences, and headings can be used to help the reader quickly navigate the document.

**PRACTICAL AND FEASIBLE**—The policy brief is a tool that aims to spur action from policymakers. As such, policy briefs should focus on specific, concrete steps that—while perhaps ambitious—are at least possible for the target audience to take.

### **Examples\* of policy brief outlines:**

#### Brief to translate research results to policy:

- Summary
- Issue
- Relevant Existing Policies (that have been implemented to address the issue)
- Comparison of the Policies, Pros & Cons
- Recommendations

#### Legislation Bill Analyses

- Summary
- Problem
- Background and Existing Law
- Proposed Solution (e.g., law change)
- Discussion of Options
- Proponents and /opponents

\*Search online for “guide for policy brief” and you will find numerous examples and further guidance on writing policy briefs. \*