



Writing for a policy audience – quick tips on policy briefs

Policy briefs have multiple possible purposes, including but not limited to providing options for decision makers, advocating for a position on an issue, supporting a stated agenda, highlighting policy-relevant research findings, and alerting stakeholders to the need to address a problem. A policy brief may have a specific audience (e.g. a legislative committee or a school board) or a broad audience (e.g. decision makers in a particular policy area, journalists, administrators, and researchers).

What about policy memos? Most of the tips offered here apply to policy memos as well as briefs. While a brief often functions as a standalone document, memos are typically “to” someone (or more than one person), “from” someone (or more than one person), and almost always have a specific date. While briefs are typically public documents that are shared widely, memos may not be. In addition, memos may hone in on a context and specific set of circumstances that apply to the sender and/or the recipient while a brief may be more broadly applicable. These distinctions don’t always hold true but are important to consider when determining what type of document will work best in each case.

A reader should be able to answer the following after reading your brief:

What’s the problem/challenge? Why does it matter? What are options for addressing the problem/challenge?

To accomplish this:

- Identify the problem, challenge, question, etc. (What is it? Whom does it affect?)
- Explain the problem’s significance (Why does it matter?)
- Identify the audience(s) (Who cares?)
- Identify the main messages you want to convey to the reader and make them succinctly
- Lead with your conclusion – don’t save the punch line for the end
- Briefly summarize findings (from research and possibly from practice, existing models, etc.)
- Suggest potential value of any recommendations (references to current policies or practice can be powerful; highlight real-world implications)
- Make the brief relevant and timely – why does this matter now – by identifying connections between the brief’s content and *current, relevant* policy issues and challenges
- Present possible policy options without “picking sides” – “provide specific guidance for policy decision-making and action” (Kirst)
- Make the information real. If the content stems from “real” people and cases, say so.
- Share and back up “best” practices or models (ideally, based on research evidence) and other approaches your audience might consider
- Avoid acronyms, jargon and wordiness
- Include easy-to-understand charts, graphs, other visuals
- Include a ‘for more information’ section to reference articles, websites, models/examples, etc.