



THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT
GUND INSTITUTE
FOR ENVIRONMENT

This document provides 1) guidance for writing briefs, broken down by typical sections you might find in a brief, and 2) helpful resources.

Guidance for Writing Briefs

THE ISSUE

Define your issue in 1-2 concise paragraphs. You could also frame the issue with bullet points to make it more readable.

- Don't assume policymakers or staff have any previous knowledge of the topic. Briefly catch them up to speed.
- Frame the issue in a way that matters to your specific audience. How does the issue impact your audience? How does it intersect with the things they care about?
- Focus on essential background (who, what, where, why, etc.) that your audience needs to know about the issue.

If appropriate, reference an image, map, or chart to make it easier for your audience to quickly orient to the issue.

KEY POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Concisely frame the policy dimensions of the issue.

1. Describe key aspects of an effective policy for dealing with the issue at hand.
2. Use "if/then" statements to apply what we know from research to a policy dialogue, e.g. "if we enacted policy A, then research suggests we could expect outcome B."
3. Consider framing what's at stake. What do we risk losing, or missing, or getting wrong?

Think about what a reader would learn if they skimmed your brief in 30 seconds.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If appropriate, provide policy recommendations for your audience. To avoid being too prescriptive or advocacy-oriented, you can frame recommendations in terms of what a policymaker *could* do rather than what they *should* do.

Lay out potential solutions to the issue. Highlight the benefits of solutions to specific stakeholders that your audience cares about.

Who can do what? Identify potential solutions and recommendations that your audience has authority and jurisdiction over or that are directly relevant to them.

Put the bottom line up front. Start with your most important recommendation. Don't bury the most important point by building up to it.

(1) Recommendation one.

Describe each recommendation. Clearly state why it's important.

(2) Recommendation two.

- If you present multiple options for the policymaker to consider, discuss the pros and cons of each option.
- Think about how to use insights from research to evaluate options or expand the range of options being considered.
- Remember: bullet points can make things more readable.

(3) Recommendation three.

Distill broad or complex ideas into the most important points using plain language. Present the evidence that supports your recommendations or conclusions.

One- or two-sentence paragraphs are OK.

(4) Recommendation four.

Get feedback from others, especially domain experts or policy staff if possible. Gund Institute staff is here to help.

In your final version, notice where page breaks occur and how formatting can help make your brief look neat and pleasing to the eye.

Use figures and tables only where appropriate. You do not need to provide a large amount of numerical data. If data add value and are essential to making your points, consider using tables or figures rather than overwhelming the reader with data in the text. Keep tables simple.



Include a brief caption to describe images, and include attribution (Photo: Stephen Posner). Images should be high quality. Charts should be large enough to easily read.

CONCLUSION

Without being repetitive, emphasize main points. Consider providing a brief blueprint for implementing recommendations. Be as specific as possible.

Mention any ongoing or future research that is exploring these issues in more detail and could continue to provide insights. When using your issue brief to engage policymakers, be prepared to provide additional information.

Don't deliver your brief and then walk away expecting someone to read it or follow up with you. Engage for the longer-term. Consider ways you could be an ongoing, trusted resource for decision-makers.

CONTACT

Include your name, email, and phone number if you like.

Resources for Writing Briefs

Guidance from universities

Harvard Kennedy School of Government Communications Program

[How to Write a Policy Memo](#)

Bob Behn on [The Craft of Memo Writing](#)

Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Peter Wilcoxon on [Tips on Writing a Policy Memo](#).

Plus [more tips](#) with “do and don’t” suggestions.

Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

[Policy Memo Writing Tips](#)

MIT Policy Lab EdX Course on Policy Outreach: [Tools for Academic Engagement in Public Policy](#)

Guidance from an academic study

Balian, E.V., et al. 2016. Supporting evidence-based policy on biodiversity and ecosystem services: recommendations for effective policy briefs. *Evidence & Policy*, 12(3): 431-51.

Guidance from NGOs

Fast Track Impact: [How to make a policy brief that has real impact](#)

International Centre for Policy Advocacy: [Policy Brief Resources](#), including an Essential Guide to Policy Brief Writing

Leadership for Educational Equity: [Guide to Writing an Effective Policy Memo](#)

Examples of policy proposals from the [Day One Project](#)

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