Getting you started…
Writing policy briefings

Policy briefings are short documents that communicate the research findings and policy recommendations of an organisation on a given issue. They are usually written for a non-specialist audience.

Why do it

Policy briefings can have a number of different purposes, so it is important to be very clear from the outset what you are trying to achieve. As well as providing a means to communicate your expertise and knowledge on a particular issue, or inform readers about specific policy developments, they can also be used to provoke discussion and debate. But above all, policy briefings provide an important tool for organisations to make the case for policy change and outline specific recommendations for how this might be achieved.

When and how to…
Audience

Consider who your target audiences are. Is it aimed at your members or users, civil servants and opinion formers, the media, the general public – or a mixture of all of them? You need to ensure that you are addressing the needs of your readers – however diverse – so this needs to be clarified before you start planning content.

Structure

When structuring your briefing, there are a few key pointers to bear in mind. Start by introducing yourself and outlining your authority on the issue. This will add legitimacy to your arguments. Then state clearly the purpose of your briefing; try and 'hook' your audience from the outset by persuading them of the importance and relevance of the issue as well as the significance of the evidence and recommendations that will follow. Make it clear where your evidence has come from (for example, is it a one-off study or a synthesis of existing information?) and include a short list of sources for further reading.

A contents summary can help with navigation; only parts of your briefing will be relevant to some readers. Always include a publication date (or date of last revision) to avoid confusion.

Clear messages
Clear and concise messages help make complex research findings easier to digest. Messages are easier to remember if they supported by catchy sub-headings, case studies and visual illustrations such as graphs or diagrams. Try and avoid jargon or technical language wherever possible as this will alienate the reader. It might be useful to ask someone else (preferably with little knowledge of the area) to read through a draft to 'jargon-proof' it.

Give your opinions, not just facts
Don't assume that your audience will only want to be presented with the objective findings of your research; most readers will be interested in your opinions too. Don't be afraid to give them!

Keep it brief
As for length, the clue is in the name! Briefings should ideally be kept to 3-4 sides of A4. Policymakers are presented with vast amounts of information on a daily basis and work to short deadlines. It is therefore important that your briefing gets to the point.

Encourage action
Encourage a reaction from your audience by highlighting questions for further discussion or making practical recommendations. You might also wasn't to consider following up your briefing with a face-to-face meeting or seminar.

Publicise your briefing
Policy briefings are not produced to gather dust on shelves; they should be publicised and disseminated as widely as possible – both online and offline. You might want to consider publishing a briefing alongside a seminar or conference, for example. In addition to your organisation's own communication channels, find out whether you can publicise your briefing via external websites and mailings.

Where to go next
- Collect examples of briefings produced by other organisations and use them to inspire how you design and develop your own.
- Find out more about writing in clear, accessible English with the Plain English Campaign: www.plainenglish.co.uk
- Download ODI's paper on *Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research* for further guidance on writing policy briefings: www.odi.org.uk/resources/details.asp?id=425&title=policy-briefs-as-communication-tool-development-research