WRITING A POLICY BRIEF

STRUCTURE OF THE POLICY BRIEF:

A policy brief will generally contain the following elements

- Title
- Executive Summary
- Purpose/Background OR Context and the Importance of the Problem
- Critical Analysis/Considerations
- Policy Recommendations and Conclusion
- Reference List

1. Title
   - Uses key content words
   - Should be descriptive, memorable and relevant

Example: Seeing Spots: Addressing the Silent Epidemic of Acne in Outlandia’s Youth

2. Executive Summary (also known as the Overview)

- Previews the whole text
- Provides a short summary of the policy brief, that is, a brief description of the issue/problem
- Identifies the importance of the policy brief – why the current policy needs to be revised
- Summarises the recommendations/proposed policy action
- Needs to be persuasive and aims to engage/convince the reader
- One to two paragraphs maximum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Function of each part</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background – Orientation to context</td>
<td>Provides information on the issue/concern being addressed – Identify the policy position that is being promoted</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Purpose</td>
<td>Provides the reader/target audience with an orientation to the purpose of the policy brief. Why is this important? Urgent?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Preview of factors</td>
<td>Informs the reader about the main factors that will be critically analysed and discussed (strengths and limitations)</td>
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<td>4. Preview of the Brief’s structure</td>
<td>This often is combined to some extent with the identification of the main factors (in stage 3 above) - it may also provide the reader with a broad summary of the results of the analysis of these factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Preview of final recommendations</td>
<td>Informs the reader about the final outcome of the critical analysis and identifies the recommendations for action</td>
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Examples:

(a) (Short) executive summary (from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2010))

Seeing Spots: Addressing the Silent Epidemic of Acne in Outlandia’s Youth

Acne is the most common chronic disease among adolescents in Outlandia. Long considered a benign rite of passage, acne actually has far-reaching effects on the health and well being of adolescents, significantly affecting success in school, social relationships, and general quality of life. [Background] Yet large portions of the state’s population are unable to access treatment for acne. The Secretary of Health’s Report on Adolescents’ Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010) is a call to action for policymakers and health professionals to improve the health and wellbeing of Outlandia’s youth by increasing access to dermatologic care. [Purpose]
(b) Preview of the Brief's structure (from Bardach & Patashnik, 2016, Appendix A):

Our central effectiveness measure is reduction of the nation's cocaine consumption, although we also examine reduction of cocaine-related crimes, along with decrease in cocaine spending, which is related to such crimes.

(Note: these align with the main aspects to be focussed on in the Critical Analysis section)

(c) Preview of final recommendations (from Bardach & Patashnik, 2016, Appendix A):

We take two approaches to mathematical modeling the market for cocaine and arrive at the same basic conclusion: Mandatory minimum sentences are not justifiable on the basis of cost-effectiveness at reducing cocaine consumption, cocaine expenditures, or drug-related crime.

3. Purpose and Background

- Detail the importance of the issue and explain why it requires action (its significance), i.e. provide a clear statement of the issue in focus
- Elaborate on the issue through a short overview of the causes of the problem and provide a brief history of your chosen problem/issue
- Include a clear statement of the implications for current policy
- Present information visually, through images, graph, charts etc.
- Identify key stakeholders, the people who have an interest in the outcome of the policy brief

Example (excerpts from Bardach & Patashnik, 2016, Appendix A):

In recent decades, the American public has responded favorably to political leaders and candidates who have espoused longer sentences for the possession and sale of drugs. Among the more popular sentencing extensions are mandatory minimums, which require that a judge impose a sentence of at least a specific length if certain criteria are met. [Background] ... mandatory minimums associated with drug crimes may also be viewed as a means of achieving the nation's drug control objectives (Significance - general) ... In this report we estimate how successful mandatory minimum sentences are, relative to other control strategies, at reducing consumption, drug-related crime, and the total flow of revenue through the cocaine market. (Purpose) The latter is a worthy objective in itself--America would be better off if money spent on drugs were spent on almost anything else--and it is also associated with drug-related crime. (Implications for current policy) ... We focus on cocaine (Focus) ... Readers interested principally in narcotics control and criminal justice policy may wish to stop at the end of Part 1. (cf. Pt 2, which is for readers interested in the mathematical modelling) (Key stakeholders)

4. Critical Analysis/Considerations

This is the longest section of the brief, the core of the document.

- Includes a short overview of the policy and why it is inadequate (shortcomings). This could take the form of identifying the strengths and limitations of the current policy.
- (For your particular assessment), ensures that although you are focusing on a specialised area in your field, you have provided a short sketch of the parameters of the policy area – how does your narrow focus fit into the ‘big picture’ policy area?
- Identifies what aspects of the policy need changing. These can take the form of alternatives for the target audience to consider.
- Evaluates alternatives using empirical supporting evidence
- Identifies implications for different stakeholders
- Ensures your critical analysis is evidence-based. This is where students use their resources/readings to support their position.
- Addresses SOME of the following concerns:
  - Strategic and policy consistency – How does the current issue fit into Government’s existing policy? Are changes warranted? Should Government continue with existing policy?
  - External reactions – How will external departments react to the proposed changes?
  - Existing obligations – Are there any existing obligations that can impact on policy changes?
  - Economic impact – What are the economic implications of the proposed changes?
  - Budgetary implications- What are the financial costs associated with the proposed changes?
  - Public support – What will be the broad Australian community response?
Example of critical analysis (excerpts from Bardach & Patashnik, 2016, Appendix A):

**Reducing consumption: More enforcement against higher-level dealers** (section focusses on 1st issue identified)

The first two bars in Figure A-1 represent enforcement approaches applied to a representative sample of all drug dealers arrested. Perhaps mandatory minimum sentences would be more cost-effective if they were restricted to somewhat higher level dealers. ...To approximate such a restriction, we limit the set of offenders analyzed to those who are prosecuted at the federal level and possess enough drugs to trigger a federal mandatory minimum sentence.

The results are shown in Figure A-3. [Description of what is in the graph]

As shown by the darker bars in Figure A-3, the consumption change achieved per million dollars spent on mandatory minimums is closer proportionally to that achieved through the other alternatives. [Further discussion of results] ... To the higher level dealers considered in this analysis, time in prison carries a greater cost, and amounts of cocaine and other assets seized through increased enforcement are also larger. Thus, risk compensation must be higher, and the higher resulting cocaine prices drive down consumption more. Nonetheless, at any given level of government, or against any given type of dealer, mandatory minimums are less cost-effective than conventional enforcement.

Why is that the case? ... [explanation, several paragraphs]

Long sentences could thus be a smart strategy if selectively applied. Unfortunately, because mandatory minimum sentences are triggered by quantity possessed and because those thresholds are low, they are not selectively applied to higher level dealers. ... [beginning of final paragraph in section]

**Reducing cocaine-related crime** (section focusses on 2nd issue)

etc.

Example of narrow vs broad focus (with justification of the narrow focus):

...mandatory minimums associated with drug crimes may also be viewed as means of achieving the nation's drug control objectives. ... We focus on cocaine, which many view as the most problematic drug in America today.

5. Recommendations/Conclusion

- Details changes needed to existing policy
- Makes definite and conclusive recommendations
- Includes as a list of practical steps/actions that need to be implemented
- Can be expressed in bullet points, eg.

  Recommendation 1: More funding for schools.
  a. More funding will help because...

  Recommendation 2: Better training for teachers.
  a. Improving training for teachers will address...

- Includes a concluding statement or paragraph that reiterates/justifies key message (ie policy position that was outlined in the executive summary) and highlights the importance of the proposed recommendations

Example of recommendations and conclusion:

While trade restrictions allowed some countries to prevent transmission of the rice crisis to their populations, domestic stability was achieved at the cost of destabilising the world market. It is very likely that the rice crisis would not have occurred if these measures had not been taken. Thus, one lesson from the rice crisis is to strengthen disciplines of the World Trade Organization so that export restrictions are used less frequently. Making trade restrictions less harmful offers an additional approach to stabilising the world rice market. An important step in this direction would be to make government policies more predictable. While many governments understandably want to maintain some flexibility in addressing sudden unforeseen events, some policy changes could be avoided. Others might be implemented according to pre-announced schedules or criteria in which changes are phased in automatically in response to external events.

6. Reference List

- Includes all sources used as evidence

7. General Tips for Written and visual communication

- Uses descriptive headings and sub-heading
- Uses figures, charts and diagrams to illustrate main point
- Uses clear, plain English and avoid technical or jargon language
- Is written succinctly but in completed sentences

POLICY BRIEF CHECKLIST

- Identified clear and specific issue
- Limited to one issue/problem
- Positioned this narrow focus into the wider policy area
- Identified target audience (e.g., decision-maker, advocacy group, media)
- Proposed outcomes are evidence-based
- Makes recommendations for the ‘real world’
- Written in plain English – Make sure you write in full sentences
- Proofread for spelling and grammar mistakes
- Included a reference list
- Chosen ONE particular and focussed aspect of either Health, Education or Welfare
- Focussed on federal policy settings in relation to your chosen area

REFERENCES


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