How to write a policy brief

This is a training tool developed by IDRC
Topics

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Planning your policy brief
What is a policy brief?

• A short document that presents the findings and recommendations of a research project to a non-specialized audience

• A medium for exploring an issue and distilling lessons learned from the research

• A vehicle for providing policy advice
Work within parameters

A policy brief is:

• A stand alone document
• Focused on a single topic
• No more than 2-4 pages (1,500 words)
Writing for your audience
Who are your readers?

Ask yourself:

• Who am I writing this brief for?
• How knowledgeable are they about the topic?
• How open are they to the message?
How can I reach readers?

• What questions need answers?
• What are their interests, concerns?
• What does it take to reach specific readers such as media, decision-makers?
Use the power of persuasion

• Answer the question “What value does this have for me?”
• Describe the urgency of the situation
• Speak in terms of benefits and advantages
Choosing Your Content
Apply a laser focus

• Focus on a single topic
• Define your purpose
• Identify salient points that support the aim
• Distil points to essential info
• Limit yourself to 1,500 words
Putting the brief together
Policy brief template

• Executive Summary
• Introduction
• Approach and Results
• Conclusion
• Implications and Recommendations
Lead with a short statement

The executive statement will:

• Distil the essence of the brief
• Provide an overview for busy readers
• Entice readers to go further
• Appear on cover or top of first page
• Be written last
Elephants are one of the big five wildlife species; their survival is one of the holy grails of conservation. Unfortunately, because of their size and migratory behaviour, elephants often come in contact with people. This is especially true in densely populated southeast Asia. A new study from Sri Lanka looks at one strategy to address this problem – electric fences.

Elephants and Electric Fences. A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005
Introduction

• Answers the question *why*
• Explains the significance/urgency of the issue
• Describes the research objective
• Gives overview of findings, conclusions
• Creates curiosity for the rest of brief
Approaches and results

• Provides summary of the facts
• Describes issue and context
• Describes research and analysis
• Should not be overly technical
• Highlight benefits, opportunities
Approaches

• Explains how study was conducted
• Relates who conducted study
• Describes relevant background
• Identifies method used to collect data
Results: what did we learn?

• Make content easy to follow
• Start by painting a general picture
• Move from general to specific
• Base conclusions on results
Example:

Do the Fences Work?

*Overall it was found that although the electric fencing does help...it is not capable of completely eliminating conflict. In each...area...technical as well as socio-economic factors affect....success. Technical failures mainly affected the early fences...Other problems resulted from failure to take into account elephant behaviour and distribution patterns.*

Elephants and Electric Fences.
A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005
Conclusion: what does it mean?

• Use section to interpret data
• Aim for concrete conclusions
• Express ideas using strong assertions
• Ensure ideas are balanced and defensible
• If hypothesis was abandoned, explain why
Example:

Overall, it was found that although electric fencing does help mitigate human elephant conflict, it is not capable of completely eliminating the conflict. A social factor that affected the success of electric fences was whether the local community supported the project in their area. Community support was critical in several ways.

Elephants and Electric Fences.  
A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005
Implications and recommendations

• Implications are what could happen
• Recommendations are what should happen
• Both flow from conclusion
• Both must be supported by evidence
Implications: if... then...

• Describe what the researcher thinks will be the consequences
• Less direct than recommendations
• Useful when advice not requested
• Softer approach but still can be persuasive
Recommendations: call to action

• Describe clearly what should happen next
• State as precise steps
• Ensure they are relevant, credible and feasible
Example:

A successful strategy to deal with the elephant problem must be much more far-reaching than it is at present. Such a strategy should include a comprehensive land use planning exercise where elephant habitats...are grouped and interconnected...The elephants’ habitat should then be enriched and fenced.

Elephants and Electric Fences.  
A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005
Designing the policy brief
Titles: add a little jazz

• Titles are a reference point
• Sub-titles break up text
• Both should entice readers
• Similar to headline writing
• Verb make them more dynamic
• Questions can pique curiosity
Sidebars can add extra depth

- Is extra to main discussion
- Is meant to “hook” reader
- Sidebars should be:
  - Short
  - Descriptive
  - Stimulating (ask questions)
  - Focused on action
Example:

Repair Bill Could Reach $250 Million

The Mozambique government estimates that it will cost $250 million to repair the damage from the cyclone and floods that struck Mozambique in February 2000. Early reports of the damage included the destruction of the following infrastructure: a key rail link used to bring in fuel and goods from Zimbabwe and South Africa; hundreds of kilometres of roads, which are fundamental to market reforms, among other things; electricity and telephone lines: more than 140 schools; and health centres.
Callouts

- Sentences or sentence fragments
- Printed in larger fonts
- Boxed or placed in margins
Example:

*Electric fences are not a “stand alone” solution.*
Bulleted lists

• Favour groups of 5 or 7
• Express completed thoughts
• Avoid tags (one or two word bullets)
Charts, photos, graphics

• Pie charts/bar graphs are better than tables
• Graphics simplify understanding
• Use captions to explain content
Check your work
Think ahead and look back

- Conduct a 20-second test: what stood out?
- Try to make it more user friendly
- Go on a jargon hunt
- Don’t overuse statistics
- Check arguments, proof, persuasion
- Build a Q and A package
Good luck writing your policy brief!