

How to Write User-friendly Policy Briefs?

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Srinivasa Madhur

Senior Economic Advisor

A Policy Brief (PB) is a concise write-up on an issue with a policy focus – current and future

- **The focus is on *policy* and *concise***
- **The write up should focus on 3 key questions:**
 - **What is the (policy) problem to be addressed?**
 - **Why change the current policy, and what are those changes?**
 - **How best to bring about the policy changes, or what are the options for the policy makers?**

A PB should be concise, yet understandable (length of the PB)

- **One size does not fit all; some customization needed**
- **Balancing standardization and customization – a challenge**
- **Know your reader/user of PB**
- **Some like it long, some like it short – difficult to measure ‘brevity’**
- **Attention span varies a great deal among PB users**
- **A wide range global benchmarks – 2 to 10 pages**
- **Different institutions follow different length limits**
- **Any suggestions for GDEFPB PBs, as we know our users well?**

A PB has to be evidence-based, not an advocacy piece or a newspaper column, but it is not a research or a typical journal article either

- **How to get the evidence? Mostly based on research and other knowledge products**
- **Drawn from existing research, own research, or both**
- **Based on evidence/experience from the country (or parts of the country) of focus or from other countries, or both**
- **Quantitative or qualitative; macro or micro**
- **Hard, research-based evidence could be supplemented by anecdotal evidence too**

Compression (or parsimony) is the name of the game in PB writing

- **Writing short and effective is more difficult than it seems**
- **Filtering the vast body of work that already exists on the subject is not easy**
- **The vast amount of writings, data, and other information on the internet – an opportunity as well as a challenge**
- **Separating the signal from the noise is both an objective and a subjective judgment call**
- **Keeping it short, simple, and sweet does make your PB very effective but be prepared to sweat it out, mentally if not physically!**

Prioritize the policy recommendations and avoid a long (shopping!) list of them

- **Try to frame three or four key messages from the PB first**
- **Further filter the messages until you reach one major message from the initial list.**
- **A process is similar to choosing one out of many applicants for a job**
- **As an economist, weigh in economic optimality, social desirability, administrative feasibility, and may be even political practicality – in your selection process**
- **Get to a one-line summary of the PB if you can**
- **It is possible – only a matter of exercising one's mental faculties, or using one's mental filter well**

PB language should not be technical and academic, but professional

- **Minimize technical jargons, if not avoid them altogether**
- **Keep the paragraphs short and of somewhat similar length across the PB**
- **Avoid repetition as much as you can**
- **Use short title for the PB and use only a few short subtitles**
- **Some like a 'matter of fact' language, others a little more artistic/colorful language – with adjectives and words that rhythm**

Different thought-organizing methods are available - top-down or build up, frontload or backload policy recommendations

- **Some prefer to build-up the conclusion, while others use a top-down process**
- **Journalistic style - place the major conclusions and policy recommendations first and then the more detailed analysis**
- **More serious researcher style follows the reverse order**
- **Some have a bullet highlight/key message first followed by the main body of the PB in each paragraph**

No definitive views on citations, sources-mentioning, or having figures, charts, and tables – Choose one out of the many methods to madness!

- **Some use a reference list and cite them in the text, although use a limited number of references**
- **Some do not cite any references in the text but do give a list of further readings kind of list**
- **Some place a few figures, or tables, or charts in the text, some avoid it, others have them in an annexure**
- **Some use boxes, sidebars, infographics, and other eye-catching pictures etc.**

Writing effective PBs is thus both a science and an art!

- **Research and logical thinking are the fundamentals of any scientific exercise such as writing a PB**
- **Yet, the ‘power of logical idea’s in a PB could be enhanced by the writer’s ‘power of persuasion’**
- **Some even recommend using a somewhat emotional tone in writing policy-relevant writings to get better outcomes**
- **Guidelines on writing an effective PB are very useful but there is enough ‘freedom to choose’ for the author(s) too.**

But remember the following

- **PB is a great communication tool that bridges the gap between ‘knowledge’ and ‘policy’**
- **Yet, like all other communication tools, it works for those who work at it!**
- **There is no substitute for hard work and regular practice**
- **To be an effective writer, one has to be a voracious reader**
- **Indeed, as a saying goes - in the initial years of one’s life one ‘learns to read’ and during the rest of one’s life one ‘reads to learn’**
- **So, be prepared to ‘read to learn’ if you are serious about writing user-friendly PBs!**