

24. Policy Papers

With the policy audience in mind the LGI / Urban Institute have developed a series of guidelines for writing effective policy briefs. Many of the lessons are applicable to developing report summaries, seminar content or web-copy on issues. A policy paper is defined as a problem-oriented, value-driven communication tool designed to aid decision-making. Whether targeting other policy specialists or decision-makers, the purpose of the policy paper is:

‘to provide a comprehensive and persuasive argument justifying the policy recommendations presented in the paper and therefore, to act as a decision-making tool and a call to action for the target audience.’

Box 8: Purpose of a policy paper

A good policy paper should:

- define and detail an urgent policy issue within the current policy framework which needs to be addressed;
- outline the possible ways (policy alternatives) in which this issue can be addressed;
- provide an evaluation of the probable outcomes of these options based on an outlined framework of analysis and the evidence from the current policy framework;
- choose a preferred alternative (policy recommendation) and provide a strong argument to establish why your choice is the best possible policy option.

Sources: Writing Effective Public Policy Papers, A Guide for Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe Eóin Young and Lisa Quinn

The policy paper is considerably different from a traditional academic paper, in that the findings of the research must be applied to the issue in question and used to argue for a specific set of recommendations to address the problem. In fact, Bardach (1996) points out that one of the most common errors that policy paper writers make is to try to include all the data and knowledge produced in the research process. The omission of all counter-posing perspectives, as one might see in an academic essay, is a central dilemma for the evolution of think tanks.

Central to any policy paper is the problem-solution relationship and the writer needs to find a balance between two competing factors: (i) the need to provide a comprehensive problem description and discussion of the available policy options within the current policy framework, which may also include the results of the writer’s primary research, so that the outlined position seems credible and allows for informed evaluation; and (ii) the need to present this in a way that only the relevant knowledge and data necessary as evidence to support the argument is included.

This does however present a dilemma:

‘The idea of the policy paper as a value-driven argument rather than a piece of cold objectivity is another major difference between the policy paper and traditional academic papers. In your paper, there is a necessity to recommend practical solutions for real-world problems to a broad and highly politicised audience. While based on rigorous analysis, there is therefore an evident need for you as the policy specialist to take a position on what you feel would produce the best possible outcome to the problem discussed. Hence, the normative aspect of your decision-making and evaluative process is also a key element of the policy paper.’ (Young and Quinn)

This is an issue that is core to how think tanks operate, and how they position themselves between academia and campaigning or lobbying, as discussed in the introduction.