

Tips and Hints: Writing an ODI Briefing Paper

ODI Briefing Papers provide a short and snappy summary of the key findings and conclusions of ODI research. They're meant to be accessible and relevant to a wide audience, including academics, policy-makers, practitioners, journalists and students. They should be easily readable by someone in a hurry – in ten minutes, say – should make sense to an intelligent non-specialist and should make a worthwhile contribution to the subject. They're also quite tricky to write, hence this short, four-step guide.

Choosing your subject

Not every research subject merits or suits a Briefing Paper: some research topics may be too complex to be tackled in this way, or too specialised to appeal to the range of audience we're trying to reach. Your ideal subject will be:

- tightly defined (you won't solve world poverty in 3,000 words, for example, but you might be able to say something useful about the links between HIV/AIDS and conflict in Africa);
- of relatively broad interest;
- topical and relevant; and
- with concrete implications for aid policy and practice.

What to put in, and what to leave out

The short length of ODI Briefing Papers means that, at the outset, you need to decide what to put in, and what to leave out. Be ruthless. Ask yourself what's really essential, and what's not:

- What are the key components of my research?
- What's new, and what's not?
- What examples or case studies must I include to support my points?
- What evidence must I present to make my conclusions and recommendations authoritative and credible?
- How much background information or context is necessary to make what I'm saying intelligible to a non-specialist?

Organising your material

Every Briefing Paper has the same basic structure:

- A title.
- A byline.
- A concise statement of topic and argument, which should aim both to inform your reader of what the Briefing Paper is about, and entice them into reading it.
- A body text.
- A set of conclusions and/or policy recommendations.

In addition, your paper may or may not include a set of key points, boxed text, figures, images, endnotes and suggestions for further reading. Whether it does so depends on your subject, the availability of material and space.

Within this, you need to plan how to organise your material. The aim is to achieve a simple, logical and progressive line of argument, leading up to a final section of conclusions or recommendations. A typical argument might begin with a statement of the problem, an explanation of why the problem exists and recommendations for addressing it, based on the findings of your research. It might help to think in terms of subheads and paragraphs:

- Use subheads to signpost key points in your text: to highlight a key research question or finding, for example, or to help people follow a change or transition in your argument. Keep subheads short, and use them sparingly.
- Use paragraphs to build your argument and give it forward movement. The ideal paragraph starts with a topic statement, like this: 'The foregoing analysis shows that a new approach to poverty reduction is required'. It then goes on to develop the idea, in this case perhaps explaining what this new approach might be. The next paragraph then picks up the baton; in this example, the topic sentence might look like this: 'These changes require a fundamental reform of the aid architecture'. And so on. Keep your paragraphs short, but be wary of fragmenting your text with an abundance of them.

Writing your Briefing Paper: tone and style

Your tone is important. You should aim to be authoritative, credible, judicious and measured. Try to be decisive and conclusive as far as your facts allow: hedge your bets only if you feel you must, and avoid lengthy caveats to your conclusions if you can. Avoid opinion or advocacy.

You're aiming for a style that's fresh, direct and engaging: you don't have many words to play with, so all of them have to count. This doesn't mean being casual, imprecise or colloquial – avoid pronouns and verbal contractions, for example, and try not to start sentences with ands or buts.

Some tips:

- Remember that some of your readers will not have English as a first language, so try to write clearly, directly and simply. Avoid puns, aphorisms, acronyms and idioms like the plague.
- Keep your words and your sentences short, and avoid complex sentence structures with multiple subordinate clauses. Ideally, each sentence should convey a single idea, not many.
- Use active verbs, not passive ones.
- Try to make positive statements, not negative ones: we want to know what your research tells us, not what it doesn't.
- No jargon unless you really can't avoid it. If you must use it, explain what it means.
- Avoid references if you can. If you have to cite other works, do so in endnotes, not Harvard-like systems.