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## Writing a policy brief: tips for beginners

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### **What is a policy brief?**

Virtually every major policy institute in the EU has the same calling card: a strong series of policy briefs – the two-page papers that concisely describe an international problem and propose some kind of solution.

To put this another way: despite the wealth of new communications technologies which allow policy analysts to get their ideas across, not to mention the sheer variety of think-tanks across Europe, policy analysts are using much the same format as they did fifty years ago. Today's analysts apparently still find the short briefing the best means to build relations with their target audience in Brussels, to prove that they understand the issues at hand, that they are capable of bringing them to the attention of a broader audience and that they have ideas to improve policy.

It is often said that a good think-tanker can mix a range of skills – he or she will be part investigative journalist, part academic, part technical expert and part diplomat. A good policy brief will sit at the intersection of these various professions.

Here are some broad guidelines worth knowing.

### **The golden rule.**

Graduates are often drawn to policy analysis because they have strong opinions and wish to express them. They never get very far: this job requires good ideas and analysis, and that in turn takes an ability to empathise with policymakers. To be successful you will need to suppress your own political and normative leanings. After all, writing for a think tank is a professional discipline, like any other. Learn to keep yourself and your opinions under control, and you will have a huge advantage over other young people starting out in this career.

### **Choose a good topic and structure.**

The basics: an average policy brief will probably be around 1,200 words long or about two pages. It will consist of a short introduction of 4-5 sentences, which will signal the overall



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structure and argument (but not in a programmatic way – avoid sentences like “first, I will explore x, then I will argue y”). Next, in the main body of the text, you will set out the policy problem under a few sub-headings. In the closing 300-400 words, you will usually propose a policy solution or simply suggest a new way of looking at the problem.

The obvious challenge here is to choose a topic small enough to fit into this short format. It helps if you have an idea for the policy solution before you start writing. You can then ‘work backwards’, tailoring your description of the problem to suit. If you are writing about the EU, choosing a topic will be quite straightforward: policy discussions are easy to follow, and the available solutions are often clear. If you are looking at a big problem of international relations, finding a solution is often harder, and you should probably confine yourself to highlighting a new way of looking at a dilemma.

### **Appeal to your reader.**

You are writing this policy brief not for yourself or as a means to get some opinion off your chest, but for your reader. Picture your reader at every step of the writing process: what is it that he or she wants from this policy brief? Hint: in this line of work, your target reader will probably be a mid-level desk officer in the European Commission or a diplomat in one of the member-state permanent representations in Brussels. Be aware that these people are busy, and are far better informed than you are.

That means you need to keep the policy brief simple. A busy person will be put off by a flowery opening. Avoid making normative pronouncements (“the EU should do x...”). This only ends up alienating your reader. But, equally, do not approach this with an inferiority complex. If you respect your reader, they will respect you. Your reader does not want to be impressed by your mastery of jargon – so don’t try to prove that you are an insider in that way. Try to show, instead, that you understand the policy problem, and that you are capable of communicating it to a wide audience.

### **Polish it up.**

The writing process as I have described it may sound rather colourless, with little room for playfulness. But that’s not so. There is plenty of space to be creative, both in the policy proposals you present and the way you do it. It’s just that you need to get the basics right first. When you think you have a good first draft finished, then you can start refining the text, and adding nice elements. A good policy brief will have a narrative arc, for example, like any story: set out the main protagonists and their interests at the beginning, highlight the problem they face and then resolve it.

But first things first: make sure the basics *are* right. Get some feedback from someone who does not know the topic, and see if they understand it. Read the text out loud to yourself, and see if it flows properly. Break up long paragraphs and sentences, and avoid the passive tense. Another tip is to ‘kill your darlings’: go back to those bits of the text which you really wanted to put in there, and ask yourself whether they actually fit after all. Very often, you will find that you have shoehorned in a favourite idea unnecessarily.



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### **Think about dissemination.**

Many writers think that, as soon as they have finished their paper and it has gone to print, then that is job done. In fact, your work as a writer has only just begun. Millions of words are written about the EU every day. To ensure yours are read by the right people – or indeed by anyone at all - you need to think about how to disseminate your text. Indeed, you need to think about dissemination from the very start of the writing process. Ask yourself from the outset: how can I write this brief so that it is easily spread?

The obvious rule, again, is to keep things simple. Avoid word-plays in your title, for instance. Nobody these days has time to decode the meaning of your text. If you are exploring how the EU can address its problems with youth unemployment, then call the brief “Five ways the EU can address youth unemployment”. Beyond that, why not add a diagram or a table that will make the text visually interesting and could be put in a tweet? And be sure to name-check some of the other people writing in your chosen field, so they have reason to engage with you.

### **A last tip.**

In writing this brief, you are trying to solve a policy problem. That’s the task. But you are also trying to solve an unemployment problem – your own. So why not use the writing process as a means to find a job? Make sure you’re writing about a field in which you would like to work. See if you can go and interview people who might be in a position to employ you later on. Be sure to send it to them afterwards. Oh, and remember to showcase your skills and talents like you would in any other job application.

#### **Some examples?**

For examples of policy briefs written in the more journalistic style, take a look at the Centre for European Reform or Carnegie Europe. For examples of the more academic style, look at *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* or Clingendael. For the more technical approaches, look at Bruegel or Bertelsmann. Amongst TEPSA’s members you will find many strong national models, be it IAI (Rome), NUPI (Oslo) or DIIS (Copenhagen).