

Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief

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As indicated on the syllabus, you have the option of writing either a conventional research paper or a policy brief. Both options require extensive research and thoughtful synthesis of primary and secondary sources. A policy brief, however, requires **succinct consideration of policy options for a particular audience** (e.g., officials, bureaucrats, politicians, development practitioners, donors). This means that the format will also be different. Some might say that a policy brief is more “professional” because it is geared towards readers who have a limited amount of time to make a practical decision, while a research paper is more “academic” because it pays more attention to the scholarly roots of particular arguments and judges their merit on intellectual and logical criteria. **If you intend to pursue a career in public policy or international development—or merely wish to experiment with a different medium of research and writing—then consider writing a policy brief for this seminar.**

Components of a Policy Brief

Please use the following nine components as guidelines for phrasing the sub-headings in the brief.

1. Executive Summary: This should be a short summary (approx. 150 words) of the purpose of the brief and its recommendations. It typically appears single-spaced on the cover of a brief or position paper. [Because you are not really writing this brief as part of your job, **please indicate in an additional sentence the audience for whom the brief is intended**, e.g., a particular NGO, government agency, legislator/politician, branch of an international organization. Be as specific as possible. Assume that someone beyond Homewood would appreciate your research and recommendations, and this assignment may turn into a ticket for an internship or full-time employment upon graduation.]

2. Statement of the Issue/Problem: Phrase the topic as a question that requires a decision. This can be as short as one question. Here are a few examples:

- **What role** can the *{any political, social, religious organization of your choice}* play in enhancing the *{political/economic/social}* status of *{any disadvantaged group of your choice}*?

- **Should** *{any organization/government of your choice}* provide humanitarian assistance to people in the *{any war zone/natural disaster situation of your choice}*?

- **How should** *{any country or region of your choice}* respond to the investment interest of *{any multinational corporation or financial institution of your choice}*?

- **Who should** take the responsibility for *{fixing any development problem of your choice}*?

- **When should** *{any country/organization of your choice}* decide to intervene in *{any development problem/crisis of your choice}*?

If you are interested in a particular topic and find yourself wanting to ask a **why** question, then it is probably better suited for an academic research paper rather than a policy brief. **In any case, I encourage you to consult with me about both the substance of your topic and the format that you choose to pursue.**

NOTE: Given that this is a seminar on international development, **please do not choose a topic of**

purely domestic (US) concern. Topics regarding US intervention elsewhere, however, are acceptable.

3. Background (of the problem): Include only the essential facts that a decision maker “needs to know” to understand the context of the problem. Assume that you have been hired to filter through reams of information on behalf of a very busy and sleep-deprived person. **Be clear, precise, and succinct.**

4. Statement of your organization’s interests in the issue: This is meant to remind the reader of why the issue matters for the country/group/organization that you are advising. If, for example, you were the National Security Advisor for the US, then it would be appropriate to review the US’s geostrategic, economic, or humanitarian interest in the problem at hand.

5. Pre-existing Policies: This summarizes what has been done (by others and the entity that you represent) about the problem thus far. Depending on your topic, some of the information may have already been presented in #3 (e.g., perhaps the problem itself stems from some other country or organization’s intervention). The objective of this section is to inform the reader of policy options that have already been pursued, if any. Note that the absence of action may be considered a policy decision.

6. Policy Options: This section delineates the possible courses of action or inaction that your organization may pursue. Please provide the decision maker with *at least three potential courses of action*. Some of them may be wildly unrealistic in your opinion, but please pose them as policy options nonetheless. At the same time, it would not be prudent to overwhelm the decision maker with too many choices. I would *cap the menu of options at five choices*--just think of how hard it is to choose your courses each semester.

7. Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Policy Option: Write this section from the perspective of the entity that you represent. For clarity, you may present the pros and cons of the options in bullet points or outline format. This may seem like stacking the deck since some options may have only one advantage and several downsides, but it isn’t always that obvious. For instance, one measly advantage may conform most fully with the interests of the organization summarized in #4. It is up to you to advise the decision maker if it is worth it.

8. Your Recommendation: After prioritizing the relative pros and cons of the above options, please recommend one option to your employer. Yes, this may require going out on a limb on an extremely complex issue that challenges your ethical instincts. But if you have agreed to advise a particular country/organization/person, then you will be asked to make a recommendation on their behalf.

9. Sources Consulted or Recommended: This is essentially an *annotated bibliography* in the event that the decision maker has the interest and time to read up on a specific issue. Please provide a one to three sentence description and evaluation of each source listed in this section. Aside from standard books and articles, on-line sources and personal interviews may be cited. Please see me if you have any questions about the acceptability of your research materials.

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