



Writing Policy Briefs & Reports

Overview, Tips, & Resources



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An Introduction to Policy Writing

Policy writing is intended to deliver content in a manner that is concise, specific, objective, persuasive, and focussed on practical decision making. Compared to academic writing it contains little to no theory and is instead focussed on (1) providing only necessary details—background, evidence, facts, and key logic; and (2) giving feasible solutions or recommendations for the problem at hand. Ideally, policy writing takes a neutral tone; this does not preclude taking a stance on the issue but demands that the issue is considered from as many perspectives as possible and that multiple solutions reflecting different views on the issue are offered.

What qualifies someone to be a politician in Canada? They must be:

- a Canadian citizen,
- 18 years old,
- not currently imprisoned,
- free from conviction of a crime in the last 5 years (7 years if the crime was corruption).

With only these broad criteria politicians come from diverse backgrounds, education levels, and occupations. Policy briefs and reports are typically prepared for politicians and, therefore, must be written for a general audience.

The focal audience for policy reports are politicians or other decision makers and reports should cater to this audience.

Politicians can come from any walk of life and thus policy writing must be general and should: avoid academic wording and jargon, assume no prior understanding, and distill issue complexity. Policy writing requires you to walk the line between summarizing essential detail simply and ensuring necessary complexity is included. It should not dumb down the issue but it should not get into every nuance either; in other words, it should state only what is absolutely necessary to understand the issue and the solutions presented. This may seem daunting but as Albert Einstein said “if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”

The goal of this guide is to introduce you to what policy writing is, explaining how it differs from academic writing in general, and to provide you with tips and resources that will help you become an effective policy writer. I’ll begin by providing an overview of how policy writing differs from the academic writing you are more familiar with. This will be followed by sections on tips for writing for a broad audience and tips for making a persuasive argument. This guide will conclude with a works cited section where you can also find further resources to help you. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at:

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Overview of Policy Briefs & Reports

Academic versus Policy Writing

Formal academic writing is traditionally meant to provide an objective analysis of information. In academic writing you may take a stance and typically your stance is one particular view-point (i.e. your thesis). This viewpoint is then corroborated with evidence and logic that is derived from prior literature and, often, new analysis of data. Academic writing takes the structure of:

Introduction: Presentation of research question, overview of paper structure and content, and presentation of thesis.

Literature Review: Typically this section makes up the bulk of the paper. It gives an overview of prior research that is presented in light of the thesis. As part of the literature review the author engages existing theory and concepts. The literature review in academic writing may also consider the historical development of ideas.

Analysis: The analysis section of academic work is where the author explicitly argues their thesis to the reader. Depending on the level of academia—for example, undergraduate versus graduate or professional academic writing—this may include analysis of new data or a new analysis of existing data that supports the author’s thesis. Alternatively, when data is not analyzed in this section, the author argues their thesis using logic and by presenting a new way of understanding an issue or, at the very least, a modification of an existing understanding. The goal then is to change or further our understanding of an issue. Little concern is often given to the practical implications of this new understanding but this may vary depending on the author and the topic of the paper.

Conclusion: The author summarizes what has been said and, by doing so, reinforces what the reader has been presented with.

Compared to academic work, policy writing is focussed on practical problem solving. In other words, instead of proving a thesis as is done in academic writing, policy writing takes as

its goal providing specific and feasible solutions to an issue of relevance. An issue of relevance is anything for which a practical and feasible solution can be provided. For example, how to lower rates of depression or how to reduce violent crime rates are issues relevant to policy. On the other hand, how Marxism can be modified to better understand modern capitalism or which theory—structural functionalism versus rational choice theory—helps us better understand deviance are issues relevant to academic but not policy writing. In this way, policy writing is grounded in solutions versus in moving knowledge forward. It is concerned with summarizing and applying what we know to solve specific problems versus trying to better understand the world.

Take cancer rates as another example. Policy writing would summarize what studies on cancer have found and make specific recommendations for how government or other authoritative bodies (for example, health boards) could reduce cancer rates. Academic writing would instead endeavor to expand our understanding of cancer by applying or developing new theories or by doing novel analysis that sheds new light on why cancer occurs. Another way to think of this is the difference between writing a recipe for a specific food like pizza (akin to policy writing) versus experimenting with new combinations of ingredients, trying to create fusion food—maybe trying to integrate flavours from Egyptian cuisine into pizza, or experimenting with different methods of cooking pizza—for example, woodfire versus conventional oven—and testing which is preferred (akin to academic writing). This distinction glosses over variations in both policy and academic writing as often the boundaries between the two are blurred by some authors, but this distinction is a good way to think of the primary difference between the two approaches.

Other differences in academic versus policy writing include:

- Academic writing can more safely assume area expertise and a high education level of its audience whereas policy writing must be prepared for a broader audience from any background, education level, or occupation. This means it must be written more simply with ideas and word choice reflecting this goal.
- The difference in goals—furthering understanding versus providing solutions—also means policy writing must target multiple audiences with varying perspectives. In other words, policy writing must actively engage different political perspectives to a greater degree than academic writing, which is typically not at all concerned with politics. For example, if a policy brief or report is written for government the

audience will differ in political perspective. Good policy writing will engage all audiences by giving a neutral overview of the problem and by recommending more than one solution that reflect the differences in political perspectives (for example, all solutions offered shouldn't necessitate a great amount of new expenditure and thus require the government to raise taxes as this runs counter to general conservative ideology).

- The length of academic versus policy writing also typically differs with policy writing being much shorter. Thus, the need to be concise and to stay focussed on a specific issue increases. If academic writing is like watching a movie, policy writing is like figuring out how to convey the essence of the movie in 10 minutes, proposing different kinds of improvements that could be made, and recommending one improvement that is the best and most feasible.

The structure of policy is different than academic writing, which reflects the difference in goals and length. Policy writing typically takes the structure of:

Introduction: Presentation of issue and overview of paper structure and content.

Literature Review: Typically much shorter for policy versus academic writing. It gives an overview of only essential information and is more neutral in perspective. Contains little to no engagement with existing theory and concepts except to show the different ways the issue can be understood. Little to no concern for historical perspective.

Analysis: There is no emphasis on analyzing new data or presenting a new way of understanding the issue. Instead this discussion focusses on why the status quo is not working and why a new policy is needed.

Policy solutions: Compared to academic writing there is much greater emphasis on providing solutions. This includes an emphasis on the feasibility of the recommendations and, as part of this, on the consequences different recommendations have for different stakeholders (more on this later). In other words, when discussing the different solutions focus on the advantages and limitations of each. Typically a few solutions that represent different political perspectives are provided—some may be new, some may come from other regions, and some may be solutions that have been suggested but not yet

implemented. You should often also consider here the short and long-term effects of the different policy solutions.

Recommendations: As the author you provide which policy solution you recommend as well as an argument for why this solution is more preferable than the others. This recommendation should be specific and you should give precise instructions on how it could be implemented. Remember as well that feasibility matters for policy so the recommendation you make may not be the most ideal solution and instead might be the best feasible solution.

Conclusion: The author summarizes what has been said and, by doing so, reinforces what the reader has been presented with.

Remember that policy writing is done with the goal of aiding policy decisions versus furthering knowledge; the difference in structure emphasizes this difference in goals. Remember also that politicians and other decision makers are often busy and need to have information delivered as succinctly and clearly as possible. For this reason, policy writing often also includes an executive summary at the very beginning. This summary mimics an academic abstract but is typically longer and provides a more detailed summary of key information and recommendations. An executive summary allows an individual with time constraints to read a succinct description of the important information. Check your assignment guidelines to see if an executive summary is required.

Table 1: Summary of Academic versus Policy Writing Differences

	Academic Writing	Policy Writing
Goal	Improve knowledge and understanding of an issue.	Provide practical and feasible solutions to an issue.
Literature Review	Includes discussion of concepts and theories as a way to understand the problem or issue.	Little to no discussion of history, concepts, and theories. Focused instead on general understanding of the problem or issue.
Analysis	Shows how the author has furthered our understanding of the issue.	Shows why the status quo is not working.

Policy solutions and recommendations	Often not included.	Comprises the majority of the document. Outlines numerous solutions that reflect different political orientations and makes a recommendation for which solution is best.
Audience	Other academics typically from the same subject or field.	Anyone that may have concern about an issue or have say over policy.
Length	Longer (academic articles are typically 25 pages, undergraduate essays typically range from 6-20 pages).	Shorter (policy reports are typically 10 pages; policy briefs are typically 2-4 pages).
Paper Begins with...	An abstract (typically between 150-250 words).	An executive summary (length depends on the length of the report but typically between 1-4 pages).
Formatting	Formal and plain.	<p>Attempts made to make policy writing appealing. For your purposes this may include using short paragraphs, including headings and subheadings if helpful, and thinking of a clever title.</p> <p>In general, policy writing is also designed to be more visually appealing through looser font restrictions, inclusion of more visual aids (graphs, table, pictures, etc.), and a colour theme or other visual supplements (for example, the blue columns included in this guide on each page). In this way policy documents often are in a middle ground between plain academic work and magazine articles.</p>

TIPS: Writing for a Broad Audience

Avoid Complex Word Choice

It is not unorthodox for academic entities to adopt exceptional and/or baroque parlance to disseminate content. The ambition of this method may comprise: (1) to manifest discernment of acumen and avoid appearing embryonic through use of mundane vernacular, which is intermittently inferred to be an accession of the discourse's potency; and/or (2) to obfuscate paltry composition and inquiry quintessence with shrewd diction. Such prose is nefarious in any locality but is an immeasurably egregious method in policy writing. At best, this proceeding will encourage quiescent or inert reading by the average person and, at worst, will create reader animus or leave them enervated. The pith of author intent should be comprehensive conversance attained through lucid diction. Writing with grandiloquent diction hinders reader cognizance and comes off as vainglorious and pompous.

What do you think of the prior paragraph? If my job as the author of this guide is to communicate my message clearly did I accomplish this? Let me state the same content in another way, this time using simple word choice:

Sometimes in academia people use uncommon and/or big words to make their point. The reasons for this are: (1) to convey intelligence and avoid seeming simple through use of common language, which may be seen as supporting the argument's effectiveness; and/or (2) to confuse the reader and thereby hide a weak structure or argument behind sophisticated word choice. Writing this way is problematic in any circumstance but is particularly bad practice in policy writing. At best this practice leads to inactive reading by the average person and, at worst, it creates hostility and leaves the reader exhausted. An authors main goal should be full understanding accomplished through clear word choice. Writing with complex words deters reader understanding and comes off as boastful and snobbish.

Remember that your goal in any writing you do is *always* to have the reader understand what you are trying to tell them. Convey your intelligence with a clear, well thought out argument instead of with complex word choice. You don't want your style of writing to be exclusionary in any way; you always want it to be as applicable to a general audience as possible. This is especially important for policy writing as the audience is broader than that of academic writing.

Avoid Jargon

The definition of jargon is *special words or expressions used by a particular profession or group that are difficult for others to understand*. Complex word choice, as discussed above, is almost never justifiable—things should be put as simply as they can. Jargon, however, does have practical use. By using a single word to summarize complex ideas the author actually writes more concisely and, as long as the readers understands this word, no comprehension is lost. For example, Marxism helps explain the existence of labour unions. This sentence is most likely understood by any sociologist as Marxism is a known basic theoretical orientation—capitalists who own the means of production and workers who don't are engaged in a constant process of exploitation and resistance. If my audience is sociologists I can proceed with the use of such jargon. Another example of jargon use is in text messages: Lol (laugh out loud), ttyl (talk to you later), imho (in my honest opinion), etc. Again, these effectively improve how concise messages are but they are only effective if the reader understands them. In other words, jargon sometimes is justifiable in its use, particularly when the audience is a type of in-group—in-group being jargon for members of a group that share a common trait.

Jargon has two basic problems. First, it assumes a common understanding of the word or concept, which more often can vary in its interpretation. For example, there are various understandings of Marxism that would differ in how much they agree with the statement: “Marxism helps explain the existence of labour unions.” For this reason, when you use jargon even when writing for an in-group, such as sociologists, it is often best to define what you mean when using a concept. This is typically done the first time it appears in your paper. The second problem with jargon use is it is exclusionary. As with complex word choice, when using jargon you limit your audience to those who are familiar with it. When writing for a broad audience, as is the case with policy writing, it is therefore best to avoid any use of jargon. If you feel you must use some jargon then ensure you provide a definition either in the body of the text or as a footnote.



Being as Concise as Possible & Editing Effectively:

Being concise in your writing takes practice but, moreso, it takes effective and thorough editing. Very few can be concise as they write and trying to do so will slow down the writing process tremendously. It is far more effective to make writing concise through the editing process. To edit concisely read each sentence and ask yourself “could this be said in fewer words?” Then read each paragraph and ask if each sentence is necessary and whether some can be combined in a way that reduces the number of words used. Finally, read the report as a whole and ask whether it makes logical sense and whether any sections are repetitive and could be combined.

Editing is best done after a few days away from the text; in other words, ideally you finish early enough to take a few days off and away from the work before trying to edit it. Taking time between editing and writing helps to avoid problems related to familiarity. If you attempt to edit immediately after you finish writing you may be deceived into thinking your writing makes sense not because of what it says but because you know what you intended to say. By taking time away before editing you will be less familiar with the work and will read it in a similar way to how a reader encountering it for the first time would. It is also good to take time away between writing and editing to ensure you are not attached to the work. Often writers report not wanting to delete content they invested time in regardless of how irrelevant it may be. If content does not fit well or is repetitive it should be deleted regardless of the time invested in it and writers are more likely to delete content after spending time away from their work.

Editing improves the clarity of your writing and it eliminates unavoidable and common spelling and grammar mistakes as well as awkward phrasings. It is vital to eliminate spelling and grammar mistakes as they immediately tarnish the credibility of the author and make the writing seem less professional. Some basic tips for editing include reading the work out loud and printing the work out versus trying to edit on a computer screen. Some further things to watch for while editing include: ensuring you are using the present tense, watching for repetition in different sections of your argument, and ensuring you backed up all claims with logic and evidence. Remember that you never want your reader to feel as if you’ve wasted their time; by editing effectively and focussing on being concise you will ensure your reader does not experience that frustration.

If you want further and more detailed advice on editing I recommend the following sources:

1. <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study-guides-pdfs/dissertation-skills-pdfs/art%20of%20editing.pdf>
2. https://lib.fit.edu/instruction/documents/guide-to-editing-and-proofreading_University%20of%20Oxford.pdf
3. <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/revising-and-editing/>

TIPS: Making a Persuasive Argument

Maximizing Accuracy

Policy writing must be based on the most up-to-date and recent information possible. It will ideally present a holistic and complete picture of the issue. The extent to which this applies to your policy writing will depend on the assignment guidelines (for example, how many sources you are required to have and where they must be from) but ensure the sources you choose give you a good overall understanding of the issue you are considering. Often it is valuable for policy writing to go beyond academic articles and to consider more general sources such as media articles or policy reports written by government agencies or research groups. In particular, getting information from sources with different political views will help you anticipate how each side of the political spectrum views an issue—for example, the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/>) is a prominent left-leaning think tank and the Fraser Institute (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/>) is a prominent Canadian right leaning think tank both of which publish reports and can serve as a source of less-objective perspectives. Considering diverse sources will aid in giving a full and thorough overview of the issue.

Stay Focussed:

Policy writing is typically much shorter than traditional academic writing. Thus, it is vital you stay focussed and ensure everything included is necessary for the reader to understand the issue and the solutions you present. Staying focussed is important in any writing but it must be worked into every aspect of your policy writing. Word choice and writing style should focus on being concise, the structure used should maximize understanding, and only the most viable and feasible policy solutions should be presented. When you edit ask yourself after each sentence: “What does this contribute? Is this necessary for the argument or would the reader be fine without knowing it?” You must be ruthless when you edit policy writing.

Consider all Stakeholders:

A stakeholder is anyone directly affected by the policy options and recommendations considered. Not all stakeholders are equal and some will be more invested in or affected by the recommendations than others. It is vital to identify all the relevant stakeholders your issue applies to and to also consider what their interests or preferences might be. For example, when considering student debt policy some of the stakeholders include:

- **universities and colleges**—students' ability to pay for their education directly effects the tuition rates that can be charged and how many people have the financial resources necessary to attend university or college.
- **provincial and federal government**—it is government resources that will or will not be used and, ultimately, student debt policy is a government decision;
- **political parties and individual politicians**—the stance they take may affect their voter appeal;
- **university and college students**—directly affected by access to and terms of student loan policy;
- **taxpayers**—it is tax dollars that are used to fund student loan programs;
- **private financial institutions such as banks**—most banks offer their own types of student loans and take up of those loans will depend on government student loan policy such as who has access to public loans and how much they have access to.

In order to make an effective argument and present the advantages and disadvantages of the various policy options, you must consider all of the stakeholders or players that are involved in and affected by the policy. Different policy options often have different implications for different stakeholders—put another way, the winners and losers of each policy option will vary. When presenting policy options this is something that should be considered and discussed in order to show that you have thoroughly thought through what's at stake for relevant institutions and individuals. Doing this will lend credibility to your argument and the policy recommendation you make.

Other Resources & Works Cited

How to Write a Policy Recommendation prepared by Susan Doyle, University of Victoria.
<https://web.uvic.ca/~sdoyle/E302/Notes/Policy%20Recommendation.html>

“How to Write a Policy Brief” by the International Development Research Center.
<https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf>

“Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief”. Good general overview and practical advice for writing policy briefs.
http://anciensite.pep-net.org/fileadmin/medias/pdf/CBMS_country_proj_profiles/Philippines/CBMS_forms/Guidelines_for_Writing_a_Policy_Brief.pdf

Video on “The and Craft of Policy Briefs: Translating Science and Engaging Stakeholder” prepared by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.
https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/womens-and-childrens-health-policy-center/de/policy_brief/video

“Writing Policy Briefs” prepared by the writing center of University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.
<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/policy-briefs/>

“Tips for Writing Policy Papers” prepared by Stanford Law School.
Good general advice as well as some specific evaluative tools that you may find helpful to guide your analysis (PEST and SWOT): <https://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/White-Papers-Guidelines.pdf>

“Policy Briefs Described”
<http://blog.lrei.org/tmurphy/files/2009/11/PolicyBrief-described.pdf>

Other resources they may find helpful:

Researchtoaction.org Guide to writing policy briefs:
<https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf>

A very general overview of writing effective policy briefs:
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>

A specific course guideline to preparing a Policy Issue Brief (not all is relevant as it is course specific but does contain some good general advice as well):
https://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301_fre1/IBInstructions_fa02.PDF