



WRITING FOR A POLICY AUDIENCE

This is a guide for researchers and others in academia on writing for a policy audience.

That could include people in government departments, third sector organisations, campaign groups, business, think tanks, members of parliament, parliamentary bodies, public service providers or umbrella organisations.

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Why do we need this guide?

Many audiences will be interested in understanding research findings, and in using them to shape their thinking and decision-making, or to influence policy and practice. However, they are unlikely to read academic papers, and may not be able to decipher the analytical methods used – or the technical terms and acronyms.

We need to provide clear summaries of findings which lay audiences will find accessible. That could mean blogs, long reads, briefings, slide packs or other outputs which explain findings and their implications to lay people.

Writing for policy audiences can boost the audience for the original research. If a summary is accessibly written, has a clear message, and is published in the right places, it is more likely to be shared. It can also reach academics outside your immediate discipline or country, and increase citations of the original work. Writing a good research summary, though, is very different to writing a good journal article.

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What should a policy briefing do?

A briefing should succinctly do five things:

1. **Understanding** – show that you understand the context and the real-world problem – and can offer an alternative approach, or new information.
2. **Relevance** – explain why your evidence is relevant and what's new, fresh or 'exciting' about it.
3. **Insight** – set out the evidence and explain how it supports or refutes current thinking or a particular policy.
4. **Clarification** – explain any assumptions or limitations, and don't oversell (e.g., correlation v causation; limitations of the measures used; unobservable factors, etc.)
5. **Reaction** – most importantly, it should provoke the reader and stimulate them to act: apply it in their work, get in touch with us/the researcher, refer to it, share it on social media, use the data in the future, etc.

With this in mind, there are practical actions to consider.



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Think about your audience

The best starting point is to ask: who do you want to reach? Evidence might be aimed at civil servants, charities, public service or business leaders, regulators, a parliamentary committee, an individual MP or a mix of audiences.

Ultimately, to inform or influence policy, evidence needs to make its way to, and convince, a minister – whether this is via civil servants, an external organisation or some other route. The government's Open Innovation Team helps to put officials in touch with academics and others who can provide outside expertise. They produce advice on the submissions officials produce when they want a minister to make a decision.

That can be useful for us in shaping how we write for many of our audiences outside academia. Their main point is brevity. A submission should be a maximum of 2-4 pages long and cover:

- **Issue:** What is this about? (2-3 sentences)
- **Recommendation:** What do you want the minister to do or approve? (2-3 sentences)
- **Background:** What is already happening in this policy area, and why is it important now? (1-2 short paragraphs)
- **Argument/advice:** Why, out of all the things the government could do (including nothing), is your recommendation the best course of action? (2-3 paragraphs)
- **Next steps and handling:** What are the specifics of your plan?
If the minister agrees to your proposal, what are the first steps to implement? How will this be presented to stakeholders, Parliament or the media? (1-2 short paragraphs)

They ask academics to:

- “do the hard work to make it simple”: write as if you are explaining your research to an intelligent member of the public, not a fellow specialist
- put key points at the top
- make clear recommendations, framed “as advice or suggestions, rather than a demand”.

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Storytelling

Some kind of narrative is helpful, and facts on their own rarely convince. If you talk to a journalist about your research, they will ask “What’s the story?” They will want to know what is new.

A good story is one that’s about change, is relevant to the reader and elicits a reaction. A policymaker may ask a variation on this: “What’s the argument?”

Whoever they are, a general audience will want a beginning, middle and end. So, although your arguments will be more complicated than this, it is worth thinking of them as:

headline finding

further information

conclusion

Breaking down what you want to say into its briefest, simplest form like this is a useful starting point. It will help you to decide what is relevant, and what to leave out.

You may have carried out extensive data analysis, but the focus must be on the story: what the data tells us, not the process of how we got there.

When you know the basics of your story, you can move on to thinking about the tone of voice you will use in telling it.

What's the Story?

Storytelling example one

A short summary of some recent research on free school meals **might be:**

- 50% of families eligible for free school meals didn't receive food vouchers during the first Covid lockdown
- Food poverty is shown to affect both cognitive learning and health of disadvantaged children
- If the Department for Education works more closely with schools and local authorities, they could make sure all eligible families receive vouchers during a future lockdown



Storytelling example two

Alternatively, research may be explaining why something doesn't work.

For example, a paper on the 'under-occupancy penalty' – the reduction in housing benefit for some recipients which became known as the 'bedroom tax' – ran to over 9,000 words, but for a policy audience could be more succinctly summarised:

- The policy was controversial, but also not completely successful.
- The government's aim was to curb increases in social housing spending, and to encourage people to move, so that limited housing stock could be reallocated, getting people into properties which better suited their needs.
- The research showed that it saved money, but “not as much as expected”, and did not encourage people to move.
- When they did move, people tended to downsize, but the number moving was no higher than it would have been due to natural turnover.



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Tone of voice and style

Your language needs to be less formal and technical than an academic paper, but still carry the weight and credibility of the research.

People don't read for long, at least on screen (and may not read every word even on paper). Many audiences are time-poor, and you need to get and hold their attention. You need to be:

Simple

- everyday language
- short sentences

Conversational

- it may help to think of your message as something you're trying to get across in conversation
- but one with a colleague – so the tone you use will be different to a conversation with friends/family

Inclusive

- avoid jargon, technical terms and acronyms
- where you use them, make sure you explain them

Accessible

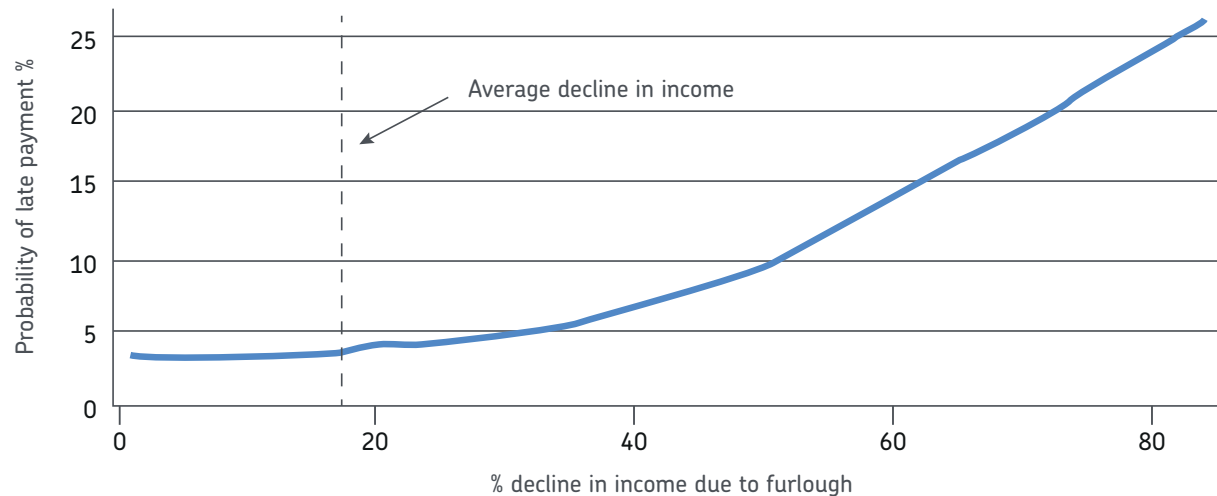
- break your text up
- short paragraphs as well as short sentences
- start a new paragraph when you move to a new point
- use boxes, charts, images, pull-out quotes – where they help to explain or guide people through the argument
- use sub-headings – to break a problem down, show connections to other issues, or answer anticipated questions

Now you know your story, and have an idea of the tone in which to tell it, you can start fleshing it out into a full document.

Boxes and charts example

A chart showing that the probability of financial distress varies little for falls in income between 0% and 20%, and begins to increase significantly above 20% (showing that it made sense to set the level of furlough at 80% of salary).

Financial distress and furlough-induced income falls



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Content and structure

1. Title: make it short, catchy and precise

- a. get their attention
- b. be relevant
- c. use a sub-title to add detail if you need to

2. Open with a bang

- a. the conclusion comes at the beginning
- b. if you can, make it topical – put your story in the context of a current issue
- c. explain it in more detail later, in your supporting evidence

3. Make it clear

- a. keep your recommendation(s) short
- b. don't have too many
- c. make them realistic (i.e., plausible in the current environment)

4. Present your evidence

- a. set out the problem in the main text
- b. say why this evidence is strong (e.g., representative data sample)
- c. use/refer to previous/external work if you need to for context
- d. show how our new evidence adds to what is known

5. Present your data analysis

- a. if possible, use a simple chart (a general audience is unlikely to have the time or expertise to read a statistical table)
- b. bar charts and pie charts are easy to understand, and will show differences between different groups quickly
- c. but let the data guide your choice of how to present it, keeping the audience in mind
- d. keep the design clean and simple

6. Further supporting evidence

- a. further information which justifies your conclusion
- b. other recent/relevant findings which provide context
- c. other reputable people or organisations who have reached a similar conclusion – an expert panel, or the government's own regulator, for example

7. Conclusion

- a. reiterate your policy recommendation
- b. or summarise the situation, and explain that there isn't yet a conclusion.

8. Finally

- a. acknowledge authors/contributors
- b. include publication details and references
- c. cite the data – and encourage readers to cite your briefing by providing a clear reference
- d. let readers know how to contact you

Simply sharing research, however accessible, is not enough on its own. It needs to happen in a broader context of forging long-term relationships with key audiences and fostering two-way exchanges. We have links to several government departments and third sector organisations, and are always building more – so we can help your work to reach these audiences.

Policy and Partnerships Unit

There are different ways to provide evidence to policy audiences, so our approach is flexible – and the level of content detail will vary according to length. This document is guidance on how we generally put together content when we write for policy audiences.

If you have questions, or want help with your output, please contact:

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