

Political Science 250: State and Local Government
Instructor: Nicholas Jacobs
Term: Spring, 2018

Policy or Political Reform Brief
Due: April 30, 2018

Working in groups no larger than three, each student will write a paper that studies a potential policy or political reform – a “brief”. The topic should be of interest to all students involved in writing the paper. For a policy brief, students might choose to study and write about an area of government activity, like education, policing, or transportation. For a politics brief, students might choose to study and write about a specific governing institution or institutional rule, like term limits for legislators, the date of local elections, or the organization of city government. The only restriction is that the issue must be predominantly state or local in nature (i.e., national defense or foreign diplomacy would be outside the scope of this assignment; local emergency preparedness or encouraging foreign investment, however, might not be).

The paper will be evaluated on three dimensions: 1) Quality of the research used to support policy/political alternatives 2) The effective presentation of that research according to the formatting guidelines 3) Evaluation of group peers on their contribution or value-added to the project. Papers should not exceed 20 pages in length.

Only papers that have been submitted to the appropriate local or state governing official(s) will be considered for a grade.

What is a Brief?

Imagine that you’re an elected official serving on a committee that sets the standards cars must meet to pass a state inspection. You know that this is a complex issue, and you’d like to learn more about existing policies, the effects of emissions on the environment and on public health, the economic consequences of different possible approaches, and more – you want to make an informed decision. You need a policy brief.

Imagine that you’re an elected official who is concerned about the health of the city’s declining voter turnout rate. You know that that individuals choose not to participate for a variety of reasons, and that these decisions might exacerbate inequalities in public policy. You’d like to learn more about why citizens participate in city politics at lower rates, how cities have tried to increase citizen participation, the effects of those reforms, and more – you want to make an informed decision. You need a political brief.

A brief presents a concise summary of information that can help readers understand, and likely make decisions about, government actions, be they policy proposals or political reforms. Briefs may give objective summaries of relevant research, suggest possible government options, or go even further and argue for particular courses of action.

How Do Policy or Political Briefs Differ from Other Kinds of Writing Assignments?

Many of your existing skills and strategies, like using [evidence](#), being [concise](#), and [organizing your information](#) effectively, will help you succeed at this form of writing. However, policy briefs are distinctive in several ways.

Audience

In some of your college writing, you’ve addressed your peers, your professors, or other members of your academic field. Policy briefs are usually created for a more general reader or policy maker who has a stake in

the issue that you're discussing. You want to assume nothing about your audience. They might not even know a problem exists in the first place!

Purpose

Policy briefs are distinctive in their focus on communicating the practical implications of research to a specific audience. Suppose that you and your roommate both write research-based papers about global warming. Your roommate is writing a research paper for an environmental science course, and you are writing a policy brief for a course on public policy. You might both use the exact same sources in writing your papers. So, how might those papers differ?

- Your roommate's research paper is likely to present the findings of previous studies and synthesize them in order to present an argument about what we know. It might also discuss the methods and processes used in the research.
- Your brief might synthesize the same scientific findings, but it will deploy them for a very specific purpose: to help readers decide what they should do. It will relate the findings to current policy debates, with an emphasis on applying the research outcomes rather than assessing the research procedures. A research paper might also suggest practical actions, but a policy brief is likely to emphasize them more strongly and develop them more fully.

Format

Briefs have a distinctive format. They tend to use lots of headings and have relatively short sections. This structure differs from many short papers in the humanities that may have a title but no further headings, and from reports in the sciences that may follow the "IMRAD" structure of introduction, methods, results, and discussion. You might also rely more heavily on graphs, charts, or other visual aids that make it easier to digest the most important information within sections. [Click here](#) to view some helpful tips on formatting visuals in a paper.

Your brief should have the following sections:

- **Title:** A good title quickly communicates the contents of the brief in a memorable way.
- **Executive Summary:** This section is often only one paragraph long; it includes an overview of the problem and the proposed policy action.
- **Context or Scope of Problem:** This section communicates the importance of the problem and aims to convince the reader of the necessity of policy action.
- **Policy or Reform Alternatives:** This section discusses the government's current approach and explains proposed options. It should be fair and accurate while convincing the reader why any new action proposed in the brief is the most desirable. It may only briefly describe the alternative approaches. The next section will put forward one of those with more detail and argue why it is a superior approach.
- **Recommendation:** This section contains the most detailed explanation of the concrete steps to be taken to address the policy issue.
- **Appendix (optional):** If some readers might need further support in order to accept your argument but doing so in the brief itself might derail the conversation for other readers, you might include the extra information in an appendix.
- **Consulted or Recommended Sources:** These should be reliable sources that you have used throughout your brief to guide your policy discussion and recommendations.

You will also need to write a one-page cover letter. The letter will be addressed to a relevant policy maker or elected official. A cover letter should complement, not duplicate, your report. It may use similar language, but it is even more brief. Its purpose is to interpret the data-oriented, factual report and add a personal touch to your

application for employment. Effective cover letters explain the reasons for your interest in contacting the person and identify the most significant components of the report. Determine relevance by carefully researching the person you are contacting.

How Do I Identify a Problem for My Brief?

An effective brief must propose a solution to a well-defined problem that can be addressed at the level of policy. The key is that you define the problem and its contributing factors as specifically as possible so that some sort of concrete policy action (at the local or state level) is feasible.

Your own process of identifying the problem likely had some stops, starts, and dead-ends, but your goal in framing the issue for your reader is to provide the most direct path to understanding the problem and the proposed change. It can be helpful to think of some of the most pressing questions your audience will have and attempt to preemptively answer those questions. Here are some questions you might want to consider:

What is the Problem?

Understanding what the problem is, in the clearest terms possible, will give your reader a reference point. Later, when you're discussing complex information, your reader can refer back to the initial problem. This will help to 'anchor' them throughout the course of your argument. Every piece of information in the brief should be clearly and easily connected to the problem.

What is the Scope of the Problem?

Knowing the extent of the problem helps to frame the policy issue for your reader. Is the problem statewide, national, or international? How many people does this issue affect? Daily? Annually? This is a great place for any statistical information you may have gathered through your research.

Who are the Stakeholders?

Who does this issue affect? Adult women? College-educated men? Children from bilingual homes? The primary group being affected is important, and knowing who this group is allows the reader to assign a face to the policy issue. Policy issues can include a complex network of stakeholders. Double check whether you have inadvertently excluded any of them from your analysis. For example, a policy about children's nutrition obviously involves the children, but it might also include food producers, distributors, parents, and nutritionists (and other experts). Some stakeholders might be reluctant to accept your policy change or even acknowledge the existence of the problem, which is why your brief must be convincing in its use of evidence and clear in its communication.

Examples

Some of the above formatting suggestions come from the Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. They also provide some excellent, more general advice on effective writing ([click here](#)). Tutors at the Longwood University Writing Center will also be familiar with this style of writing.

The Johns Hopkins University Writing Center also provides an effective example of [A Not-So-Good Policy Brief](#) and [A Better Policy Brief](#). Do note, however, that you will still need to follow the formatting requirements above.

Finally, and this should go without saying, I anticipate (expect) meeting with each group – often more than once – throughout the semester to discuss the research and the writing process.