European Commission

Sharing scientific evidence with policymakers

Guide on writing policy briefs for impact

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How is this guide structured?

It is structured in two main parts, the first gives a general overview and tips on writing a policy brief while the second outlines a recommended structure for a template including useful pointers and examples.

PART 1

What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide explains how EU funded research and innovation projects can create a clear, impactful policy brief that informs policy.

What is a policy brief?

A policy brief presents clear, actionable recommendations based on scientific evidence (e.g. from project results) for a specific policy matter. It is a **concise, focused document**, typically 2 to 4 pages, and is a powerful tool for informing policymakers of the relevance of your work for policy purposes.

Who are policy briefs intended for?

Policy briefs are written for **policymakers**. Carefully consider whether to target policymakers at the European, national, regional or local level, depending on the scope of your findings and the relevance of recommendations.

Where to start when drafting a policy brief?

Follow these steps to ensure your policy brief hooks your audience:

- Start **planning early**;
- Get to know and understand the **policy context**. At the EU level, your project officer can point you to relevant ongoing policy and legislative debates or other initiatives. A basic starting point could be the call/topic under which the project is funded before looking into the wider policy landscape;
- Clearly identify the **issue(s)** your brief will address in view of the policy context, demonstrating the pressing need to address the challenge. Ask yourself: what problem are you tackling and why is it relevant now?;
- Identify the target **audience** and their needs (e.g. a policy stakeholder mapping). Connect with relevant policymakers to help ensure your brief is well targeted and timely. Consider asking targeted policymaker or professional with policy experience to review your draft, boosting the chances of uptake of your recommendations (for European policymakers, your project officer may put you in touch with relevant policy officers);
- Identify **stakeholders/projects** with whom you could collaborate to enrich the proposed recommendations and/or include a multidisciplinary dimension in the evidence;
- Spell out actionable **recommendations**;
- Back-up recommendations with **relevant evidence** drawing on your project results;
- Identify channels (e.g. events) to **disseminate** your policy brief during and beyond your project's lifetime;
- Get inspired by the **template** provided in this guide as a recommended basic structure for your brief, including suitable subheadings. Tailor the structure to the specific policy context as well as needs of target audience;

- Keep in mind some **basic guidelines**:

DOs

Present policymaking context: Show how your recommendations are pertinent to a concrete policy context (e.g. refer to specific legislation).

Tailor to audience: Consider the needs and perspective of target audience and address them directly.

Highlight key messages: Focus on the essentials: what the issue is, why it matters and what should be done.

Include clear recommendation(s): Clearly state actions you recommend.

Provide evidence: Back-up your recommendations with compelling evidence and reliable data, including references to external sources. Be clear on limitations or uncertainties.

Be transparent: Clarify assumptions to maintain credibility and trustworthiness.

Structure clearly: Follow a structured format with headings and subheadings that highlight the key messages.

Keep it concise: Focus on what your project findings mean for the issue/challenge you address.

Use plain language: Write in a straightforward manner that is accessible to all. Ask a non-expert to read your brief.

Enhance readability with visuals: For graphs and tables, choose legible colours and fonts. Ensure photos are of high quality and rights or licenses secured[1].

Proofread carefully: Ensure grammatical accuracy and coherence throughout the document.

DON'Ts

Omit setting the scene: Avoid being generic and overlooking current political and legal framework.

Ignore audience needs: Avoid writing without understanding what the audience requires from the brief

Bury important information: A policy brief is not a scientific paper: avoid lengthy analysis or hiding crucial insights within dense paragraphs.

Leave it open-ended: Failing to provide specific recommendations or actions can detract from the brief's impact.

Make unsupported claims: Avoid making statements or recommendations without backing them up with evidence or source.

Let bias show: Avoid letting personal biases or unfounded opinions influence the document. Science should act as honest broker.

Make it inaccessible: Avoid lengthy blocks of text. A good test is to see if message is clear without reading any of the main text.

Overload with information: Avoid including too much data or overly complex information that can overwhelm readers.

Use jargon: Steer clear of jargon, ambiguous language or acronyms. Define technical terms in a footnote (e.g. CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing: a tool for precisely altering DNA).

Rely solely on text: Avoid excessive text without visual elements that can help clarify and emphasize key points and provide complementary information to the text.

Neglect editing: Sloppy errors can undermine the credibility of your brief.

Where can I find out more?

Check out this starter kit on sharing scientific evidence with policymakers for practical tips on bringing your project's results to the attention of policymakers.

[1] European Commission (2024), 'How to write an effective and engaging policy brief: guidelines' https://emotionalcities-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Policy-brief-UHC.pdf

PART 2

This section outlines the recommended structure to help ensure your policy brief has the desired impact, including tips and examples.

[Recommended length: 2-4 pages]

Project Title / Acronym / Logo [Authors and Month/Year]

TITLE

The title of a policy brief is important. It aims to catch the attention of the audience and convey the importance of your findings.

Your policy brief title should:

a. **Be clear and specific:** reflect the main issue of the policy brief;
b. **Capture the essence:** summarise the core focus in impactful words;
c. **Use keywords:** include relevant terms for visibility and searchability;
d. **Keep it concise:** aim for a brief title, ideally under 10 words;
e. **Engage the reader:** use playful and topical language that sparks interest;
f. **Consider the audience:** tailor the title to resonate with your audience's interests.

For example:

- 'Evidence supporting a cross-government strategy to address health inequalities'[2]
- 'Breathe easy: Tobacco tax brings better health, new revenue'[3]

Highlights *(grab reader's attention: summarise key messages in bullet points, making it memorable)*

- **Summarise most relevant parts of the context:** for example, after the arrival of children, women tend to take longer leaves of absence than men and are more likely to work part-time. These shifts contribute to differences in wage growth between women and men – the so-called 'motherhood penalty'.
- **Highlight policy recommendations:** for example, one way to close this gap is to focus on men. If fathers are given non-transferable rights to parental leave, their leave uptake can increase significantly and they could spend more time caring for their children.
- **Recapitulate key findings of research, leading with striking facts:** for example, 'Information on leave use is essential for understanding the uptake by mothers and fathers as well as the impacts of different leave policies.' On average across OECD countries, only about one in four men take parental leave, dropping to less than one in ten in several countries.
- **Reiterate key potential impacts of recommendations:** for example, 'Paid parental leave primarily aims to support parents and children by letting both parents take time off paid work to care for a very young child. This is good for many things, including household finances, child development and parental well-being. Paid leave policies can also promote a better sharing of unpaid work within households'[4]

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[2] University of Cambridge, Cambridge Public Health, Queen Mary University of London (2023), 'Evidence supporting a cross-government strategy to address health inequalities' policy_brief_-_evidence_supporting_a_cross-government_strategy_to_address_health_inequalities.pdf.
[3] Renate Pore and Elizabeth Paulhus (2011), 'Policy Brief Breathe Easy: Tobacco Tax Brings Better Health, New Revenue' https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/5/BreatheEasy020811.pdf.
[4] OECD (2023), 'Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers' https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2023/01/Paid-parental-leave--Big-differences-for-mothers-and-fathers.html

1. Context of the issue *(policy hook: highlight specific policy context, relevance of challenge, and pressing need to be addressed)*

- Start with an engaging **introductory paragraph** that sets the scene, mentioning policymakers addressed. Highlight the issue's importance, relevance and timeliness.

  For example:

  ▸ as urban populations continue to grow, the demand for efficient public transportation systems has become a pressing concern for policymakers aiming to reduce congestion and improve air quality.

- Link to **policy initiatives** to frame the policy brief in ongoing discussions ('policy hook', e.g. State of the European Union speech by the European Commission's President) and present the policy landscape.

  For example:

  ▸ 'Modernising the public sector with digital technologies should not lead to the creation of new silos. The European interoperability framework gives guidance for how to ensure interoperability amongst public administrations and across Member State borders.'[5]

- Define the **issue**, its significance, timeliness and background information.
- Formulate a **specific question** that the brief aims to address.
- Identify, if relevant, any **shortcomings of current policies**, arguing why and how the current approaches could be improved.
- Point to **gaps** in state-of-the-art revealed through your project activities.
- Outline **barriers** and **challenges**, particularly those affected by policy.
- Consider including **visuals** such as graphs and tables, to complement the main text.

2. Policy recommendations *(action-oriented recommendations: list main practical actions that solve the challenge)*

- Present clear, actionable, **evidence-based recommendations** showing how recommended action solves the problem and where uncertainty exists.
- Link to needs and **policy initiatives** (presented in section 1).
- Consider **impacts** (e.g. economic, environmental, social, geopolitical, ethical, etc.) in areas of particular interest to targeted policymakers.
- Evaluate various **policy options**, acknowledging different viewpoints, if relevant e.g. for agenda setting.
- Connect specific **project results** to proposed recommendations (developed in section 3).
- Propose a **manageable number of actions**, ranked by impact or urgency. Financial implications could be accompanied by an estimate of expected costs if known.
- Be specific and outline how they could be taken up by policymakers.

  For example:

  ▸ Supporting R&I funding in a specific field: establish a dedicated research area focused on 'women's health throughout lifespan', with a specific emphasis on the intersection of sex, gender, and age in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases affecting women.

  ▸ Introducing specific tools in regulations: the Committee of Regions could develop a regional data-sharing framework for museums, in collaboration with the mayor network, to facilitate the exchange of information on cultural goods and prevent illicit trafficking.

  ▸ Proposing institutional reform: 'Encourage working contacts between universities, ministries, and research funding councils; reward policy advice at universities; educate researchers and university managers on policy advice'.[6]

[5] Joint Research Centre (2021), 'Science for Policy Briefs - Public sector modernisation for EU recovery and resilience' 62831cde-3ed6-40da-b8ec-4d9c3c7e3f52_en

[6] Joint Research Centre (2025), 'Building capacity for evidence-informed policymaking in governance and public administration in a post-pandemic Europe' Estonia_Final report_Buidling capacity for EIPM in governance and public administration.pdf

3. Evidence and analysis *(keep it short: summarise the most compelling evidence of interest and relevance to audience)*

- Keep this section **short**, focusing on your most robust and relevant results (use references section for details) supporting the recommendations proposed.
- Summarise the most compelling **evidence** (e.g. project results, expert opinions, concrete examples etc.) with the aim and audience in mind, in a clear and understandable format, that doesn't require specialised knowledge.
- Stipulate any **limitations** of the research.
- Highlight any **concrete example** or demonstration that could be a striking illustration of your research results.
- Ensure your analysis is **convincing** yet balanced, clarifying the facts.
- Incorporate **visuals** where possible to engage reader and enhance their comprehension of the data, complementing the text. Visual aids may help distil complex information.
- Choose carefully the **type of graphic** e.g. bar charts are clear and easy to read, line graphs are ideal for showing trends while stacked bar charts are a good alternative to pie charts[7]. Include legible labels, explanatory titles and/or captions with colours, shading patterns, and symbols that are easy to distinguish from one other[8].
- Conclude this section by briefly explaining the **research methodology** for the reader to understand the robustness and scope of your results. Mention how the study was conducted, who carried it out, how data was collected, alongside any relevant background not previously covered.

4. References

- List key sources referenced in the brief itself for further consultation (ensure all references provided are open access).
- In case of joint policy briefs, mention the project(s)/stakeholders involved. Consider including information on who has been consulted.

5. Contact details

- If you wish to credit the authors, include their names, positions, institutions, and email addresses. Otherwise include an email address so that readers can reach out for additional information.

[7] Resyst (2013), 'Policy briefs: A guide to writing policy briefs for research uptake' https://blogs.lshtm.ac.uk/griphealth/files/2017/01/Policy-briefs-guide_2015.pdf
[8] For additional tips, see footnote 1

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