



How to...

Write a research briefing

This guide will help you to structure a research briefing. It provides a set of questions and prompts to consider before you start writing, a suggested structure and practical tips.

1. What is the purpose of a research briefing?

Research Briefings provide a concise summary of your research and its relevance to policy and/or practice, in plain English. You can use them to present information impartially and map out options; or, alternatively, you can advocate a particular option based on your findings. Which is most appropriate will depend on your project and stakeholders.

Printed copies are useful as a 'calling card' at meetings and to share at events, in delegate packs or on a stand. If you have a website, blog or social media presence, think about how you can use them to engage your audiences. They may also provide a hook for media coverage or be useful as the basis for an opinion piece in a relevant publication. If you have a Communications Officer, they will be able to provide advice, as will the Press Office.

2. Who is your target audience?

You are writing for non-academics: policymakers, analysts, practitioners and others who formulate, influence or implement policy. Your reader is not a specialist in your area, and is likely to be very busy. S/he is interested in the substantive issue and how it relates to the current context, rather than the methodology. You will need to situate your research within the current policy and practice context and make clear links for them.

3. When should I write a research briefing?

Policymakers and practitioners are interested in policy relevant research as it progresses. You can write a briefing at any stage in a project; in fact you may want to plan a number of briefings throughout a project.

Ask yourself how you can generate conversation around your Research Briefing(s). Speaking with research users during a project allows you to hear what would be most useful to them and usefully inform the direction of the research.

4. How should I structure my research briefing?

A Research Briefing is generally between 2 and 8 sides of A4. There are many ways to structure the content; have a look around and see what peers or competitors are doing. Here is one suggested structure (see boxes on page 3 for more detail):

- Title
- Summary
- Key points, findings or recommendations for policy or practice
- Introduction
- The body (the main text)

In addition, you should include some of the following: boxes and sidebars, cases, tables, graphics, photographs, quotations from a source credible to your audience.

5. How to use boxes, tables, graphics and images effectively

Boxes are useful for definitions, explanations, lists, and examples to illustrate points in the text. They should have a clear title and be understandable on their own. Consider using 1 or 2 boxes of 100-150 words. Remember to reference them in the text.

Tables need to be simple. Would a graph be better? Make the title talk, e.g., 'irrigation boosts yields' rather than 'comparison of yields on irrigated and non-irrigated land'. Give the source of information.

If using diagrams/graphs/maps, choose the type of graphic that best suits the information you are presenting e.g., a bar/pie to compare figures and a line graphs for time series. Give it an explanatory title. Don't clutter your graphic. What is most important to show? Remember that most people printing in an office will print in black and white.

Images make your Research Briefing more eye-catching and therefore more likely to be read. Use them, and the captions, to illustrate your findings, recommendations or conclusions.

Look around for examples you like and borrow the elements that work for your briefing:

Research findings from I'DGO <http://edin.ac/24eNuOi>

This infographic features a photograph of an elderly woman in a blue jacket walking on a path. Text boxes are overlaid on the image. One box asks 'Why does the outdoor environment matter?' and another asks 'How the design of gardens, streets, and open spaces can make a difference to older people's wellbeing and quality of life.' Logos for WARRICK, Salford, EPSRC, and REQUL are at the bottom.

Research briefing from AQMeN <http://edin.ac/24eNkGv>

This infographic is for ESPA (Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation). It includes a photo of people in a rural setting. Text boxes discuss 'BEST Practice' and 'Evidence Note from ESPA'. Logos for ESPA and various partner organizations are present.

This infographic is for AQMeN (Applied Quantitative Methods Network). It features a photo of students. The main title is 'Subject choice and inequalities in access to Higher Education: Comparing Scotland and Ireland'. It includes a 'Key points' section and a 'Methods Network' section.

Evidence Note from ESPA
<http://edin.ac/1OjLb0A>

Title

- Keep it short.
- Make it catchy but ensure you use relevant key words. Try using an unusual turn of phrase or a question.
- Keep it to the point - make sure it is relevant to the topic.

Summary

- What are the main points you want your audience to get, even if they read nothing else?
- Put these in larger font or in a box, on the front page.

Key points, findings or recommendations for policy or practice

- In academic writing, you work up to reveal your conclusions at the end. A Research Briefing is the opposite! You need to keep conclusions short (5 or 6 is enough) and make them easy to find.
- Put them on the front page, as part of the summary or immediately after it, or in a separate box or sidebar.

Introduction

- The aim here is to grab the reader's attention, introduce the topic and say why it is important. Aim for 100 words.
- You could introduce the topic, say why it is important, give basic background and context, outline why your research is relevant to the topic.
- Or you could introduce a problem; say why it is important; summarise what happens, to whom and where; outline the effects of the current situation.

The body (main text)

- Trying to edit a long academic paper into a short policy focused one is impossible. Take a step back, think of the big picture and write from scratch.
- Ask yourself (again): What problem does the research address? What were you trying to find? What did you find? How is it relevant to current debate? What will be of interest to your audience? What do you want them to do as a result of reading your Research Briefing?
- Guide the reader. Use sub-headings, short paragraphs, boxes, graphs or images, or quotations from policymakers or practitioners.
- Ask yourself 'so what?' after every paragraph that you write.
- Use clear, simple, easy to understand language (e.g., the level of a broadsheet newspaper). Avoid academic, technical and methodological terms or the jargon of your discipline. Keep headings short and clear, and keep sentences and paragraphs short.

This guide was produced by the CAHSS Knowledge Exchange Office. We help colleagues to engage with industry, policy and practice to maximise the impact of their research. Find out more at www.ed.ac.uk/cahss/rke

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