# Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents

**This writing guide has been produced to assist Operating Agents and their colleagues in maximising the impact of the work of the IEA Energy in Building and Communities Annexes on policies that deal with decarbonisation, resilient buildings and communities.**

This resource is one of five documents.

The other four documents are:

– *Policy Brief Writing Guide for Operating Agents*

– *Policy Brief Template*

– *Executive Summary Writing Guide for Operating Agents*

– *Executive Summary Template*

*Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents* provides

– insights into understanding your audience or readers

– planning and delivering effective policy briefs and summaries

– writing in plain English

– using visuals

– adapting the written materials for use in presentations, such as PowerPoint

– and other useful resources and information.

The two writing guides provide guidance on how to use their respective templates. They show academics and other researchers how to write for a policymaker, who will need to advise senior policy advisors or politicians and/or navigate an influential stakeholder, or others.

Collectively, these resources complement the technical report, news article, and fact sheet writing guidance in the *Management Guidelines for Operating Agents* (August 2020).

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# Things to consider before you write

## What is a policy?

Policy is a consistent approach to a problem. Government policy is the basic agreed principles by which government is guided in relation to a specific issue.

More specifically, policy is a set of statements of principles, values and high-level intentions for actions. It provides a basis for consistent decision-making and resource allocation in respect to a specific issue, and states the expected outcomes from taking action.

## What is a policy brief? What is an executive summary?

A policy brief and an executive summary are both tools to present important key information to a non-academic audience. Each is a concise summary of a single specific issue or topic.

The key difference is their purpose: an executive summary *informs* while a policy brief *advises*.

| Policy brief | Executive summary |
|---|---|
| A stand-alone document | |
| Focused on a single topic | |
| About 2 pages or up to 1000 words. | |
| Purpose: to tell the reader what they should do. | Purpose: to keep the reader informed. |
| **A policy brief presents research and recommendations to a non-academic audience of an issue that requires action.** It includes actionable policy options to deal with the issue, based on the evidence. A policy brief is *not* a summary of research. It is an interpretation of the research for policy. | **An executive summary presents the state of knowledge to a non-academic audience.** It brings to light information or findings that were previously not understood.<br><br>It provides a summary of the relevant, evidence-based research to ensure the reader is well informed on the topic of interest. |

Policy briefs and executive summaries do not replace a technical report; rather they distil the lessons learned from the research and provide a vehicle for providing policy advice or relevant valuable information to decision makers who are in the position to use the research to benefit society.

Note that the terms 'policy brief' and 'executive summary' are often used interchangeably, along with other terms, such as 'policy summary' or 'policy report' or 'research brief.'

## Why write a policy brief or executive summary?

Ideally, policy and decision makers should make decisions informed by the best evidence possible. However, decision makers are often time-poor and may not have the level of expertise to easily understand evidence presented in technical reports or journal publications.

They also have other people and organisations competing for their time and attention, and often turn to more readily accessible information sources to influence their decisions. The information they provide may be out of date and may not be relevant or have academic rigour.

There is an opportunity and an obligation to better convey complex academic material to policy-making audiences in a way that is informative, immediately accessible, useful and/or actionable.

## Strategy and audiences: planning your policy brief or executive summary

### Define what you want to achieve

Why are you writing this document?

Your purpose could be:

- Make recommendations that will lead to policy change and impact.
- Provide evidence on a specific problem or issue you know they are tackling.
- To inform the audience of a new issue.
- To present evidence to counter misleading information that may have been provided directly or indirectly to your audience.

**A policy brief or summary report should have a clear and specific purpose, supported by the evidence.**

It should address just one topic, issue or argument.

Write down your purpose and refer back to it often.

Only include information in your document that serves this purpose.

Considering the evidence:

- Is there something new and important you would like them to know?
- Is there a specific action you would like this audience to take?
- Can you show/quantify the potential benefits of doing that action?
- What do you want them to do with your findings?

### *Additionally for policy briefs*

Now consider your policy recommendations. Use your research and other data to formulate your advice for policy. While you may feel strongly about your recommendations, make sure your advice is based on evidence. Your role is to set out clear arguments informed by research in relation to the proposed action.

### Map and understand the stakeholders – for writing policy briefs

Stakeholder mapping is a useful exercise for planning all your communication. It helps you to understand the social, political, cultural and practical context your research can be applied in.

You only need to do a stakeholder mapping exercise in detail once and can update your map as circumstances change. Refer to it when you write a brief or report to help you define your audience.

1. Brainstorm and identify who the policymakers stakeholders are. Their stakeholders might include:

- Governments
- Judiciary governmental bodies
- Political parties
- Commissions
- Sub-national and local governments
- Finance institutions
- International organisations (World Bank Group, UN)
- Business associations

- Businesses and corporates
- NGOs
- Social movements
- Advocacy groups
- Media
- Educational institutes
- Religious institutes
- Indigenous people

It may be useful to group them by sector. For example:

**Public sector**

- Political decision-makers
- Driving group

- Entities in partnership with the government (e.g. international bodies and financial institutions)

**Private sector**

- Private business developers (e.g. SMEs, firms and corporates, large industries)
- Business associations
- Private banks and financial institutions
- Technology developers

**Civil society and non-profit entities**

- Technical support (e.g. academia, researchers)
- Social support (e.g. Social movements)
- Institutional support (e.g. National NGO, local authorities)

2. Determine what level of involvement and influence or power each stakeholder has.
3. Identify each stakeholder's interests and goals.
4. Note the relationships between different stakeholders. This can be useful – if one stakeholder is difficult to engage, you may gain traction by engaging with one of their valued stakeholders.
5. Note stakeholders that are important allies, gate keepers, or potential antagonists.
6. Identify the most important stakeholders.

Visually mapping stakeholders is also useful, particularly if your research involves many stakeholders with complex relationships. You can map stakeholders to emphasise priority, group them by type or their level of power or influence, or to show relationships. Different types of stakeholder maps are explored in Learning Module 1: Audience and Strategy.

### Identify and define your target audience

The nature of your document depends on the audience.

**Knowing who you are targeting will shape your language, the information you include and the purpose of writing the brief or report.**

You may need to write different documents for different audiences. For example, research about residential indoor air quality may need to be expressed differently for policymakers working in housing to those working in population health.

Considering your audience, what information needs to be included in the brief or report?

– What is their role in changing policy? What do I want them to do after reading this document? The information should be targeted according to what the policymaker can realistically act upon.

– How much do they already know about the issue?

– What new information would give them greater insight?

– What evidence do they need to make a decision or change their behaviour?

– What do they know about me/my organisation? How might this influence what I present?

# Communication tools and tips

## Language

– Remember that you are writing for a non-academic audience. Do not use jargon or technical language. Use language that is easy to understand, positive, and persuasive.

– Note that some words, such as 'bias' or 'values', have different meanings for academics compared with non-academic audiences. See table below for a list of such words, how they are misunderstood, and alternative you can use.

**Table: Terms that have different meanings for scientists and the public[1]**

| Scientific term | Public meaning | Better choice |
|---|---|---|
| enhance | improve | intensify, increase |
| aerosol | spray can | tiny atmospheric particle |
| positive trend | good trend | upward trend |
| positive feedback | good response, praise | vicious cycle, self-reinforcing cycle |
| theory | hunch, speculation | scientific understanding |
| uncertainty | ignorance | range |
| error | mistake, wrong, incorrect | difference from exact true number |
| bias | distortion, political motive | offset from an observation |
| sign | indication, astrological sign | plus or minus sign |
| values | ethics, monetary value | numbers, quantity |
| manipulation | illicit tampering | scientific data processing |
| scheme | devious plot | systematic plan |
| anomaly | abnormal occurrence | change from long-term average |

– Avoid using acronyms as much as possible, and do not assume your audience will know what they stand for. If you must use them, always spell out the term in full, followed by the acronym in brackets on its first appearance. For example, World Health Organization (WHO) when stated for the first time, and WHO thereafter.

– Follow the version of English used by the Operating Agent (or lead author if different) and apply it consistently. For non-English native speakers, the Annex participants should agree on a single English version and apply that consistently.

– Leave any report titles, proper nouns and organisation names unchanged (for example, use American spelling for World Health Organization in a British English document).

– There are two 'voices' in writing: active and passive. Use active voice to begin sections of the document. Active voice is clear, direct and easily read and understood. Examples:

> ✔ Active: Ventilation improved indoor air quality.

> ✘ Passive: Indoor air quality was improved by ventilation.

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[1] Somerville, R.C. & Hassol, S.J., 2011. Communicating the science of climate change. *Physics Today*, 64(10), pp.48-53.

Writing for time-poor non-academic audiences is the reverse of academic writing! Policy makers will be more interested in how your research can help them achieve their own deliverables than your research process.
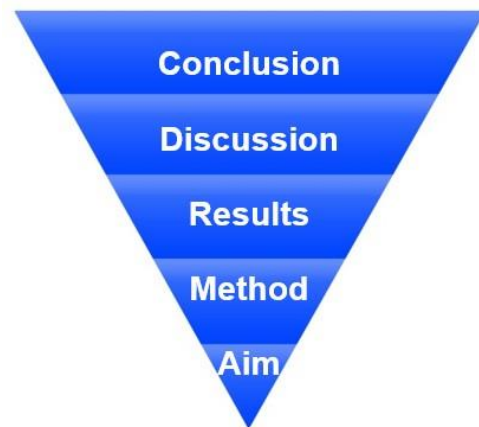
**Writing for journals and academic audiences**

**The Pyramid**

**Writing for non-academic audiences**

**The Reverse Pyramid**



**Writing for policymakers and non-academic audiences**



*water*

## Visuals

Photographs, graphics and other visuals make policy briefs more interesting for readers. Simple graphics and charts are especially useful if they can replace text-heavy descriptions.

Choose effective visuals for the type of information you would like to communicate.

– Pie charts and bar graphs are preferable to data tables to illustrate findings.

– Photographs can make documents more powerful, appealing and inspiring. Our subject matter is energy in buildings and communities, so it is ultimately about people and their homes. Do not be afraid to use images that illustrate this as they humanise your work and make a powerful connection with your reader.

– Include captions for photos and other visuals that explain the content to the reader.

– Use high quality images, especially if you expect your document to be printed.

## Presenting your brief as a slide show presentation

You may be asked to present your policy brief or research findings in person, with the help of a PowerPoint presentation.

| Do | Do not |
|---|---|
| ✓ Keep text to a minimum. | ✗ Present a written Word or PDF document projected onto a screen. It's way too much text. |
| ✓ Use large text: 32 point or larger. | ✗ Use too much text per slide. If your audience is reading, they will not be listening to you talk. |
| ✓ Have high contrast between the text and background. | ✗ Read your slides word for word. |
| ✓ Use graphics and visuals that illustrate the concepts. | ✗ Use Word Art, Clip Art or in-built animations. They can look amateur. |
| ✓ Speak with enthusiasm and passion. | ✗ Speak in monotone. |

## Other tips and things to keep in mind

- **Use language tools in Microsoft Word**: Use spelling and grammar checking tools in Microsoft Word and other word processing programmes.
- **Read your brief aloud**: Reading your writing out loud is an easy way to check that you are using clear, simple, concise language.
- **Test your writing:** Ask non-academic friends and family to be a test audience and read the brief. Ask them questions to see how well they understood the brief and ask for feedback.
- **Culturally sensitive language:** If your work impacts or involves people from disadvantaged or underrepresented populations or people from different cultural groups – for example, migrant communities in social housing or First Nations peoples – make sure you are using respectful and culturally sensitive language. Your university or institution may have resources or staff to help with such communication.

## Resources

### Plain English writing resources:

- **Plain English Campaign** (UK): www.plainenglish.co.uk

  This website has a suite of free PDF writing guides, including 'How to write in plain English', 'The A-Z of alternative words' and guides to punctuation, grammar, apostrophes, and using capital letters.

- **plainlanguage.gov** (USA): www.plainlanguage.gov

  A suite of plain language guidelines, teaching, examples and other resources, provided by the United States government.

- **Hemmingway Editor** and other editing apps: These applications check your writing and highlight areas for improvement. hemingwayapp.com



- *The Conversation* (editions include Africa, Australia, Brasil, Canada, Canada (français), España, Europe, France, Global, Indonesia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States): a unique collaboration between academics and journalists that in a decade has become the world's leading publisher of research-based news and analysis. Researchers who write for *The Conversation* use a portal that has in-built plain language editing tools. This platform is useful for both practising plain language writing and extending the reach of your research. Global edition: theconversation.com/global.

## ALCHEMY COLAB

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