

Policy Brief Writing Guide for Operating Agents

About this guide

This writing guide has been produced to assist Operating Agents and their colleagues to maximise 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 guide helps academics to write for the specific audience of a policymaker, who will need to advise senior policy advisors or politicians and/or navigate an influential stakeholder.

This guide is one of five documents. The other four are:

- **Policy Brief Template**
- **Executive Summary Writing Guide for Operating Agents**
- **Executive Summary Template**
- **Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents**

The two writing guides demonstrate how to use their respective templates. *Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents* provides broader insights into planning and delivering compelling 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.

A deeper Communication Masterclass course, using online learning modules, has also been developed.

Structuring information for policymakers, journalists and the wider community

Writing for time-poor non-academic audiences is the reverse of academic writing! This is important. Policy makers will be more interested in how your research can help them achieve their own deliverables than your research process. The “Reverse Pyramid” or “Inverted Pyramid” is the heart of good communication for general audiences and the opposite of the way researchers are trained to write.

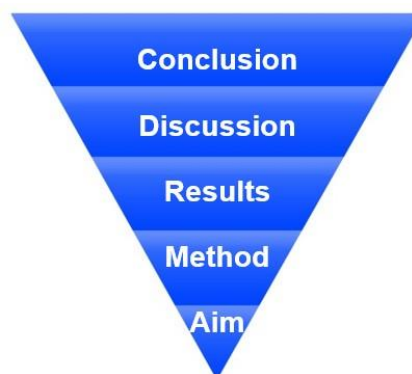
Writing for journals and academic audiences

The Pyramid



Writing for non-academic audiences

The Reverse Pyramid



Writing for policymakers and non-academic audiences



What is a policy brief?

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. A policy brief is:

- A stand-alone document.
- Focused on a single topic.
- Aim for about 2 pages or 700 - 750 words.

2 pages is an appropriate length of document for a policymaker to comprehend and be able to take action (which may include seeking further information or expertise).

Policy briefs 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 information to decision makers. This audience is in the position to use your research to benefit society.

Information that is **important to your audience** needs to come first, such as potential benefits, impact and outcomes.

Policy brief sections

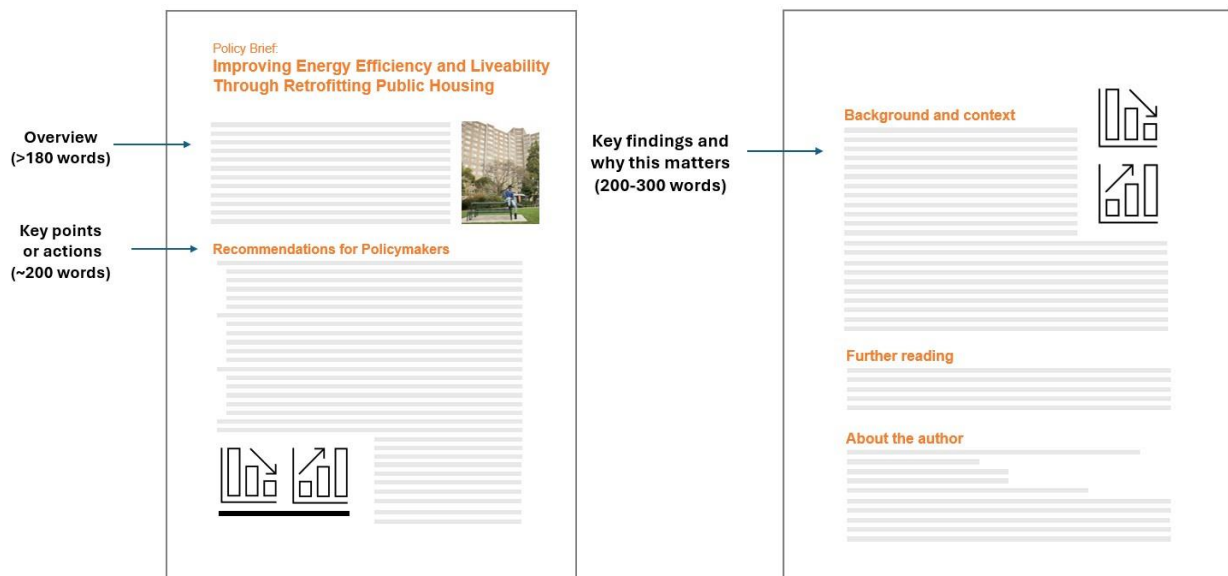
A good policy brief is brief – two A4 pages. This equates to approximately 700 words or 350 words per page, which allows space for images, figures and/or tables. For more complex topics, you can write up to four pages, but **the longer the document, the less likely the policymaker is to read it.**

A policy brief has five sections:

1. **Overview of issue:** This provides an overview of the issue for busy readers. It states the issue or defines the problem this research is trying to solve in one or two sentences. It contains everything the reader needs if this is all they read. It does not need its own subheading.
2. **Recommendations or Key information for policymakers:** This section details the most important points, actions and research findings that the policymaker should know about.

These first two sections should be on the first page.

3. **Background and context:** This section supports the key points or actions from the previous section with evidence from research and important background information. Describe why the recommendations and findings are important and situate the brief in the context of the policymaker's work and responsibilities.
4. **Further reading**
5. **About the author**



What to include in each section

One line title

- This should describe what this brief is about. Be specific. It should ***not*** be the full Annex title – that will not describe the specific issue and may include technical terminology which policymakers do not understand. It should convey the benefits of taking the recommended action/s.
- Examples:
 - *Improving Energy Efficiency and Liveability Through Retrofitting Public Housing*
 - *Removing Barriers to Centralised Radiative Cooling in Apartment Buildings*
 - *Combating the Urban Heat Island Effect Through Cool Surfaces*
 - *Telework Transition: Adapting Energy Efficient Houses for Working from Home*
- Use title case. In title case, major words are capitalised, and most minor words are lowercase.

Overview of issue

150 – 180 words or 25% of the document

- This section provides an overview for busy readers. It summarises what the problem that needs solving is, and why it is important for the policymaker. It tells the reader what information can be found in the main report, such as detailed policy recommendations that are relevant to them.
- This section should:
 - Distil the essence of the brief
 - Directly relate to the interests of the reader
 - Lead into the recommendations
 - Appear near the top of the first page
- Be written last, once the messaging is very clear in the author's mind
- Option: Include a simple graph or diagram that illustrates the importance of the issue or the most significant recommendation. This should clearly show units of measurement and be accessible to a generalist audience.

Recommendations

200 words or 35% of the document.

- State what policymakers should do and what outcome you expect this to lead to in three listed points. Present these in sequential order or in order of importance.
- Ensure what you suggest is credible, feasible, and has additionality (that is, it will provide additional benefits, such as carbon offsets above a baseline that would not otherwise occur). Note that recommending measuring something more accurately is only a worthwhile action if that more accurate measurement would make a difference to the outcome.
- Make the case for change, briefly stating the public value, which can be further described later in the document.

Making the ‘public value’ meaningful

Terms like “carboxyhaemoglobin (COHb) concentration”, “ecosystem services”, or “ground-based albedo modification” may be poorly understood outside of expert circles. Articulate the public value of your research in terms that resonate more strongly or are more meaningful to policymakers, politicians and non-academics:

- Public **health benefits**, such as improved air quality
- **Emissions reductions** articulated using well-recognised carbon accounting standards
- **Affordability and financial benefits**, such as reduced infrastructure costs, reduced **cost of living** from lower energy bills, or growth opportunities for businesses
- **Social benefits**, such as programs that address inequality
- **Wellbeing, lifestyle, and liveability** benefits.

Background and Context

200 - 300 words or 40% of the document

This section:

- Connects the recommendations from the previous section with more detailed insights and important background information:
 - Highlight key information that supports the recommendations such as examples of successful implementation in other regions, similar successful work in related fields, organisations that support this approach, or other research that supports the thesis.
 - What specifically is the value to the public? State if the research uncovered a cost-benefit or other key output that supports the recommended change.
- Explains the significance or urgency of the topic – indicate why policymakers need to read this report now.
 - Quantify or describe what is at stake, such as financial costs for householders or governments, carbon emissions, social impact, or health costs or benefits. A graphic or key statistics in bold may help present this information.
- Explains why this research is being undertaken: what is the main challenge/opportunity for society that this research addresses? Explain the policy context.
 - Is there a dominant discourse or understanding of this topic that a generalist audience would be aware of, and does this research challenge or reinforce it? Who will benefit from addressing this opportunity? Who will not benefit from addressing this opportunity? Who is disadvantaged by not addressing this opportunity? Quantify the value at stake (cost, carbon, productivity hours, lives lost, and so on).
- Identifies risks with the proposed recommendation(s). Who will oppose it (for example: builders, manufacturers, banks?) and why? What should be done to mitigate these risks?

Remember that YOU are the expert. Provide your unvarnished opinions with confidence.

Write strong, active statements that convey your authority.

- Identifies the counterfactual; what are the risks of doing nothing?
- Briefly (in 1 or 2 sentences) explains how you did your research, what the process was, and what makes this accurate (for example, the sample size or sensitivity analyses).
- Outlines any next steps that you will now take as part of this research.

Further reading

- Provide information about the publications, such as technical reports or fact sheets, from the project or Annex that are specifically relevant to the policy brief. State the publication's title and, if it is available online, include a link.
- Be brief and relevant. Do not provide an exhaustive list of further reading, as this can create an impression that you are giving the reader more work to do or that the topic is more complex than it is.

About the author

- State the name of the Operating Agent, position, institution, contact details and the name of the Annex. This gives the brief credibility.
- You can also include other acknowledgements or disclaimers if needed. Include the standard paragraph about the IEA EBC programme.

Example:

This work was made possible by: Annex ##: NAME of the International Energy Agency (IEA) Energy in Buildings and Communities (EBC) Technology Collaboration Programme and funded in part by XXXXX Research Council, grant no. YYYYYY.

Contact:

Dr Jelle Laverge, Assistant Professor, Ghent University Department of Architecture & Urban Planning, Building Physics

Operating Agent for IEA EBC - Annex 86 - Energy Efficient Indoor Air Quality Management in Residential Buildings

Email: Jelle.Laverge@UGent.be

The IEA [Energy in Buildings and Communities Programme](#) is an international energy research and innovation programme in the buildings and communities field. It enables collaborative research and development projects among its 26 member countries. The programme provides high quality scientific reports and summary information for policymakers.

Visit: www.iea-ebc.org.

Incorporating visuals

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

Choose effective visuals for the type of information to communicate.

- Bar or line graphs are preferable to data tables for illustrating findings.
- Photographs can make policy briefs more powerful, appealing and inspiring. The subject matter of energy in buildings and communities is ultimately about people and their homes and workplaces. Do not be afraid to use images that illustrate this as they humanise the research and make a powerful connection with the reader.
- Include descriptive captions for photos and other visuals that explain the content to the reader.
- Use high quality images.

Use fonts, colours and visuals in accordance with the IEA EBC *Corporate Design* guide (March 2021) which can be found on the IEA EBC website.

The guide *Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents* and the online learning modules provide more detailed help with understanding policymakers as the audience for your communication. This will help you understand the context the policymaker and/or your Annex are working in, choose additional information what will show the relevance of your research to their needs, and use language that will make your writing more accessible and impactful.



ALCHEMY COLAB

The IEA EBC TCP Impact Masterclass was developed by Alchemy Colab, a team of science communication, education and built environment experts.

Contact details:

Tanya Ha, science and environmental communication/media specialist, Science in Public

Mobile: +61 404 083 863 Email: tanya@scienceinpublic.com.au

Web: www.scienceinpublic.com.au

Caroline Pidcock – architect and Alchemy Colab director

Mobile: +61 418 248 010 Email: caroline@pidcock.com.au

Web: www.pidcock.com.au

Dr Dominique Hes, academic, author and policy advisor

Mobile: +61 425 765 688 Email: dominiquehes27@gmail.com

Web: www.linkedin.com/in/dominique-hes/