



# A Student's Guide to Writing a Global Health Policy Brief



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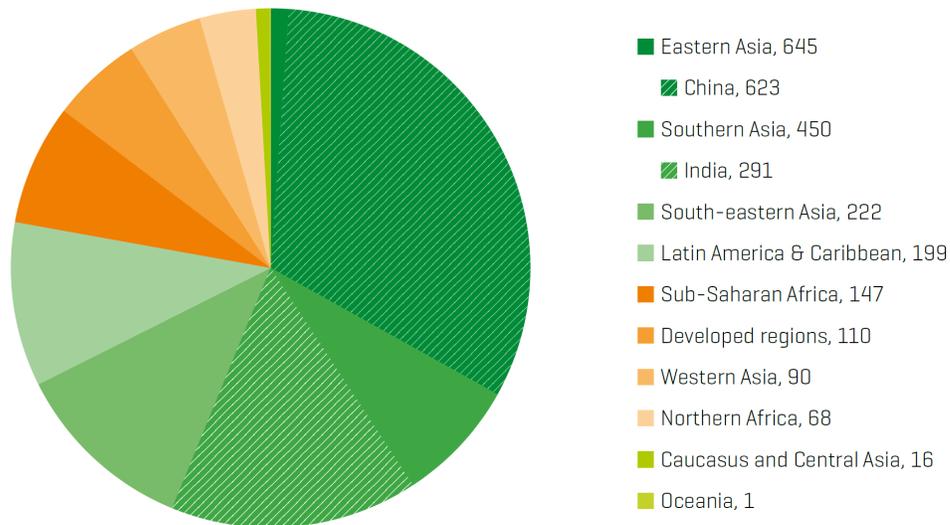
# A Student's Guide to Writing a Global Health Policy Brief



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### Almost two billion people have gained access to improved sanitation since 1990



**Fig. 14.** Number of people [in millions] who gained access to improved sanitation from 1990 to 2012, by MDG region

Source: Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation. World Health Organization, UNICEF 2014.  
[http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112727/1/9789241507240\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112727/1/9789241507240_eng.pdf?ua=1).

Throughout this writing guide, we have included various figures to provide different examples of the kinds of evidence that may be used in writing a policy brief. Graphical literacy is an important skillset to develop in order to first critically analyze data and then connect this data to policy. To leverage primary sources for exploring global health-themed topics, begin with some of the links included in the “Additional Writing and Data Related Resources” section.

# Introduction

## What is global health?

Global health presents an interdisciplinary set of challenges that transcend national boundaries. Global health is not “foreign health,” “international health,” or “health of the poor.” Rather, global health refers to the health of all populations in the world, regardless of nation state, geographical position, or stage of development. It includes an interdisciplinary set of challenges involving health determinants (social, political, economic), collections of health problems, and the societal responses to both. Global health is inclusive of population-level policies as well as individual approaches to health promotion and pays special attention to the needs of the most vulnerable populations. The defining characteristic that makes global health “global,” however, is its central concern with the interconnectedness among populations, the transfer of health risks across national borders, and the consequences of globalization on evolving patterns of health, disease, and social determinants.

Global health knowledge depends on an understanding of the principal health problems of different populations, ranging from their physiological basis to their epidemiological context. Essential in the study of global health are the rigorous methods for measuring population health; the analytic tools necessary for decision making; and the evidence base for the effectiveness, risks, and costs of interventions, ranging from individual health services to population-based instruments of policy. Because global health challenges are diverse and interdisciplinary, information from the basic sciences, applied life sciences, and social sciences—including economics, biostatistics, and demography—is all critical to learn about health conditions that result from a world that is becoming ever more interdependent. Some of the most fundamental challenges in global health relate to (1) an unfinished agenda of infections, malnutrition, maternal-child health problems, (2) the rise of non-communicable diseases and injuries, and (3) emerging health risks that transcend national boundaries. To understand these challenges, it is important to study patterns of global morbidity and mortality; identify determinants that contribute to health inequalities; and discuss both the challenges and responsibility to provide health services to the most vulnerable, including populations of failed or fragile states, refugees, and victims of humanitarian crises and human rights violations. Case studies and comparative exercises can help you to confront ethical challenges associated with priority setting, learn how real world policy is critically influenced by cultural norms, systemic factors, health system capacity, and the economic, social, and political climate, and consider the complex process of how knowledge is translated to evidence-based policy.

## What is knowledge translation?

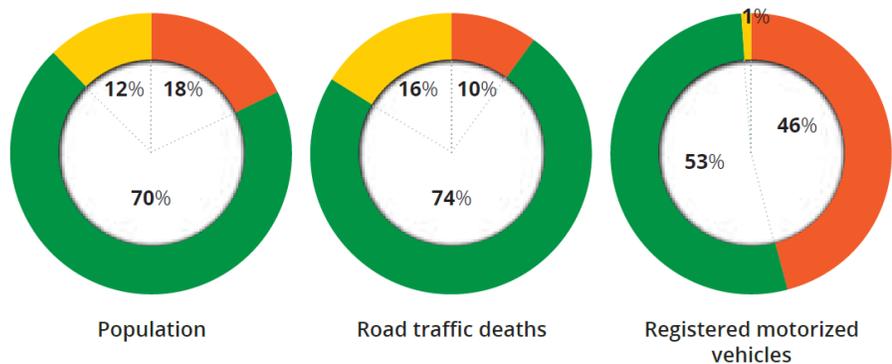
Knowledge produced through research must be translated into understandable, accessible, and relevant evidence that can be used by decision makers to mobilize resources, formulate policy, implement programs, and evaluate impact. However, shortcomings found in the translation process mean that evidence is not always utilized as effectively as it could be. Indeed, research findings are often not synthesized, packaged, or contextualized for those very audiences that could have the largest benefit. The resulting discontinuity between research and action is sometimes referred to as the “knowledge-action gap.”

Written communication skills are a key component of effective knowledge translation and a critical tool for successfully meeting global health challenges. Knowledge translation is a process that brings together the often disparate realms of research and action to ensure that health practices, behaviors, and policies are based on reliable evidence. The concept of knowledge translation includes more than the simple handing off of evidence from the researcher to the end user, a process that is sometimes termed “dissemination.” Rather, knowledge translation involves refining or transforming evidence to make it comprehensible and meaningful for the recipient who will be reviewing and/or implementing it. This process requires not only selecting specific information but also organizing and packaging it in ways that vary with both the creator’s intentions and the audience’s needs. Effective knowledge translation therefore requires communication and partnerships between researchers and key stakeholders who must understand and use the research; these various audiences include policy-makers, health care practitioners, journalists, administrators, and the general public.<sup>1</sup>

The plethora of public health policy research and the variety of audiences it must reach present considerable challenges to translating knowledge in this field. For one thing, as with any piece of writing, you have to choose material that can be used both to convey your intentions and to satisfy the audience’s requirements, a task that is obviously more complicated when you are faced with voluminous data sources. You also have to determine clear, coherent, and effective ways to organize and present the data before beginning the writing process, and, as you write and edit, make specific rhetorical choices to suit different audiences. For example, you will generally want to include more detail, references, and technical jargon in a document intended for a technical audience than in one intended for non-specialists. The main purpose of this writing guide is to assist you with the creation of a policy brief, and it includes examples of different charts, graphs, and tables to give a better sense of the variety of evidence you may want to consider in communicating your point.

### Population, road traffic deaths and registered motorized vehicles<sup>a</sup>, by country income status

■ High-income ■ Middle-income ■ Low-income



<sup>a</sup> Population relates to 2013, see Explanatory Note 1. Registered vehicle data provided only for countries participating in the survey.

Source: Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015. World Health Organization 2015. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/road\\_safety\\_status/2015/en](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/road_safety_status/2015/en).

# Framework for Analyzing Policy Choices

An obvious prerequisite to effective translation and communication about global health challenges is a comprehensive understanding of the problem and an analysis of the policy choices. However, contemporary global health problems are generally complex, interdisciplinary, and dependent on context. A rubric can be a helpful tool to guide a systematic approach to identifying the elements of the problem, ensuring that the many kinds of information required for the analysis have been considered, and that the process for comparing different options is comprehensive in its scope. The framework proposed by Stokey and Zeckhauer in 1978 is one of the most useful frameworks used to guide policy analysis.<sup>2</sup> The authors proposed that any accurate analysis must consist of the following five-step framework:

1. Establishing the context. Who are the stakeholders, decision makers, influential actors? What is the nature of the problem and the decision or policy choice that needs to be made? What are the contextual factors included in the case that would be important to consider?
2. Laying out the alternatives. What are the realistic and feasible options? What information is needed about the different options or strategies? What are the attributes of each alternative? Are there obvious tradeoffs? What is the timing of the decision and the implementation of the policy choices?
3. Predicting the consequences. Given the information about each alternative or strategy described above, what would the expected outcomes be for each of the choices? Which will be most effective? Would subpopulations differentially benefit? (e.g., rural versus urban, children versus adults, etc.)
4. Valuing the outcomes. What are the decision making criteria—meaning what outcomes are valued by the decision maker or stakeholders (e.g., improving health, reducing risk, promoting equity, preferential protection of the poorest, etc.)
5. Making a choice. Formulate a recommendation based on the systematic process. Where are the key uncertainties? Which factors were most influential? Where would you have liked better information? Would you have made the same recommendation if the context significantly changed, for example a different setting?

Employing a framework such as this will aid both you and your intended audience, whose comprehension of the subject matter will be enhanced by a well-defined methodology. Each step follows from the preceding one, and while your specific goal may require the use of only one—for instance, describing the current circumstances of an epidemic may only require the first step—for an analysis, you cannot remove any steps. For instance, any value you place on potential policy choices will be weakened if you have not previously summarized all the options available. Likewise, you cannot predict the consequences of an action without a complete understanding of its contextualized background. We will rely on this rubric as we proceed through the written exercises for policy communication.

## Communication Tools

There are a range of print tools routinely used to translate knowledge about global health, including, but not limited to, research articles, editorials, fact sheets, and policy briefs. Each of these tools has a distinctive format and style, but every one of them, correctly applied, serves a critical function in conveying global health information to a variety of audiences.

Choosing which tool to apply to convey a given message is not determined by the issue itself but by the underlying objective, message, motivation, and target audience. Knowing the audience—and why they are being targeted—is key not only to selecting an appropriate communication tool, but also to ensuring that the document successfully communicates the message. As the accompanying box suggests, the target audience may consist of policy makers, technical or disciplinary experts, practitioners, or the public. Technical experts are much more likely reached using a research article than a fact sheet. On the other hand, for the public, a fact sheet could be an excellent choice, while a research article is likely to leave the message unheard.

### Translation in Global Health: Written Communication

		SELECTED EXAMPLES			
		Research Article	Editorial	Fact Sheet	Policy Brief
TARGET AUDIENCE	Policy Makers				
	Technical Experts				
	Practitioners				
	Public				

Indicates a common primary target audience  
 Indicates a potential secondary target audience

# Building Skills to Write a Policy Brief

Policy briefs about global health topics may vary in their format and content. For the purpose of this writing guide, we will focus on those which start by introducing a specific policy issue and address the following general purposes:

1. Convince a specific audience that a problem matters;
2. Clearly present a set of available and feasible options to address that problem;
3. Cogently argue for and against these options; and
4. Make specific recommendations to motivate action to address the problem.

A policy brief can be challenging to write as it must be concisely written but also carefully constructed so that each section flows logically into the next, and because it should be based on accurate information and high-quality evidence drawn from a variety of disciplines. The following are the typical components of an effective policy brief: title, executive summary, delineation of the problem, description of the options, analysis of the options, recommendation, and, sometimes, addenda such as references or recommended reading.

## Overview of Communication Tools

This writing guide has been designed to help you understand, and learn to utilize, two specific communication tools, using three separate optional exercises. The first two exercises will familiarize you with different components of a policy brief and provide an opportunity to practice some of the skills that are necessary for creating an effective one. The third tool, developing a 3-page policy brief, will challenge you to integrate these tools with the lecture material, and will be very similar to your final exam.

## Exercise 1: Writing a Fact Sheet

### *Purpose and Content*

Fact sheets communicate public health knowledge to a variety of audiences. They can provide background information, an overview of the features of a new measure or strategy, a timeline of events, or a detailed question-and-answer discussion. An effective fact sheet typically provides answers to questions such as:

- What is the public health issue or global health challenge?
- What is the magnitude of the problem? What are the health consequences?
- What are the risk factors? Who is most affected?
- Are there non-health consequences (e.g., economic, social, political) from this problem?
- How is this particular problem related to other global health challenges?
- What are the available interventions, strategies, and policies to address this problem?

### Sample Fact from a Fact Sheet

Avian influenza (AI) is an infectious viral disease of birds (especially wild water fowl such as ducks and geese), often causing no apparent signs of illness. AI viruses can sometimes spread to domestic poultry and cause large-scale outbreaks of serious disease. Some of these AI viruses have also been reported to cross the species barrier and cause disease or subclinical infections in humans and other mammals.<sup>3</sup>

The primary function of the fact sheet is to provide information in a style that facilitates quick and easy absorption and comprehension. **As a conduit for objective fact, the purpose is to inform (not persuade toward specific action, which is one of the key differences for the purposes of this course between a fact sheet and a policy brief), which means it should be free from overt bias and opinion.** However, a well-written fact sheet can still be persuasive by clarifying a complex or misunderstood subject.

### *Audience*

A fact sheet might be written for either a lay or a technical audience. For example, a fact sheet for the general public could address aspects of seasonal flu prevention critical for use in people's homes. Alternatively, a fact sheet might provide technical information to policymakers, politicians, and other leaders as they consider alternative health investments and programs.

Once you understand your audience, you should look for ways to shape your presentation so it communicates facts to them most effectively. If the intended audience is the general public, for example, attention grabbing visual displays—such as a chart showing how the H1N1 flu (avian influenza) might be spread from person to person—might help attract and retain reader interest. For a more technical audience, you may also want to use a chart or graph to present data with maximum clarity.

## Style & Formatting

A fact sheet generally contains a limited amount of information, yet it should be comprehensive and self-contained. Often fact sheets are bulleted and sub-bulleted for easier consumption by the intended audience, although this is by no means the only effective format. Some writers choose to bold the first few words of each bulleted section, so that readers can easily skim to sections of immediate interest.

Although a fact sheet should be comprehensive, inevitably it will leave some aspects of the issue unresolved. This is because writing a fact sheet inherently involves making decisions about which of many facts are the most critical for a particular audience. Therefore, the end of the fact sheet often includes a section listing high-quality resources where readers can find more information and explore various facets of the issue or intervention in more depth.

## Model Fact Sheets

One of the best ways to understand how to translate public health knowledge into a fact sheet for a specific audience is to look at some examples. How to choose the kind of information you would like to include and how to structure your fact sheet will depend on your audience. While there is no such thing as an ideal fact sheet because it is so dependent on the audience and purpose, we present a few fact sheets below in a variety of informally defined styles that each have different strengths:

- **“Graphical” Fact Sheet**  
World Health Organization, “Maternal deaths, by WHO region, 2015” (Figure A.1.2)  
[http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world\\_health\\_statistics/2016/whs2016\\_AnnexA\\_MaternalMortality.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/2016/whs2016_AnnexA_MaternalMortality.pdf?ua=1)
- **“Bullet Point” Fact Sheet**  
UNFPA, “The Power of 1.8 Billion: Adolescents, Youth and the Transformation of the Future: Asia”  
<http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/SWOP%202014%20fact%20sheet%20-%20Youth%20in%20ASIA.pdf>
- **“Narrative” Fact Sheet**  
World Health Organization, “Zika Virus”  
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/zika/en>  
(updated 6 September 2016)
- **“Technical” Fact Sheet**  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Technical Fact Sheet: Eastern Equine Encephalitis”  
<https://www.cdc.gov/easternequineencephalitis/tech/factsheet.html>  
(updated 5 April 2016)

When you look at these models, ask yourself the following questions:

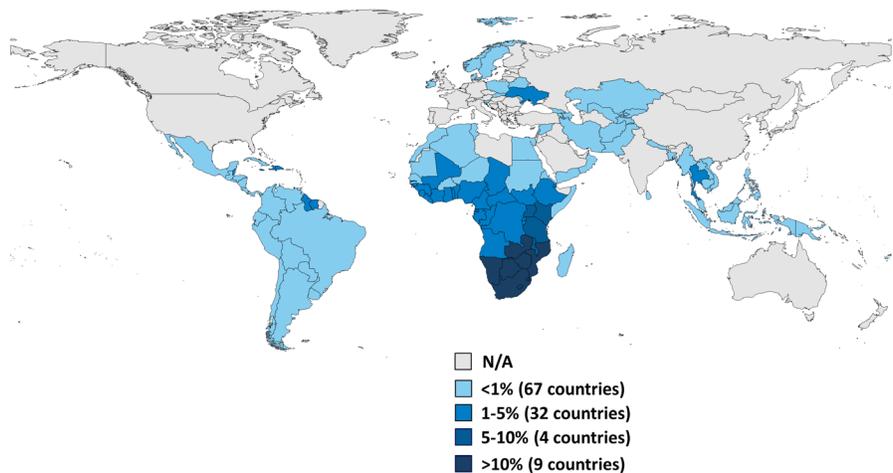
- What is the topic being addressed? Is this topic accurately reflected in the sheet's title?
- Who is the intended audience? How are tone, diction, layout, and evidence shaped to reach that particular audience?
- Does the fact sheet begin with an overview of the topic? Does it provide background information about the topic's relevance and relationship to broader public health issues?
- How are the facts divided and subdivided? Does this approach enhance the accessibility and comprehensibility of the information?
- Are any boxes used to pull out key points?
- Are any charts, graphs, tables, and/or pictures included? If so, how do these contribute to the message being conveyed?

### Key Points to Remember

- **Stick to the facts.** Do not include personal opinions or those of any other experts.
- **Be concise.** A fact sheet is a compact document that provides essential, empirically-based information on a specific subject and that is meant to be absorbed at a glance. Brevity is critical.
- **Be as inclusive as possible.** Choose your information judiciously so that despite being concise, you present a relatively complete picture to your intended audience.

## Adult HIV Prevalence Rate, 2014

Global HIV/AIDS Prevalence Rate = 0.8%



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation 2015; based on UNAIDS, How AIDS Changed Everything. <http://kff.org/global-health-policy/slide/adult-hiv-prevalence-rate>.

## Exercise 2: Critiquing a Policy Brief

### *Purpose and Content*

A policy brief is written for, and often at the request of, a person who can control how research can be used to shape policy. This person is usually a decision maker, but some policy briefs also target a broader audience comprised of people who are generally knowledgeable but are not specialists in the area under discussion, a group that may include journalists, diplomats, administrators, or other researchers. Policy briefs are not research papers but compelling overviews of a problem that lead to a proposed solution or course of action. **By providing a clear and concise view of a problem and persuasively presenting solutions for remedying it, the policy brief fulfills one of public health's most critical goals: clearly presenting recommendations to decision makers to serve as an impetus for action.**

### Key Elements of an Effective Policy Brief

- An explanation of why this issue deserves the decision maker's attention.
- A consideration of challenges to addressing the issue.
- A presentation of options or interventions available to the decision maker.
- A compelling recommendation for action.

### *How Policy Briefs Use Evidence*

Like a traditional academic research paper, a policy brief uses evidence to support its points. However, policy briefs differ from research papers in a variety of fundamental ways. Whereas academic papers aim to contribute to a body of knowledge within an academic specialty, policy briefs aim to stimulate action to resolve real-world problems. Academic papers are also targeted at readers who specialize in the paper's topic. In contrast, policy briefs are targeted at decision makers who may be generally knowledgeable but are not experts in the area being addressed.

These distinctions require that writers of policy briefs handle evidence differently than writers of research papers. To write a policy brief, you must select, shape, and present evidence not to build understanding, as in a research paper, but rather to provide a **comprehensive and concisely elaborated foundation** for the final recommendation. Despite the common assumption that data and research are objective and speak for themselves, evidence means nothing in a vacuum. In fact, evidence only has meaning when it is put into a certain context—that is, “framed” or shaped to support a particular perspective or argument. In the case of policy briefs, this means that merely providing information is not enough: you must apply that information directly to specific, real-world situations. For example, in a policy brief arguing for quarantining an entire city to prevent the spread of a pandemic flu you may cite 10 studies that confirm the appallingly high rate of flu deaths, but these statistics will be meaningless in the context of the brief unless you also show what these studies imply for the city in question and how they relate to the proposed quarantine.

Convincing readers that a recommendation is desirable and practical also requires writers of policy briefs to make overt value judgments about evidence. To some extent

all writers make value judgments, at least implicitly, in determining the relative weight of evidence or the importance of an argument. However, in writing a policy brief, you must make explicit value judgments about each piece of evidence as you determine how it relates to the feasibility and desirability of your proposed solution. In addition, this judgment involves a broad consideration of the evidence from a number of perspectives, not just scientific ones. Not only will you be considering the scientific accuracy and significance of the data, but also their cultural, political, and socioeconomic implications from the perspective of the target audience.

### *Attributes of Effective Policy Briefs*

There is no single formula for writing an effective policy brief. Some briefs devote most of their effort to outlining a problem, while others devote more space to evaluating the options or providing a recommendation. Policy briefs also differ in terms of their visual presentation. Some divide their text by using questions, some use bullets, while others sprinkle text boxes and anecdotes throughout the document. The specific approach, emphasis, and layout of your policy brief will vary depending on your subject, the evidence supporting it, and the target audience. However, all effective briefs share several common attributes:

**A clearly identified audience.** A brief with a clearly identified audience is most likely to be read, understood, and, most importantly, acted upon by its readers. The tone, style, diction, and content of an effective policy brief all provide clues about the audience that the writer intends to reach.

**Language and format suitable to that audience.** Because almost every policy brief is aimed at non-specialized but generally knowledgeable readers, the most effective briefs have a professional tone, but use **clear and simple language** and **avoid technical, academic jargon**. Readers of these documents are generally smart, busy people who want the bottom line: the nature and importance of the problem as well as feasible solutions, all grounded in convincing evidence. These readers don't have time for the methods used to obtain this evidence—information more suited to a specialized, academic readership.

**Helpful signposts and orienting information.** Writing for busy decision makers also means finding effective ways to grab and hold the reader's attention. **Color, logos, photographs, and/or illustrative quotations** can help catch the reader's eye. **Subdivisions using clear, descriptive titles** can break up the text, highlight main points, and guide the reader through the argument.

**Balance between length and breadth.** To build a compelling case without overloading readers with information, policy briefs also have to **balance limited space with comprehensive presentation**. That is why the most effective policy briefs are generally **limited to three pages or fewer** and **focus on a particular problem or aspect of a problem**. **Charts, tables, and graphs** can also help convey large amounts of information succinctly and accessibly.

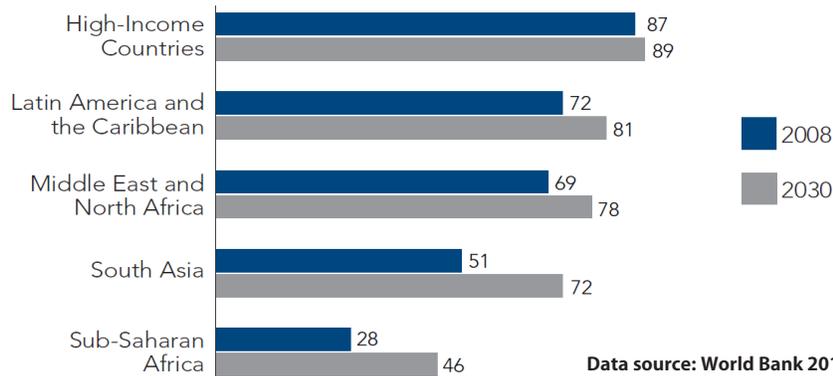
## Packing a Lot of Information into a Little Space

Decision makers expect the facts in policy briefs to be well-supported, but they aren't interested in personally wading through the evidence. That's why successful policy briefs emphasize the findings of a study rather than how the findings were derived. This is how a policy brief recommending ways to protect Latin American and Caribbean youth from the rising burden of non-communicable diseases establishes the importance of the problem:

**“While infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis capture much of the world’s attention and resources, the four major NCDs— cardiovascular disease, most cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases—will account for approximately 81 percent of deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by 2030 and 89 percent of all deaths in high-income countries.”**

This brief uses the figure reproduced below to effectively reinforce this message, packing a lot of information in a small space that is both visually appealing and persuasive.<sup>4</sup>

### Percent of total deaths attributed to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) by region



Source: Noncommunicable Diseases and Youth: A Critical Window of Opportunity for Latin America/Caribbean. Population Reference Bureau 2013. <http://www.prb.org/pdf13/noncommunicable-diseases-latin-america-youth-policybrief.pdf>.

**Logically-organized, persuasive arguments.** The policy brief has a clear goal: to convince the target audience of the need for action. To accomplish this, effective briefs build an argument systematically, logically piecing together facts and analysis to build a compelling case for their recommendation.

**Evidence-based, value-driven arguments.** Policy briefs reflect value-based judgments that broadly assess data based on a wide range of societal and scientific considerations. The argument of an effective policy brief must be based not only on valid, reliable data, but also on value-laden judgments about the suitability of its recommendations within a particular culture and setting.

**Practical, feasible, and culturally-appropriate recommendations.** Because policy briefs are written for policy practitioners, its recommendations have to be “actionable”—realistically applicable in the setting in which the policymaker works. An actionable recommendation is achievable, accessible, practical, and affordable in terms of lives, dollars, or other resources—qualities that may differ from one setting to the next. It must also respect the cultural context of the audience. A policy brief advocating family planning programs in Afghanistan has to consider the lack of adequate facilities, health infrastructure, and skilled human resources in that country. Similarly, a brief addressing unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion in Nigeria must consider the cultural and economic changes in that country that underlie the problem, as well as the fact that abortion is illegal in Nigeria except to save a woman’s life.

### Deconstructing a Policy Brief’s Logical Story

Breaking down an existing policy brief is a useful way to understand the relationship between the logical story that underlies every successful brief and the finished document it engenders. Consider, for example, a policy brief published by the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization advocating remedial actions to address world hunger.<sup>5</sup>

This brief makes its case through a series of specific points, each supported by evidence and analysis, and each building on the preceding points in a way that leads readers toward the brief’s final recommendation:

- There are unprecedented numbers of hungry, undernourished people in the world today that will increase without immediate and substantial remediation.
- The global economic crisis and persistently high food prices underlie this sharp increase in world hunger.
- A global food security crisis and globalization have made the current economic crisis particularly severe and historically unprecedented.
- The global economic crisis has hit developing countries through both financial and commercial channels that have undermined their food security and economic growth.
- Rising hunger and food insecurity are affecting all world regions, including developed countries.
- The poor cope with this crisis by making a variety of undesirable compromises.
- Several available policy responses—specifically, safety nets and social protection—could ameliorate this situation.
- It is important to keep agriculture on the policy agenda.

You might try to identify the key points in the policy brief you choose to critique. Does the writer present points that flow logically from one to the next? Is each point supported by evidence?

## Model Policy Briefs

- Global Health 2035, “Achieving a Grand Convergence in Health”  
<http://globalhealth2035.org/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/policy-brief-1-english.pdf>
- World Health Organization, “Transition to New HIV/AIDS Treatment Regimens – Procurement and Supply Chain Management Issues”  
[http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85514/1/WHO\\_HIV\\_2013.10\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85514/1/WHO_HIV_2013.10_eng.pdf)
- World Health Organization, “Uganda Advancing the Integration of Palliative Care in the National Health System 2013”  
<http://www.who.int/entity/evidence/sure/PCBExecSummarySept2013.pdf?ua=1>
- World Health Organization, “Multi-Sector Determinants of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health”  
[http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/events/2013/au\\_policy\\_brief\\_determinants.pdf](http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/events/2013/au_policy_brief_determinants.pdf)

How are they similar? How are they different? Read them closely, looking for ways in which the writer selected and presented evidence to support his or her recommendation. Go through each brief, circling all the places that present evidence and underlining all the places that convey an opinion regarding or analysis of that evidence. Identify the main points of the argument and determine how they are used to tell a simple, logical story that leads to the author’s conclusions.

## General Approach to Critiquing a Policy Brief

A policy brief critique generally includes each of the following:

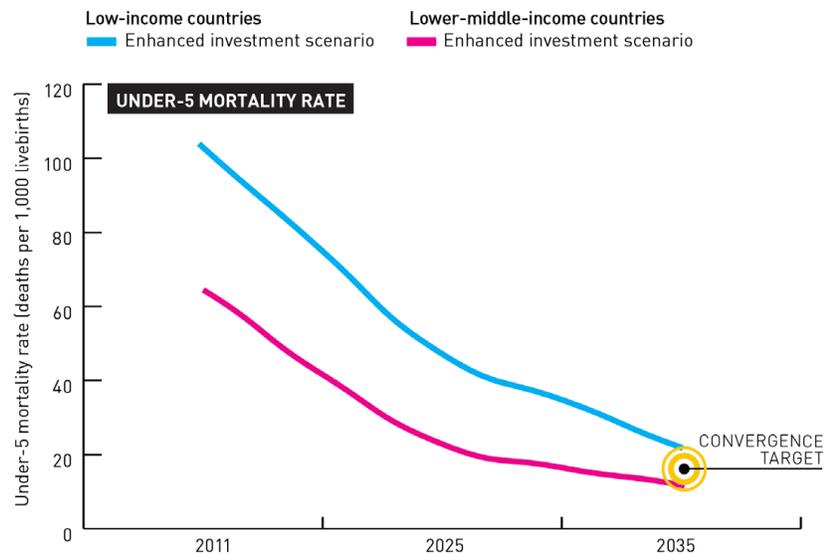
- Summary of the brief (e.g. description of global health issue, why it is a problem, intended audience, overview of challenges, recommendations, etc.)
- Critique of the brief (e.g. appropriate use of tone, language, and style for intended audience, logical flow, inclusion of 4 key elements, weight given to each element, success conveying a clear and concise view of a problem and recommendations, etc.)
- Ways to improve the brief (e.g. include missing information, give more weight to specific key elements, provide more evidence or opinion, incorporate additional details on recommendations, etc.)

## Key Questions to Consider in Your Critique

- What global health problem is the brief addressing?
- Who is the intended audience? How do the tone, style, language, and level of detail reflect the needs of that particular audience?
- What role does evidence play in the brief’s introduction?
- Does the brief have a logical flow? Can you identify the four “key elements” (i.e. why the issue deserves attention, challenges to addressing the issue, presentation of options or interventions available, and a compelling recommendation for action)? How much weight is given to each?
- How are the recommendations laid out on the page? Is the level of detail given to some of the options significantly different from that given to others?

- How do headers, pull-out quotes, boxes, graphs, references, tables, pictures, and/or charts strengthen the brief?
- Is the entire brief a mix of evidence and opinion, or are some sections weighted more toward one or the other? If there are differences, at what point or points does the balance shift from presenting evidence to opinion?
- What conclusions do you draw after considering the delineation and analysis of options? Do you feel that the author is leading you in one direction or another? Why?
- Is this brief effective in conveying a clear and concise view of a problem and persuasively presenting solutions for remedying it?
- Is there any information you feel is missing and should have been included in the brief?

## Enhanced health investments in areas with high child mortality rates could have a dramatic impact by 2035



Source: "Achieving a Grand Convergence in Health." The Lancet/Global Health 2035 2014. <http://globalhealth2035.org/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/policy-brief-1-english.pdf>.

## Exercise 3: Writing a Policy Brief

### *Purpose and Content*

By integrating fact, policy options, and the author's well-reasoned opinion to produce evidence-based recommendations to a targeted audience, policy briefs combine key features of fact sheets and commentaries. At the same time, policy briefs fulfill one of public health's most critical goals: presenting recommendations to policymakers clearly and succinctly to serve as an impetus for action.

Before you begin, make sure you think about...

- Have you identified a clear problem to address? Can you summarize it succinctly?
- Do you have sufficient evidence to support your claim that a problem exists?
- Have you outlined and evaluated the possible policy options that could solve this problem?
- Do you have sufficient evidence to argue effectively for one policy alternative over the others?

Have you applied the framework introduced on page 3?

### *Audience*

Determining exactly who will be using your brief is essential. In nearly all cases the intended audience of a policy brief will also be a decision maker—and usually a busy one without the time or inclination to wade through copious data. That is why your policy brief should be as concise as possible, condensing just enough of the available research on a specific topic to justify a practical recommendation.

You should also know enough about your audience to decide whether to explain scientific terms and spell out acronyms or whether your audience would consider this approach condescending. One option is to include a glossary of acronyms to which readers can easily refer.

### *Style & Formatting*

Determining the length of your policy brief is a significant decision. If you write in too much length, you risk losing your audience. If your brief is too short, you won't have enough space to summarize key data and make a compelling argument.

While some policy briefs are longer, we have provided examples here that are in the approximate range (2-4 pages) of what you might have to do for your assignment. Be sure to consult the assignment guidelines once they are posted.

### Key Points to Remember

- **Determine your emphasis by considering your audience.** While a good policy brief will attempt to synthesize all relevant information, it can also emphasize one particular aspect of an issue that most interests its intended audience. An organization like the World Bank could be looking for an analysis that focuses on the economics of a particular intervention, for example, while the American Heart Association might be more interested in the health benefits associated with that same intervention.
- **Hook your audience.** Use the introduction of your brief to give an overview of the significance, relevance, and urgency of the problem, which will draw in the reader. You can often do this using statistics about the magnitude or extent of the problem, a well-documented prediction, or an anecdote showing a disturbing trend. After hooking the audience, many authors also use the introduction as an abstract or executive summary of the entire brief, providing a concise description of the argument up front.
- **Build a case.** Don't include evidence just because it's accurate, interesting, or even important. Only include evidence that helps build your case. Your goal should be to synthesize information into a series of clear, compact, coherent points that support your recommended course of action rather than merely listing information (as you would for a fact sheet).
- **Keep it simple.** The intended decision maker is most likely not an expert in the field being addressed. Therefore, while you should be thorough, you must cover your points as simply and succinctly as possible, emphasizing findings and statistics over the methodology required to determine them.
- **The style should be jargon-free.** Keep the argument easy-to-follow for a non-academic audience. Unless you are writing for a highly specialized audience, explain technical issues and solutions in non-technical terms.
- **Consider using headings to increase accessibility.** Headers can serve as signposts that keep readers moving in the right direction and remind them of just where they are in the course of your argument. They can not only break up long passages but also signal the message you want to send in each section. Headers can also take the form of statements, labels, or questions. For additional guidance, some authors break up larger sections into subsections.
- **Aim to inspire action, not just inform.** An effective policy brief should not only convince readers that a specific course of action makes sense, but also compel them to make it happen.
- **Add graphics or tables to boost your case.** Selective and judicious use of figures and tables can significantly augment your position and provide data and statistics in visual form. Graphics can both add illustrative evidence and simultaneously keep the policy brief within a reasonable length.

- **Cite your sources.** Your policy brief must appropriately cite your sources with either footnotes or endnotes. The most commonly used formats for notes are The Chicago Manual of Style, The American Psychological Association (APA), and the Modern Language Association (MLA). You can access formatting guidelines for these and other styles online. Some examples:

“Harvard Guide to Using Sources,” Harvard College Writing Center  
<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

“Research and Citation Resources,” Purdue University Online Writing Lab  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2>

“Citation Styles” resources available through Williams College Libraries  
<http://library.williams.edu/citing/styles>

# Writing Support at Harvard

## Harvard College Writing Center

Barker Center, ground floor  
[writingcenter@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:writingcenter@fas.harvard.edu)  
<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu>

The Writing Center offers hour-long, one-on-one conferences with trained staff to help with various stages of paper planning, writing, and editing.

## Bureau of Study Counsel

5 Linden Street  
617-495-2581  
<http://bsc.harvard.edu>

The Bureau of Study Counsel offers academic and psychological support through services including counseling, consulting, and peer tutoring, as well as workshops in writing.

## Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Center for Writing and Communicating Ideas  
Dudley House 203  
<https://gsas.harvard.edu/center-writing-and-communicating-ideas>

The Center for Writing and Communicating Ideas (CWCI) seeks to provide GSAS students with the means to enhance the clarity and depth of their communications, supporting the leading role of GSAS research in the world.

## House Tutors in Academic Writing

Several undergraduate houses have resident or non-resident writing tutors who hold regular drop-in hours to help students with their writing. Contact your House Tutor for further information.

# References

<sup>1</sup> Bennett G, Jessani N, Eds. 2011. Sage India, International Development Research Centre. The Knowledge Translation Toolkit: Bridging the Know-Do Gap: A Resource for Researchers. <http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/IDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=851>.

<sup>2</sup> Stokey E & Zeckhauer R. A Primer for Policy Analysis. W. W. Norton & Company. 1978.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. 2014. Avian influenza: Fact sheet. [http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/avian\\_influenza/en](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/avian_influenza/en).

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin W et al. 2013. Noncommunicable Diseases and Youth: A Critical Window of Opportunity for Latin America/Caribbean. Population Reference Bureau. <http://www.prb.org/pdf13/noncommunicable-diseases-latin-america-youth-policy-brief.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2009. More people than ever are victims of hunger. [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/newsroom/docs/Press%20release%20june-en.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/newsroom/docs/Press%20release%20june-en.pdf).

## Additional Writing and Data Related Resources

### *Additional resources on how to write policy briefs*

David D, Evans M, Jada A, et al. The case for knowledge translation: shortening the journey from evidence to effect. *BMJ* 2003;327(7405):33-5.

Hanney SR, Gonzalez-Block MA, Buxton MJ, et al. The utilization of health research in policy-making: concepts, examples and methods of assessment. *Health Research Policy and Systems* 2003; 1(1):2.

Jones N, Walsh C. 2008. Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research. Overseas Development Institute. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/594.pdf>.

Lavis JM, Robertson D, Woodside JM, et al. How can research organizations more effectively transfer research knowledge to decision makers. *The Milbank Quarterly* 2003; 81(2):221-248.

Wewers D. 2007. A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper. Harvard College Writing Program. [http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg\\_writing\\_history.pdf](http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_history.pdf).

### *Additional sources for data and example figures*

Kaiser Family Foundation: <http://kff.org/global-health-policy>

UNICEF Country Data: <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry>

Population Reference Bureau: <http://www.prb.org>

WHO Global Health Observatory: <http://www.who.int/gho/en>

WHO World Health Statistics Report: [http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world\\_health\\_statistics/en](http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/en)

World Bank World Development Indicator Data: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>

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