



How to write a policy brief

Topics

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A close-up photograph of a white notebook resting on a wooden surface. The notebook is open to a page with a hand-drawn diagram in blue ink. The diagram consists of several rectangular boxes arranged in a grid-like structure, with some boxes containing text that is mostly illegible due to blurring. A box at the bottom right of the diagram contains the word "MORE...". A green 'X' is drawn on the page below the diagram. Two yellow sticky tabs are attached to the left edge of the notebook. The background is a blue world map graphic.

Planning your policy brief

What is a policy brief?

- A short document that presents the findings and recommendations of a research project to a non-specialized audience
- A medium for exploring an issue and distilling lessons learned from the research
- A vehicle for providing policy advice

Work within parameters

A policy brief is:

- A stand alone document
- Focused on a single topic
- No more than 2-4 pages (1,500 words)



Writing for your audience

Who are your readers?

Ask yourself:

- Who am I writing this brief for?
- How knowledgeable are they about the topic?
- How open are they to the message?

How can I reach readers?

- What questions need answers?
- What are their interests, concerns?
- What does it take to reach specific readers such as media, decision-makers?

Use the power of persuasion

- Answer the question “What value does this have for me?”
- Describe the urgency of the situation
- Speak in terms of benefits and advantages



Choosing Your Content

Apply a laser focus

- Focus on a single topic
- Define your purpose
- Identify salient points that support the aim
- Distil points to essential info
- Limit yourself to 1,500 words



Putting the brief together

Policy brief template

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Approach and Results
- Conclusion
- Implications and Recommendations

Lead with a short statement

The executive statement will:

- Distil the essence of the brief
- Provide an overview for busy readers
- Entice readers to go further
- Appear on cover or top of first page
- Be written last

Example:

Elephants are one of the big five wildlife species; their survival is one of the holy grails of conservation. Unfortunately, because of their size and migratory behaviour, elephants often come in contact with people. This is especially true in densely populated southeast Asia. A new study from Sri Lanka looks at one strategy to address this problem – electric fences.

Elephants and Electric Fences.

A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005

Introduction

- Answers the question *why*
- Explains the significance/urgency of the issue
- Describes the research objective
- Gives overview of findings, conclusions
- Creates curiosity for the rest of brief

Approaches and results

- Provides summary of the facts
- Describes issue and context
- Describes research and analysis
- Should not be overly technical
- Highlight benefits, opportunities

Approaches

- Explains how study was conducted
- Relates who conducted study
- Describes relevant background
- Identifies method used to collect data

Results: what did we learn?

- Make content easy to follow
- Start by painting a general picture
- Move from general to specific
- Base conclusions on results

Example:

Do the Fences Work?

Overall it was found that although the electric fencing does help...it is not capable of completely eliminating conflict. In each...area...technical as well as socio-economic factors affect....success. Technical failures mainly affected the early fences...Other problems resulted from failure to take into account elephant behaviour and distribution patterns.

Elephants and Electric Fences.
A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005

Conclusion: what does it mean?

- Use section to interpret data
- Aim for concrete conclusions
- Express ideas using strong assertions
- Ensure ideas are balanced and defensible
- If hypothesis was abandoned, explain why

Example:

Overall, it was found that although electric fencing does help mitigate human elephant conflict, it is not capable of completely eliminating the conflict. A social factor that affected the success of electric fences was whether the local community supported the project in their area. Community support was critical in several ways.

Elephants and Electric Fences.

A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005

Implications and recommendations

- Implications are what could happen
- Recommendations are what should happen
- Both flow from conclusion
- Both must be supported by evidence

Implications: if... then...

- Describe what the researcher thinks will be the consequences
- Less direct than recommendations
- Useful when advice not requested
- Softer approach but still can be persuasive

Recommendations: call to action

- Describe clearly what should happen next
- State as precise steps
- Ensure they are relevant, credible and feasible

Example:

A successful strategy to deal with the elephant problem must be much more far-reaching than it is at present. Such a strategy should include a comprehensive land use planning exercise where elephant habitats....are grouped and interconnected...The elephants' habitat should then be enriched and fenced.

Elephants and Electric Fences.

A study from Sri Lanka EEPSEA 2005



Designing the policy brief

Titles: add a little jazz

- Titles are a reference point
- Sub-titles break up text
- Both should entice readers
- Similar to headline writing
- Verb make them more dynamic
- Questions can pique curiosity

Sidebars can add extra depth

- Is extra to main discussion
- Is meant to “hook” reader
- Sidebars should be:
 - Short
 - Descriptive
 - Stimulating (ask questions)
 - Focused on action

Example:

Repair Bill Could Reach \$250 Million

The Mozambique government estimates that it will cost \$250 million to repair the damage from the cyclone and floods that struck Mozambique in February 2000. Early reports of the damage included the destruction of the following infrastructure: a key rail link used to bring in fuel and goods from Zimbabwe and South Africa; hundreds of kilometres of roads, which are fundamental to market reforms, among other things; electricity and telephone lines; more than 140 schools; and health centres.

Callouts

- Sentences or sentence fragments
- Printed in larger fonts
- Boxed or placed in margins

Example:

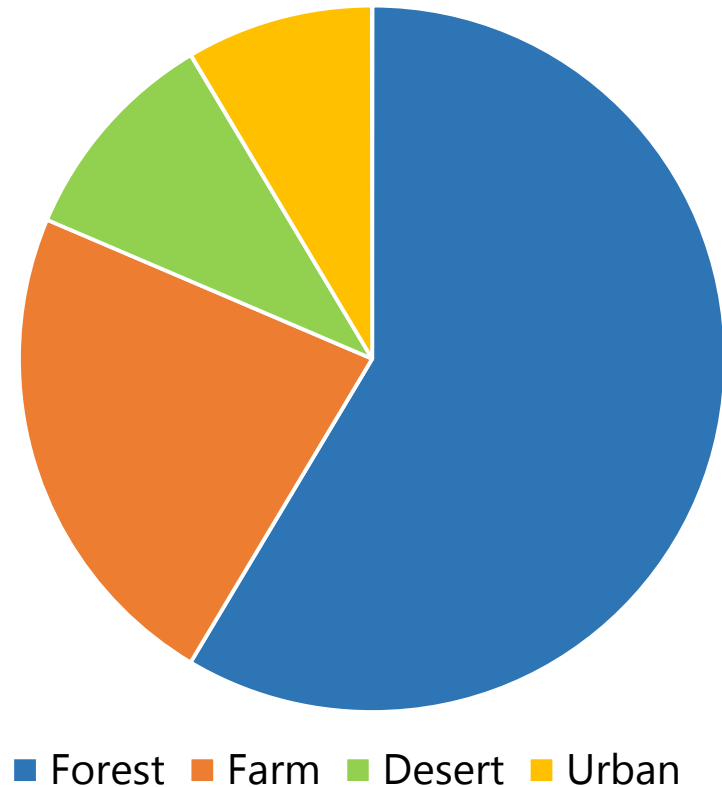
Electric fences are not a “stand alone” solution.

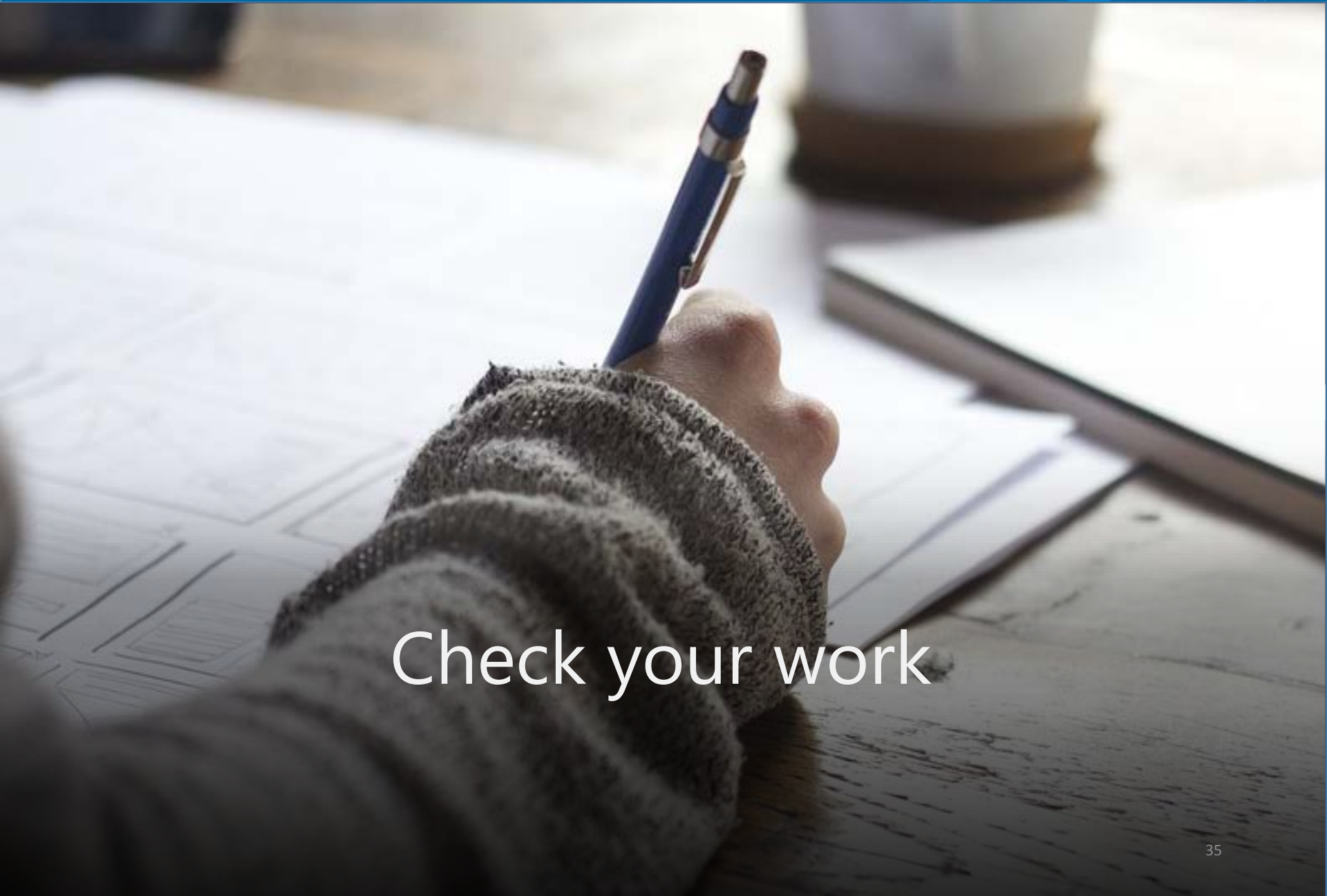
Bulleted lists

- Favour groups of 5 or 7
- Express completed thoughts
- Avoid tags (one or two word bullets)

Charts, photos, graphics

- Pie charts/bar graphs are better than tables
- Graphics simplify understanding
- Use captions to explain content





Check your work

Think ahead and look back

- Conduct a 20-second test: what stood out?
- Try to make it more user friendly
- Go on a jargon hunt
- Don't overuse statistics
- Check arguments, proof, persuasion
- Build a Q and A package



Good luck writing your policy brief!