



# EUC Paper Series

MAEUS TALK

## **Debunking Policy Briefs and Beyond: A Best-Practices Guide for Graduate Students**

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### **Graduate Level Writing**

As a graduate student, your duty is to begin to engage in an academic conversation within your field to boost your credibility and recognition as a young scholar. This is achieved by writing and publishing. However, breaking into the publishing realm is both difficult and intimidating, particularly for those in terminal masters degree programs with only two years to accomplish a multitude of tasks. A very suitable entry point into this realm is through policy briefs, especially if you can publish through your department. Policy briefs provide you with the opportunity to both expand upon the policies that fuel many debates in your field and gain practice synthesizing your ideas succinctly.

The most important questions you must ask yourself before writing a policy brief are, “What is the purpose?” and “Who is my audience?” A policy brief is meant to be a short, two-to-four-page analysis of one particular policy, distilling its main components and problems, and offering recommendations to the readers. It is primarily meant to serve as an argumentative

essay addressing well-supported concerns about a particular policy or approach. It can also act as a teaching tool about complex policies requiring a dialogue in order to grasp its full spectrum. You should synthesize the most important aspects of the policy, addressing what strides (or lack thereof) the policy makes, what issues it presents, and how you think it can be solved. This guide will provide you with some best practices for choosing a topic, designing a template, and writing a brief, in addition to some general practices that will help you write effectively.

### **Choosing a Topic**

There is a vast array of contentious policies that drive debates in academia and beyond. When choosing one, your first step should be to consult your colleagues, advisors, and professors to ask, if you do not already know, what are the most pressing issues in your field connected to these policies. This type of policy brief is meant to serve researchers, politicians, and decision-makers, most of whom are typically interested in quandaries they are trying to solve in the present. For example, in 2016, writing a policy brief on a European migration policy would be helpful,

timely, and would engage with a diverse audience. Or perhaps your ideas are a little closer to home. Maybe you were invited to address the university board about assistantship contracts. Writing a brief outlining well-supported research for or against their current policies or processes has the potential to be effective. Keeping these factors in perspective, it is also important that your passion for and interest in a topic should be the primary motivator when making your choice.

### **Writing for Your Audience**

Due to the brief nature of these writings, it is important to remember your target audience, whom you will identify in the preliminary stages of your brainstorming, researching, and writing. As previously suggested, these briefs are directed toward policy and law makers, likely with little time to spare. Your policy brief will be the successful if it is succinct, much like a cover letter, and have an effective hook at the beginning. Each word counts, particularly if you are writing for individuals who have little to no familiarity with the academic jargon associated with the policy topic. You want to present your question/dilemma/paradox by the end of your first paragraph.

### **Designing a Template**

After researching and determining your audience, your first step should be to create an outline. “On my list of maladaptive practices that make writing harder,” says Paul Silvia, author of *How to Write a Lot*, “not outlining is pretty high – just above Typing with Scratchy Wool Mittens, just below Training My Dog to Take Dictation” (Silvia, 2007: 79). Writing an outline, even a simple one, gives you a roadmap to follow when the mounds of sources, uncertainty, and

procrastination pull you into the deepest depths of the writer’s block forest.

Typical policy briefs include:

- Executive summary
- Introduction (which includes the context and importance of the problem)
- Discussion (including its approaches and results) and critique of the policy
- Conclusion, policy implications and recommendations
- Sources

Follow this template and adjust accordingly, depending on your individual needs.

### **Writing the Brief**

*Executive Summary:*

The executive summary should convince the reader that the policy requires further in-depth investigation. This summary is perhaps the most important portion of your brief because it will determine whether or not your audience will remain engaged. Think of it as carrying the same weight as an abstract for a journal article or thesis. The executive summary is typically one to two paragraph(s) and includes: the problem being addressed, why the policy needs to be changed or investigated, and your recommendations (Quinn and Young). This will be your roadmap for the rest of the brief.

*Introduction:*

The introduction will expand upon the problem, its root causes, its implications, and its importance (Quinn and Young). Relating its significance on a larger scale is essential, especially if you are focusing on a low politic issue/policy, meaning not related to major topics such as trade, immigration, security, and/or economics.

### *Discussion and Critique:*

Your discussion and critique is just that: a discussion and critique of the policy's shortcomings (Quinn and Young). You should address *how* and *why* the policy and/or its approaches are not succeeding. As in all scholarly writing, you must address all sides of the issue to ensure credibility.

### *Conclusion, Policy Implications, and Recommendations:*

This paragraph can vary depending on the nature of the policy and how in-depth the issue is. In general, this last section is reserved for your overall conclusion about the policy and/or approach, and what you recommend to solve the issue. You should break down step-by-step measures that you believe need to be implemented to solve the crisis (Quinn and Young). A succinct, closing paragraph can also be included, re-emphasizing the importance of your discussion.

### **Peer-Review**

Peer-review can be one of the most helpful steps in the writing process (see Lundstrom and Baker, 2009; Min, 2006). In the scholarly journal realm, it is an indication of higher quality research and writing which has been reviewed for appropriate facts, method, argument, grammar, citations, and much more. Settling some of this peer-review process prior to submitting your policy brief manuscript will help you develop your time-management and editorial skills. Reach out to peers with whom you can discuss your topics and ideas. This will promote fluidity and logic throughout your writing.

In the case of policy briefs, it is best to have someone who has written one review yours.

Qualified and reliable peer-review sources include: professors with experience in writing and submitting policy briefs, professionals in your discipline, etc. It can be equally as helpful to have someone with absolutely no knowledge of the subject read your brief. It is easy to lose readability and meaning with such a condensed piece, and having a fresh eye will help identify points that require more clarity. Having these individuals review your work will prove to be helpful in the long run. Your work and ideas will be available for the world to see. Make them good, and make them count.

### **General Writing Practices**

Before you delve into writing, it is important to establish good writing practices. Ineffective practices can result in an ineffective finished product that is messy, disorganized, and hard to read.

#### *Write Every Day*

Even if it is fifteen minutes, you should be writing (or editing) every day (Belcher, 2009; Lamot, 1994; Larivé, 2013). This encourages good writing habits, and helps you complete writing tasks on time. Karen Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* is a great resource to help keep yourself accountable to a writing schedule, as is Peg Boyle Single's *Demystifying Dissertation Writing* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Dr. Maxime Larivé's article, "How Blogging Helped Me Write My Dissertation" in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed.*, offers valuable insight into this process of writing everyday by way of blogging on a professional website. Not only does this help you write more often, but in many cases helps your thought process and writing style overall.

### *Write, then Edit*

Once you begin writing, it is important to understand that **writing** and **editing** should be two separate actions (Belcher, 2009). While your ideas and research methods may not be as developed as senior scholars, you must start somewhere in order to make progress. Without you, the field cannot continue. Be confident in what your mind produces. If you have doubts, the peer-review process will help you clarify and deliver a successful argument.

### **Publishing Your Brief**

Where to send your brief should depend, in part, on your intended audience. Many organizations and think tanks such as the Brookings Institution or Migration Policy Institute (MPI), which primarily address decision makers, politicians, and researchers, only publish in-house briefs written by their scholars. If you are addressing a very specific group – i.e., university administrators or city board members – your brief should be sent to them directly. In fact, you may be invited to speak with them and prepare a policy brief. If your intended audience is composed of fellow researchers, your best option is to look to your department and university first for publishing opportunities. Your inquiries may yield publishing with a small student-run operation or may afford you the opportunity to publish through another institution that will reach your intended audience and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed, publishing at the graduate level is a necessary, albeit intimidating, venture. Policy briefs are a reasonable entry point into the realm of scholarly publishing. They afford you the chance to contribute to your field and, due to their brief nature, require

you to deliver succinct ideas with high impact. A successful policy brief may include a salient topic in your field, will be tailored to the intended audience, be structurally organized, succinct with well-supported claims, and peer-reviewed. This guide provides you with the tools to achieve these points, write effectively, and produce quality policy briefs to positively impact governance and beyond.

### **Further Resources:**

IDRC's, "[Toolkit for Researchers](#)"  
Univ. California Davis', "[Policy Briefs 101](#)"

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*This best practices guide was developed based on the analysis and consultation of several sources and individuals, discussing topics relating to best writing practices, policy brief guides, and the art of publishing.*

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