

Moving your research results into practice through policy briefs

Writing one can be a great way to make your work more accessible.

BY LETITIA HENVILLE | NOV 16 2022

Question:

My latest study showed real problems in the current conventional supports for a specific, vulnerable population — in my case, people too young to advocate for their own needs — with a specific concern. A colleague suggested that I write a policy brief, but I've never written one before, and don't know where to start. Any suggestions?

– Anonymous, Sociology

Dr. Editor's response:

In my opinion, the best way to ensure that your research serves a public, community or particular stakeholder need is to bring members of that public, community, or stakeholder group into your research project from Day Zero. Your approach might take the form of [knowledge exchange](#), [integrated knowledge translation](#), [participatory action research](#), [bi-directional knowledge mobilization](#), [engaged scholarship](#), or some other framework. Such forms of research help your results to readily transfer into practice: if you have policymakers as co-researchers, you likely won't need to write a formal brief for them, because they'll already be keenly aware of your research and findings. Is my opinion backed by any evidence, other than what I've seen and heard? Nope — what recent research there is on this topic tends to be inconclusive (e.g. [Gagliardi et al., 2015](#); [McIsaac & Riley, 2020](#)); one source described this as “the ‘black box’ of researcher–policy maker partnerships” ([Lawrence et al., 2019](#)).

But while involving stakeholders in research might be my preference, not all research projects are appropriate for this kind of collaborative approach. Assuming your work isn't, you'll likely want to write an **advocacy brief**, suggesting that policymakers take a particular course of action, rather than an **objective brief**, in which you provide options from which they choose their preferred approach.

There are tons of resources out there on how to structure such a brief. As a sociologist, dear letter-writer, I think you might most appreciate [this brief guide](#), which is targeted to your discipline; I also quite like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Centre's [excerpts of poorly and well-written briefs](#). Given the plethora of resources out there on structuring a policy brief, let's focus instead on some specific writing and dissemination strategies for yours.

Writing persuasive policy briefs

Again, here, a lot of my usual advice applies: keep your writing [clear](#); use language [your readers will understand](#); structure your [sentences with care](#). You can also transfer some of the persuasive writing strategies that I've described that are used in other contexts, including [P&T dossiers](#) and [letters of reference](#).

You can find lots of example policy briefs online, from sources including:

- [the International Development Research Centre](#),

- [University of Alberta's Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities](#),
- [University of California Davis's Centre for Poverty and Inequality Research](#), and
- [the OECD](#).

Once you find a brief that you think is particularly well-written, you can copy its text and paste it into the “reference” box at [writingwellishard.com](#), and then paste your own draft in the “your text” box, to compare the characteristics of your writing to those of your reference. This tool will help you to identify if, for example, your sentences are much longer than those in your reference brief, or if yours use the passive voice much more than theirs does.

For those interested in the [writingwellishard.com](#) tool but struggling to figure out how to make the most of it, grab the [free guide to interpreting your results](#), or consider taking my course, [“Becoming a Better Editor of Your Own Work.”](#)

Getting your policy brief to reach policymakers

If your department or your research centre, institute, or cluster doesn't already have a webpage dedicated to policy briefs, it'd be a good idea to start one — but of course that shouldn't be the end-point of your knowledge-sharing strategy.

Ask a communications-focused staff member in your university if anyone in their team can help with sharing your policy brief. If they can't do it themselves, they'll likely know who you should talk to. Many institutions have a media relations office that could help you to share your research findings (though not your brief specifically) with a local or national newspaper, radio show, or news channel. If they write a press release about your work, you could ask them if they might link to your policy brief at the bottom of the document, along with providing your contact information.

Beyond your institutional channels, consider how else you might reach policymakers or other decision-makers and stakeholders through your own network. Do you have a colleague — at your institution or another — who you know is good at influencing policy, and if so, could you ask their advice for where they circulate their briefs? Are you a member of any professional associations of which policymakers may also be members? If so, could you locate their names and email addresses?

If you have the time to share your work in more active ways, consider: are there any conferences that you could attend where you might speak about or circulate your brief? Or regular meetings of a group to which you might pitch a one-hour presentation or webinar? The people who listen to your talk or chat with you over coffee may be — or may have connections to — the policymakers who you're looking to influence.

Advocating for systems-level policy change in academia

Getting the word out about your research can be a challenge, and the work of sharing your findings doesn't end when your article or book is published. Writing a policy brief can be a great way to make your work more accessible, and it's wonderful to see journals like the American Sociological Association's *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* promote this mode of knowledge-sharing through their [policy briefs page](#).

However, until more faculty associations successfully argue for “number of policies influenced or created” to be included on promotion and tenure criteria, all the work you do to actively share your findings among policymakers won't count as much as your number of citations or grant dollars received. So while you seek to influence public policy, remember as well to advocate for policy change within your institution, to ensure that the work of knowledge-sharing is appropriately respected and valued.



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