

National Collaborating Centre  
for **Healthy Public Policy**

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## The Policy Brief: A Tool for Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge sharing and public policy series | September 2019



Centre de collaboration nationale  
sur les politiques publiques et la santé

National Collaborating Centre  
for Healthy Public Policy

*Institut national  
de santé publique*

Québec 



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## **The Policy Brief: A Tool for Knowledge Transfer**

**Knowledge sharing and public policy series | September 2019**

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## About the National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP) seeks to increase the expertise of public health actors across Canada in healthy public policy through the development, sharing and use of knowledge. The NCCHPP is one of six centres financed by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The six centres form a network across Canada, each hosted by a different institution and each focusing on a specific topic linked to public health. The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy is hosted by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), a leading centre in public health in Canada.



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## Highlights

- The policy brief is a knowledge transfer tool that has increasingly been used in recent years as a way to inform or influence public policy decisions.
- Because policy briefs are designated by a variety of terms (e.g.: policy note, research snapshot, etc.) and prepared in various formats, it can be difficult to determine how to go about writing one. What exactly is it? What criteria should be met to produce a high quality document? Which writing guides are of interest?
- This document is intended to assist knowledge producers in writing a policy brief based on research evidence.
- The first two sections describe the characteristics of a policy brief, its components and the elements that should be considered to maximize its potential. The final section presents a selection of resources to guide readers who wish to pursue further knowledge.
- The information presented is based on the recommendations included in the guides reviewed (2008-2018), as well as on studies of experimentation with different models of policy briefs and research on factors that support or limit the extent to which policy makers take evidence into account.



## Introduction

This document is part of a series of documents focused on sharing knowledge in the context of public policy development. All of the documents in this series available to date may be found at [www.ncchpp.ca](http://www.ncchpp.ca) > Projects > Knowledge Sharing.

Sharing research results and systematic reviews is one of the ways to inform decisions made during public policy development. However, disseminating such results and encouraging their use by policy makers and stakeholders represents a challenge (Chambers et al., 2011; Orton, Lloyd-Williams, Taylor-Robinson, O’Flaherty & Capewell, 2011). This challenge stems from issues related to the complexity of both knowledge production and public policy development (Beynon, Chapoy, Gaarder & Masset, 2012; Boswell & Smith, 2017; Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Cairney & Oliver, 2018) (see Box 1).

To address some of the issues over which knowledge producers have more control, a range of knowledge transfer strategies has been developed, including the use of policy briefs (Lavis, 2009; Murthy et al., 2012; Perrier, Mrklas, Lavis & Straus, 2011; Wallace, Byrne & Clarke, 2014). The latter has been growing in popularity over the last decade. This popularity stems in part from the efforts made by many international organizations to communicate information more concisely to policy makers. It also coincides with a trend toward funding agencies placing stricter demands on knowledge producers, requiring them to assume responsibility for facilitating the use of scientific results by those outside the research community<sup>1</sup> (Adam, Moat, Ghaffar & Lavis, 2014; Boswell & Smith, 2017; Petkovic et al., 2016).

“Policy brief” is the term most frequently used to designate briefing papers that summarize research-based evidence. However, a broad range of vocabulary is used to designate the same type of document: briefing paper, briefing note, evidence brief, evidence summary, summary of findings, research snapshot, research summary, or in French, *note de breffage*, *note de politique*, *note technique*, *faits saillants*, *résumé de recherche*, *note d’information*, etc. Moreover, the term policy brief is used to refer to documents that do not all share the same characteristics, both in terms of content and of format, which can be confusing or discourage their use for knowledge transfer (Dagenais & Ridde, 2018; Moat et al., 2014).

Therefore, the aim of this document is to guide knowledge producers (researchers, scientific advisers or analysts, consultants, etc.) through the writing of an evidence-informed policy brief intended for policy makers. What exactly are policy briefs? What criteria should be considered when writing a policy brief to ensure it contains useful information that will potentially be used by policy makers? Which of the wide variety of guides and models proposed are most useful for those intending to write policy briefs? Sections 1 and 2 of this document provide an overview of the effectiveness of the policy brief, its characteristics, its components and the elements to consider when writing one to maximize its potential. The information is derived from: 1) recommendations collected from the guides reviewed (2008-2018); 2) factors, identified in various studies, which limit or facilitate the consideration of evidence by policy makers; and 3) lessons drawn from studies on experimentation with different models of policy briefs. The final section provides a selection of resources to guide readers who wish to deepen their knowledge toward resources adapted to their specific needs. The documentary search method is detailed in the Annex.

<sup>1</sup> Examples: Consortium for Research on Equitable Health Systems (CREHS); the World Health Organization’s Health Evidence Network & Evidence-Informed Policy Network; Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC); McMaster Health Forum; Supporting Policy Relevant Reviews and Trials (SUPPORT); Health Systems Evidence; Cochrane summaries.

**BOX 1 – FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE UNDER-USE OF EVIDENCE BY POLICY MAKERS**

Among the factors most frequently identified as responsible for the under-use of evidence by policy makers are:

The complexity of problems, which requires consideration of different types of information, produced and compiled by diverse actors who may have differing points of view regarding the nature of the problem and the best solutions (Cairney, 2018; Cairney & Oliver, 2018).

The discrepancy between the generally short timeframe in which a decision must be made (the window of opportunity), and the relatively long timeframe required to generate research results or synthesize evidence (Andermann, Pang, Newton, Davis & Panisset, 2016; Khangura, Konnyu, Cushman, Grimshaw & Moher, 2012).

Lack of knowledge about the workings of politics among researchers and, conversely, lack of skill in searching for and understanding scientific literature among policy makers (Andermann et al., 2016; Harris, 2015; Larsen, Gulis & Pedersen, 2012).

The length of research reports and systematic reviews, conflicting results and lack of time for critically reviewing all the available evidence (Beynon et al., 2012; Cairney, 2018; Huggett, 2012; Petkovic et al., 2016, 2018).

The absence of contextualized evidence from local studies (Chambers et al., 2011; Khangura et al., 2012; Orton et al., 2011; Rajabi, 2012).

The difficulty of uprooting well-established practices and less political receptivity to new solutions, which cause the results of convincing research to take years to “percolate” (Andermann et al., 2016; Dobbins, Rosenbaum, Plews, Law & Fysh, 2007).

The tendency among policy makers, for various reasons (lack of time, political influence, complexity), to take “shortcuts,” i.e. to reduce complexity by ignoring certain dimensions of an issue or solution and to rely as much on their beliefs or values as on facts (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Cairney, 2019).

# 1 Purpose and characteristics of policy briefs

The following sub-sections describe the specific purpose of a policy brief, its users (target audience), the perspective to adopt when presenting the information, the overall format and the effectiveness of policy briefs.

## 1.1 Purpose

The policy brief is a knowledge transfer tool used in various fields of action (public health, education, environmental sciences, etc.). Its aim is to inform decision making related to the selection, development, adoption or implementation of a public policy.

As mentioned in the introduction, the policy brief, and its derivatives, can take various forms. Thus, the format – an aspect to which we will return – varies greatly. The World Health Organization, for example, favours various formats, including 40-page summaries with highlights,<sup>2</sup> 1-3-25 documents<sup>3</sup> or, like many international and regional organizations, 2- to 4-page documents.<sup>4</sup> In examining the many examples of policy briefs, one also notes that the content presented can cover various aspects. A brief may, for example, describe all facets of a problem,<sup>5</sup> identify the fields of action through which the problem can be addressed, assess the potential, the benefits or the negative effects of one or two policy options, or else identify barriers to and levers for implementing a public policy.

To clarify the situation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC], 2018) have identified four types of briefing documents, classified according to the availability and reliability of the knowledge related to an issue or problem and the stage in the policy development process (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Different types of briefing documents



Adaptation of a CDC figure, 2018

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/124418/e94294.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/124418/e94294.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See: [https://www.who.int/evidence/resources/policy\\_briefs/en/](https://www.who.int/evidence/resources/policy_briefs/en/)

<sup>4</sup> See: [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/388071/tg-pb-older-people-eng.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/388071/tg-pb-older-people-eng.pdf?ua=1); [https://www.share-asean.eu/sites/default/files/PB%208\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.share-asean.eu/sites/default/files/PB%208_FINAL.pdf); <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/12929/12929.pdf>; [https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/healthyfoodamerica/pages/274/attachments/original/1485885864/DietBeverages\\_totaxomotJan2017\\_linked.pdf?1485885864](https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/healthyfoodamerica/pages/274/attachments/original/1485885864/DietBeverages_totaxomotJan2017_linked.pdf?1485885864)

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.slideshare.net/fatmatacherif/policy-brief-la-structure-de-veille-lectoralepar-gore-institute>

This typology has the benefit of defining the purpose of the policy brief relative to other similar documents. It also highlights the importance of specifying concrete policy options in the brief. Indeed, in contrast with the information brief, the issue brief or the research summary, the policy brief focuses on the practical resolution of an issue or problem. Of course, the proposed definition does not always correspond to what is presented as a policy brief in reality. Nevertheless, it serves as a useful guide, which can be adapted to the content to be covered. In any case, one must not lose sight of what is most important: the relevance of the subjects discussed. This factor is central to encouraging the use of evidence (Andermann et al., 2016; Bunn, 2011; Chambers et al., 2011; Orton et al., 2011). In this regard, the information needs of policy makers vary depending on their role, on the issues that emerge or resurface, on political opportunities and on progression through the iterative steps in the public policy development process (Lavis, 2009).

## 1.2 Target audience

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The policy brief is intended for policy makers. Depending on the nature and scope of the public policy (e.g.: municipal regulation, departmental orientation, provincial program, action at the neighbourhood level), policy makers may work in government or in non-governmental organizations, be positioned at the local, regional or national level and wear many faces: senior executives, elected officials, advisers of policy makers, policy analysts, etc. In general, several audiences can be targeted, since decisions related to the planning, adoption and implementation of a public policy are rarely made by a single person or a homogeneous group of actors. In some fields, such as that of public health, the audiences targeted by knowledge transfer are also likely to work in diverse sectors, and, in particular, those outside of health (e.g.: education, transportation, environment).

Studies (Dobbins et al., 2009; Injury Prevention Research Center, 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2014) suggest that the customization of messages (*targeted tailored messages*) represents an effective influence strategy that can increase the use of evidence in public policy development. However, various target audiences may not share the same priorities, the same interest in various aspects of the issue raised, or the same background knowledge. In addition, an effort may be required when considering a given subject (e.g.: the mandatory wearing of bike helmets), to reconcile the priorities of the knowledge producer (e.g.: the safety of cyclists) with those of various target audiences (e.g.: sustainable mobility through unrestricted access to bike-sharing services.) This involves identifying, before writing the policy brief and ideally in consultation with representatives of each target audience, the characteristics and needs of audiences, including:

- their information needs;
- their perspective on the problem at issue, controversial aspects and areas of convergence;
- the vocabulary they normally use;
- their sphere of influence;
- their overall ability to decipher research results.

Some authors also propose identifying as a target audience, or within the target audience, those who view themselves as influencers. They are more likely to want to act on evidence and to attempt to convince others (Beynon et al., 2012; Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Cairney & Oliver, 2018).

### 1.3 Perspective to adopt in presenting the information

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A policy brief may be based on a single study, on a few selected studies or on a systematic review, combined as needed with complementary research evidence and context-specific evidence (Lavis, 2009; Shaxson & Tsui, 2016). It is not, however, an academic summary whose purpose is to enrich a body of knowledge. Since the policy brief is explicitly aimed at informing policy-making, the majority of the guides consulted recommend including, at a minimum, an evidence-informed account of the policy implications and presenting the information in a way that focuses attention on specific elements. However, the way to do this is a matter of debate. Should recommendations or expert opinions be included and, in general, what tone is preferable?

Thus, Dagenais and Ridde (2018) position policy briefs on a continuum ranging from “neutral” to “interventionist” (the terms used by the authors). “Neutral” briefs present the options to be considered without taking a stance. The authors of more “interventionist” briefs position themselves in favour of a particular policy option and may incorporate specific recommendations (Arcury et al., 2017; Ffrench-Constant, 2014; Young & Quinn, 2012) or even the writer’s opinion and that of other experts (Mental Health Innovation Network, 2015).

There are differing points of view regarding the relevance of including expert opinions that go further than making evidence-informed recommendations about which policy elements may have the greatest impact. Several of the guides reviewed caution against activism and differentiate the policy brief from lobbying, media campaigns (e.g.: Amnesty International) and militancy (e.g.: Greenpeace), whose messages are more focused on values and on criticism of inaction (Injury Prevention Research Center, 2017). This position is justified by pointing to the duty of researchers to demonstrate reserve and the prime importance of preserving their credibility and safeguarding relationships of trust. However, in contrast with those advocating reserve, some authors call into question the presentation of “completely technical solutions” (Cairney, 2019, p. 2) and argue that one of the potentially more effective ways of dealing with the tendency among policy makers to base policy choices on their values, among other things, is to combine the presentation of evidence with a story that engages their emotions and appeals to their values (Boswell & Smith, 2017; Cairney, 2019).

There is greater consensus among researchers about the need to focus attention on a specific issue and to provide precise information about a limited number of policy options. Studies on barriers to the use of evidence (Oliver, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman & Thomas, 2014; Orton et al., 2011; Tricco et al., 2016) and experimentation with different types of policy briefs (Marquez et al., 2018; Masset, Gaarder, Beynon & Chapoy, 2013; Moat et al., 2014) indicate that overly nuanced portraits of a situation and recommendations based on mixed results are not welcomed by policy makers. They also prefer to have actions to be taken described rather than to have to deduce them.

These findings strengthen the position of authors who consider it important to reduce ambiguity<sup>6</sup> by also framing information so as to draw attention to one interpretation of a policy problem. Described as a persuasion strategy, such framing of information increases the likelihood of the problem being put on the policy agenda, because it directs attention toward a single way of interpreting a problem and its solution, at the expense of other problems and other solutions (Brownson et al., 2011; Cairney, 2019).

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<sup>6</sup> Ambiguity arises from multiple interpretations of a problem, whereas uncertainty derives from a lack of knowledge about a given problem (Cairney, 2019).

## 1.4 Format

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Several aspects of format need to be considered for an effective policy brief. These are presented in the next section. One of these aspects, the ideal length, is abundantly discussed in the literature. Two to four pages seems to be the standard recommended length when addressing non-specialists, as is often the case when public health actors address target audiences working in diverse sectors. When the target audience is composed of subject-matter or information-processing specialists, such as policy analysts and advisers, limiting the document to fewer than 6 pages (3000-4000 words maximum) is recommended (Woolf et al., 2015). But again, the shorter the better, given that lack of time is a major barrier to the use of evidence.

## 1.5 Are policy briefs effective?

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Despite its popularity, few studies have examined the effectiveness of the policy brief, and its influence on the policy-making process has not been clearly demonstrated (Beynon et al., 2012; Dagenais & Ridde, 2018; Dobbins et al., 2009; Moat et al., 2014; Perrier et al., 2011). Researchers also point out the difficulty of estimating its impact in real policy contexts and in the short term (Beynon et al., 2012; Boswell & Smith, 2017; Cairney & Oliver, 2018). Indeed, evidence circulates in overlapping networks and constitutes only one of the many elements that influence policy making.

### **BOX 2 – THE STUDY BY BEYNON AND COLLEAGUES: A RARE RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL AIMED AT MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF THE POLICY BRIEF**

Beynon and her colleagues (Beynon et al., 2012; Masset et al., 2013) tested different types of policy briefs: neutral, including the opinion of an unknown person, and including the opinion of an expert. The results, which were mixed, indicate that the policy brief is more effective at influencing readers with no prior opinion about the issue the brief discusses. Interestingly, the impact on beliefs seems to be unrelated to the type of message. In other words, strengthening messages by including the opinion of an unknown person or an expert does not alter readers' beliefs. However, an authority effect is clearly produced (by expert opinion), which affects their intention to act (e.g.: by passing the brief on to others) although, in general, participants were more inclined to carry out actions requiring little effort, such as sharing the information, than to modify their practices based on the evidence.

Then, why write a policy brief? The fact remains that many studies suggest that policy makers are more inclined to consider evidence during decision making if it is presented in the form of a summary or of highlights, and the policy brief is seen as a relevant means of transferring knowledge that fulfils the need to receive information in condensed form (Bunn, 2011; Chambers et al., 2011; European Commission, 2010; Jones & Walsh, 2008; Lavis et al., 2005; Mental Health Innovation Network, 2015; Murthy et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2014; Orton et al., 2011; Perrier et al., 2011; Petkovic et al., 2016, 2018; Tricco et al., 2016).

## 2 Components of a policy brief

According to the various guides consulted (refer to the bibliography), the policy brief generally includes the following sections, tailored to the target audience: title, summary, context (or introduction), results and implications (summary of the evidence, policy implications or options, recommendations, if applicable) and references.

### 2.1 Key elements for writing

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#### Title

The title must be short, informative and catchy.

#### Highlights and summary

Several authors recommend including either highlights or a summary in a policy brief (Biodiversa, 2014; Community-Based Monitoring System Network Coordinating Team, 2014). Others suggest including both headings, a method that has proven more effective, according to them, at quickly convincing policy makers, given how little time they spend reading a policy brief (Huggett, 2012). Presenting a summary of the key messages on the first page ensures that readers will at least become aware of the brief's content even if they do not continue reading.

- **The highlights** are usually encapsulated in a box and presented in bullet point form. They state the 3 to 5 key messages developed in the policy brief.
- **The summary** is intended to capture the attention and arouse the interest of readers (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014; The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019). It announces:
  - the aim of the policy brief and its relevance for the target audience;
  - the importance of addressing the subject of the brief through policies;
  - the conclusions to be drawn or a broad outline of the recommendations.

#### The context

Sometimes called the introduction, this section is used to:

- position the subject, frame the problem and explain its severity (magnitude? causes? who is affected? what is affected? why talk about it now? why take policy action?);
- describe the current situation (past actions, current actions, effects if known and gaps) focusing only on the factors at play;
- convince the reader of the need to act

(European Commission, 2010; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2011; Harvard Global Health Institute, 2014; Young & Quinn, 2017).

## Results and implications

This section constitutes the core of the document. The aim is to summarize the main aspects of the study or studies on which the policy brief is based, including only the evidence most relevant to the subject being discussed, and to identify the implications for policy action. Structuring the text using many titles and sub-titles, and illustrating statements with examples (concrete cases, images, etc.) is recommended.

### ▪ Summary of research results or evidence

Research results do not necessarily need to be summarized separately. Where appropriate, they can be integrated into the description of policy options. When they are presented in a separate section, it is a good idea, depending on the target audiences, to limit details about the research methodology (see the section on transparency).

### ▪ Policy options or recommendations

This section usually presents the policy option or options best suited to addressing the framed problem, given the evidence. It is advisable to limit the options, but to consider all their facets, to the extent possible, based on the contextual factors. The proposed solutions may be new, already known or constitute a combination of various solutions.

In more neutral policy briefs, different policy options are suggested, whether the aim is to consider, for example, divergent political perspectives (e.g.: conservative, liberal), the conflicting interests of groups affected by the public policy, or other factors, but no policy is given preference. More “interventionist” policy briefs may include (or even be limited to) recommendations. Recommendations summarize – based on the evidence – the advantages and benefits of each policy option, focusing on concrete, realistic, implementable, feasible actions. McIvor (2018, p. 6) makes this point: “Remember as well that feasibility matters for policy so the recommendation you make may not be the most ideal solution and instead might be the best feasible solution.”

- Several of the guides consulted propose considering the known or potential effects and the applicability of each option (Chambers & Wilson, 2012; Pan American Health Organization, 2010; The SURE Collaboration, 2011). To this end, the framework for analyzing public policies developed by the NCCHPP (Morestin, 2012), which discusses and details the essential dimensions to be considered, can serve as a guide (Table 1). This often entails drawing on complementary research data and calling on experts or on the expertise of policy makers themselves. It is also important to consider, to the extent possible, divergent points of view regarding acceptability, a dimension of particular concern to policy makers.
- Depending on which stage in the public policy development process is mainly concerned and on the subject at issue, not all the dimensions in Table 1 need to be covered. However, an effort should be made to present policy options in the most actionable way possible. The perceived usefulness of the policy brief according to policy makers and stakeholders, indications about the costs and benefits of the options proposed in the brief, and the ability of policy makers to envision concrete and local actions (if applicable) have been identified as factors that encourage them to assimilate and act on evidence (Murthy et al., 2012; Tricco et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2014).

**Table 1**      **Dimensions to consider when presenting policy options**

<b>Effects</b> To the extent possible, specify if the research evidence attesting to the effects of an option is transferable to the context in which the option is being considered.	<b>Effectiveness</b>	What are the known or potential beneficial effects on the problem of the option being considered?
	<b>Unintended Effects</b>	What are the known or potential unintended effects on the problem of the option being considered?
	<b>Equity</b>	What groups are most likely to be affected by the policy option? What are the known or anticipated differential effects on the most vulnerable groups?
<b>Applicability</b>	<b>Costs</b>	What are the costs and benefits generated by the implementation of the option being considered? What resources are required for successful implementation, in terms of human, material and financial resources at all levels (local, regional, national) and in all the sectors involved? What are the anticipated costs of inaction?
	<b>Feasibility</b>	What levers for action and administrative mechanisms are already in place or need to be in place for the option being considered to be implemented? What are the necessary conditions for implementation and the possible barriers? Are the required resources available?
	<b>Acceptability</b>	Which stakeholders are concerned by the option being considered and what is their position regarding its acceptability?

Table adapted from Morestin, 2012.

## References

The various guides reviewed suggest restricting references to a short list (10-15 references maximum), including a link to the most complete research report, if applicable, for those who would like further details.

## 2.2 Other elements to consider for an effective brief

### Visual presentation

No consensus emerges from the literature with respect to readers' preferences linked to colours and fonts (Marquez et al., 2018), but the authors consulted agree on the importance of visual appeal, the judicious use of boxes to differentiate the various sections, the use of bullet points to set off key elements, a well-spaced presentation, and the use of tables or graphics, provided these are not overused and are legible (Bennett & Jessani, 2011; Dagenais & Ridde, 2018; European Commission, 2010; International Development Research Centre, n. d.; Wolfe, 2013; Wong, Green, Bazemore & Miller, 2017).

### Formulation

The vocabulary used and the formulation of ideas are among the main factors that limit or facilitate the use of evidence (Beynon et al., 2012; Marquez et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2014; Orton et al., 2011). When writing policy briefs, it is recommended to:

- use simple language (which is not to say simplistic) and explain complicated or technical terms;
- limit the content to a specific question, or a particular aspect, or one interpretation of a problem, and avoid the temptation to bury the reader under research data;
- consider your readers' perspectives and explain the potential implications of research results for them (given their roles, functions or tasks);
- guide interpretation of the results and draw connections;
- formulate specific recommendations, based on concrete facts, and abstain from extrapolating.

### **Transparency**

An experiment was conducted by Marquez et al. (2018) among health care managers and policy makers concerning the best format to adopt to facilitate the use of evidence from systematic reviews. The results demonstrated a lack of agreement between these two groups regarding how much information about methodology to provide. Managers prefer to get more details, while policy makers pay little attention to this aspect. Both groups, however, desire access to complete data. The authors of the documents consulted also agree on the importance of reporting results in a transparent manner (indicating significance of results, grading quality of the studies considered and the strength of evidence), because this is central to readers' assessment of the value of the proposed recommendations (Vogel et al., 2013).

### **Dissemination**

For the policy brief to have the potential to influence policy decisions, it must first and foremost be read. However, as with the analysis of the target audience's needs, the dissemination step is too often skipped (Andermann et al., 2016; Andrews, 2017; Injury Prevention Research Center, 2017; Lavis, Permanand, Oxman, Lewin & Freithem, 2009).

To increase its potential influence, the communication of evidence should be included in a broader dissemination process. Thus, it is more effective to combine the policy brief with various other transfer strategies targeting diverse audiences, including journalists who stimulate public debate, in cases where it seems relevant to involve them. In addition, the diversification of communication channels potentially ensures greater visibility (professional newsletter, blog, transmission of the document to members of one's networks, etc.) (Andermann et al., 2016; Andrews, 2017; Wolfe, 2018).

Several authors (Bennett & Jessani, 2011; European Commission, 2010; Injury Prevention Research Center, 2017) also suggest, when possible, taking advantage of political windows of opportunity to send or resend policy briefs (e.g.: a change of government, a crisis situation, media coverage, etc.).

### **Collaboration with policy makers**

Any knowledge transfer strategy must, to be more effective, involve the users of the knowledge, and the policy brief is no exception. Collaboration between researchers and policy makers is described as a way to reduce the gap between these two groups, enabling researchers to learn about the workings of politics (the contexts in which evidence is used) and to better understand the perspective of policy makers, thus enhancing the relevance of messages and, consequently, increasing the use of evidence (Arcury et al., 2017; Bunn, 2011; Bunn & Kendall, 2011; El-Jardali et al., 2012; Friese & Bogenschneider, 2009; Wolfe, 2018).

### 3 Useful resources for writing policy briefs

The resources proposed were chosen because of their varied formats. Some are limited to the presentation of a template accompanied by brief guidelines, others provide explanations which clarify, in particular, the specificity of the policy brief, its usefulness or its relationship to other dimensions of knowledge transfer (e.g.: channels of dissemination). Longer documents also tend to include examples and exercises. Canadian resources have been given preference; however, the final selection includes resources from other English-speaking countries. They are not all specific to public health, but their content is applicable to this field. They are presented in alphabetical order.

#### 3.1 A selection of useful resources

Ffrench-Constant, L. (2014). *How to plan, write and communicate an effective policy brief. Three steps to success*. Research to Action. Retrieved from: <https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf>

<b>Type of resource</b>	Practical guide
<b>Content elements</b>	Definition, relevance of the policy brief and three steps to completing one (1. Key questions to ask during planning; 2. Components of the brief, language and style tips for writing briefs; 3. Tips to promote dissemination). One of the guide's strengths is it makes clear the importance of the planning stage. The inclusion of tips under each step aids understanding. Very concrete.
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	Yes
<b>Has it been assessed?</b>	No

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO]. (2011). 4.1 Preparing policy briefs. In *Food security communications toolkit* (pp. 139–170). Rome, Italy: FAO and the European Union. Retrieved from: <http://www.fao.org/3/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>

<b>Type of resource</b>	Chapter in a practical guide
<b>Content elements</b>	1. Types of policy briefs (objective and advocacy forms, both evidence-based); 2. Objectives of the brief; 3. Components of a policy brief (title, summary, recommendations, introduction, body of the brief, policy implications, etc.). Each component is explained and illustrated by numerous examples. It is visually appealing.
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	Yes
<b>Has been assessed?</b>	No

Injury Prevention Research Center. (2017). *Writing & disseminating policy briefs. A communications guide for injury and violence researchers and practitioners*. The University of Iowa. Retrieved from: <https://iprc.public-health.uiowa.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Writing-and-Disseminating-Policy-Briefs.pdf>

<b>Type of resource</b>	Practical guide, with questions for reflection and tips
<b>Content elements</b>	<p>First section: Definition of the policy brief and specific information about policy makers; the different types of policy briefs and their aims; planning the brief and examples of elements to consider when writing (specific components are not suggested); tips on writing for impact and tips concerning visual appeal. The second section focuses on dissemination and on how to make policy briefs more relevant to policy makers.</p> <p>Of the guides reviewed, only this one includes a section, in the form given, on the categories of policy briefs, their characteristics and the questions that can guide writing. This tool is user-friendly despite its length (31 pages) and contains numerous examples.</p>
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	This guide is based on the scientific literature and on the organization's experience.
<b>Has it been assessed?</b>	Not indicated

Lavis, J. N., Permanand, G., Oxman, A. D., Lewin, S. & Fretheim, A. (2009). SUPPORT Tools for evidence-informed health policymaking (STP) 13: Preparing and using policy briefs to support evidence-informed policymaking. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 7(Suppl 1): S13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-4505-7-S1-S13>

<b>Type of resource</b>	Hybrid resource that combines the characteristics of a scientific article and elements of a guide. This article is part of a series of documents focused on the development of support tools (grouped under the SUPPORT initiative), whose objective is to support the use of research evidence. The article is accompanied by a template, downloaded separately. In all, 14 tools are available.
<b>Content elements</b>	<p>The article describes the two main steps in the development of a policy brief (prioritization of an issue and selection of evidence) and suggests key questions to guide its development: 1. Is this a priority issue? Is it contextualized? 2. Does the brief describe the problem and its consequences, and the costs-benefits and implementation considerations related to policy options? 3. Are the research findings based on rigorous and transparent studies/research syntheses? 4. Are local applicability and equity considerations discussed? 5. Does the policy brief include highlights and a summary? 6. Is the brief relevant both scientifically and with regard to policy making?</p> <p>The template describes key components of a brief and presents questions for reflection to guide writing.</p>
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	Yes
<b>Has it been assessed?</b>	See: Rosenbaum, S. E., Glenton, C., Wiysonge, C. S., Abalos, E., Mignini, L., Young, T., ... Oxman, A. D. (2011). Evidence summaries tailored to health policy-makers in low- and middle-income countries. <i>Bulletin of the World Health Organization</i> , 89(1), 54–61. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.10.075481">https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.10.075481</a>

The SURE Collaboration. (2011). *SURE Guides for preparing and using evidence-based policy briefs*. Version 2.1. Retrieved from:  
[https://epoc.cochrane.org/sites/epoc.cochrane.org/files/public/uploads/SURE-Guides-v2.1/Collectedfiles/sure\\_guides.html](https://epoc.cochrane.org/sites/epoc.cochrane.org/files/public/uploads/SURE-Guides-v2.1/Collectedfiles/sure_guides.html)

<b>Type of resource</b>	Practical guides
<b>Content elements</b>	<p>SURE is a collaborative project supported by the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative. The project involves teams of researchers and policy makers from seven African countries and is supported by research teams from three European countries and Canada.</p> <p>There are eight guides: 1. Getting started (definition of the policy brief, its content, its use); 2. Prioritizing topics; 3. Clarifying the problem; 4. Deciding on and describing policy options; 5. Identifying and addressing barriers to implementation; 6. Clarifying risks and needs for monitoring; 7. Organizing and running policy dialogues; 8. Informing policy makers and stakeholders.</p> <p>This set of guides covers the various facets of the policy brief in detail. It can be used online, although its presentation is not very user-friendly.</p>
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	Yes
<b>Has it been assessed?</b>	Users are invited to comment on the guides and to give their assessment.

Young, E. & Quinn, L. (2017). *An essential guide to writing policy briefs*. Berlin, Germany: International Center for Policy Advocacy. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa\\_policy\\_briefs\\_essential\\_guide.pdf](http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf)

<b>Type of resource</b>	Practical guide
<b>Content elements</b>	<p>1. Description of the policy brief and its relevance as an advocacy communication tool; 2. Purpose of the policy brief; 3. Components of the brief in detail; 4. Tips concerning visual appeal; 5. Key lessons to take into account when writing; 6. Writing checklist; 7. Examples of policy briefs.</p> <p>This guide is comprehensive and user-friendly.</p>
<b>Is it evidence-based?</b>	References are cited. The guide is based primarily on the organization's 15 years of experience in policy research and in writing advocacy documents.
<b>Has it been assessed?</b>	No

### 3.2 Other relevant resources for further reflection

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## **Annex 1**

### **The documentary search process**



This document is based on a narrative review – most commonly designated simply as a “literature review” – whose objective is to identify relevant publications on a specific topic. The search is generally carried out without a systematic methodological process.

### Questions

What are the criteria to consider for writing effective policy briefs?

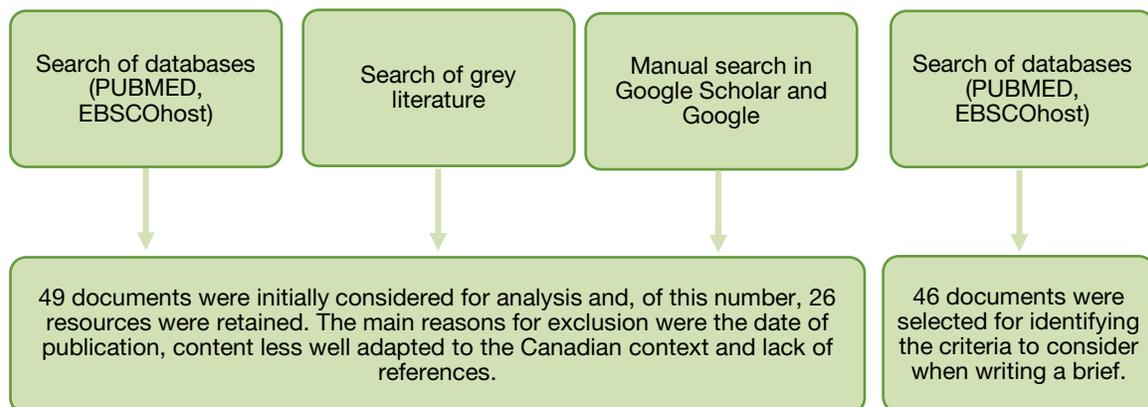
Are there any relevant guides to support the writing of policy briefs?

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

- Published between 2008-2018
- English/French
- All types of publications with the exception of dissertations
- Applicable to the Canadian context
- Supported by evidence (based on the literature and organizational expertise)

### Search strategies

Two complementary search strategies were carried out. One was aimed at identifying guides to writing policy briefs, while the other was aimed at identifying documents in the scientific literature likely to detail criteria to consider when writing a policy brief to enhance its effectiveness.



### Grey literature: sites consulted

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (CADTH)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Public Health Professionals Gateway)

Centre for Policy Research

Centre for Reviews and Dissemination

Cochrane (PDQ evidence, support tools)

Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) (Practical tools)

European Union

Haute autorité de santé (outils, guides, méthodes)

Health Affairs

Health Canada

Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux (INESSS)

Institute for Research on Public Policy

Institute of Health Economics (KT section)

Making Evidence Matter

Manitoba Centre for Health Policy

McMaster Health Knowledge Refinery (McMaster PLUS)

National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools (<https://www.nccmt.ca/knowledge-repositories/search/137>)

National Guidelines Clearinghouse (NGC)

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) Public Health Guidance

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Partnership for Economic Policy (scientific and policy brief writing)

Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research (ProSPER.Net policy brief guidelines)

Public Health Resources on NHS Evidence

Santé France

Science Media Centre of Canada

Turning Research into Practice (TRIP) Database

Women's and Children's Health Policy Center

World Health Organization (WHO) (Resources)



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