

# How (and why) to write a research brief

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*With warm memories of Karin Backteman*

# *A Road Map*

1. What is a research brief?
2. Relationship to discussion paper
3. What is the purpose of a research brief?
4. Who is the target audience for a research brief?
5. Writing a policy-relevant takeaway message, without jargon
6. The parts of the research brief
7. Other details about the preparation of the brief
8. Stuff we won't have time for...

# 1. What is a Research Brief?

## *Definition*

A Research Brief is a short, non-technical summary of a discussion paper, intended for decision-makers, with a focus on the discussion paper's policy-relevant research findings.

*What a Research Brief will look like...*



# Notice...

- The EfD Secretariat and Resources for the Future have prepared a template for each center
- It's three pages long, including logos, pictures, references
- That's about two pages of text, about 800 words

2. What is the relationship between a research brief and a discussion paper?



## *Relationship between a paper and a brief*

- One research brief for every discussion paper
- Differences between a research brief and a discussion paper
- The research brief can be based mostly on the introduction and conclusion of the discussion paper

# *One Research Brief for each Discussion Paper*

- Researchers are obligated to produce a number of Discussion Papers for each EfD-funded research project
- Also obligated to produce one Research Brief for each Discussion Paper

# *A Research Brief is not simply a short version of a discussion paper*

- A Research Brief presents the findings first and the background later
- That isn't how researchers write, but it's how decision-makers read
- A Discussion Paper is written for academic peers (PhD level researchers)
- A Research Brief is written for policy-makers and other stakeholders
- Policy implications appear near the end of Discussion Paper but near the beginning of a Research Brief
- Econometric issues, sampling method, literature review generally are *not* included in a Research Brief

*A well-organized Discussion Paper is the starting point for a Research Brief*

- Most of the material for the Research Brief should be found in the introduction and conclusion of the Discussion Paper

3. What is the purpose of a Research Brief?

*The purpose is to...*

- Communicate policy-relevant findings to policy-makers and other stakeholders
- In briefings, workshops, training, for example
- Also, the “foundation” for other communication, such as news articles, blog posts, policy papers, etc.

4. Who is the target audience for a research brief?

# The target audience is a decision maker

- A ministry official (decision maker)
- Ministry staff (technical staff assisting decision maker)
- Development practitioner in a NGO or donor organization
- Other stakeholders: community groups, business, utilities



## *Think about the interests of your target audience*

- A ministry official who has requested a briefing
- The participants at a planned training or workshop
- An agency that is considering entering into contract with your research institution

# Examples of targeted audience

## Research Topic

- Energy
- Water

## Audience/stakeholders

- Ministry of Energy, Energy Regulatory Commission, Geothermal Development Co. (a private firm in Kenya)
- Institute of Aqueducts and Sewers (Costa Rica), utility companies, water users cooperatives

# Different readers of a Research Brief will use it in different ways

- Ministry/agency staff need to advise government officials
- Government officials need to explain their decision to the public
- Workshop leaders can present the findings to colleagues
- Community groups want to know which policies meet their needs
- Donors want to know whether to fund further research

# What about a paper surveying several countries?

- You do need to include findings from all the countries in order to accurately represent the discussion paper.
- Emphasize your own country if you expect the target audience to be policy makers in your country.

## *Activity (5 minutes)*

- For the discussion paper that your center submitted as a sample, think about the target audience for the research brief.
- Think about ***why*** that audience will be interested in the findings of the paper, or ***how*** that audience might use the information.
- Make some notes
- Share

5. Writing a policy-relevant  
takeaway message, without  
jargon

## *Two key points about the text*

- The focus needs to be on a **policy-relevant takeaway message**
- All language needs to be **non-technical**
  - **Avoid jargon and acronyms**

## *The policy-relevant takeaway message*

- How is this research relevant to sustainable development and poverty alleviation?
- Some readers will only read
  - title and subtitle
  - bullet points (key points)
  - maybe the introduction and conclusion
- Summarize the takeaway in *each* of those parts, so each could stand alone.



*Use non-technical language; avoid acronyms, or spell them out and explain them*

**No! (academic paper version)**

Using a longitudinal dataset in two rounds of surveys, we estimated WTA for PES for land conservation.

**Yes!**

We interviewed 300 farmers to find out how much money they would want to set aside land for conservation, under a program called “Payment for Ecosystem Services.” Three years later, we were able to interview most of them again to ask whether the payments were high enough to convince them to stay in the program.

# More examples of non-technical language

## No!

- Our identification strategy exploited the discontinuous implementation of land certification.

## Yes!

- We compared the income of farmers who did and did not have certificates proving that they owned their farmland. We could make this comparison because only about half the farmers we interviewed had received these certificates as of the time of our survey.

# Still more...

## No!

- The heterogeneous impacts of abatement technology on the marginal costs of production suggest that command and control methods result in suboptimal welfare compared to market-based mechanisms.

## Yes!

- Requiring all factories to use the same smokestack might be an expensive way of reducing pollution, compared to charging a tax on coal as a way of encouraging factories to use less. This is because not all factories use the same production methods and therefore their costs are different.

# Practice activity (15 minutes)

- Break into assigned pairs.
- State your takeaway message aloud to your group members, in non-technical language
- Ask the listener to repeat back what you said
- Did the listener hear any “jargon?” If so, clarify
- Then switch roles and do the same for the other center’s paper.

## 6. The parts of a research brief

- Title and subtitle
- Bullet points (key points)
- Introduction
- Body/story
- Conclusion

# Title (heading) and subtitle (subheading)

- The title should be about two lines long in the template
- The subtitle can be one or two lines
- The title should tell a story. It should be a sentence (have a verb)
  - Farmers say they would use more fertilizer if they could get credit
- The subtitle can be a sentence or a phrase/short description
  - Maize farmers in Kenya have to borrow from relatives.
  - A study of maize farmers in Kenya

Can the title and subtitle be the same as in the Discussion Paper? Maybe!

- If the paper title is technical jargon, use everyday language
- The title and subtitle should focus on the most important, policy-relevant findings, even if that was not the focus of the Discussion Paper title



*Example: changing a technical title*

- DP # 13-07: Community Controlled Forests, Carbon Sequestration and REDD+: Some Evidence from Ethiopia
- DRB # 13-07: Even when communities do a good job of managing forests, additional incentives are needed to encourage them to store more carbon: A Study in Ethiopia

Another way to use the title and subtitle to write a takeaway message

- The title and subtitle can work together as a Q&A (presenting the research question and answer)
- Example: How do villagers want to receive payments for conserving the forest? Some Tanzanians want individual payments, while others want financing for community projects.

*Another approach: title presents main finding;  
subtitle gives more details*

- Title: Farmers aren't investing in water conservation practices that could yield larger crops.
- Subtitle: Maize farmers in Kenya say it's because they can't get credit.

## *Activity (10 minutes)*

- Write a title and subtitle for a Research Brief based on the sample Discussion Paper
- Compare/share the original title/subtitle of the DP and the title/subtitle of the RB

# Bullet points or key points

- Three to five bullet points
- One sentence each (maybe two!)
- Could stand alone if that's all the reader reads
- Focus on the policy problem and key findings.
- Non-technical language

## *Example of bullet points from a Research Brief*

- A city's air quality can be affected by the movement of the wind from surrounding cities.
- Pollution control policies should be coordinated among cities/provinces to improve urban air quality.
- An increase in gasoline prices can effectively improve air quality by encouraging people to drive less.
- The same policies that can reduce pollution in Chinese cities can produce global benefits by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Source: DRB #15-15

## *Another example*

- China has the potential to produce about 250 million tons of crop residues each year.
- Rice straw, wheat straw, and corn stover (residue) are likely to be the primary biomass types for bioenergy production in China.
- Combining agricultural biomass with coal in power plants that are currently coal-fired has the potential to reduce coal consumption, improve air quality, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- The prices that fuel buyers are willing to pay for biomass affects how profitable it is for farmers to collect these by-products of farming.

Source: DRB #15-06

## *One more...*

- Children's participation in fetching water is one of the most important factors that reduce children's ability to read and write.
- Literacy is lower for ages 6-10, higher in the middle (11-14) and declines for ages 15 to 17. This suggests that policy interventions could focus on children in the top and bottom age categories.
- School proximity is an important determinant of child literacy.
- Education policy should consider the contribution of educating household heads to increased likelihood of child literacy.

Source: DRB #14-18



# Practice activity (10 minutes)

- Write three key points based on your sample paper

## *Introduction (about 50 to 100 words)*

- Write a one-paragraph introduction (50 to 100 words) summarizing the policy problem, the research question, and the key findings.
- Use the introduction and conclusion to the discussion paper as sources for the introduction (and conclusion) of the brief.
- This is your homework!

# Next: Tell the Story

- This is the main body of the research brief.
- Tell the story of your research in about 600 words, not counting the intro and conclusion.

# Ideas for the story

- Why was this an interesting problem to study?
- How does this problem affect people?
- What practical solutions can you suggest?
- Was anything surprising?
- What was interesting about the ecosystem, community, etc.?
- How will your research help households, organizations, government, business, etc. make better decisions?

# Include vivid verbal images

- Fewer than 1,000 of this gorilla sub-species remain alive.
- The amount of post-harvest grain loss in Africa would be enough to feed XXXX people for a year.
- Children have to spend on average XXX hours a day collecting wood.

# Reminder: don't include

- Literature review
- modeling theory
- data preparation
- econometrics
- robustness checks

# Conclusion (heading and one paragraph, 100-150 words)

- The heading should be similar in style to the title, but move beyond introducing the findings to discussing possible actions
- The conclusion should restate the takeaway message, with a focus on what the decision-maker should *do* with the information
- What policy actions are in progress, or are recommended?
- What challenges or trade-offs should be kept in mind?

## 7. Finalizing the brief



## *A picture and a caption*

A photo or other image.

An engaging picture of people, wildlife, a farm, landscape, etc.

JPEG or TIFF

A visually-appealing pie chart, bar graph, etc.

No detailed statistical tables

Please write a caption for the picture

The caption should show action

# References and contact information

At the bottom of the template, there are spaces for:

- The full citation to the discussion paper
- Two or three references for further reading.
- The authors of the research brief (could be some or all of the paper authors)
- Contact information for one author

# Template, date, numbering

- If the researcher hasn't already placed the text in the template, she can work with the center Communications Officer to do that.
- The Secretariat (Research Officer and/or editor) will assign a "DRB number"
- These are "DRBs" because some centers produce research briefs that aren't related to the discussion paper series or to EfD-funded research
- "D" for discussion paper-related
- Dating and numbering of DRBs...

# Dating and numbering

- The brief should be dated with the month and year that it was actually completed.
- However, the “DRB Number” refers to the number of the discussion paper, which is based on the year that the discussion paper was completed. Example:
  - Maria Researcher’s Discussion Paper Number 16-24 is numbered as the 24<sup>th</sup> discussion paper published in 2016. It was published in December, 2016.
  - Dr. Researcher’s research brief was completed and published in January, 2017. It is numbered “DRB 16-24” and dated “January, 2017.”

# A review of the whole product

- Title and subtitle
- Bullet points
- Introduction
- Story/body
- Conclusion (heading and paragraph)
- References and author information
- Picture and caption
- Template
- Number and date

8. A well-organized discussion  
paper

- A well-organized Discussion Paper should have a clear beginning, middle, and end
- “Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.”
- Review/preview
- Road map/recap
- The intro, body of the paper, and conclusion should match each other
- The intro is a promise. Deliver on the promise in the body of the paper.

# Introduction to a paper...

- Make sure that the intro to the Discussion Paper tells “what you did,” “what this paper is about.”
- The intro should be able to stand alone without the abstract



# More about the intro to a paper

- Make sure that all key ideas are introduced in the intro to the paper
  - The country where you did the research
  - The crop, ecosystem, or economic activity that you studied
  - A basic overview of the data
  - Definitions of key terms and variables.

# Conclusion of a paper

- The conclusion of a DP must include policy-relevant findings
- Findings or policy concerns that are important enough to be included in the conclusion should not first be introduced in the conclusion
  - “Oh, by the way, we wrote this paper because there is a severe water shortage in Cape Town.”

# 9. Active and concrete language

*Show action. Use active **verbs***

**Passive voice**

- It **was found** that
- adoption of an intensification technology **was increased**
- in the presence of alternative earnings opportunities.

**Active voice**

- **We found** that
- more farm households **used** fertilizer
- when they **earned** money in non-farm jobs.

## *Be specific. Use concrete nouns*

### **General**

- It was found that
- adoption of an **intensification technology** was increased
- in the presence of **alternative earnings opportunities**.

### **Specific/concrete**

- We found that
- more farm households used **fertilizer**
- when they had opportunities to earn **money** in **non-farm jobs**.

# Goodbye for now. Want to learn more?

- I am available for one-on-one or small group training on writing skills during the Annual Meeting.
- Just find me and ask.
- Please tell your colleagues about this opportunity for training.
- Thanks for listening.
- Enjoy lunch!