

## How to Write a Briefing Note

This advice is intended for anyone -- not only students -- tasked with providing written policy advice in a public sector context. That is, it would apply to people working in government departments, in not-for-profit organisations, in universities -- basically, anywhere that the writer is expected to analyze a policy issue and provide recommendations for action.

1. **A briefing note is not an essay.** It is a written communication from one person to another that, normally, has been drafted by a third person.
2. **When writing a briefing note, make sure you understand exactly what you have been asked to do and keep that task clearly in mind as you write.**
  - Nothing is more exasperating than receiving a note that doesn't do what the writer has been asked to do.
3. **Make sure you understand the audience for the briefing note.** Is it your immediate boss? Is it a more senior person up the chain of command? Is it a Minister?
  - If you are going to brief effectively in writing, you have to understand who will be reading the note, what their needs and expectations are, what they know already about the issue, and (literally) how much time they have to deal with the issue you're raising with them.
4. **Pay careful attention to the factual information relevant to the issue on which you are advising.**
  - You need to provide only as much factual information as is necessary to situate your advice properly for the recipient.
  - Briefing effectively is not a matter of showing the reader how much you know, but rather giving the reader what he or she needs to know to deal with the advice you're providing.
  - Too much information in a briefing note is as bad as too little.
5. **Remember that a briefing note is essentially a line of reasoning leading to a compelling conclusion.**
  - It is not simply a catalogue of relevant facts and other information; nor is it a place for unsupported assertion of major points that require justification.
6. **Remember that, in almost all cases, the author of the briefing note is not the person who signs the note.**
  - This means you have to put yourself in the shoes of the person signing it. The note must convey the voice and perspective of that person, not the point of view or perspective of the drafter.

7. **It's crucial that your briefing note have a clear bottom line.**
  - It has to come to a bottom line, normally advice or options for the reader on which he or she can take action.
  - Briefing notes “for information only” are usually not read.
8. **Remember that in briefing, less is more.**
  - Most senior readers won't read a note longer than about two pages.
9. **If there is a standard departmentally format for a briefing note, be sure to follow it exactly.**
  - If there is a Summary box, then use that box to capture the issue, key facts and (most importantly) your bottom-line advice.
  - Normally, a Minister will read the summary box first to see whether the note itself is worth reading. If the summary doesn't grab his or her attention, the note won't be read.
10. **Once you've done a good draft, re-read it to check for spelling, grammar, missing words and any stylistic awkwardness.**
  - Then, read it out loud. The experience of listening to your draft will help to identify poorly constructed sentences, things that don't make sense and any other weaknesses that would be obvious to a reader.
11. **Keep your sentences short.** A sentence that goes on for four lines is two lines too long.
12. **The best briefing notes have an intimacy, a directness and a ‘voice’ that makes them feel as if the person who signed the note is speaking directly to the person reading it.**
  - If you can achieve that in your briefing note, you've succeeded.

**James R. Mitchell, PhD**

Senior Research Associate, Carleton University, and  
Former Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government