

How to Write a Policy Recommendation

What is a Policy Recommendation?

A policy recommendation is simply written policy advice prepared for some group that has the authority to make decisions, whether that is a Cabinet, Parliament, council, committee or other body. Policy recommendations are in many ways the chief product of the ongoing work of government managers to create and administer public policy. (We'll use the term policy recommendation to refer to policy submissions made to a provincial, territorial or federal Cabinet or a municipal council, although there are many other terms for these submissions.)

Policy recommendations have a lot in common with briefing notes. Like a briefing note, a policy recommendation serves to inform senior decision-makers about a policy issue. However, a policy recommendation document goes further than a briefing note, providing both a more in-depth analysis of the options and a policy recommendation.

Policy recommendations are the key means through which policy decisions are made in most levels of government. In many federal and provincial governments, policy recommendations are brought forward by a minister or department for approval by Cabinet or Parliament. Whether the policy recommendation is accepted as sound advice or dismissed in favour of another option largely depends on how well the issue and the arguments justifying the recommended course of action are presented.

How are Policy Recommendations Structured?

Policy recommendations usually must be presented in a standard format. Formats vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction but have a number of common features. They all, for example, begin with an issue. An issue is a matter on which a policy decision is required. Policy recommendations also, of course, include one or more recommendations. In between the issue and the recommendation (though not necessarily presented between these two in the actual document) is the policy analysis. A policy recommendation may have other pieces, but those three parts—issue, analysis and recommendation—will always be there.

One reason for this structure is that writing policy recommendations is basically a process of problem solving. In some version or other (there are many variations on the problem solving model), most problem solving approaches to policy follow a simple sequence:

- identify and clarify the policy issue
- research relevant background and context
- identify the alternatives
- carry out required consultations
- select the best policy option
- prepare policy recommendation document for approval

Take a look at these steps and you'll see that the stages between identifying the issue and making the recommendation (the first and last bullets) are all parts of the analysis.

How to Write a Policy Recommendation

Policy Recommendations and Analytical Reports

Policy recommendation documents are really just forms of the standard analytical report. Both documents analyze a situation and recommend a course of action. In both cases, the primary purpose is to help others make a decision; the writer's task is to convince the reader of the appropriateness of the analysis and the recommendation.

How Policy Recommendation Documents are Organized

Like other analytical reports, policy recommendation documents can have a direct or an indirect structure.

Direct structure: In a document that follows a direct structure, the issue is introduced, followed by the most important information—the recommendation. The analysis (discussion) follows the recommendation. This part of the document covers the background, factors considered in arriving at the alternatives considered, the analysis of the options and any other information that was considered in arriving at the recommendation. This structure allows the reader to get the most important information first. The reader can then read the discussion to see how the recommendation was arrived at (or, of course, can skip the discussion).

Indirect structure: An indirect structure follows the traditional academic approach to inquiry: the issue is introduced, followed by the analysis (discussion) as described for direct structure, and finally the recommendation. The reader follows the same sequence as the writer. Few policy documents follow this structure; if they do, the recommendation is still presented before the analysis.

What are the Characteristics of a Well-written Policy Recommendation?

By now you probably have noticed that well-written documents share the same characteristics. They fulfill a well-defined purpose for an identified audience and are clear, concise, complete and easy to read. The same is true of policy documents. However, in the case of policy recommendations, some characteristics are especially important. These are:

Conciseness: Decision-makers tend to be busy people, with lots of documents demanding their attention (and often a backlog). Keep your documents as focused and concise as possible so that your readers spend only the minimum time required to glean the information they need from them. Conciseness is really a product of the revising and editing stages.

Readability: No matter how complex the issue, or the recommendation, your ideas must be clear and readable.

Accuracy: Like briefing notes, policy recommendations must be based on the most recent, accurate and complete information available.

Argument: Policy documents are a form of argument and should reflect the qualities of effective argumentation including, forming reasons, justifying beliefs, and drawing conclusions with the aim of influencing others.