TRAINING: HOW TO WRITE A POLICY BRIEF

This set of slides has been adapted from a presentation developed by the Women’s and Children’s Health Policy Center at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health entitled “The Art of Crafting Policy Briefs.”
What Makes for a Good Policy Brief?

• Addresses a policy problem
• Provides information or a perspective that is needed
• Written with the audience in mind
• Easy to understand without specialized knowledge or additional reading
• Communicates essential information that drives policy recommendations
• Tells a story, and flows logically
Why Develop a Policy Brief?

- There is a gap between current outcomes and ideal outcomes
- The problem is clear but the solution is not
- The problem is emerging but is not being addressed
- New knowledge has implications for policy and practice
What Kind of Changes Are Being Promoted?

- Legal
- Administrative policies/regulations
- Agency funding priorities
- Organizational practices
- Program implementation
Who is Your Audience?

- What is their technical knowledge?
- What are the political/organizational constraints?
- What is their exposure to the issue?
- What is their openness to change?
- What information do they need?
Essential Elements

• What is your aim? This drives the rest.
• Describe the problem
  • Why is this problem important to the audience?
  • Why have previous efforts failed?
• Recommendations
  • Backed by the evidence
  • Flow from your argument
  • Are specific
  • Are appropriate for the audience
  • Do not go beyond the research*
Exercise 1: Deconstructing a Policy Brief

Skim a policy brief for 30 to 45 seconds. Can you tell…

• What is the purpose of the brief?
• What problem does it seek to address?
• What changes does it recommend?
Organizing a Policy Brief

• Start with your conclusions
• Keep the flow logical
• Give visual clues
  • Break up the text
  • Use headings
  • Use bulleted lists
  • Highlight key points (e.g., using font, call-out boxes)
  • Have healthy margins and lots of white space
• Write for clarity and simplicity (see example brief)
  • Economy of words
  • De-jargonize
Economy of Words

• Did you use a big word when a smaller one would have worked?
  • “Operationalize” versus “carry out”

• Can you cut out words or phrases without changing the meaning?
  • “It is important to note that”

• Have you used a phrase or clause when a word or two will do?
  • “Due to the fact that” versus “because”
De-jargonizing Scientific Writing

- Executive function
- Working memory
- Cognitive dissonance
- Psycholinguistic
- Cognitive skills
- Cultural schemas
- Idiolect
- Intergroup
- Neural connectivity
- Analogous
- Implicit ingroup attitudes
Additional Language Tips

- Use the active voice
  - People do things (versus “things were done”)
  - “The focus of this study” versus “This study focuses on”
- Can you say in one sentence what you just said in two or three?
- Can you break a long sentence into two clearer ones?
- Are the subject and verb easily identified?
Make Data Talk

- Choose carefully, with your audience in mind
- Present data simply and clearly
  - Assume the audience has no knowledge of statistics
  - Don’t overwhelm the reader with numbers
- The use of data should flow logically from the text (without being duplicative)

As predicted, marginalization predicted greater significance loss ($B = .21, SE = .04, p < .001$), as did discrimination ($B = .38, SE = .06, p < .001$). Moreover, the relationship between marginalization and significance loss became stronger the more one had experienced discrimination ($B = .17, SE = .05, p = .002$). In turn, significance loss predicted support for a radical interpretation of Islam ($B = .17, SE = .07, p = .03$). The confidence intervals suggested that marginalization indirectly related to support for a radical interpretation of Islam via significance loss when having experienced high levels of discrimination (CI95 = .0053, .1282).

Radical groups like ISIL prey on youth who lack clear purpose and direction by promising belongingness, status, and recognition for those who work on their behalf. And this seems to work—some Muslim Americans who feel a lack of meaning in their lives report being more attracted to radical groups and ideologies.
Presenting Data Visually

• What story do you want to tell?
  • Use graphs to show relationships, the shape of data (e.g., patterns, trends)
  • Use tables to show individual values
  • Bar graphs are more effective than pie charts
  • Minimize visual clutter (e.g., grid lines, legends, 3-D effects, colors that don’t copy well)
Presenting Data Visually (Continued)

INDICATOR PHY2.B: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN AGES 0–6 LIVING IN HOMES WHERE SOMEONE SMOKED REGULARLY BY POVERTY STATUS, 1994, 2005, AND 2010


EXERCISE 2: BEGINNING YOUR POLICY BRIEF

Attendees will use the Exercise 2 handout to outline a policy brief based on their own research or the broader body of research that interests them. If time permits, attendees will then draft one-page briefs using these outlines as guidance.
EXERCISE 3: POLICY

BRIEF CHECKLIST

If time permits, attendees will share their draft briefs with other attendees and solicit feedback for improvement.
GROUP DISCUSSION

• In your brief, what policy problem did you choose to address, and who was your audience?
• What was your “take home” message and how did the content of the brief support that message?
• In developing your brief, what were the translation challenges you encountered and how did you address these challenges?