

Preparing a Policy Issue Brief

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I. Introduction

What? The issue brief is a short, *neutral* summary of what is known about a particular issue or problem. It is widely used in government and industry. A *policy* issue brief is about a public problem, one that may or already does affect, or is affected by, government. Analysts prepare such briefs for educated generalists (e.g., legislators, managers), who may know little or nothing about the topic, but need to have a general background, quickly. The issue brief distills or synthesizes a large amount of complex detail, so the reader can easily understand the heart of the issue, its background, the players (“stakeholders”) and any recommendations, or even educated guesses about the future of the issue. It may have tables and graphs; it usually has a short list of references, so the reader knows something about the sources on which it is based, and where to go for more information. Often, the brief has its own “brief”—a one page “executive summary,” allowing the reader to quickly grasp the essence of the report.

Why? Learning how to research and write issue briefs will familiarize you with several health care policy issues, in-depth, and build skills such as information search, teamwork, and communication (reading, writing, listening, speaking). These tools will serve you well in HPA 400-level courses, & in the job market. Completing two different issue briefs will broaden your understanding of health care issues and reinforce the skills. The instructor assigns topics and teams (for the second brief), which both saves time, and replicates the world of work, where needs of the organization, rather than employees’ personal preferences, drive decisions. However, the best rationale for the issue brief exercise is the efficiency of a well-done issue brief itself.

So, be sure to read through the *sample* issue briefs,—both past students’ as well as professional versions, which will be made available at the Reserve Reading Room in 1 East Human Development (basement). Also, Pattee Library staff has prepared a very helpful series of tutorials on information literacy. It can be found at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/crsweb/instruction/ip/tutorials.htm>. Particularly important are the tutorials on “The CAT”, “The Information Cycle,” and especially “Information Literacy and You.” Also, Pattee’s “Reference Shelf” web site is helpful.

How? Whether working alone on the first brief (so you learn the basics), or with others on the second brief (to learn how to work in teams), the projects focus on two main processes (which are also skills):

-Researching, or becoming ‘information literate’ by : 1) specifying , or narrowing, the information needed; 2) searching relevant bibliographic data bases; 3) assessing relevance of records and documents; 4) selecting useful passages and sources; 5) noting new information, its author and the source. These will be reviewed in detail in class.

-Writing: includes synthesizing notes into completed drafts, proper citation and formatting, and *re-writing based on instructor’s revision comments* For specifics, see “Parts of the issue brief,” below.

When? A specific submission/revision process is to be followed:

- **Original draft.** Submit each of the several parts when due, about every 10 days (see Schedule). Before submission, be sure to re-read carefully for typographic errors, incomplete sentences, faulty grammar, and nonsense. Consider pairing up with a classmate, and swap papers for proof-reading. Papers, due at class time, will be returned in a few days. Late submissions will be penalized; see “Grading” below for specifics.

- **Revised draft.** Respond to requested changes on original drafts as soon as possible. Carefully review

instructor's comments to make sure you understand everything written in margins. If you do not, you may e-mail questions, or make an appointment with teaching assistant or instructor. Because you *must* include your original with instructor's comments for the final version, you may want to photocopy the original to work on it directly. For the second, team project, *re-written versions of part B, C, or D need not be submitted until the final deadline; however, submitting beforehand for feedback is strongly advised.*

- Re-submit original and final revisions of all parts: *You must* include originals of each part (w/ instructor comments still on pages). Major penalties will be incurred if original drafts are "lost." You may want to photocopy your original drafts to better see your own work.

Some pointers for drafts:

1. Neutrality. Because this analysis is intended for use by partisans of either side of the issue, that is, it should be neutral, writers' personal opinions on the issue are inappropriate. Others' opinions (e.g. stakeholders) may indeed be important, but if stated, must be properly attributed and documented.

2. Format. For drafts as well as final versions, print on only one side of a sheet. Number every page, always double space, and use 12 point font. For all headings and sub-headings in text, use questions directly from instructions.

3. Standards. Be sure to use a standard reference, such as Turabian, *Guide to writers of term papers...*etc.

Grading

The two IB projects count for 70% of your grade (solo-40%, team-30%). Each of the parts is weighted differently. Note that you can get a LOWER grade on the final version than on the original drafts, IF you ignore the reader's revision comments on your original. Negative points (deductions) are possible for ignoring basic elements of writing (spelling, grammar, etc.). Deductions will also be made for late papers, missing drafts, as well as for *exceeding* prescribed page lengths. Late drafts will be penalized at 10% per day. For details, study carefully the "Grading Criteria" checklist, below.

II. Parts of the issue brief

Part A. Identify stakeholders (Weight: 15%)

First, narrow or specify your issue topic to something manageable, “do-able” in six weeks time.

Next, identify a major stakeholder group on each side of this issue. There may be more than two, and you can mention them, but the main work should focus on the two most active, opposing stakeholders. Occasionally with some topics, the major stakeholders will not have sharp differences, but usually they do.

Stakeholders define issues, generating much of what is publicly known about them. Stakeholders are organizations (and sometimes loosely organized groups or even, rarely, individuals) with an interest in the outcome of a policy issue. Any controversial issue always has at least two major stakeholders (otherwise there would be no public debate or controversy). Note that government entities may *occasionally* be stakeholders, as in the President, or Governor and/or one of his/her executive agencies. For example, the Food & Drug Administration’s role in tobacco control, or Pennsylvania’s Department of Public Welfare’s role in anything to do with Pennsylvania Medicaid. Legislatures and their members are rarely stakeholders. However outspoken a congressman or assemblyman may be on an issue, he or she is usually speaking *for* another special interest organization, and therefore is rarely a true stakeholder on an issue.

You may find helpful the reference *US Health Policy Groups, Institutional Profiles*, as well as the electronic database: *Associations Unlimited*.

Next, answer these questions for **each** stakeholder group:

1. Preliminary definition of issue or problem. Based on your first review of the literature, what seems to be the issue? What do stakeholders say is the issue or problem? Based on these, define the issue in a preliminary way. Use the stakeholders’ own perspectives (and language) to narrow your topic. Pay close attention when stakeholders define the issue differently from one another. Look ahead to Part C for guidance on how this issue definition is to be done ultimately. What the reader needs at this point is a concrete idea of just what your issue is about.

(Items 2, 3, & 4 are repeated for each stakeholder)

2. Stakeholders’ positions on the issue. What does each stakeholder organization say is its position? Why? What’s in it for them? Direct quotes from stakeholders are helpful here.

3. Stakeholder resources. Resources are assets needed for exercising influence. Membership size, budget, media exposure, coalitions with other stakeholder groups, etc. Try to estimate their political “clout.”

4. Stakeholder actions. What did stakeholders do to bring the issue to government’s attention, to make the issue more (or less) visible to the public, or closer to (or farther from) government action? (E.g., Testify at hearings? Consult w/ legislative staff? Provide data supporting their position or countering the opposition’s? Draft legislation? Extensive public relations? Behind the scenes maneuvering? Campaign contributions? (For the latter, see www.opensecrets.org))

Organize your answers in separate sections, one for each stakeholder.

Cite major sources, using standard citation rules. Note that a solid job of referencing might require assessing 3-4 times the number of sources ultimately used. “Solid” means deeper than newspapers or news magazines--e.g. specialized health care literature.

Part B. Describe issue's history (Weight: 25%)

This is the most comprehensive part, requiring both historical depth and breadth. It is commonly the longest.

5. Emergence. When and how did the issue begin to become an issue, historically? Was it all started by a key event, or series of events, such as the discovery of AIDS in the early 1980s? Did it build slowly from increased press attention, as did public awareness of a backlash toward HMOs in the mid 1990s?

6. Chronology. List the key dates (usually by year) in the issue's development, particularly *governmental actions*--legislative (hearings, laws), executive (orders, regulations), or judicial (opinions, rulings)? List major events year by year, or if appropriate, month by month. Events listed should be no more than one page.

7. Trends. What historical *trend* data show how the situation evolved (e.g., got better, or worse, increased public awareness, public opinion, growing costs, decreasing quality or access, etc.), particularly in relation to:

-*access* Identify at least one measure of access, and show how it changed over time

-*costs* Identify at least one measure of cost “ ”

-*quality* Identify at least one measure of quality “ ”

(See Part D, below, for definition of “trend.”)

Cite new information sources used: at least a half dozen different sources should be used and shown.

Part C: Define the issue (Weight: 30%)

This is the most important of the four parts of the issue brief. It is also the hardest! Your task is to decide what are the boundaries of your inquiry--what is “inside” your definition, which you will deal with, and what is “outside,” which you will not include. You need to identify “missing” or new information needed to understand the issue more fully. Keep in mind that you may well have to re-define your issue several times during the life of the project.

8. Problem. Define this issue clearly for the reader, in one or two sentences only. How, why and to whom is this issue *problematic*? One definition of “problem”: a problem is a gap between the ideal and the real, between what could be and what is. A variation of “problem” is: a difference of opinion; a *conflict* about the definition of the real or the ideal, between or among major stakeholders. A problem statement should specify what the conflict is about. A good way to identify a problem is to listen to those who have the problem--especially the stakeholders, or those organized interests who speak out, either seeking to change the status quo, to achieve the ideal, or seeking to defend things as they are. So, you need to think about who might be the stakeholders for this problem....

9. Extent. What is the extent of the problem? Provide quantitative estimates, if possible, of the problem's magnitude, and intensity--for example, how many lives are affected, how many dollars are spent or lost, etc., now or are expected in the future, *if no action is taken to change the status quo*.

10. Public policy. What makes this a public policy issue, i.e., one on which government *action* (legislative, judicial, or executive) or government *monies* should (or should not) be spent to help resolve the problem?

References: *Minimal expectation:* 7-8 solid sources for Part C of first, solo project; 3+ good sources per team member for second project. Note that “solid sources” might require assessing 3-4 times that number of sources; “solid” means deeper than newspapers or news magazines--e.g. specialized health care literature.

Part D. Monitor issue's development (Weight: 15%)

11. What two trends best show the future?

Identify 2-3 kinds of trend information (data) you would want to monitor this issue over time. A *trend* is a series of observations showing change; usually these are derived from data already collected on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annual basis. Justify your selection of these over others available. Selection could be derived from information used in parts A, B, or C. E.g., how would you measure whether things got better or worse?

If no data seem to be available, you may construct a measure of your own, showing how it could, if available, help track the issue over time. Also, use existing graphically displayed information. Charts, tables, etc. may be taken directly from original sources, but the source must be precisely identified and listed in your bibliography.

Examples: annual budgets over a period of years; monthly illness rates; daily hospital admissions; news coverage trends, public opinion polls, quarterly medical price indexes, etc.

Tip: The journals *HCFA Review*, *Health Affairs*, and *Statistical Bulletin* are likely sources of data for trends. **Cite** sources of data in text, on tables, graphs & charts, etc., and at end of this section, in bibliography.

Part E. Executive Summary (Weight: 5%)

Write this last. It is a single page summary, *placed right after the cover page*, but before 'contents' page; it is standard in most business and government communications, and can be very helpful to the busy reader. Each of the main parts of your brief (A-D) needs to be summarized in a paragraph, then all these parts brought together in a single page. No new composing should be needed, but some transitional sentences will be helpful. Other than "Executive Summary," this page has neither headings, bibliographic citations, nor pagination. Avoid technical terms, and spell out any acronyms (e.g. "HCFA--Health Care Financing Administration"), if you must use them. See sample issue briefs.

Part F. Bibliography (Weight: 10%)

Use formal, publication format (author, title, location, publisher, date), first listing hard copy references alphabetically, by author; titles underlined, or in *italics*. Next, list web sites by URL address, then identify sponsor (e.g., "http://www.psu.edu [Penn State University]"). *Number* each citation, and use that number for all in-text references to it. References include only sources actually used, not a list of everything you glanced at, or did not really use. See Turabian, *Guide for writers of theses and term papers*. You should use APA or another formal citation system, making certain only that you use the same citation procedure throughout.

III. Grading criteria check list

Students often want to know the difference between an A, B and C, etc. These performance criteria try to spell out what you have to do to achieve excellence. High quality on each of the criteria below, plus clarity and coherence in writing, constitute an “A” grade. Use this to understand what a good answer to the question should minimally include, and as a checklist before submitting any draft. The instructor uses this same checklist in grading.

Parts / Questions	Value	Answers / Performance Criteria
A. Identify stakeholders 1. What is the issue? 2. What are their <u>positions</u> on the issue? 3. What <u>resources</u> do they have? 4. What was done to <u>get government attention</u> or action?	15%	Did your answer include? _ preliminary statement of what is problematic? _ a clear statement of position, for both major stakeholders? _ membership size, budget, etc., identified clearly for both? _ specific actions and outcomes detailed, re how they sought to get or block government action - for both?
B. Policy background 5. How did the issue <u>emerge</u> historically? 6. What was <u>chronology</u> , esp gov't action? 7. What quantitative <u>trends</u> help explain: -How “access” fit into issue? -How “costs” fit? -How “quality” fit?	25%	Did your answer include? _ history of its beginning and rise in public awareness? _ which legislative, judicial & exec. acts shaped issue, & at what dates? What was the year by year time line? _ how users could/could not get services & why? _ changes in dollar (or time or psychic) costs? _ examples of changes in quality (structure, process & outcome)?
C. Define the issue 8. What is the problem? For whom, how & why is this problem? 9. What is the <u>extent</u> of the problem? 10. What makes this a <u>public</u> policy issue?	30%	Did your answer include? _ 1-2 clear sentences of problem or conflict creating the issue? _ all three questions answered? _ how much money spent, how many people affected, etc? _ how is government (state, federal, both) involved? Which branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial)?
D. Monitor development 11. What 2 trends best show the future?	15%	_ identified issue-related trends, data changes, & data sources?
E. Executive summary F. Citations & Bibliography -Format details (See separate checklist)	5% 10%	_ one page only?; _ captured all four parts of brief? _ all facts sourced, in text? _ proper citation format? _ web sites : maximum of 1/3 total citations? _ identified each web site sponsor? _ followed all format details, closely?
Final draft (+revisions)		_ made all revisions requested? _ original revisions attached?

IV. Format check list

(before submission, use this to make sure everything is in order.)

General

- ___ length: *no more than 8-10 pages* (solo version), *or 13-15 pages* (team version), excluding cover sheet, title page, executive summary, table of contents, and bibliography. Text beyond these limits *will not be read*
 - ___ *text: word-processed (12 pt single font, double-spaced, single-sided, spell-checked, and grammar-checked)
 - ___ *pagination: ***un-paginated papers will be returned!*** Number pages consecutively, starting at second (2nd) page of text and continuing to the last page of Part F (or X on IB2).. Report pages which are not paginated are: cover sheet, executive summary, table of contents, & page one (1). If you can't get word processor to paginate properly, do so by hand.
 - ___ *headings: use **bolded** headings *and* subheadings in text, based on table of contents
 - ___ cover: use the **cover sheet form** provided (no staples, binding or covers; paper clip only).
 - ___ title page : Issue brief title, course name, date, author; Team project (IB2) title page—same as IB1, **plus** each member's name, *and the section(s) the individual contributed.*
 - ___ table of contents (see section G.)
- *Up to 15 points may be *deducted* for typographic, spelling, punctuation, grammatical errors, as well as for missing subheads, information sources, incomplete sentences, and other forms of sloppiness. Several persons should proof-read the text for errors, several times.

Submission

- ___ use the cover sheet forms provided
 - ___ *include originals ***and*** revisions of parts submitted, w/ TA or instructor's marginal comments.
- This is critical. An entire grade point will be deducted for missing original drafts.**
- ___ copies: make two (2) copies of final version to instructor, plus copies for team members;
Note: final issue briefs will *not* be returned, although comments will. *So, be sure to...*
 - ___ *make extra copies for yourself and team members !*
- *No credit for asterisked items, but points will be deducted for noncompliance.**

V. Cover sheet

HPA 301 *Issue Brief Cover Sheet*

(Must be used with each submission)

Title _____

Part A/B/C/D/ (circle one) **Team** __ (#); **Solo** _____ (name)

1st draft __; **revs'n** __; **final** __ (check one) **Date** _____

Readers' Comments:

Priorities for revision

VI. Sample Title Page

Why Job-based Health Insurance?
A Policy Issue Brief

HPA 301
Spring 1999

Team Four

S.Smith Part A&B

J.Jones Part B&C

F.Ford Part C&B

J.Jose Parts D,E,F&C

VII. Sample Contents Page

(be sure to use these headings & subheadings in your text)

Executive Summary

[Note that “Issue Definition” was not the first step completed in preparing the brief, but is now placed first, because it is more logical for the reader; for the same reason, “Stakeholders,” is placed later~ for the reader.]

A. Issue defined.....	1
Definition	
Problem	
Extent	
Public policy	
B. History.....	3
Question	
Emergence	
Chronology	
Trends: Access, Cost, Quality	
C. Stakeholders.....	7
Stakeholder A	
(Position on issue; Resources; Government action; Success)	
Stakeholder B	
(Position on issue; Resources; Government action; Success)	
D. Trends.....	10
E. Bibliography.....	11

VIII.

Reader Scoring Sheet for Policy Issue Briefs 1 & 2 8/02

Author.....Title.....Reader.....

Wt for IB1/IB2	IB Questions	Initial Draft	Changes Made on Final Draft?	Final Score
20% 16%	A. Analyze stakeholders			
(5% /4%)	1. Prelim. issue/prob. definition			
(2.5 / 2%)	2. Position on issue (Stkhldr #1)			
(2.5 /2%)	3. Resources (Stkhlder #1)			
(2.5 /2%)	4. Getting gov't action (Stkhlder #1)			
(2.5 /2%)	2. Position on issue (Stkhlder #2)			
(2.5 /2%)	3. Resources (Stkhlder #2)			
(2.5 /2%)	4. Getting gov't action (Stkhlder #2)			
25%/15%	B. Describe policy background			
(5%/3%)	5. Emergence?			
(5%/3%)	6. Chronology?			
(5%/3%)	7. a) Access trends?			
(5%/3%)	b) Cost trends?			

Wt for IB1/IB2	IB Questions	Initial Draft	Changes Made on Final Draft?	Final Score
(5%/3%)	c) Quality trends?			
-30% -	<i>C. Define the issue</i>			
(10%)	8. What is the issue/problem? (again)			
(10%)	9. Extent of problem? (#s, \$, etc.)			
(10%)	10. Public policy aspect?			
- 10% -	<i>D. Trends / Development</i>			
0% 10%	<i>"X". Recommendations(IB2 only)</i>			
- 5% -	<i>F. Executive Summary</i>			
10% 5%	<i>G. Citations & Bibliography</i>			
0% 10%	<i>"Z". Oral Presentation (IB2 only)</i>			
Tot100% (IB2=101				

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