

Short, shorter, shortest

If there's one thing we've heard loud and clear from the new Government about policy advice, it's that they expect shorter, tighter papers.

Over the past few years, we've been warning about seeing papers getting longer – this includes standard briefings to your Minister as well as Cabinet papers.

This masterclass provides some advice on how to get better at writing short papers.

There are lessons to be learnt from executive summaries, Key points and presentations

Some of the techniques you've been using to write great executive summaries¹ or Key points² sections or orally presenting your paper to the Minister³ can be pulled into play here. They are all about getting down to the essentials of the argument.

It's harder to write a short paper than a long one

We are harking back to Mark Twain.⁴ It does take more effort to write a short paper. You must choose your words carefully and have a clear structure and logical argument.

Editing also takes time and careful thought.

Our 50/50 rule⁵ comes into play here. Half the time on doing the analysis and half the time on writing the paper.

Think first, write second

Spend some time thinking through the issues, doing the analysis and structuring the paper before you start writing.

This makes the writing much easier – as you are clear on what you are talking about and how to present the issues to decision makers.

Story-lining,⁶ i.e. producing a structured set of headings, can help. It's worth testing this outline with others (including those without in-depth subject knowledge) before starting to write the paper.

It also helps avoid mental cul-de-sacs, i.e. including content that isn't strictly necessary.

Be ruthless – include what is needed, but not what is nice to know

Streamlining is essential to manage length.

There is no need to show all the analysis you've done – but of course, you do have to have done the necessary work (and be able to answer questions or provide more detail if asked).

¹ Masterclass No.3 Executive summaries
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_3_masterclass_executive_summaries.pdf

² Masterclass No. 41 Effective key points
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2041%20Key%20points_2022.pdf

³ Masterclass No. 20 Presenting evidence
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2049%20Presenting%20your%20paper.pdf>

⁴ Masterclass No. 29 Tips on writing from Mark Twain
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_29_tips_on_writing_from_mark_twain.pdf

⁵ Masterclass No. 53 Fifty-fifty rule
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2053%20Fifty-fifty%20rule.pdf>

⁶ Masterclass No. 15 Make papers pop
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_15_make_papers_pop.pdf

Most of what follows is about striking the right balance: enough to convince and no wasted words.

As analysts, it can be hard to see the wood from the trees when we've done a lot of work on the topic and have a lot of expertise and experience. We need to put that aside when it comes to the communication side of the policy advice task. In terms of the Policy Quality Framework, it's the 'Advice' that's the focus at this stage, rather than the 'Analysis'.

Firstly, work on what is critical to your argument and what can be set aside.

Secondly, find ways of summarising the analysis you include in the paper to show you've done it and to cover the vital points.

A careful balance is needed in presenting the analysis – it's easy to take streamlining too far and make your work look superficial and without the depth of analysis needed. An example we often see is concerning risk – papers often only discuss one or two risks. But they don't explain that a full risk analysis has been done, and the ones presented are only the most significant risks.

This can lead to the impression that the risk aspect hasn't been carefully thought about. A similar fault occurs when presenting options analyses. It's always important to explain what else was considered and why what you are recommending is best.

The use of tables here can be helpful as they both:

- show all elements you've covered
- summarise what you've done and what their importance is.

Plain language is important

There's no point in a short paper if it's hard to read and absorb at pace.

Stick with plain language and explain any technical language.⁷

Use appendices – but not too many

We often encourage putting more detailed analysis or information in an appendix.

This is an easy way of reducing the body of a paper. But it shouldn't be used as an easy way out.

The appendices should still add value and be essential to the arguments in the paper.

A great visual has a place

Don't be afraid to include an infographic, diagram, chart or table. Good ones present information and ideas more succinctly and clearly than you can do in writing.

Use the 'at a glance' test – if a diagram/chart/map needs more than a sentence of explanation, it doesn't work.

Review, review and review

Authors must take time to review their work and try to shorten and tighten it.

But this is also a key role for a peer reviewer. Indeed, you might want to ask someone to just review your paper with an eye to streamlining it as one part of a peer review process.

Reviewers and all those experts asked for input on a paper, sign-out managers (and indeed other agencies) need to take care not to just request additional content. We've all seen examples where others try to introduce additional material that's important to them but isn't essential to this paper. All reviewers need to remember the overall goal: be thorough but succinct.

⁷ Masterclass No 42 Say it in Plain English
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Brief%2042%20Say%20it%20in%20plain%20English.pdf>

Try one-pagers⁸

As we've mentioned before, we've seen a number of agencies develop and use one-page briefings. These are often for quick response briefings and are usually written using dot points only. Give them a go.

But take care not to use one-page briefings for things that could be covered in a couple of sentences in a weekly report or similar.

It's a skill – practice makes perfect

Writing super-short papers might not come naturally for everyone. Of course, some Ministers/agencies have tried hard for many years to make this a standard practice. Others have not.

It is a skill. It will take longer initially, but you will get better and quicker with practice.

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⁸ Masterclass No. 54 One-page papers
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2054%20One-page%20papers.pdf>