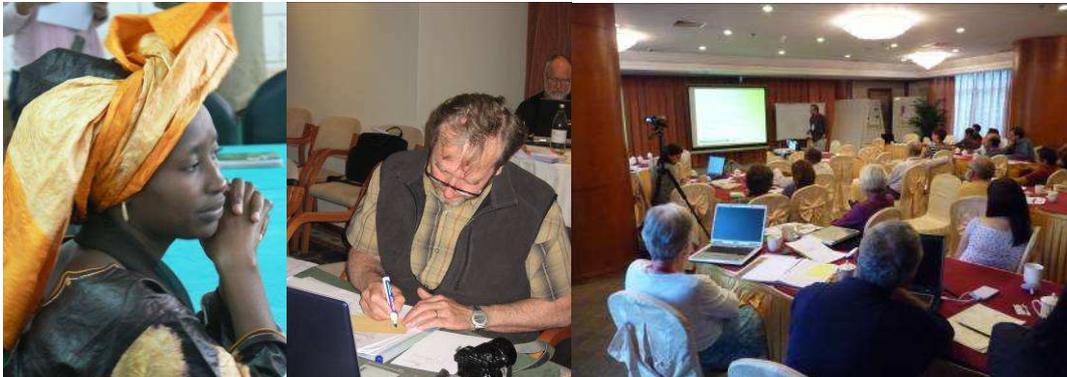


Guideline



DESIRE guidelines to writing a policy brief

These guidelines for writing a policy brief have been compiled to help DESIRE study site teams with writing a policy brief based on the results of their DESIRE research. Any questions and comments can be directed to the authors.*

Introduction

Why should we write policy briefs, with what aim?

Policy briefs respond to various levels of needs, from demand driven to supply. Their intensity in "push" can be different according to the local conditions and will of the authors on a scale going from informing to convincing. Most of the time the reasons leading to a policy brief are a mixture of these. In the case of DESIRE the following reasons could be given:

- because we are asked to put forward recommendations on issues

about which we have specialist knowledge;

- to justify our own research in the eyes of policy makers, and to secure future funding;
- to present our findings and recommendations because we feel our insights can add to decision making (this is how we "inform" policy makers);
- to give our recommendation(s) and advise policy makers
- to advocate for a certain position (this is how we "convince" policy makers);
- to explore an issue and distil lessons learned from our research for future use.

Below you will find some writing tips and tricks, and guidance through a template of how a policy brief could look. Depending on the topic you choose, and the purpose you have with the policy brief, the brief has various entry points based on different levels of interest of your target audience. The type of policy maker you are targeting also

*Authors: Marie José van der Werff ten Bosch, Both ENDS, mjb@bothends.org, Patrice Burger and Maude Gentit, CARI, cariassociation@yahoo.fr. Thanks to Nicky Geeson for editing and comments.

determines how to formulate your message, concrete and practical or rather general for example.

The brief should be centred on DESIRE findings. Findings are not necessarily positive and ready-for-use results; a finding can also be knowledge gained throughout the project which can bring a change in a current situation:

- an issue or problem that came up during your research for DESIRE that you would like to bring to the attention of your policy audience, and/or that you want your audience to take action on
- a method or technique you would like to promote on the basis of your experiences and knowledge with using it
- a relevant decision that will be made soon, and that you want to influence

In short, you have a key message for your audience:

- “this issue/problem needs your attention and action”
- “this method/technique should be supported/used by you in your future actions”
- “the decision you or others are about to make should be this one and not the other options”

The focus of the brief needs to be limited to just one particular problem or area of a problem. That is because your message needs to be crystal clear in order to be understood and acted on.



During writing, constantly try to go back to your message to check if what you are writing is really relevant to your message. Stay to the point!

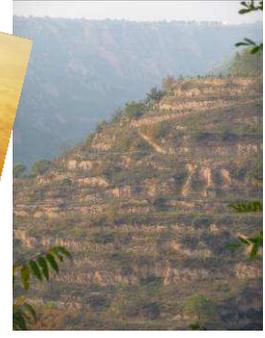
Most important for a policy brief is that it must link to an actual policy or public debate in which your target audience should be or is involved. Be brief; convince the reader of the importance of the message and the urgency to take action; inform, to give all readers an overview of the current debate in easy to read language. Stay close to actions that are good to the common interest.

Some general tips

- Scientific facts alone are not enough — focus on the impacts on people, especially those whose interests the politicians are likely to be particularly concerned about.
- Be accurate, avoid using general terms like “large” or “most of” without qualification. Always present (or at least summarise) the evidence for your argument. Be clear, precise and succinct.
- Avoid sensationalist language; be objective and let the science speak for itself.
- Use plenty of headings. Consider using boxes if you have a short list of key points. These guide the reader through the text and help them spot your main points at a glance. Solid text with no signposts is off-putting and difficult to digest.
- A policy brief must advance a persuasive argument in a concise, clearly organised fashion. A policy brief does not include a lengthy analysis or review of the literature.
- If you cannot refer to specific places or people for reasons of privacy or political sensitivity, use fictitious case studies from which the reader can draw their own conclusions.

In order to choose your audience, see some useful tips in the two papers in the Annex. Furthermore a collection of other materials that can give you guidance while writing a policy brief can be found on the DESIRE ftp-site.

In order to succeed with a policy brief there is also a question of timing: are there any important dates or events when this brief has the maximum of chances to reach the audience?



Choose the “twin trick” by channelling the message both ways to your primary audience (the decision makers) and to the general public (press, CSOs, students...) in order to stimulate the debate and avoid that your message will be lost. Below are some suggestions and tips on how you can structure your policy brief, and what to put in the different sections.

Title of the paper

Make the title clear, descriptive, punchy and relevant. Decide on the title once you have written the brief. “Add a little jazz”:

- Titles are a reference point
- Sub-titles break up text
- Both should entice readers
- Similar to headline writing
- Verbs make them more dynamic
- Questions can pique curiosity

Executive summary

The executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a 1 to 2 paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

- A description of the message addressed and/or the purpose of the brief;
- A statement on why the issue is relevant to them, and why it is important now;
- Your recommendations for action.

The first paragraph or introduction is crucial in hooking the reader's attention, and motivating them to read the rest of the text. A science communication article needs to start with a bang — an attention-grabbing fact, question or the like.

Context and importance of the problem or issue

The purpose of this element of the brief is to convince the target audience that a current and urgent problem exists which requires them to take action. The context and

importance of the problem is both the introductory and first building block of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

- A clear statement of the problem or issue in focus - “the message”

- A short overview of the root causes of the problem. Include only the essential facts that a decision-maker “needs to know” to understand the context and tendency of the problem or issue. Include, if necessary, what has been done about the problem or issue so far. Try to reflect the balance of opinion on an issue, and to make its nature explicit, in terms of whether there is general consensus or widespread controversy on the issue or some of its elements.

- A clear statement of the policy implications of the problem which clearly establishes the current importance, urgency and policy relevance of the issue.

Critique of policy option(s)

The aim of this element is to detail shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented

and therefore, illustrate both the need for change and focus of where change needs to occur. In doing so, the critique of policy options usually includes the following:

- A short overview of the policy option(s) in focus.
- An argument illustrating why and how the current or proposed approach is failing. You can also state advantages and disadvantages of the options.

It is important for the sake of credibility to recognise all opinions in the debate of the issue.

Policy recommendations

The aim of the policy recommendations element is to provide a detailed and convincing proposal of how the failings of the current policy approach need to be changed. As such this is achieved by including;

- Repetition of your message of what action needs to be taken, and why, in light of the previous section, this option should be preferred. Explain why the evidence is significant;
- A breakdown of the specific practical steps or measures that need to be implemented – don't forget the timeframe!
- Sometimes also include a closing paragraph re-emphasising the importance of action.

Appendices

Although the brief is a short and targeted document, authors sometimes decide that their argument needs further support and so include an appendix. Appendices should be included only when absolutely necessary.

Sources consulted or recommended

Many writers of the policy brief decide not to include any sourcing of their evidence as their focus is not on an academic audience. However, if you decide to include a short bibliography then place it at the end. Many writers prefer to lead their readers to further reading and so, include a recommended readings section.



Layout and choices

- 2-4 pages is ~1500 words
- Callouts (sentences or sentence fragments, printed in larger font, boxed or placed in margins) enliven the brief
- Bulleted lists are easy to digest; groups of 5-7 are favourable. Express completed thoughts and avoid tags (one or two word bullets)
- Pie charts and bar graphs are better than tables

Check list

Both ENDS check list for writing a policy note, by Tobias Schmitz, with some additions:

1. Is the brief written in accessible language? Go on a jargon hunt! Even though the topic might be complex, is the brief nevertheless understandable for a non-informed reader?
2. Is it linking to actual policy debates?
3. Is the brief summarizing the current debate well, is it giving a brief but complete overview?
4. Are any normative (one-sided, unbalanced) words used like “have to”, “unacceptable”, and “deplorable”? Try to replace them with the underlying argument instead (why it has to be done, what makes something unacceptable or deplorable). It is necessary to present arguments that convince others who might not necessarily have the same norms and values. Also, superlatives and emotive language can be quoted out of context.
5. Does the brief contain concrete policy recommendations that are derived logically from the arguments?
6. Is the composition of the brief logical? Are all parts needed for the story and do they logically follow one another?
7. Is the brief rooted in a relevant lecture that is balanced in its composition?
8. No more than 1500 words?
9. Does the brief clarify the view of the author(s) and/or its organisation in the debate and thus flag the organisation?
10. Conduct a 20-second test: what stood out?

Used resources

- Annex 1 and 2
- The Policy Brief, Eoin Young and Lisa Quinn, <http://www.policy.hu/ipf/fel-pubs/samples/PolicyBrief-described.pdf>
- How to Write a Policy Brief - IDRC Canada, http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-132135-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html
- Guidelines for Writing a Policy Brief - Prof. Tsai, http://www.rhsupplies.org/fileadmin/user_upload/toolkit/B_Advocacy_for_RHS/Guidelines_for_Writing_a_Policy_Brief.pdf
- http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/1226604937112265958681Chapter_8%5B1%5D.pdf

Of course, see also:

- Guidance for Facilitating dissemination on the DESIRE Harmonised Information System;
- and particularly Appendix 4 of the DESIRE Manual of communication and dissemination, downloadable from the HIS or the website as well.



Annex 1

How do I brief policymakers on science-related issues?

<http://www.scidev.net/en/middle-east-and-north-africa/practical-guides/how-do-i-brief-policymakers-on-science-related-iss.html#>

Chandrika Nath - UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 7 February 2008

Chandrika Nath provides tips on preparing a briefing paper on a scientific topic for busy policymakers.

Few politicians or senior policymakers have scientific backgrounds. Yet they must frequently make vital policy decisions on science or technology issues that have widespread implications for society — such as GM crops, the treatment of infectious diseases or intellectual property legislation. Politicians need to be adequately briefed about such subjects, and able to communicate their ideas about them both to colleagues and the wider public.

Scientists also have a stake in ensuring that accurate information about their work is effectively communicated to policymakers, for two main reasons. They may need to put forward recommendations on an issue about which they have specialist knowledge, or they may primarily be interested in justifying their own research and secure future funding.

This article focuses on situations where a scientist must provide a background briefing for a politician or senior policymaker on a particular subject. Here, the researcher's aim is to provide these people with enough information to make informed decisions — while avoiding the temptation to try to make the decisions themselves.

For anyone faced with this task, there are a few general points to bear in mind:

- Politicians are always busy! Be clear and concise in your communication.
- Explain why the issue is relevant to them, and why it is important now.
- Science alone is not enough — focus on the impacts on people, especially those whose interests the politicians are likely to be particularly concerned about.

- Be accurate, and always present (or at least summarise) the evidence for your argument.
- Avoid sensationalist language; be objective and let the science speak for itself.

What's the most effective way of communicating?

There are several ways of communicating directly with politicians and senior policymakers. One of the most widely used methods is seminars and oral briefings. Seminars have distinct advantages in this context, as they can stimulate dialogue between all the main stakeholders, and are a good way of getting questions answered promptly.

Seminars and oral briefings should be held in a location that is convenient for politicians and senior policymakers. Many groups, for example, hold seminars and exhibitions in the House of Commons so that parliamentarians can drop by between other engagements. It is also important to give potential participants plenty of notice before the event.

You can target a much wider audience via written reports and briefing papers. These are also less likely to be misquoted than oral presentations, but offer fewer opportunities for interaction and dialogue.

The art of preparing a briefing paper

Briefing papers should be just that — brief! Few politicians will have time to read a long report from cover to cover.

Policymakers are constantly inundated with information. Do not write about a subject just because it is new and exciting — it must have some relevance to them. For example, there might be imminent decisions on funding to be made, or relevant legislation about to be passed.

Provide timescales whenever you are talking about future developments. As a general rule, politicians are more interested in something that might happen within the next few years than in '50 years' — or even '10 years' — time. After all, they probably will not be around then, or at least, not seeking re-election.

Step 1: Getting started

Preparing material for a policy briefing paper is usually a two-step process: first, you need to do some background reading, and then you must talk to experts in the field concerned.

Remember that the required background reading is not the same as that needed to start academic research. The most important difference is that it generally involves collating information from a wide range of sources, rather than doing original work.

The Internet is a good place to start. Try to use reliable websites — for example academic or government sites, or official sites of nongovernmental organisations and other interest groups. Consult personal sites only when you are convinced of their reliability.

Even if you are writing about your own specialist subject, it is important to consider it from as many different angles as possible, including those of people with different perspectives from your own. This means drawing on information from all the main parties to a discussion — not only official sources such as government, regulators and scientific publications, but also learned societies, think tanks, academics, and nongovernmental organisations.

Remember that communicating with people directly is the best way to obtain up-to-date information, and can often avoid spending weeks drowning in hundred-page reports.

Consider circulating a background paper to all your potential contacts, telling them your objectives and outlining the scope of your research and its timescale.

If you have the time, meet people whose advice you are seeking in person — or at least talk to them over the phone. Email is useful for making initial contact or setting up meetings but if you ask questions by email, there is scope for delay as well as misinterpretation. It is better to talk to people in 'real time' first, then to finalise any outstanding detail by email if necessary.

Finally, keep a record of who you have talked to, and when. If possible, write up minutes of your meetings with contacts while they are still fresh in your memory. One advantage of this is that if you have omitted anything, you can contact people while they still remember who you are. It will also prevent any confusion over who said what.

Step 2: Writing

In writing the briefing paper, it is useful to remember that in order to be effective, experience has shown that it should pass the 'breakfast test' — that is, whether a politician could identify its main points in the time it takes to eat a hasty breakfast!

Your briefing should be self-contained and the reader should not need to refer to other documents. There should be enough detail for those who want to examine the issue in more depth, while the main points should be expressed succinctly enough to be grasped easily and quickly.

Make sure that the paper's structure is clear. Start with an overview that tells the reader why the subject is relevant and timely and outlines the main issues that will be discussed in the order they appear.

You should ensure that the briefing paper contains some background information but not so much that it interrupts the main flow of the text. You may want to put any additional detail in boxes. At the very least, if you have written more than one page, make sure the first page has something to grab a reader's attention. (Mentioning money on the first page often works well!)

How the main content of the briefing is structured obviously depends on the subject, but a general hint is to use plenty of headings. These guide the reader through the text and help them spot your main points at a glance. Solid text with no signposts is off-putting and difficult to digest.

Another point to remember is to avoid placing too much information in annexes and footnotes; only a few readers will consult these.

Finally end (or start) with a well-written summary — remember this may be all that a busy politician or policymaker has time, or inclination, to read. Consider presenting your summary as bulleted items in a list. That way they may be easier to remember.

Style

If the language used in a briefing paper is too dry and technical, the intended reader will rapidly 'switch off' and turn to something more interesting. Here are a few tips for preventing this:

Use short sentences and short paragraphs. Remember that your briefing is essentially a narrative. Write it so that the reader is guided through your story from start to finish.

Avoid using jargon and acronyms. If you must use them, include a brief explanation in the main text — or at least in a box that can easily be spotted.

Use figures and graphs in place of — or at least to illustrate — words, but make sure they are clearly and consistently labelled, not too complex and easily interpretable.

Define all units of measurement and where possible try to place them in context, or at least make them meaningful. For example, if you say that something is "a few microns across", explain that a micron is one-millionth of a metre, and "about one hundredth the width of a human hair".

Accuracy

The information you provide should be accurate, well defined and from reliable sources. Remember that it may be used in a political debate, or to make crucial policy decisions.

Avoid using general terms like 'large' or 'most of' without qualification. For example, rather than saying 'a large amount of radioactivity was released ...' consider saying 'The amount of radioactivity released was X times that released by the Hiroshima A-bomb', where you can be confident of your calculation.

Discrepancies between different sources often arise from variations in definition and methodology. When you quote figures or statistics, explain how they have been calculated

Make sure you know what your sources have been for every item of information in your briefing, even if you do not cite all your references. Attribute any statements that you have obtained from a specific source — and indicate if you are giving a direct quotation.

Independence and objectivity

The independence and objectivity of the arguments you present depend on the way information is put forward. There is always a risk of being misinterpreted or misquoted, particularly if your briefing circulates outside your specific target audience.

Avoid using superlatives and emotive language that can be quoted out of context. If there is an important caveat attached to a particular statement, make sure that you mention it at the start of your briefing paper — but also reiterate the same caveat whenever it is relevant.

Presenting scientific information

Try to reflect the balance of opinion on an issue, and to make its nature explicit, in terms of whether there is general consensus or widespread controversy on the issue or some of its elements.

You should indicate whether there are only a few, but possibly vocal, dissenters opposing a broad consensus, or that dissent is widespread. You may need to consider the reaction of the mainstream scientific community to the dissenters and whether this is likely to change. Above all, you will need to examine the limitations of science in addressing the issue.

Do not be afraid to omit direct conclusions if you feel that none can be drawn. For example, a briefing on mobile phones might justifiably state that there was insufficient scientific evidence to conclude whether or not they cause adverse health effects in humans. In the face of this uncertainty, the decision about whether or not to limit their use is then a political decision, not a scientific one. Say this, and leave the political decisions to the politicians!

There are some instances where you might want to use a concrete event to illustrate a point — for example, about public reaction to a decision in the field you are addressing — but cannot refer to specific places or people for reasons of privacy or political sensitivity. In such cases, it is sometimes useful to create a fictitious case study from which the reader can draw their own conclusions.

Step 3: Reviewing

If time permits, send a draft of your brief to all the main actors you have consulted before presenting it. This is a good way of checking accuracy and balance.

If you do this, make sure that you give people a clear deadline so that your own deadlines do not slip while you are waiting for their comments. At the very least, make sure anyone you have consulted is happy with any information you have attributed to them before you publish. Otherwise, they may be reluctant to talk to you in future — or worse — may publicly criticise your briefing.

Step 4: Distribution

It is best to make your briefing available both electronically and in hard copy. If your organisation has a website, make the electronic version available online so that as many people as possible can get access to it.

If you draw up a distribution list for the briefing paper, consider targeting individuals with a specific interest in your subject, rather than sending out hundreds of copies in the hope that someone will read it. You can often find out who these people are by looking at who has been associated with the topic you're covering, through interviews with the press, parliamentary discussions, or active campaigning.

It is also useful to target people who you think should be interested, and to tell them why you have contacted them. When the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) published a briefing paper on flooding in 2001, it sent a copy to all members of the British Parliament

accompanied by a map of their constituencies, on which the floodplain had been highlighted. This proved a very effective way of capturing their attention!

Finally, send a copy of the completed briefing paper to all contributors. You may find that they want to distribute it to their own contacts, so it will be disseminated more widely without any effort on your part.

Some final thoughts

Be resilient to criticism — not everyone may be happy with your work, however accurate and objective you have tried to be. It is still tremendously rewarding to work with policymakers, and you'll get a great buzz when you first hear your words quoted in a political debate.

Chandrika Nath, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), UK

This article was previously part of SciDev.Net's e-guide to science communication and has been reformatted to become this practical guide.

Annex 2

'The Little Manual on Science Communication': A summary

<http://www.scidev.net/en/middle-east-and-north-africa/practical-guides/-the-little-manual-on-science-communication-a-summ.html>

Cássio Leite Vieira - Ciencia Hoje, 5 February 2008

Cássio Leite Vieira provides bite-sized tips on how to write about science — and please your editor.

In 1999, I published a 50-page booklet, 'The Little Manual on Science Communication – Tips for Scientists and Science Communicators'. The venture arose from my work at Ciencia Hoje, a science communication magazine published by the Brazilian Association for the Advancement of Science.

Ciencia Hoje is similar in some ways to Scientific American. The magazine's core is made up of articles written by scientists, and its aim has always been to foster accessible science writing. My job as a science editor at the magazine meant I had to 'translate' raw copy into language appropriate for lay readers.

However, the material I was receiving was often written in inappropriately difficult, technical language, and sometimes included complex formulas and obscure jargon. Another problem was that the magazine had no authors' guide. So I prepared one. The result is the Little Manual: a set of basic, common sense rules for readership-oriented science writing.

The summary that follows is an adaptation of the manual — simple rules followed by a brief explanation. Perhaps the 'back-to-basics' nature of these rules is a reflection of the situation in Latin America, where writing for a non-specialised public is not as widespread in our scientific community as it is among researchers in Canada, Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, I hope they are helpful for scientists from other countries, as well as science writers and communicators abroad.

Be aware of different 'languages'

The language in a science communication article must be different from that employed in a scientific paper. Incredibly, some members of the scientific community still fail to realise this.

Hook the reader

In science communication, the first paragraph or introduction are crucial in hooking the reader's attention, and motivating them to read the rest of the text. Novels or short stories may generally save the best for last, but a science communication article needs to start with a bang — an attention-grabbing fact, question or the like.

Avoid scaring the reader off

A complex, science-heavy first paragraph or introduction, with formulas and difficult concepts, is an infallible recipe for making the reader abandon an article after the first few lines.

Use analogies wisely

Analogies are an essential element in science communication writing. The best describe concepts in the kind of day-to-day language the reader uses. However, when necessary, point out the analogy's limits to the reader in order to avoid incorrect extrapolations.

For example, "According to science's most famous formula, $E = mc^2$ (E for energy, m for mass, and c for the velocity of light), one kilogram of matter would supply around 25 billion kWh, energy enough to guarantee Brazil's current electric energy demand for 8 months. However, physicists still do not know how to transform matter into energy with an efficacy of 100 per cent, and, in practical terms, this percentage is very low. Even in an atomic bomb explosion, it is less than 1 per cent".

Be rigorous

Any information (scientific or not) must be precise. Always. In science communication, it is vital to distinguish speculation from tested results.

Aim at the target

Perhaps this is the most important of all the rules presented here: always have your audience in mind. Even Einstein did that (see the preface to *Evolution of Physics*). This rule is valid whatever the readership — children, laypeople, even experts.

Avoid formulas

Always aim to avoid formulas altogether. If you find you need to include a few, explain the meaning of the terms. Even known formulas such as $E = mc^2$ should be explained. In the same vein, avoid chemical equations.

Remember that PhDs forget too!

Another thing to bear in mind is that even people with PhDs forget basic concepts from fields outside their own. So always explain concepts. After all, in science communication, no one wants to have to use a science dictionary just to read an article.

Use humour

Humour can make articles more enjoyable for the reader, ensuring they'll want to read to the end. It is important not to offend readers, however, so use humour sensibly.

Avoid rococo style

Use straightforward, informal language. Remember: simple language is not incompatible with rich content.

Be succinct

Compare "It is expressly forbidden to smoke in this room" with "Don't smoke". It's easy to see which is preferable. Remember, space is precious in newspapers and magazines (see 'Go for the right length' below).

Avoid jargon

Avoid jargon altogether. It makes an article 'heavier'. If you deem it absolutely necessary, explain the term parenthetically or in a glossary (see the next item).

Always explain

We said to avoid jargon. But it is almost impossible to avoid scientific concepts. So explain these in the simplest way possible. Examples: sodium chloride (salt); sodium hydroxide (caustic soda); mitochondria (cell's energy factory).

Avoid using one scientific term to explain another, however, such as: fermions (particles that obey Fermi-Dirac statistics). When an explanation seems impossible, try a little bit harder. Use an analogy. Go at least partway towards explaining it — that's better than keeping it unintelligible in the name of the preciousness.

Put complex concepts in a box

Need to describe something more complicated or technical? Put it in a box or side texts, and don't forget to simplify technicalities sensibly.

Include who, what, where

Use "the Danish physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962)" rather than "Bohr". Use "in 1998 the British physicist, Joe Olmi from the Department of Artificial Intelligence of the University of the United Kingdom, published an article on nanobots in the Journal of Robotics (vol 20, n 456, p 457)..." rather than "According to Olmi (J. of Rob. 1998)...".

Write out acronyms once

Nobody is obliged to know acronyms. So, for example, use "the Brazilian Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS)" rather than just "BAAS".

Use neither footnotes nor acknowledgments

There is no room for this in daily newspapers and magazines. Also, avoid bibliographical citations such as (Science 43 (6543): 53, 1992). These are generally useless for the lay reader. If you need to cite an article, use this formula: "[...], published in the American scientific journal Science (vol 43, no 6.543, 1992, p 53)".

Don't encourage false hopes

In medical articles, ensure it is clearly stated when the treatments or medicines discussed are still undergoing trials, and are some way from general availability. Your reader (or one of their relatives) may have the illness you are writing about.

Obey the 'space-time' dictatorship

All media suffer from the so-called 'space (or time) dictatorship'. In daily newspapers and magazines, for instance, the number of words written must fit the area reserved for your article. So be concise, and comfort yourself with the fact that even the Encyclopaedia Britannica does not contain all the information on any one subject.

Go for the right length

Write the number of words the editor asked you to write. Longer articles must be cut. Shorter ones must be enlarged (and some journalists say that enlarging is more difficult). The best way to avoid surprises is simply to ask the editor for the word count.

Suggest titles

Titles are the first thing to be read. Creating them is a kind of art performed generally by experienced editors (in newspapers, titles follow strict rules concerning the number of words). However, suggestions are always welcome by any editor.

Give the reader a break

Shorter paragraphs are preferable to longer. Daily newspapers generally use shorter ones. Even in writing for magazines, it is good sense to give your readers a break in their reading to allow them to think about what they have just read.

Send illustrations when you can

Whenever writing for a daily newspaper or a magazine, try to send good illustrations or, at least, to point out where the editor can track them down. High-resolution (300 dpi or higher) images are preferable. Avoid sending complicated graphics, schemes or tables; the majority of people find them

hard to interpret.

Caption that image!

Once, while editing an article, I looked at the accompanying photo and called the creature in question a caterpillar. It was a fish. This kind of mistake is all too possible when images come without captions. So do not forget to caption your images.

Remember copyright

Never, ever forget to copyright a photograph. In the case of illustrations, tables, diagrams, schemes and so on, cite the source. If in doubt, consult the editor, who will probably know whether an image can be reproduced.

Include other perspectives

If possible, include another perspective on the issue under discussion in your article. The absence of it can give the reader the erroneous idea that your article is the final word on the subject.

Cássio Leite Vieira is the editor of *Ciencia Hoje*

This article was previously part of SciDev.Net's e-guide to science communication and has been reformatted to become this practical guide.

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SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME