

## How do I brief policymakers on science-related issues?

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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 about whose interests the politicians are likely to be particularly concerned.
- 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, 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 NGOs 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 non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

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. E-mail is useful for making initial contact or setting up meetings but if you ask questions by e-mail, 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 e-mail 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'. Do not say  $10^{-6}$  metres unless you explain that also.

## **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.