

Quality Control Checklist for Policy Briefs

The following checklist is meant to help teams producing briefs to have a fresh look at their output with a critical eye for both the content, language and consideration of key audiences, and process, which includes copy editing.

GrOW suggests that the writer(s) of the brief secure approval from the principal investigator(s) on the content of the brief, particularly the methodology text and policy lessons. Beyond consensus on content, it is key to copy edit the piece to ensure that information is accurately portrayed and that the messaging matches the audience and intended uptake goals.

When available, it is encouraged to turn to the Uptake or Communications team in your research institution for input on the content and visuals of your draft brief. In the absence of an internal Communications team, a critical eye by a few selected members outside of the writing team who did not create the brief is the basic step recommended. Briefs are intended for non-technical audiences. Securing the services of a copy-editor is advised, if resources allow.

The GrOW team, composed of the Uptake Officer and other Program Officers are interested in providing input to briefs as part of our efforts to support uptake by teams. Sending a final draft version of the output is asked of teams. The added value is to have an external mechanism of input coordinated by the GrOW team, through which expertise from IDRC staff, program peers and external can reach teams in anticipation of a final copy that can be disseminated. Input includes support on the messaging and visual elements of the brief. Keeping the GrOW Uptake Officer aware of the timeline of your intended outputs in advance (i.e. research uptake strategies and emails) is particularly relevant to secure extensive input and support, as needed.

Key questions to consider when reviewing a brief include:

Accuracy

- ☐ Is the evidence shared in the brief accurate?
- ☐ Are the lessons shared commensurate with the evidence to date?
- ☐ Did creators outline the context and policy problem accurately?
- ☐ Did creators accurately outline or portray the limitations of this research as it relates to the lessons for action?

Audience

- ☐ What audience was the brief originally targeting? Is that still the case?
- ☐ Are the interests or concerns of that audience well addressed in this brief?
- ☐ What is the intended goal of this brief? Does the content of this brief have sufficient quality to help achieve that goal?
- ☐ Is the language suitable for that intended audience, or is too academic?
- ☐ Did creators explain the methodology in a way that a non-academic would understand?
- ☐ Is all the text outlining the methodology necessary for the reader to understand the brief overall? Where can I shorten or simplify text?

- ☐ Where should creators shorten/expand text in other sections to make the message clearer?
- ☐ Are the lessons outlined only summarizing the findings or are creators writing action-oriented lessons that the target audience can follow?

Names

- ☐ Review spelling and inclusion of all names and universities of all investigators. (In the text and the end citation.) The order of names should match the order listed in the paper you're drawing from.
- ☐ Discuss logo placement in advance. Which logos need to be included and in what order? Are we making sure we prioritize the key content to be upfront in the brief rather than administrative items?
- ☐ Check names/spellings of partner organizations.
- ☐ Check names of locations/places or research

Numbers

- ☐ Review every number used in the text. This includes figures (10 percent), time frames (6 months), ages (5-10 year-olds), study details (120 villages), etc. Ensure consistency in how these data is presented (i.e. % or spelled out percent)
- ☐ Review every claim about a number (i.e. "absenteeism fell by half," "they were no more likely to...")
- ☐ Careful about the use of Percent/Percentage points: these are not equivalent terms, and it's really important to double-check which one you need.
- ☐ Ensure every result is from the correct regression specification (usually the author's preferred specification. If preferred specification is TOT, report TOT with take-up numbers) Percentage points are reported with comparison group average and percent change.

Figures

- ☐ Check every data point on every chart.
- ☐ A graph without clear and concise axis titles is useless. The axis titles and figure captions must reflect how the data was calculated. (I.e. If your data show the percentage of ill individuals who took up the product, make sure that the caption does not say "percent with illness." This is especially important if one graph shows results from multiple studies, and different investigators may have calculated data differently.)
- ☐ Title and legend(s) of the graph clearly describe how reader should interpret graph. For example, if a bar chart is used, make sure to clarify what the height of the bar represents (mean outcome in treatment group *versus* point estimate of treatment impact).

Citations

- ☐ Make sure to reference all evaluations used and systematically check their proper citations.
- ☐ Is the most recent version of the paper the brief refers to cited? Check all author websites and corroborate with principal investigators.

- ☐ Does the citation style match Chicago (Author-Date)? (Check spacing, periods, commas, parentheses, italics, page numbers, year, issue, etc....). Pick a style and be consistent throughout.
- ☐ Do in-text footnote numbers accurately match the number next to the citation?
- ☐ Weigh in the value of having a “For Further Reading section” where readers are visibly invited to consult studies referenced, both tied to your institution and beyond.

Visual power

- ☐ Does the outline of the brief make the brief easy to scan?
- ☐ Does the brief have a short attractive title?
- ☐ Does the brief have subtitles that provide highlights to the reader about the content of each section?
- ☐ Does the brief make use of images that relate well to the content of the brief? *Make sure you have the right permissions to use imagery.
- ☐ Is the brief oversaturated with text and images?* Don’t be afraid of a little white space
- ☐ Did the authors put the most important information right front and center? (i.e. Tagline, key results box, policy lessons)
- ☐ Is the diagram/chart selected helping the authors tell the story better? Would another tool be more useful? *Simpler is better- NO regression tables.
- ☐ Do authors include a personal story or case study to help readers understand the challenge and results? If not, how am I providing the context of the research in a compelling way?
- ☐ Does the brief use colors, fonts, and visuals that lure people to the text, or are they distracting from the content?
- ☐ Are the lessons outlined in the brief clearly visible to the reader? Do they invite the reader to learn more?
- ☐ Does the brief have a consistent look and feel throughout? Is the brief using consistent colors, fonts, subtitles or section breaks that make the brief read and look cohesive?)

Dissemination and outreach

- ☐ How is the brief going to be shared with its intended audience?
- ☐ What communication plans accompany the brief launch? *Consider multifaceted outreach strategies (i.e combine an online brief launch with a media or blog piece, and a policy event to act upon recommendations)
- ☐ Is the research paper that informed the brief accessible online? *Include hyperlinks to resources if you are using an online brief. A brief can be a great introduction to the longer piece of research, so make sure both are easily accessible and tied.
- ☐ Will teams use traditional media or a social media campaign to publicize the results and lessons reflected in the brief? If so, what?
- ☐ Will teams organize or participate in a policy event to discuss your research findings and lessons? If so, what?
- ☐ How will teams know /monitor if their brief is being consulted and/or used?

- ☐ Do the outreach plans and content of the brief accurately represent the voice of the women the research speaks of? If not, how can authors make these stories more prominent for decision makers?

Final Review process considerations

- ☐ Have the principal investigators approved the brief?
- ☐ Has input from the Communications/Uptake team been considered? (if relevant)
- ☐ Has input from the GrOW team been considered?
- ☐ Has input from additional reviewers been considered?

Additional notes by editors:

For additional questions contact: Alejandra Vargas avargas-garcia@idrc.ca