

# BUILDING A POLICY BRIEF

## FROM START TO FINISH

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Over the course of the semester you will work toward becoming an expert on a very small slice of public policy and writing a set of practically perfect, beautifully crafted, persuasive, and incredibly concise policy brief. The objective of this assignment is for you to teach yourself (and others) more about a social, political, or economic problem that you want to know more about as well as potential policy solutions to that problem – as well as learn practical skills about policy communication. Part of your brief should discuss the politics or political implications of your policy issue and/or policy alternatives.

You may be asking, “What is a small slice, Prof Kreitzer?” I’ll give you an example. Maybe you are interested in immigration (big slice), but for this assignment, you might think about focusing more acutely on a path to citizenship or amnesty for non-DACA recipients OR building a wall on the US-Mexico border OR maximizing/ minimizing/ eliminating/ developing a particular visa program for some particular group of immigrants, OR creating a new version of DACA that goes through the legislative process, and the like. Maybe you are interested in criminal justice (gargantuan slice), but you may consider a smaller issue such as, the racialized effects of money bail systems across the states, the criminalization of people with HIV/AIDS, or re-integration policies for justice-involved individuals. Really, you should delve into an aspect of policy that you genuinely want to learn more about.

The project develops over the course of the semester with scaffolded assignments and a series of workshops. You will submit an annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources, a final (revised) version of a 4-page single spaced fact sheet, and a final (revised) version of a 2 page, fully designed policy brief. You will also have an opportunity for extra credit by writing and submitting an op-ed or twitter-thread for publication. There will be four workshops: first, a workshop led by our neighborhood librarian on conducting research; a workshop to peer-review the factsheet; a workshop led by our visual design librarian on the basics of graphic design and infographics; and a workshop to peer review the policy brief. In the sections below, you will learn more about each of the assignments. You are encouraged to reach out to your teaching assistants to help you develop your project.

My website also has [dozens of examples](#) of completed policy briefs. Feel free to reach out to a teaching assistant or me for help along the way. I strongly encourage you to [review the rubrics](#) for each assignment, which are found at the end of this document.

### PART 1: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND TOPIC OUTLINE

#### What is an annotated bibliography?

A *bibliography* (usually found at the end of a scholarly resource) provides the reader with the author, title, and publication details of a resource. An *annotated bibliography* adds a brief summary about each of the sources, and it’s usually used for the author’s own reference, though there are sources like [Oxford Bibliographies](#) that produce annotated bibliographies for anyone to access.

The purpose of an annotated bibliography is to compile sources that will support your central argument or theory (depending on the task). The process of developing an annotated bibliography will also help you to understand the scholarly and policy debates that you are engaging in before you begin to write your policy brief.

When writing the annotation (the summary), you should provide enough information in about three to five (grammatically correct, full) sentences for readers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the source's purpose, content, and special value. It should be clear how this article is contributing to your project; you may want to make this explicit. For each source, you should provide the full bibliographic citation, followed by a brief analysis of the source (Citation format is your choice. Just be consistent.)

This annotated bibliography will serve as the foundation for the basic facts you will outline in order for the reader to understand the problem at hand, and it will provide the basis of the evidence you provide to substantiate your claims. When you are finished with your preliminary research, you should be able to respond in the affirmative to the following elements of an effective annotated bibliography:

- I am “sitting on the shoulder of giants” and have found the most important sources, one that several people cite as key works;
- I have found at least two theoretical approaches to understanding the topic; and
- I have found a variety of sources—some books, some journals—but the vast majority of them are scholarly.
  - Scholarly means peer-reviewed, academic analysis. We will also count law review articles as “peer-reviewed” even though they are reviewed by students We will talk about this more on Library Day.

Your analysis will consider the following questions:

- What question do(es) the author(s) seek to answer?
- What is the primary thesis/argument/theory of the work?
- How is this source relevant to my topic? What aspect of my research question/topic does this source illuminate?
- What are the main findings? Are there reasons to doubt the evidence? What are some of the problems (e.g. clarity, methodological issues, out-of-date) with the source?

What you must submit in your annotated bibliography and topic outline:

Your annotated bibliography should include a mix of 8-10 sources, at least 6 of which should be scholarly (academic, peer-reviewed). You should put the sources you believe to be scholarly in bold, **like this**. You may not end up using all of the sources in your fact sheet and policy brief, but the more (appropriate) sources you identify now, the easier it will be to refine your points. You may also find that as you're working on your project, you will need to find *new* sources. (That's fine – you don't need to submit an annotation for these additional sources.

In addition to the annotated bibliography, you should write a short paragraph – no longer than six sentences – that previews the policy problem you will address, why it's an important issue, and (briefly) the evidence-based policy solution(s) you will advocate for in the brief. The purpose of this is to help the TA see your vision of where your project is going. This will help the give you feedback on re-directing, if they think it would be wise.

## PART 2: FACT SHEET

### What is the purpose of this fact sheet?

You have a good set of sources, now it's time to start putting it all together. In this second part of the project, you will be creating a 3-4 page double spaced fact sheet. You have to put a lot of information into this relatively short document. They should be short and to the point and provide a substantial body of evidence to support the highlighted points.

Ultimately, you will piece together what constitutes an advocacy brief, which argues in favor of a particular policy or set of actions. You should provide enough background on the policy matter and provide **substantial evidence** that supports your proposed line of action. What this means is that you should begin this assignment with the end in mind (as any highly effective person would do.)

For this part of the project, you will be highlighting the policy problem, myths and misconceptions about that policy problem, and how other states (or other levels of government) are dealing (or considering dealing) with that problem. How long each of those sections are really depends on your topic – some will be heavy on the problem, others will be heavier on the myths. Here is what I mean about each of those sections.

### The Problem

For the first part of the assignment, you should provide some context about the problem that you will address over the course of the semester. What history do we need to know to get a real grasp at what is going on? What trends should people be aware of? What concepts and vocabulary do we need to be aware of to fully understand the problem at hand? You should tell us how we got into the position we are in the first place, and then explain the implications/impact/effect/ramifications of the policy matter at hand. You may want this to be about 1 – 1.5 pages in length, though this varies for each project.

### Myths and Misconceptions

For most policy problems, you're always going to have to explain a few things and refute a few misnomers. Here, your job is to anticipate the questions rooted in the myths and misconceptions of either the people who are most affected by the policy of concern, or the policy itself. Here, you might also consider the major roadblocks to addressing this problem in a systematic, effective way, such as media or elite framing, dominant stereotypes, common public misunderstandings of the issues or groups, etc. You may want this to be about 1 – 1.5 pages, though this varies for each project.

### Potential Solutions

Are there best practices already being worked out (say, in another country, or in the private sector, or in some states, but not others)? Some things to consider or think about: What are the counterarguments that might be lobbed toward your proposed solutions? How much does it cost to fix your problem? (Is that greater than the cost of not fixing it? Or do the benefits weigh more?) You may want this to be about 1 page, though this varies for each project. You will go into greater detail with your actual proposed policy solutions in the third part of this project – so here you can do more of a summary of what other folks have tried. You will make your pitch later.

## Politics

This is your opportunity to make direct connections between the course material and your selected policy problem. After identifying the problem, researching the myths and misconceptions, and proposing a solution, you should draw upon key concepts and theories covered in our lecture material to explain key aspects of policies meant to address your problem. Your section covering the politics of your policy area should draw on at least three distinct concepts from lecture. Though the entire syllabus should be considered “fair game,” some commonly used concepts (including political actors) may come from the lectures on Federalism, Interest Groups, Social Constructions, Media, Courts, Bureaucrats, Representation, Partisanship and Public Opinion. Note: there’s no “right answer” as to which you should choose. It depends on your topic and what you want to achieve with your brief. The “politics” you discuss might involve what caused or contributed to the policy problem, about the politics of passing certain policy alternatives, or the politics of implementation.

## PART 3: POLICY BRIEF

### Policy briefs are important.

A policy brief is a relatively short, to the point, jargon free document written for non-specialists. It presents research or project findings to policy actors, highlighting the relevance of the specific research to policy and offering recommendations for change.

Policy makers have very limited time to become informed on a wide range of information, and they need to get up to speed on what is going on, what the range of possible policy alternatives are, and what the best policy would be. Interested parties (like activists, interest groups, non-profits, private citizens) have to work hard to get policy makers focused on *their* favored policy.

Policymakers are busy, and often do not have time to read full-length academic papers. On average, [policy actors spend only 30-60 minutes reading a policy brief](#), so it is essential for students who are interested working in public policy to become effective at communicating in this format that can be quickly consumed. Policy briefs have the potential to reach large audiences through different networks because of their condensed, but eye-catching format. [Policy makers do actually pass them along to their colleagues](#) when they perceive them to be important! There are two types of policy briefs. A really short version, that is about 2-3 pages, and a longer version that can be more like 7-10 pages. You will be writing the short version.

The best way to become familiar and comfortable with the genre is by exploring it some. This will also be a good way for you to get an idea for the types of topics that policy briefs sometimes cover. Start reading! A good source for examples is the [Harvard Kennedy School of Government](#). You are also going to read a couple of policy briefs like documents for this class, including executive research summaries and the like.

- This is a good example of an executive summary of a [longer report from Oxfam and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research](#). The writing, content, and layout are a good example for your long-format policy brief (albeit this is a longer version than you need to do, obviously).
- Gault, Barbara, et al. 2014. [Paid Parental Leave in the United States: What the data tell us about access, usage, and economic and health benefits](#). Institute for Women’s Policy Research Report.
- You can also see examples of briefs written [by my students](#) in previous semesters.

Once you have an idea for the genre, you can also get tips about writing a policy brief by [reading this primer](#) and [this shorter one](#).

## What I expect from you:

You should craft a professional, concise, and informative advocacy oriented 2 page policy brief on your topic. An advocacy brief means that it should argue in favor of a particular policy or set of actions. It should be eye-catching and easy to read. It should include, charts, graphs, bulleted points, tweet-worthy side bars and other images that help the reader to get all of the information they need in a concise format.<sup>1</sup> Any extremely busy person should be able to read them at-a-glance. They should be short and to the point and provide a substantial body of evidence to support the highlighted points and policy recommendation and/or alternatives. You will be graded on your ability to convey a great deal of information in a concise format. Someone reading your brief should walk away knowing about the policy problem as well as how it might be addressed.

## PART 4: WRITING AN OP-ED OR TWITTER THREAD (Optional)

### Why write for the public?

You are now an expert on a slice of public policy, like I said you would in Part 1 of this project! A great way to reach a wider audience for these ideas and possibly influence what people are thinking, saying, and doing is to write an op-ed or authoring a twitter thread. Op-ed stands for “opposite the editorial page,” though people often take it to be short for “opinion piece.” Unlike the rest of the newspaper/site which are written by staff writers, op-eds are written by a range of voices from experts to everyday people. Twitter threads are a series of connected tweets and can be published (tweeted) by anyone.

“I view it as my social responsibility as a social scientist to write op-eds,” [says Jaana Juvonen](#), PhD, professor of developmental psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has written several pieces for lay audiences, including the 2017 op-ed “[I Study the Psychology of Adolescent Bullies. Trump Makes Perfect Sense to Me](#)” for The Washington Post. “If I can shed light on something timely, then I need to communicate it,” says Juvonen.

### How to write an op-ed:

There is a lot of advice on the internet about how to write an op-ed. [I strongly encourage you to skim some/all of these links.](#)

Here are some of the most important tips in no particular order (though I encourage you to explore some of the links above):

- Keep it short. 750 words max.
- Make a single point – persuasively.
- Be informal.
- Lead with your conclusion - put your main point on top.
- Have a news-hook
- Make it clear why readers and the editor should care.
- Offer specific recommendations.
- Use short sentences, with no jargon.
- Use an “active” voice.
- Acknowledge the other side.
- Pick a possible outlet. Read some examples there. Tailor your op-ed to match that audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Writing concisely is part of the challenge. If you are able to meet the challenge, you will have a skill that will come in handy for life. What can I say except, “[You’re welcome!](#)”

### How to write a Twitter thread:

Twitter threads have a different tone compared to Op-Eds. While the former has more formal writing and must be accepted by the Editor, Twitter threads are more colloquial and anyone can speak to the masses. Your twitter thread must have a minimum of 8 tweets (though it can have more). The thread should start with an attention-grabbing question or statement of the policy issue. Your subsequent tweets will summarize your findings and recommendations, and also may loop in other things, like current events. You should include a hyperlink to view your brief (like via Google Drive, Dropbox, Box, etc). Because Twitter threads are more casual, it's common to use gifs, images, and emojis to attract attention and engage the reader.

Op-Eds have a built-in readership (newspaper subscribers) but you have to do a little work to get your Twitter thread seen by people. You may want to tag other accounts (policymakers, activists, celebrities, journalists, your professor) or use hashtags to attract readers. If you want me to retweet your thread, tag me @rebeccakreitzer!

### Earning extra credit:

You will receive 3 points of extra credit on your final policy brief for

- any op-ed submitted to a local, national or North Carolina publication
- twitter thread with at least 8 tweets

To receive credit, upload proof you sent your public commentary out into the world. This might be a screenshot from a newspaper submission portal, email confirmation, or a hyperlink to tweet.

# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND OUTLINE

## Grading Rubric

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Assistant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Grade: \_\_\_\_\_/10

### MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS - 2 points possible

- Name included
- Save the file as follows "Bibliography\_LastNameFirstInitial"
  - for example, my file would be titled "Bibliography\_KreitzerR.docx"
- State citation style *and* use consistently
- Use appropriate DOI or permalink hyperlinks
- Must have 8-10 sources
  - The majority must be scholarly
  - Scholarly sources are in **bold**
  - Should represent a variety of quality sources

### ANNOTATIONS - 5 points possible

- Sources cover topic from a variety of angles (for instance, explanation, history, effects, perspectives, etc.).
- Annotations summarize the source, including the source's objective or bias (if relevant); the data or time period; and the primary findings. Feel free to include other interesting or useful information.
- Your annotation should also address how this article contributes to your project. Why is this source relevant or helpful?

### POLICY TOPIC OUTLINE - 3 points possible

- The topic is outlined in no more than 6 sentences.
- The outline should include:
  - The policy problem you will address
  - Why this is an important issue
  - (Briefly) reference the evidence-based policy solution(s) you will advocate for in the brief.
- The outline should demonstrate that the annotated bibliography sets you up on a good research trajectory.

Comments, if any:

# FACT SHEET

## Grading Rubric

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Assistant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Grade: \_\_\_\_\_/15

### MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS - 2 points possible

- Name included
- Save the file as follows "FactSheet\_LastNameFirstInitial"
  - for example, my file would be titled "FactSheet\_KreitzerR.docx"
- 3-4 pages double spaced
- Lists the topic of the brief (research question) at the top using 1-2 sentences
- State citation style *and* use consistently
- 1 point = all this is done perfectly; 0 points = missing 2 or more of these.

### THE PROBLEM - 3 points possible

- Should explain the background for the policy problem (how problem emerged, etc.)
- Should explain the implications for the issue at hand
- Should make sure all key terms and concepts are clear

### MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS - 3 points possible

- Should cover roadblocks to addressing this problem, what people don't know or misunderstand about the issue.

### POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS - 3 points possible

- How are other localities (states, cities, etc.) dealing with this issue?
- What are the main counterarguments used against certain policy solutions?

### THE POLITICS - 3 points possible

- Should incorporate at least three concepts from class (theories, frameworks, political actors, etc.) to explain the politics surrounding the emergence of the problem, alternatives and/or implementation

### EXPLAINING THE POINTS

- 3: you used a "substantial body of evidence"; the writing is concise and compelling, etc.
- 2: you are on the right track – you explain the problem and implications, but it isn't supported by evidence, not concise, or missing some relevant points, etc.
- 1: you are missing key information, the section doesn't meet all of the objectives listed in the prompt, or is not clearly written – etc.
- *You can receive ½ points in between these categories*

### COMMENTS:



# POLICY BRIEF

## Grading Rubric

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching Assistant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Grade: \_\_\_\_\_/75

### MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS - 2 point possible

- Name included
- Save the file as follows "Brief\_LastNameFirstInitial"
  - for example, my file would be titled "Brief\_KreitzerR.docx"
- 2 pages, any appropriate line spacing; citations permitted on a 3<sup>rd</sup> page
- 2 points = all this is done perfectly; 1 point = missing one of these; 0 points = missing 2 or more of these.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK -20 points possible

Does the writer display a firm grasp of the concepts (e.g. politics, policies, institutions, actors) discussed in the brief?

Exemplar Work (A-Range Paper)	Basic Criteria Fulfilled (B-Range Paper)	On the Right Track (C-Range Paper)	Missing Elements (D-Range Paper)
<p>Work in this range is strikingly perceptive and the argument of the advocacy brief is incredibly persuasive.</p> <p>The contents provide a solid foundation for potential solutions/ recommendations presented in an "objective" brief.</p>	<p>The written work is reasonably thoughtful.</p>	<p>The written work is relatively underdeveloped and simplistic; faulty analysis.</p>	<p>No central argument or focus; erroneous explanation of policy, actors or institutions.</p>
19-20 points	16-18 points	14-15 points	12-13 points

### CONSISTENCY AND USE OF LOGIC -20 points possible

Do the different pieces of the argument interlock in a relatively seamless fashion?

Exemplar Work (A-Range Paper)	Basic Criteria Fulfilled (B-Range Paper)	On the Right Track (C-Range Paper)	Missing Elements (D-Range Paper)
<p>The components of the paper scaffold on one another to build a persuasive argument.</p> <p>The foundation of the paper allows the reader to have a full appreciation of the complexities of the problem that needs to be solved as well as the pros and cons of the potential solutions in an "objective" brief.</p>	<p>Sound, original, and reasonably thoughtful argument.</p>	<p>Inconsistent argument; lots of summary without analysis.</p>	<p>Superficial engagement with the policy matter; no analysis.</p>
19-20 points	16-18 points	14-15 points	12-13 points

## USE OF LITERATURE -10 points possible

Does the writer substantiate their arguments with insights from the relevant literature? Do they address counter-arguments or evidence to the contrary?

Exemplar Work (A-Range Paper)	Basic Criteria Fulfilled (B-Range Paper)	On the Right Track (C-Range Paper)	Missing Elements (D-Range Paper)
The author provides comprehensive synthesis and trenchant analysis of an abundance of material; the citations provide evidence for the claims made and help move the author's point forward.  Citation format is consistent; References section is appropriately organized.	Sound, original, and reasonably thoughtful argument.	Inconsistent argument; lots of summary without analysis.	Superficial engagement with the policy matter; no analysis.
9-10 points	8 points	7 points	6 points

## WRITING AND LANGUAGE -10 points possible

Does the writer's choice of words and sentence structure lend itself to the reader's full understanding of the paper?

Exemplar Work (A-Range Paper)	Basic Criteria Fulfilled (B-Range Paper)	On the Right Track (C-Range Paper)	Missing Elements (D-Range Paper)
The writing can be characterized as exceptionally clear, cogent, fluid; error-free prose.	Clear, cogent, mistakes are limited	Stilted or distracting prose; comprehensible but not fluid; errors that could have been caught by proofreading.	Error-riddled; in any way sloppy; misspellings; poor punctuation; unclear writing
9-10 points	8 points	7 points	6 points

## FORMATTING -13 points possible

Exemplar Work (A-Range Paper)	Basic Criteria Fulfilled (B-Range Paper)	On the Right Track (C-Range Paper)	Missing Elements (D-Range Paper)
Attractive and accessible; efficient use of space; use of charts, photos, tables, etc. enhance the authors' central points and highlights the most important information; Author maximizes the content given the 2-page limit.	Basic format, including subheadings and highlighted texts; not especially attractive; figures are decorative but not consequential; space not optimized.	Words are on the page, with subheadings	Words. Just lots of words.
12-13 points	10-11 points	9-10 points	8-9 points

## COMMENTS