



Policy Briefs 101: A Guide for Translating Research Findings into Policy Impact

This guide was developed to accompany a training the [California Policy Lab](#) conducted with the [Community Engagement and Research Program](#) at UCLA in March 2023. It is meant to provide an introduction to policy brief writing with additional resources linked throughout.

Introduction - why write a policy brief?

- Because you want policies or programs to change
- To shorten something so that a busy person will read it
- To simplify something for a non-scientific audience
- To take the important parts out of something that is long and detailed

How are policy briefs structured differently than academic publications?

In academic writing, you have to convince the reader that your **methods** merit the result. In policy-brief writing, you have to convince the reader that the **results** merits their attention. In other words, it is an act of translation - and to translate effectively, you need to know your audiences and their languages.

Academic Writing

- Motivation
- Data
- Methods
- Findings
- Discussion



Policy Brief Writing

- **Motivation**
- ~~Data~~
- ~~Methods~~
- **Findings**
- **Discussion/Implications**

In policy briefs, provide the punchline up front, give only enough methods/data to understand the results, and refer the reader to a longer paper or technical appendix if necessary.

Typical policy brief outline

1. Summary (1st half of 1st page)
 - Question(s)
 - Policy background or other context
 - Key finding(s)
2. Findings
 - Organized to answer your questions
 - Data/methods to provide context
 - Headlines can be tracked visually
3. Recommendations or implications

Prompts for identifying your key findings

- *What were our research questions?*
- *What is the most important thing we learned?*
- *Why should someone pay attention?*

Sample policy brief editing timeline

Allow 6-8 weeks from start to finish.

Writing a brief takes time and many reviews to refine.

1st draft: Shorten

2nd draft: Restructure, improve flow

3rd draft: Make language understandable and consistent

4th draft: Make sentences short and eliminate unnecessary words

5th draft: Typos and data viz tweaks (confirm data visualization matches text!)



Photo credit: Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

Language, jargon, and writing

- Target technically correct nomenclature that is simultaneously comprehensible to laypeople.
 - Try to avoid too many caveats. Usually one will suffice.
 - Sentences should be short (1-2 lines).
 - Words should be short (1-3 syllables).
- ➔
- ~~Target technically correct nomenclature that is simultaneously comprehensible to laypeople.~~ **Be accurate but simple.**
 - ~~Try to avoid too many caveats. Usually one will suffice.~~ **Avoid too many caveats. Usually one will suffice.**
 - Sentences should be short (1-2 lines).
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Photo credit: The Walt Disney Company

If you use these words, your reader may think:

“Exploit the data” Why are they harming it? *Alternative:* “use the data”

“The stock of claimants” Are they cooking soup?
Alternatives: the “group” or “number of claimants”

“An unemployment spell” Is a fairy godmother making magic spells?
Alternative: “period of unemployment”

Strategies for better figures and tables

1. Tell the story in the title - what do you want the reader to focus on? Why did you include this figure or table?
2. Double check tables and charts are clearly labeled, numbered, referenced correctly (e.g., Table 1), and provide a source for the data. Also confirm any references you make to the figures or tables in the text match the figures or tables.

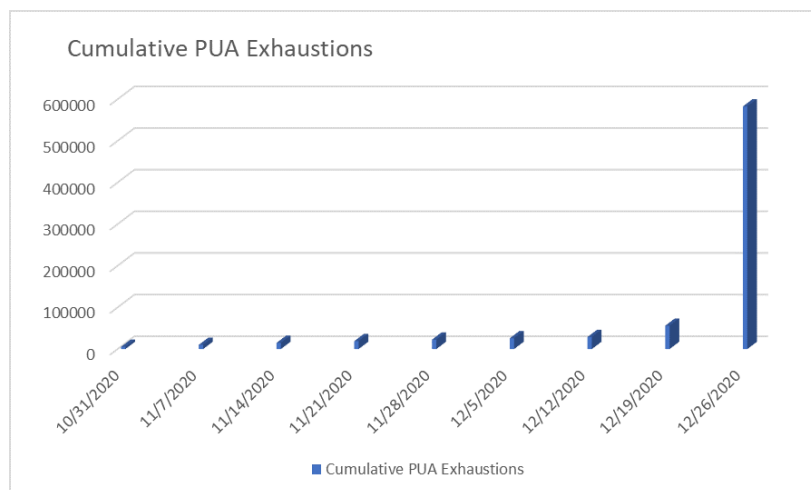
Figures

- Aim for a high data to ink ratio - eliminate chart junk (like gridlines) that distract your reader.
- Annotate to help reader
- Label directly when possible

Tables

- Right align numbers in tables
- Left align text and headlines in tables
- Highlight outliers
- Remove symbols (like % or \$) from cells if it's all the same. Instead, put the symbol in the column or row heading.

Figure 1: Example of Excel bar chart + bad data viz practices

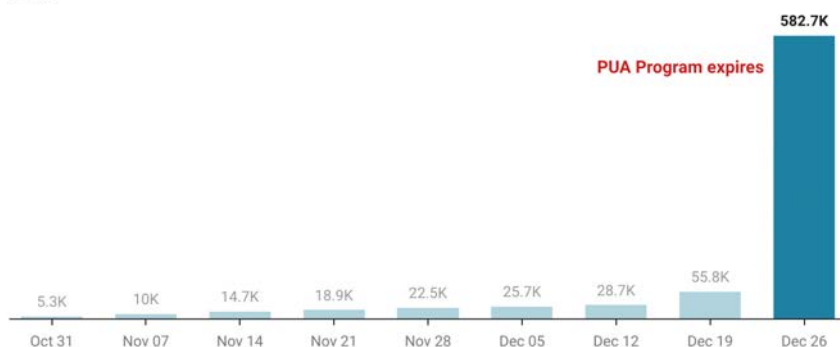


Example charts using Excel and bad data viz practices vs. using Datawrapper and good data viz practices

Figure 2: Same chart, made in Datawrapper + uses good data viz practices

More than half a million Californians currently receiving PUA unemployment benefits will stop receiving them if PUA ends on Dec 26, 2020

Cumulative # of people whose Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits are exhausted each week



This projections assumes PUA claimants will continue to exit at the same rate going forward as they have on average over the latest 10 weeks available.

Source: California Policy Lab & EDD-LMID • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2 improvements

-Labeled the columns/dropped Y axis, deleted gridlines, no 3D bars, added a title and source, explained what PUA is, highlighted and annotated the outlier.

Now the point is clear to the reader:

580,000 Californians would have stopped receiving unemployment benefits on 12/26/2020 unless Congress and the president acted.

From CPL report: [Nov 19, 2020 Analysis of UI claims in California](#)

Data visualization resources

1. [Policy Viz](#) is a website run by Jonathan Schwabish with helpful resources, including compilation of data viz blogs. He also wrote: “[An Economist’s Guide to Visualizing Data](#)” and “[Better Data Visualizations.](#)”
2. Urban Institute: [Data Visualization Style Guide](#) and [Applying Racial Equity Awareness in Data Visualization](#)
3. World Bank Blogs: [New visual libraries for R and Stata users](#)
4. CDC: [Considerations for qualitative data](#)
5. Datawrapper: [How to write good alt text](#)
6. Short [compilation](#) of qualitative examples
7. UC Berkeley: [How to Create Accessible PDF Documents](#)
8. Datawrapper: [Guide on picking colors for data viz](#)

Why use [Datawrapper](#) for your figures and tables?

- It’s free, easy-to-use, includes accessibility and social media features, is mobile-responsive, and you can annotate figures.
- You can use your organization’s color palette, and embed figures and tables on your website.
- Investing time in data viz increases the impact of your research by telling the story better.

Improving accessibility: writing alt text

Alt text helps people who use assistive technology like screen readers by describing (with text) the image, figure, or table on a page. The main goal when writing alt text is to share a very short description of what key finding you expect the reader to take away from the figure. Include alt text for figures in reports, social media, and on your website. If using Datawrapper, you can add alt text and you can also select “allow people to download the data.” This way, a reader with a visual impairment can download the data and have it read to them by a screen reader.

3 main things to include in an alt text figure description:

1. The type of chart (like line graph)
2. The type of data in it (may use the X and Y axis labels)
3. What’s the takeaway from the figure? Example: “This bar chart of monthly ice cream sales shows a dramatic increase in sales during the months of June, July, and August.”

Sample policy briefs from the California Policy Lab and UCLA CTSI CERP

[Who benefits from the student loan payment pause and what will happen when it ends?](#) (2022)

[Fact Sheet: What Research Says About Homelessness Prevention](#) (2020)

[The Impacts of the Make-it-Right Program on Recidivism](#) (2022)

[Pushed out by paperwork: Why eligible Californians leave CalFresh](#) (2021)

[COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy and Acceptability in Multiethnic Communities: Implications for Public Health Policy, Messaging, and Community Outreach](#) (2021)

Additional CERP and LAC DHS Partnered Policy Briefs [here](#).

Additional CPL Policy Briefs [here](#).

Table 1: Dissemination strategies to increase the impact of your research

AUDIENCE	METHOD Outreach should be tailored to each group to improve relevance and convey importance. Why are your findings important to the individual, group, or organization?	SHARE EMBARGOED VERSION EARLY?
Policymakers, government partners (could be local, state, federal, or all of the above)	Identify proper government contacts in official posts who would be interested in the work (i.e. health officer of mayor’s office). Share directly with them and their staff. Focus on committee staff who directly work in field of interest.	Yes
Media	Identify reporters that have reported on similar topics (locally, regionally, statewide, etc). As applicable, consider ethnic news media sources (i.e. Spanish language newspapers, Black news outlets).* Identify 10-15 reporters to share embargoed copy with 3-5 days before official release (and longer list on day of release).	Yes
Peers, co-workers, similar orgs	Share directly, ask to promote (including social media)	Yes
CBOs + community partners	Share directly, ask to promote (including social media), offer lay language presentations, share media articles	Yes
Funders/potential funders	Share directly, ask to promote (including social media)	Yes
State and local associations/ membership organizations	Share directly, ask to promote (possibly in newsletter)	No
General public and brainstorm with colleagues - who else would be interested and how can you reach them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write an OpEd • Present at conferences • Email to your list-serve, and include 1-2 key findings, a quote from the press release, or an important figure • LinkedIn Post (“tag” your contacts) • Twitter thread of key findings • Put report on your homepage 	No

*UCLA CTSI CERP has publishing relationships with LA Sentinel, an African-American owned newspaper, and La Opinión, a Spanish-language newspaper, based in Los Angeles, for you to share your work. More information: <https://ctsi.ucla.edu/patients-community/pages/community-news>

Reporter outreach

Identify 10-15 reporters/outlets who focus on this issue who might be interested. Write a catchy 1-3 sentence email about your research (just enough to be exciting) and email them 3-5 days before your actual release date to see if they’d be interested in reading an embargoed copy of your report and press release. Reminder: an embargo is not an “exclusive.” An exclusive is rarely used (results need to be very newsworthy) and it means you are sharing your report with only one reporter and they’re agreeing to write about it in exchange for you not sharing your research with other reporters until it’s published.

Preparing for a media interview

1. Prepare a briefing document with the 1-3 key points you want to convey/would like to see in an article.
2. Brainstorm reporter questions and how you’d respond.
3. Practice the interview with a colleague. For TV and radio, it’s especially important to have concise answers since they may only use 30-45 seconds of a 5-10 minute interview.

You will never regret practicing before an interview, especially if it’s a challenging topic or interviewer.

Resources for discussing research for policy-impact

- [CDC Resources for writing policy briefs](#)
- [Communicating science to policymakers: six strategies for success](#)
- [Designing for Dissemination and Sustainability to Promote Equitable Impacts on Health](#)
- [Positioning Universities as Honest Knowledge Brokers: Best Practices for Communicating Research to Policymakers](#)

Resources for building community partnerships and/or engaging people with lived experience of the policy issues

- [HRSA Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience](#)
- [Nemours Children's Health System, Nemours National Office of Policy & Prevention. Lived Experience: The Practice of Engagement in Policy](#)
- [New Washington State Law 2SSB 5793 Community Compensation Guidelines for paying community members for policy input](#)

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The **Community Engagement and Research Program (CERP)** partners with community members, organizations, service providers, policymakers, academic researchers, government, and local health systems to identify and research public health priorities towards the goal of improving health equity and reducing health disparities in Los Angeles County.

The **California Policy Lab** translates research insights into government impact. Through hands-on partnerships with government agencies, CPL performs rigorous research across issue silos and builds the data infrastructure necessary to improve programs and policies that millions of Californians rely on every day.

The California Policy Lab builds better lives through data-driven policy. We are a project of the University of California, with sites at the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses.

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