

# How to Write a Briefing Document

## cs199r – Spring 2007

A policy brief is a document that

- *outlines a ~~policy problem~~ <sup>construction defect</sup> and*
- *offers a rationale* for selecting a solution or course of action.

The policy briefs you will write will be aimed at a particular audience, and should represent that audience's perspective and reflect its interests.

### Content

The brief should accomplish the following:

- *Identify the problem and convince the audience of the importance of addressing it.* From their perspective, what is important and what is not important? Highlight what aspects of the status quo are relevant to the problem. This should include a full treatment of any underlying technical issues.
- *Identify a solution.* This solution should include some course of action to be taken by your audience. Doing nothing is a sometimes valid course of action.

### Guidelines

- Tie the audience's interests to the means and the end.
- Identify other solutions and point out why the proposed solution is better for the audience (if it is useful or relevant).
- Discuss your solution's feasibility and the initial steps that can be taken, as well as obstacles to its implementation.

You are encouraged to explore a wide range of solutions. Think about technology (including changing infrastructure or client-side capabilities), government regulations (including direct mandates, incentives or changes in liability), and market tools (including new markets or marketing campaigns to realign incentives).

Addressing your audience's needs is as important as solving the larger problem. You should understand what it is they hope to accomplish, and what tradeoffs they would be willing to make.

### Attributes of a successful briefing memo

- **Short:** Your audience will not have an attention span for a long document.
- **Succinct:** Be brief and clear; avoid empty rhetoric and sweeping generalizations. (Such as this.)
- **Persuasive:** You are aiming to convince your audience on the best course of action.
- **Evidence-based:** Cite specifics, and use empirical data wherever possible.
- **Accessible:** Incorporate critical technical facts and trends without jargon, in a fashion understandable to a non-technical audience.
- **Realistic:** Be careful with the assumptions you make. State the important ones.