

## The Background – getting it just right

### Enough, but not too much

Most conventional papers lead off with a Background section. This follows the Proposal, an Executive Summary/Key Points and the Recommendations. It's the beginning of the main body of the paper.

Poorly done it takes up lots of time and space. It can resemble a long build up in a novel or a play – with the action then coming very quickly before the end. This can lead to it being skipped over by a busy reader.

However, it is an important context-setting piece. Without it, readers can wander off on the wrong path, and then question the conclusions and recommendations of the paper.

Context has several different sides and they all influence the way the Background should be approached. First there is the **place of the paper in the reader's scheme** of things. **Why** is this being placed in the reading pile?

Then there is the **information necessary to understand** the issue. **What** has happened or might happen?

Finally, it provides the practical superstructure to position this advice in terms of limits to its coverage, previous relevant doings (particularly major decisions) and connections to wider (especially strategic) policy. **Where** does it fit?

### Think about who you are writing the paper for and what they know already

The key is to write this section so it just does its job – not too much and not too little.

And the critical aspect of that is to tailor the material to the audience. As with all other factors associated with advising, the trick is to provide the exact amount of information to allow a quality decision. Remember who you are writing for, as

this will change the nature of a Background. If it is a well-informed Minister who is up to date on the issue it can be very short, with references or appendices available for further information, if needed. However, if it's going to a group of Ministers with different levels of background knowledge and understanding of the topic you'll need to cover more of the basics to ensure they are all starting from the same level.

### The Background section sets the foundation for the paper

It is the place to explain the rationale for the paper.

This may already be set out to some extent in the Purpose statement. But the Background is the place to provide more information, if needed.

If it has been requested (by the Minister or Cabinet, for example) explain the request and what sits behind it. This should have been part of the commissioning process.<sup>1</sup> It's always worth setting out the detail here, as you can't necessarily expect that a busy Minister will remember exactly what was asked for – after all, a week is a long time in politics. Also, if it is referred to other Ministers, this helps set the context for them.

Of course, the usual advice applies. If the original request isn't that clear – then get further information from the commissioning Manager, or from the Minister's Office staff (through usual channels).

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[https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief\\_17\\_commissioning.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_17_commissioning.pdf)

Other papers might be generated from the agency itself. In this case explain to the Minister what lies behind the paper, and why it's coming up to him or her now; what they need to do, and by when. So, examples include:

- A standard process, e.g. annual levy adjustments.
- A regular report, e.g. quarterly monitoring reports.
- An emerging issue – remember to explain the reasons for urgency or otherwise.
- The next step in an ongoing process, e.g. regulations following Cabinet decisions;<sup>2</sup> or part one of a package of three papers on different aspects of the same issue.
- Part of a previously agreed work programme.

### Explain what's in scope and what's not

Sometimes a paper will only answer part of the issue, e.g. in the situation where further data or information might be needed to fully address the issues raised by the Minister, or as one in a series of papers. This is the place to explain just what's included and what's not. And then, when a further report is expected and what its coverage will be.

### Reference previous and related decisions and advice

This is critical. It puts clear markers in the ground about what has gone before, explains the starting point of the analysis, and assumptions behind the current advice.

Remember to reference Cabinet decisions fully and properly and give internal reference numbers for previous advice, reports or decisions.

You need to use your judgement about the level of detail in this part of the Background.

On one hand, if there is a long history to the issue, it is worth including an appendix which sets out the timeline<sup>3</sup> and impact of previous decisions, with just a short summary in the Background. Similarly, you could use an appendix to list in detail prior decisions.

At the other end of the spectrum, if it's a topical issue that the Minister knows well and has dealt with recently, then you can be very succinct.

### Explain linkages to wider government policy or priorities

Explain how this particular issue fits with wider government strategies and priorities.

Such an explanation helps to show its relevance and importance to not only the Minister's portfolio interests, but to the wider Government agenda. It will also show its overall priority in the scheme of things. This is particularly important for papers going to other Ministers, or to Cabinet. It helps determine the time and effort they might put into the issue.

### Consider including a 'road map' in longer complex papers

A quick paragraph or series of bullet points setting out what is going to be covered in the body of the paper, and in what order is a useful addition to the Background.

We refer to this as a 'road map'. It not only helps to give the paper a clear structure, it also improves readability.

The road map comes into its own in complex longer papers. But isn't needed in shorter papers.

### In a shorter paper, it may contain the problem definition

In a short paper on a relatively simple issue we often see the 'problem definition' in the Background. That's fine if it is simple and can be expressed succinctly.

But, even in those cases, make sure it stands out from the rest of the section. Using a clear subheading would do the job.

If not, it can easily be skipped over and missed by a busy reader.

However, if it's a substantive issue, then it deserves a section of its own.

<sup>2</sup> We have a further Masterclass coming on a series of papers and how to best integrate that stream of advice.

<sup>3</sup> Consider using a timeline tool e.g. one of the templates in Microsoft Office <https://templates.office.com/en-us/timelines>

## Check it again

Authors often start with writing the Background. It's often relatively straightforward and gets the writing juices flowing.

It's even easier if this was well covered in the Commissioning stage of the project.

But always remember to go back and review it at the end of the writing to make sure it matches the final paper, and the commissioning brief.

## Remember to cover it in peer review

Background is often a section that is skipped over when pushed for time.

But it does serve an important purpose. It sets out what the paper is about. So, establishing reader expectations. If it doesn't match the analysis and conclusions in the paper, or line up with the original brief, the paper itself is going to fall at the first hurdle.

A key question for peer review is whether the paper does what it said it would do.

## In summary, the 'three Ws'

Use this as a reminder:

- **What?** – what is the paper about? (and what it's not about)
- **Why?** – why is the Minister getting it now?
- **Where?** – where does it fit with previous decisions? And wider government priorities?

## Further information

For Cabinet papers – see the Cabinet Office Manual <https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications/what-are-key-requirements-cabinet-paper>

The Policy Project – 'Context' section contains detailed guidance. At a high level they suggest:

*"Context: Explains why the decisions maker is getting this and where it fits:*

- *Purpose, context, priorities, and connections across government are clear.*
- *Outlines previous advice and history of the issue"*

<https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-06/FINAL%20full%20Policy%20Quality%20Framework.pdf>

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