

One-page briefings: making them work

We've seen a number of agencies experimenting with one-page briefings. For example, the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) in DPMC have been doing them for many years as part of their regular briefings on Cabinet papers. MFAT use them to great effect on emerging issues. Customs are also trying them.

So we've pulled together the lessons from the best of these and highlighted the things that can trip you up. It's worth giving it a go.

Busy Ministers like succinct, clear briefings

Ministers' reading piles, whether in paper form or electronic, are large and constantly being topped up. Short, clear briefings provide relief and are generally appreciated by Ministers.

There are several critical factors:

They must be an easy read – all the things you should do in any paper to make it an easy read need to be on display here. There's no point in a short paper if it's still a hard read.

Plain language¹ is particularly important. Make sure you don't use long sentences or long paragraphs.

Writing a short paper is harder than writing a long paper – Mark Twain² was right. It takes time and care. You'll need to edit carefully to ensure the essentials are there and the non-essentials aren't. A fresh set of eyes in peer review is vital.

Be upfront about the purpose of the paper – one of the most important elements of a super short briefing is to be clear upfront about why the Minister is getting it and what they need to do, e.g. for information, for decision, for support at a meeting, or to provide talking points.

Don't be afraid to use data and evidence – key data, evidence, or even a graph can help make the point.

Structure matters – it needs to flow logically.

Try using the same principles used for writing Key points.³ It doesn't necessarily have to start with the background but can lead with what you are proposing and then explain why.

It's fine to include recommendations – one-pagers don't just have to be aides-mémoire. They can be used for decisions too.

We've seen some great examples

Heads-up on an emerging issue

These are typically briefings on a topical issue. They are usually for the Minister's information and can be complex. Although, they might provide some advice on how to respond if asked about the matter in the media or by colleagues.

They provide a quick summary and background to the problem and explain what is being done to get more information and/or resolve the issue. Sometimes they promise a further detailed briefing and may suggest a 'holding' position.

Briefing ahead of a meeting or Cabinet item

We've seen some highly structured briefings for your Minister ahead of discussing an agenda item – either at Cabinet, at a Ministers' meeting, or for a more informal discussion with a colleague/s. They are often second-opinion advice⁴ and have all the necessary features of that sort of advice.

Simple, regular decisions

Most agencies have some things that require relatively simple decisions by the Minister but are similar in nature and type.

Typically agencies develop a standard short template for this sort of repeated decision.

There are other traps to avoid

We've seen some which don't work. Other common faults are:

- Using a one-pager when an item in the weekly report would suffice. This is a waste of time and effort.
- Adding all the usual administrative bits and pieces, including a cover sheet – avoid these.
- Using noting recommendations – they just add length and repetition.

¹ See Masterclass No. 42 Say it in plain English
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Brief%2042%20Say%20it%20in%20plain%20English.pdf>

² See Masterclass No. 29 Tips on writing from Mark Twain
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_29_tips_on_writing_from_mark_twain.pdf

³ Masterclass No. 41 Key points
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2041%20Key%20points_2022.pdf

⁴ See Masterclass No. 34 Second opinion advice
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2035%20Second%20Opinion%20Advice%20-%202022.pdf>

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