

Writing the only 11 papers that matter

The previous Masterclass (no. 9) outlined the main types of papers analysts write, and went on to include hints to use.

This brief looks at the logic and requirements of each of these individual models, separately. It is a succinct overview of the key features of each model, to help drafters.

1	Policy brief Introducing a new policy or changes to an existing policy. This report will typically identify a problem and propose a solution within an analysis and backgrounder.
2	Meeting or visit brief Preparing for a face-to-face session. This is essentially a 'cheat sheet' to allow a busy Minister to fly through the day without interruptions for briefings.
3	What's up? Progress/budget report updating on developments. These can be short term information papers on an ad hoc basis or regular reports to keep the Minister on top of a larger and/or longer project.
4	Crisis response Emergency briefing to inform and advise. The key features here are speed and accuracy to allow the Minister to have a basis for decisions and public responses.
5	Draft response Seeking Ministerial feedback or sign-off on a draft Cabinet paper or official document. This is part of a dialogue iterating towards a final conclusion on a serious or sensitive issue.
6	Release brief Seeking authority to publish research or results of an investigation. This will cover material that has been some time in the making and usually about to be launched on the public.
7	Business case or evaluation Logical analysis of proposal or policy. This is a technical piece and will need to be explained in terms of what it says and what it doesn't.
8	A3 poster or other visual Material to prompt discussion. Typically, a chance to use design skills to display a complicated set of options or linked aspects of an issue in a manner that puts all salient material on the table.
9	Process/machinery of government report Necessary stage in progress of an initiative. Will have its own specific requirements – often legal – to be traversed formally.
10	Joint decision brief Taking a decision with a colleague. Ministers are often delegated authority jointly, and this type of report is the basis for such a process.
11	Catching the omnibus Wrap-up pieces typically tidying up final stages of a project or legislation. These reports break the 'one paper; one topic' rule but are necessary as a means to group all the last aspects of a project for a final push.

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Policy brief

Introducing a new policy or changes to an existing policy

Situation

A serious problem has emerged that requires a solution.

Structure of paper

What's 'broken' and why? (Problem definition)

How big/serious is it? (Size of problem)

How might it be fixed? (Options)

Why pick this way? (Decision framework: criteria/assessment)

What are the risks and what can be done about them?

Does the Minister need to act, and if so how, and can we help?

Key content

The issue needs to be located in terms of its salience: so what is at stake – what is the size of the prize?

The problem should be described in terms of underlying causes, rather than the symptoms.

The options are best if they obey the old maxim: mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. And always give reasons for the options selected for analysis.

The appraisal of the options has to be convincing. Choosing an action will likely trigger a debate. So the selection must have a well-established and credible logic.

Note it doesn't have to be the only possible solution – typically options are sifted using criteria.

Costs are a critical part of most policy decisions and, even if not known with accuracy, an estimate should be included.

Things to watch

The description of the problem needs to be firmly set in context. Origins and previous history can be useful but should be brief; this is a solution not a debate about the past.

Criteria for selection of the best outcome [recommendations] are basic and need a source mandate. If there's no clear basis for these like the wording of a manifesto, draw on wider policy or practical common sense to develop criteria and, if possible, seek Ministerial endorsement.

Risks are core and deserve special efforts. Grouping all risks in a table with proposed mitigation is often striking. See Masterclass 5 Taking Chances with Risk for more hints.

Implementation and follow up are often neglected – again they are worthy of a designated section.

Traps

Take care with the problem definition to stop the paper looking like the old joke: the situation is a crisis, we must do something; this is something, therefore we must do it.

All information is subject to uncertainty; policy advice is no exception. What matters is helping the decision-maker to understand the extent of evidence available to support their next steps. All politics is about risk taking; and managing those risks.

Detail that obscures the story is the enemy, unless it is exemplary.

All policy is going to be the subject of dispute. The logic of the proposals must be accessible to all relevant politicians and thus be really short and simple to follow.

What a good one looks like

Aside from the characteristics of all good papers mentioned in Masterclass 9, a good policy brief is:

- **Integrated** – the problem definition establishes the domain to be included and no extraneous material appears
- **Proportionate** – the analysis and the suggested action are both fitting for the scale and salience of the issue
- **Justified** – there is a sensible and short reason provided for the action recommended, and it is clearly stated
- **Practical** – the proposed solution has been tested under operational conditions, or is sufficiently similar to one that has.

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Meeting or visit brief

Preparing for a face-to-face session

Situation

The Minister is to meet a person or group for an official discussion.

Structure of paper

Who called it?

What's the agenda? What issues might get raised?

What's your objective/a good outcome?

Who's going to be there and what's their angle (e.g. media, vested interests)?

What should be said (and *not* said)?

Key content

The substance for the meeting needs to be summed up in short order, so the Minister can refresh their thinking and be prepared as the visitors arrive. This needs to indicate specifically what it's all about and why it's all happening.

The core of the issue needs to be clearly expressed.

Often several options need to be covered.

An indication of the "value" of the session – particularly if the pre-set goal is achieved – provides the incentive for the Minister to drive toward the conclusion.

Things to watch

The whole brief should be no more than a couple of pages, plus substantive talking points.

Arrange the layout to be readily accessible by the Minister in the meeting without having to spread the whole brief out. So make sure it's easy to follow and read at a glance (e.g. large type face, clear headings, structured in accordance with the meeting agenda).

Organise talking points under logical agenda items, in spoken English, on a separate sheet (i.e. provide a script).

Remind the Minister of previous discussions and any social links – however distant – with the guest.

Provide brief bios in an appendix, with photos to avoid confusion.

Traps

Avoid providing anodyne talking points that are the equivalent of discussing the weather. That said, a brief recall of common points (a visit to a country; previous discussions; or even a recent event) can be an icebreaker.

Make sure all the likely issues the visitor may raise are backgrounded to make sure the Minister is not surprised.

On the same line, try to prevent the Minister from being ambushed by attempts to gain approval for an initiative being promoted by the guests. Each instance needs its own solution but some pre-meeting discussion of the agenda can often be helpful.

What a good one looks like

Aside from the key content above, the best basis for a good meeting brief is to know and be prepared for the topics and issues the guests want to traverse.

The best way to manage this, if possible, is to consult with the visitors to obtain an idea of what's on their minds. (They may need to be reminded that surprising Ministers is not usually an effective tactic – most significant government decisions are collective and thus require preparation).

This allows the inclusion of prepared material to deal with points of contention in a thoughtful and disarming way that may produce positive results.

Top shops will provide 'just in case' defensive material in the form of talking points to cover tricky issues – see Masterclass 4 for ideas. (An 'all-purpose rebuff' is a useful element).

Good meeting sessions have a beginning, a middle and an end. If possible, schedule the agenda to take such a form.

Think carefully about the close out: one idea is that it should be positive. This is when to have a formal photo taken, sign something or hand over a gift. Just consider the way a line can be drawn to mark the end of the meeting without the stagey awkwardness of the Minister's secretary appearing to announce that time is up.

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What's up?

Progress/budget report updating on developments

Situation

A project that is going to take time to work through to its completion usually has regular (stage by stage) reports to keep stakeholders – including Ministers – up with the play.

As this unfolds the reports must reacquaint the reader with the task and its worth; but equally they must not be boring; and crucially must convey the essence of the performance of the project team in reaching their goals along the way.

Structure of paper

Provide an overview of the project in a swift paragraph.

Remind the Minister why they should be interested, and what is involved.

Whatever else is included, the core of the paper revolves around reporting on just as many indicators as it takes to make sense of performance against expectations/targets.

Three elements must be covered for each component:

- Target: “We said we’d do XXX”
- Result: “We managed YYY” – signal whether this is good or bad
- Comment/risks: “Here’s why it’s over (or under) and what we’re going to do next to put it right” (or take advantage of the head start we now have). Or, “we are concerned about this element in the coming period as ZZZ may occur and so we are looking at doing WWW”.

In addition, there needs to be an assessment overview: what is the best way of briefly describing the situation of the whole project? Examples might be: “it’s broadly on track”; or “ahead of schedule”; or “falling behind because of ..., and we are looking at ways we can catch up with the timetable.”

Linked to this overview is draft material for the Minister to use if anyone asks about progress – in talking point format, with instances and examples, to show the Minister is more than reporting on a report. These should go into apt detail.

Key content

What’s at stake – the reason this project is being done.

The way the selected indicators fit into the life of the project.

Key risks in carrying out the project – what might go wrong?

What is the effect of any deviations from the plan on the overall results?

Things to watch

The shorter the better for regular updates – use high level signals to show at a glance what’s happened.

Take the Minister along for the ride with no surprises, but don’t overdo it – own up to the true state of affairs.

A 3-column table [columns: target/result/comment] often works well.

Adding simple indicators like a traffic light system provides colour and can crisply summarise complex outcomes. These are very powerful and it’s usually worth the initial design investment for a long-running series of regular reports.

If material is to be made public, think about the communications process or provide defensive talking points.

Always think about delivery or stakeholder risks.

Traps

Getting bogged down in detail.

Having too many indicators.

Not reporting on the right issues – they are the ones that either:

- show the real progress to the goals that matter (indicators); or
- have political salience in their own right.

Failing to carry the stakeholders along with the project team as their view of the task changes along the way – any such shift in realistic expectation by team members that is not reflected to wider stakeholders is technically a surprise and is the biggest single risk to long-running tasks.

Getting captured by the project – all reports have to be sufficiently independent to ‘work’ for the outsiders they are for.

What a good one looks like

All the key information is readily accessible on the front page, but backed up in detail in the rest of the paper.

Most of the initial page signalling is in a form that jumps out at the reader – this might be colour shading, traffic lights or smiley faces; whatever it takes to make an impact. The more the whole situation can be boiled down to progress indicators, the more comfortable Ministers will tend to be.

The reasons for the over and under achievements are clear and have credible, usable, short summaries – “the windows have been held up by shipping delays”.

Remedial action is included for all areas of lagging results – even just “to investigate the possibility of catching up by...”

Broad impacts of the departures from budget/timetable must be included.

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Crisis response

Emergency briefing to inform and advise

Situation

A serious situation has developed very quickly and at least somewhat unexpectedly. There is significant media interest and your Minister has a responsible role.

The task is to bring the Minister up to speed and into a position where media comment can be handled.

The key feature of such reporting is to be clear about the facts and the non-facts and to thereby retain credibility.

Structure of paper

What is the perception of the problem? Public discussion or media views? Social media?

What's really going on – including the evidence that this is actually the case?

How do we reconcile perception and reality? What further enquiries are being made?

What does that mean in terms of action/comment?

Who is in charge/taking action?

How is this likely to play out and what's the timing?

Longer term considerations.

Key content

Provide a short description of what has happened as best it can be put together. Format this in a way that the Minister can read it out if necessary.

Use an informed official style (cause to effect) if possible: "on X of December at Y pm, a flask of anthrax was mistakenly disposed of into the upper Avon River, with the consequences that...".

If that is not available, stick to what is known: "since the weekend many people in the W area have been complaining of ... and while the reason is unknown, we are taking action...".

What efforts are under way.

What is being done to resolve the information gaps.

When further information might be available.

Advice about what can be said – and how to phrase it (see Masterclass 4 Talking about Talking Points).

Things to watch

This is all about identifying and mitigating public perceptions of risk.

The Minister's main role here is to remain credible; if there is no information in an area say so. But adding what is being done to gather better information/decide appropriate responses is useful.

Provide talking points and/or a communications plan. Suit the tone to the mood.

Outline next steps, both immediate (fire-fighting) and subsequent (enquiry/fixing problem).

Own up to any knowledge gaps – don't speculate or fill in spaces.

Traps

Being over-bearing.

Talking/commenting too much.

Talking/commenting too little.

Claiming knowledge in areas where it is still uncertain – or speculating.

Getting timing of future events wrong.

What a good one looks like

Sticks to the facts carefully.

Sympathises with those affected.

Shows the Minister what can be said, based on what is known.

Reflects the emerging public mood.

Focuses on the short term, while providing a brief look ahead to allow the Minister to see where things may be going.

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Draft response

Seeking Ministerial feedback or sign-off on draft of Cabinet paper or official document

Situation

A paper that has been prepared by the agency is to go to Cabinet or be released to the public. Before it is cleared there are a series of issues to be resolved, and this step is focused on clearing these away.

Structure of paper

Reminder: what's the background to this paper?

What has changed since the last version the Minister saw? (Tracked changes on the papers itself are useful, or a summary table drawing all proposed changes together).

On what aspects, in particular, is Ministerial feedback sought?

Other aspects of the process (such as: further back up material; draft talking notes; an aide mémoire for Cabinet; or arrangements for a public launch, with media drafts) are in train and require Ministerial exposure or approval.

Key content

Why is this whole enterprise being done – in the sense of its wider achievements? (And how valuable is it to those goals – critical or just supportive?)

What is the process ahead, including its detailed timing?

What are the risks – especially the big ones?

What likely resistance is there to this process from political or community stakeholders?

What general reaction will there be from the public – is there a communication plan?

Things to watch

Save the Minister time by focusing tightly on what's changed from previous reports. Use devices (tracked changes, a table) that direct the Minister's attention to sections where there is still uncertainty or unresolved issues. Avoid long narratives.

Always provide a one-sentence reminder of what's at stake – why is this effort worth making?

And sum up this goal in a stripped-down way so the Minister can check proposals against the objective.

Provide both an assessment of the contentious areas and a guide to the agency's view (with reasons). This lets the Minister take an informed decision.

Traps

Losing the bigger picture; the overall goal and what it means.

Getting bogged down in the individual items.

Failing to provide an agency's assessment and direction backed up with short but sound reasoning.

Letting the timetable get away – or not communicating clearly to the Minister what needs to happen next, and by when.

Failing to lay out the (small p) political background of just who is affected by the measures in debate, and where they stand.

Stakeholder opinions are often vital to successful policy.

What a good one looks like

Highly focused on the stages in the process to achieve the aim, including: critical process steps (e.g. consulting/briefing Ministerial colleagues); and external deadlines.

Very clear about the issues, the different solution options, and their pros and cons.

Integrated, so the effect of changes in section X on section Y are exposed and discussed.

Highly responsive and innovative to seek out new ways of doing old tasks. This allows the Minister to play a wider game and possibly satisfy more than the usual range of stakeholders.

Well-informed, so the fine gradations of the different options can be employed to resolve trade-offs.

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Release brief

Seeking authority to publish research or investigation

Situation

The agency has prepared or commissioned research findings or a review/investigation. It is now time for it to be released to the public. This paper is asking for authority to publish.

Structure of paper

Why was the research/investigation/enquiry commissioned, and how does it link to the Minister's or the Government's priorities?

What are the headline results? Are any controversial?

How is the research/findings going to be used by officials? What is the timetable? What will it take to implement?

How is it likely to be received by media and other stakeholders, and is anyone likely to get upset/angry?

Is there sensitivity about the way it is released?

What follows – is there legislation, a change of process, or just a public debate?

Key content

An authoritative summary that covers all the content that matters. It needs to be written so it could be read out if necessary.

The background is explained.

The reasons for the work being done this way (or by this person/group) must be recapped.

The big points it makes, either of substance, or in terms of media interest need to be set out and discussed briefly.

The implications for the Minister should be described – positive or negative.

Suggestions about a line to take publically, or any explanatory material, should be provided with talking points in script form. This would include any action that needs to be covered in the release.

What is going to happen next must be clear. Any follow up reporting or actions should be explained. If there is no formal communication plan say so and why.

Things to watch

Keep it really brief – a couple of pages at most.

Unless it is devastating, avoid discussing the (detailed) methodology. If there is a difference of view that will become the core of the subsequent debate, find a key (high level) description of the core, and stick to that.

The emphasis must be on 'what does this mean for the Minister?' and identifying any risks from the findings of the research/investigation being in the public domain.

Always have a really brief summary (the 'meaningful so what?').

Include suggested text for talking points, on a 'just in case' basis if there's no suggestion of a communications plan initially.

Traps

Pretending to be technically adroit. Stay away from dealing with technical material in depth – if necessary have officials who are competent available to cover this.

Unidentified 'depth charges' – that is revelations that are not obvious when the report goes out but later prove to be important. Cover this by seeking advice and having the report reviewed by the right people.

Creating controversy.

Making too much of what is essentially background material. Unless it is crucial to a larger aim, it's usually better to have material go unheralded than make too much of it.

What a good one looks like

Brisk and focused.

Clear about the content and its impact.

Informed about the reactions of the relevant interest groups and including material to respond or handle their likely comments.

Kitted out with all the forward-looking bells and whistles. This depends on the expected level of interest but always includes the 'just in case' talking points. And it escalates to industrial strength briefing material, such as draft media releases, a communications pack and/or more full-on publicity arrangements, if necessary.

Clear about what it all means and what is coming next.

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Business case or evaluation

Logical analysis of proposal or policy

Situation

Any significant proposal needs to be pre-assessed in economic or financial terms before it goes ahead, and probably again later, once it has been operating for a sufficient period.

There are technical frameworks for the detailed business case work. This is about the cover note and wider briefing.

Structure of paper

What is proposed to be done, to what end, and at what cost?

What would be gained/lost (and by whom) and how sure are we about the details?

How do we make it happen? Or how do we call a halt? What are the consequences either way?

What can be said publically?

Key content

Clear statement of what is afoot – what will it do and how?

Similarly, clear statement of why it matters.

Significant risk analysis both of the initial uncertainties and of the possible events that might derail the project subsequently, during construction or operation.

Things to watch

The base documents here are often very long. The Minister is unlikely to read the whole thing. So the cover note becomes the briefing. (The main case will be appended and likely be very numerical and possibly technical).

Thus the covering brief has to speak clearly and suggest the way the Minister will want to discuss the matter.

This means being crisp, concise and focused on the Minister's interests. It needs simple descriptions of the situation that link the issues through to the recommended course of action.

Include a one-sentence summary of what the proposal aims to achieve – and why that matters. This should be drafted for repeated (oral) use – it is effectively the project's slogan.

Traps

Presenting the trees rather than the wood. Cabinet decisions are usually sold on the big picture and brought down by the risks. So both need attention.

Failing to present the goal and likely achievements of the project clearly and with just the right set of necessary caveats. If you don't ensure the Minister's case is made carefully it falls on the Minister's shoulders.

Don't get bogged down in the technical side of the case – for instance discussing the difficulties of forecasting usage patterns. The point that needs attention and careful presentation is the risk these uncertainties pose to the proposal's viability, and what might be done to mitigate this.

Avoid leaving out the downsides – be realistic, indeed, be conservative, if possible. Politicians are usually very impressed with results on the upside.

What a good one looks like

Very clear about what the policy proposal will achieve.

Has a snappy, readily usable description of how it will work and why it is efficient. This should be in a talking points form that not only can be used by the Minister to carry the case to colleagues, but picked up and used by them if asked about the proposal.

Is open about risks and potential drawbacks while also reflecting that there are possible upsides. (See Masterclass 5 Taking Chances with Risk).

Shows how there are potential mitigation responses to threats – even those that have yet to emerge.

Rests on a sound analytical base with the key figures having a low variability.

Shows how the benefits are widespread and the detriments outweighed.

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A3 poster or other visual

Material to prompt discussion

Situation

An agency has a major policy development that it wants to discuss with the Minister or a group of Ministers.

Base material that will support and encourage debate and open discussion is required. An A3 is to be used.

Structure of paper

Start with problem/purpose of discussion – what is the point of the session and how will we know when we've reached the end?

Try to indicate scale of the issue – various indicators can be used but cost is always valuable.

Adopt a simple visual structure: move left to right or top to bottom, through options and analysis. Make sure the conclusion stands out.

Include next steps or discussion points/questions at the end to focus attention.

Key content

The issue needs to be reduced to its key elements. What forces are at work?

These then have to be logically positioned to use their spatial arrangement, as a metaphor of the effect you are trying to capture. So, a link in space can show cause and effect, or indicate time: one precedes the other.

Get help in doing this from experts – there are usually people in your team (or in the communications group) that are really good at this – use their flair to assist in design and then to review.

Include just sufficient description of the problem to capture its key features. Think of the A3 as a 'model': it is another way of conversing with the audience, effectively a visual shorthand.

Reduce complexity – too much on the page is overwhelming and thus counterproductive. One simple test to apply is whether it 'talks' to the reader without having to be talked through in any detail.

Things to watch

Keep the text to a minimum: if lengthy explanations are required, a poster is the wrong communication vehicle. An A3 is naturally two dimensional, so there are two types of classification that can be used (vertically and horizontally). Beyond this another presentation format is required.

Design effects can be helpful as they add to the imaging and thus the unspoken impact. But watch that these do not become objectives in their own right.

Try to use a variety of different ways to communicate on the page – graphs, tables, diagrams, etc.

Make full use of colour, headings and different sizes for the various elements.

But search for the universal; what is striking for one person can be confusing for another. Test your drafts carefully, and work to the core audience – who are the critical people to reach?

Traps

Poster ends up being text-rich: stick with a written paper

Lacks obvious visual structure: an A3 only works with a clear visual logic that reflects the underlying logic of the issues and elements in play.

If it has no 'shock' visual impact it will not work except as another way to display options, and a table may be preferable.

Clutter ruins most of the posters we see fail – there is so much in front of the reader that the key points are hidden.

What a good one looks like

Relatively stark.

Simplified ideas reduced to their critical dependencies.

Built round a simple idea that makes a strong visual statement – a circular movement; or an arrow from lower left to upper right.

Powerful visual images of the components that catch the eye in a meaningful way where the problem is concerned.

Limited amount of text – perhaps mainly background or follow-through points.

The conclusion stands out.

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Process/machinery of government report

Necessary stage in progress of an initiative

Situation

Public administration has to use processes to achieve its ends. As part of these many projects will include stages that have to be completed.

The paperwork has to be done to ensure the proposal jumps through the necessary hoops.

Structure of paper

What is all of this doing – what is it all about?

Where does this stage fit?

What does the Minister need to do and why?

Are there any risks?

Supporting analysis and precedents (legal and/or prior examples).

Certifications, where required – all the necessary precursor steps have been done.

What needs to happen next?

Key content

Brisk reminder about the wider interest (and its scale) the project is serving.

Framework of the process – what are the applicable rules and why are they relevant?

Necessary moving parts to be assembled and checked.

Evidence of the all the necessary prior steps being complete and in place.

Instructions as to what to do once signed.

Things to watch

These are rarely exciting for the Minister – often there are many of them for an individual Minister to deal with.

Make it easy by keeping them short and reassuring the Minister there's nothing to worry about so that they can sign and move on.

But double check:

- the right set(s) of rules have been applied
- all the necessary priors are complete.

For any serious process, at least two pairs of eyes should be involved. It frequently merits a formal legal engagement to ensure no unusual situation has been overlooked and that compliance is fully satisfied.

Timing can be lost sight of, so it needs to be carefully checked – and don't rush the Minister – allow time for the office to handle the matter and find a space in the diary.

Traps

Assuming that things are done or in place that in fact are not present.

Mixing up processes that are similar. Sound legal advice and a second pair of eyes usually avoids this.

Spending too long in the paper offering detailed discussions of the necessary steps.

Taking too much space in the paper on the point and worth of the project. By this time in the whole business of deciding policy and then implementing it, it's a matter of reminding about the course chosen, not seeking approval for it.

What a good one looks like

Short and focused.

Sharp about the underlying venture and its worth.

Clear about the framework in play and the necessary precursors.

Credible certification that all the critical priors have been satisfied and are in place.

Delivered on time. And with time for the Minister to action without a panic.

All attachments present to move the issue forward.

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Joint decision brief

Taking a decision with a colleague

Situation

With so many decisions now going to Cabinet, it frequently delegates its powers to subgroups of concerned Ministers. They therefore have to be jointly briefed to take the decision.

In concept these papers are midway between a Cabinet paper (for many Ministers) and a Ministerial briefing (for a single Minister).

Structure of paper

Background to the decision – what was put to Cabinet when the delegation occurred?

What's at stake – where does this fit into wider priorities?

What are the key trade-offs here?

What alternatives are there?

What are the criteria for assessing the options?

How do the options rate?

What are the risks?

What happens next?

Key content

These papers need to reflect the interests and aims of the joint Ministers. Thus they will have to be strongly structured around a way of thinking about the problem.

The risks need to be carefully appraised.

The assessment according to the criteria should be well established and clear.

The recommendations should be unambiguous and indicate who is to carry them out.

Any tricky implementation and monitoring matters should be flagged.

Things to watch

Justify the criteria in terms of previous or current government policy.

Presenting the assessment in a table means the comparison is easy; but it cuts the amount of discussion in each cell.

Complicated cases need more space to discuss and the use of a longer discussion in an appendix is suggested.

Remember that a joint decision means both Ministers have to agree. A sensible approach is to write the paper in a way that is neutral in tone and language. That is, it should not represent the views, jargon or positions of either agency, but rather be professionally styled to outline the issues in a manner that is acceptable to both.

Typically, this means removing all emotive wording too, as it is often difficult to agree on this.

In doing this, working closely with the other agency is a good policy; they will know their Minister's wrinkles, and be able to discuss and nuance the position they are favouring.

Implementation is a frequently neglected aspect of policy advice – partly because it is often subsumed in the same agency. But when joint decisions are being made, for at least one of the participants, it is a matter that needs attention to ensure sound results.

Traps

Spending too much time negotiating with the other agency when Ministers can often quickly agree. (But be sure to test the willingness of your Minister about this – many are irritated at having to settle interdepartmental disputes).

Too many recommendations with split decisions between agencies.

Writing for one or other Minister when the paper is for both.

Failing to set the matter out clearly.

Using jargon and acronyms that one or other Minister won't understand.

What a good one looks like

Short.

Clear.

Trade-offs explained.

As many unified recommendations as possible, and collectively drafted with agreed frameworks.

But, where necessary, presenting split recommendations with brief reasons.

1 Policy brief	2 Meeting or visit brief	3 What's up?	4 Crisis response	5 Draft response	6 Release brief	7 Business case or evaluation	8 Poster or visual	9 Process / machinery report	10 Joint decision brief	11 Catching the omnibus
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Catching the omnibus

Wrap-up pieces typically tidying up final stages of a project or legislation

Situation

Most projects and virtually all pieces of legislation have as part of their consideration process a last 'wash-up' paper that goes through all the remaining (minor) elements that must be resolved to complete the task.

This paper then is a long list of relatively unrelated matters that have to be considered individually and decided.

Structure of paper

Reminder about the whole project and what it is achieving. Put this into a few sentences if possible, but stress its public value and have a clear aim that sums it up.

Where is this process on the timetable? What's already happened? What stage is this?

Is everything still on track?

Detail any significant elements, otherwise find a general description for this collection of 'bits and bobs'.

Organise the 'list' so its parts can be readily accessed.

Provide a wrap up.

Key content

Overview and rationale are key here, followed by organising the elements in the 'list' to ensure the progress of decision-making is kept tractable – in many cases these papers have a tendency to sprawl and leave readers floundering.

Beyond that it is just a matter of getting sufficient brief material on each issue to support the string of individual choices, bit by bit.

But each backgrounder must be accurate and deal competently with the salient features of the point to which it relates. This needs at least a 'pros and cons' consideration for each to provide a minimum decision guide.

Something on the level and make up of outside interest and/or consequences for each topic is useful.

Things to watch

The 'list' must be comprehensive – this is the final wrap-up so there is no capacity for further amendment.

Each selected option needs a reason that can be used in public – and seem sensible.

A well-organised summary table with each item listed with its key point and supporting comments can be useful – especially to organise thoughts.

Try to group the items in the list into smaller groups e.g. major issues, technical amendments, or on topic lines.

All chosen elements must tie back to the aim/rationale for the task in the first place – the selections must be driven by the aims of the project.

Recommendations deserve attention. The trick is to ensure that the presentation is such that the Minister can work through the list and pick the options cleanly and clearly. A table is often the best device.

Traps

Too much detail.

Spending too long on each minor decision.

Failing to consider each choice carefully.

Lacking a sensible arrangement of the items, the paper can become a chore to read and loses its logical structure.

Not drafting the considerations with care – this dooms the whole exercise to be a long, drawn out and boring task.

What a good one looks like

Introduction warns the reader what's coming and sets up the structure.

Crisp and fresh presentation.

Well drafted and soundly analysed.

As short as can be reasonably managed and clearly organised in presentation. Good subheadings can make a deal of difference.

Clear common sense reasons presented.

Recommendations set out individually, each with yes/no or careful alternative options for the Minister to select, to ensure no ambiguity about choices.