

The first eleven: Scoping the key skills

In the many – a few

Long experience has convinced us that, while every piece of advice has its own wrinkles, a limited number of types cover virtually all the papers that must be prepared.

This brief discusses the various papers and what they have in common. In later briefs we will be dealing with the particular quirks and requirements of each type of report.

Different strokes for different folks

The distribution of paper types will differ by agency: some of this is due to the natural work load. Other influences acting include the way the Minister likes to be supported.

Many shops spend most of their time on the top three of this list, but others have responsibilities more widespread.

Tools for using

Whatever the workload, it is worth becoming familiar with the full ambit of these, as it allows the analyst to consider a wider field when thinking about which response to select.

In the following list there will likely be types of papers that individuals may not have had to draft. The brief description here is to show the width of styles that senior analysts should have at their command.

The 11 main papers you'll write

	Type of paper
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.

Of course there are other papers that will crop up occasionally, but these are the bulk of those we see.

Common threads

Whatever the type of paper that is being prepared there are a number of central elements that need to be kept in mind or drawn on as they apply in all the circumstances we are discussing.

Aside from the more obvious requirements like checking what the requirement is and driving towards it, plus the value of clear writing, in our reviews we find shops still – at least from time-to-time – neglecting one or more of the following central advising principles or smart ideas:

- **Keep it as short as possible** – it does not matter whether it is a crisis response or a backgrounder for a visit to a local factory; short is always best.
- **Stick to the rule: one paper one topic** – unless the issues are so intertwined they cannot be separated it is always best to try and keep the presentation of the material straightforward and focused.
- **Enlarge your product range** – several shops have evolved a small number of specialised types of paper (such as an Aide-mémoire) with different uses than the classic report to signal clearly to the Minister that this is a specialised communication. The trick is to be strict in the rules and keep the number of these types of paper down.
- **Make it a breeze** – Ministers are always pressured; and they have to fit their reading into full days, so some of it is going to be in the car or late at night. To do the job properly, however complicated the topic the paper should be made as easy to absorb as an airport novel. No sentence should cause the reader to backtrack. A strict peer review process can both enforce and encourage this standard.
- **Think about the reader's next steps** – all material sent to the Minister is “raw material”. In other words, it is part of a larger process whereby the Minister has to decide or act or play a part in a wider drama. Whatever the nature of this context, the drafter needs to consider where the paper fits into it, and include advice for the Minister to support their next action – if possible, in immediately useable form.
- **Make the piece self-contained** – it is impossible to know just when and where the advice is going to be read and/or acted on. Typically, the reader will be the Minister, and usually the setting will be one that enables access to previous work or even the author.
 But occasionally the work is passed to a colleague for action, and occasionally the situation is not conducive to support; in these circumstances the paper has to speak for itself. Selecting just sufficient information and turning it into clear compact drafting is a real skill, and one worth cultivating.
- **House style rules, OK** – all shops need to build a common house style. This is part of the process of establishing a trust relationship between the Minister and the shop over and above the faces in the shop they regularly see. Both the Minister and the agency benefit when the standard of quality of the advice work is taken as read by the Minister regardless of the signature on the paper. This is encouraged when the look and feel of the paper is independent of the author, but redolent of the agency.
- **Visual aids can make the piece** – shrewdly selected diagrams, charts or tables can compress information, make comparisons or show the way a project is tracking, much more succinctly than a paragraph of good writing. But the same rule applies to these as above to the paper: if the meaning does not leap out without extra explanation or chewing it over, it's not working. Again a helpful peer reviewer must be honest about these things and assist in finding the right method to get the point across.
- **Plot the story** – while we believe that the key points in all papers need to be right at the front, the unfolding of the more substantial content needs to be thought about. Once the material is more than a page it needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, the idea is to tell a [short] story. Think carefully about what this story is before writing anything down, and check at the conclusion that it has been successfully caught on paper.

Learning the craft

As we have already stressed in this series, top class policy advising is a craft that is perfected by practice, but which has elements that can be acquired second hand.

The central principles set out above are a framework that all advisors should have woven into their work habits. We will supply more detailed ideas about the different types of paper in subsequent briefs.

This paper was written at NZIER, July 2016.

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