



Department
for Transport

How to Write the Perfect Policy Brief

Peter Binfield-Smith

UK Department for Transport

5 Principles for a Perfect Brief



5 Principles for a Perfect Brief:



1. Your reader wants the answer, not the story



2. Your reader is having a busy day



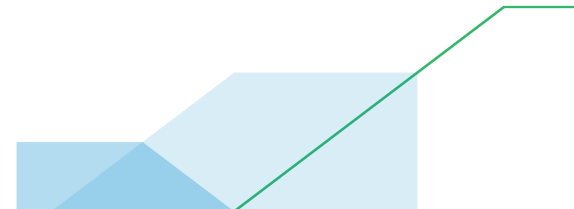
3. Your brief is (probably) not their top priority



4. Don't leave your reader guessing

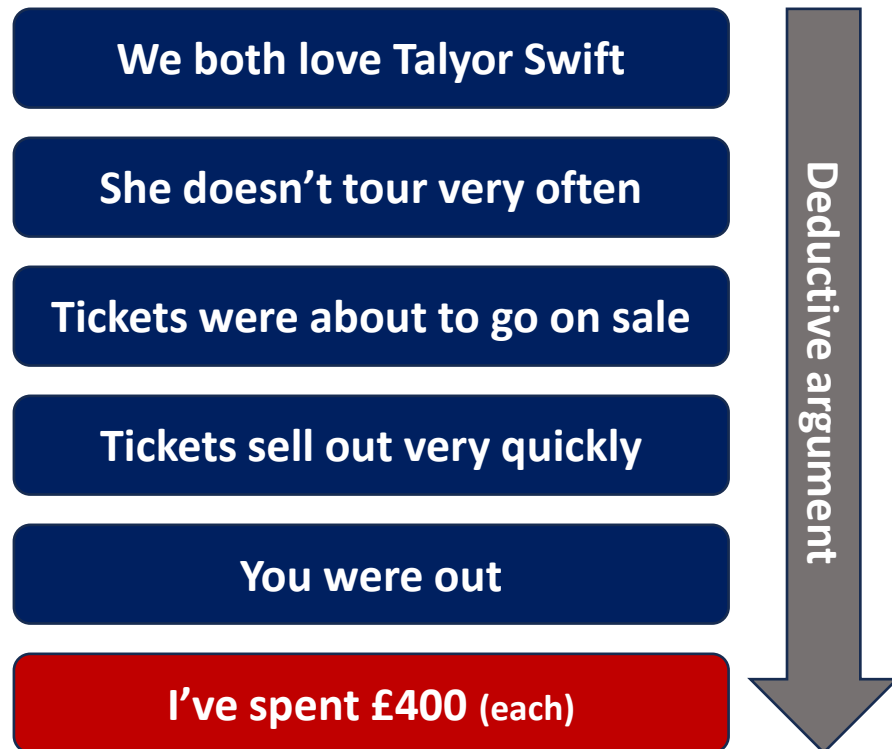


5. Leave no doubt about next steps



1) Your reader wants the answer, not the story

- Put your recommendation and key message up front.
- Decision-makers should know what you're asking for immediately.



What has happened:

- I have spent £400 (each) on Taylor Swift tickets

This happened because:

- We both love Talyor Swift
- She doesn't tour very often
- Tickets were about to go on sale
- Tickets sell out very quickly
- You were out

Inductive
Argument

Example

Deductive Policy Paper

Background:

- How did we get to this point?

Motivation:

- Why should we act now?

Options:

- What actions did we consider?

Recommendations:

- What should we actually do?



Inductive Policy Paper

Issue:

- What are we talking about?

Recommendations:

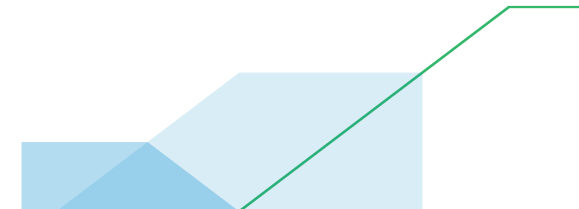
- What needs to happen?

Background:

- How did we get to this point?

Other Considerations:

- Why should we act now?
- What else did we consider?
- What are the risks?



2) Your reader is having a busy day

- Prioritise clarity, brevity and scannability so key messages can be grasped in seconds.
- Make every word earn its place. Many dyslexia-friendly writing techniques improve clarity for all readers.
- Use annexes for providing confidence, not extra page count.

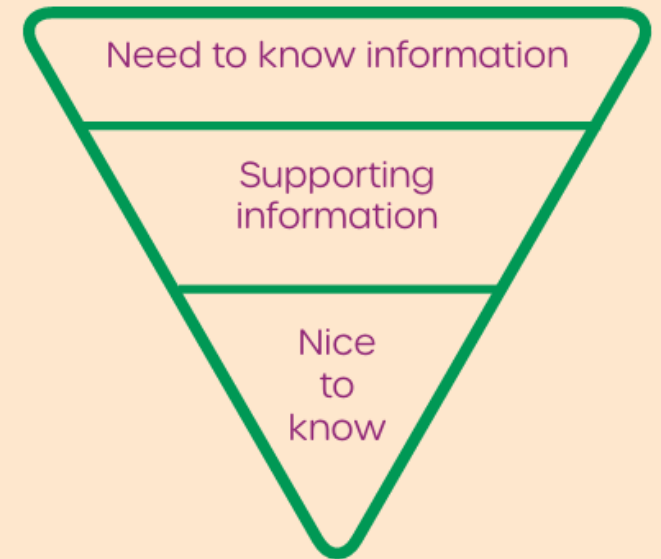
Tips for Accessibility

- Chunk content clearly
- One point, one paragraph
- Highlight key information
- Use accessible language

Top (widest part): Start with the key point or summary – the 'need to know' information.

Middle: Add supporting details, background, and explanations.

Bottom (narrowest part): Finish with extra or less critical details that are 'nice to know'.

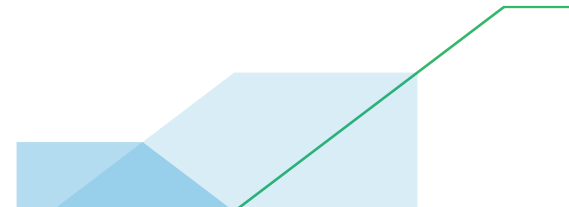
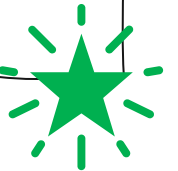


Example

- Investing in urban tree planting would provide a range of benefits for local communities and the environment, including improving air quality by absorbing pollutants and capturing carbon emissions, helping local authorities meet environmental objectives and create healthier places to live, while trees can also reduce the urban heat island effect by providing shade and cooling city streets during hotter weather, helping communities become more resilient to climate change and reducing pressure on health services during periods of extreme heat, and in addition tree planting can improve the appearance of neighbourhoods, encourage outdoor activity, support biodiversity and increase local pride, which can contribute to stronger communities and make areas more attractive to residents, visitors and businesses.



- Investing in **urban tree planting provides a range of benefits** for local communities, the environment and biodiversity.
- Trees improve air quality** by absorbing pollutants and capturing carbon emissions. This helps local authorities meet environmental objectives and create healthier places to live.
- Trees reduce the urban heat** by providing shade and cooling city streets during hotter weather and reducing pressure on health services during extreme heat.
- Tree planting improves the appearance of neighbourhoods**, increasing local pride and contributing to stronger communities.



3) Your brief is (probably) not their top priority

- Don't rely on prior knowledge or memory.
- Provide enough context to stand alone without overwhelming with background.
- (For meeting briefs) Let them decide if they want to add background and flavour.

Q1: How much will the Mega Project cost

The Mega Project is expected to cost £500 million.



Q1: How much will the Mega Project cost



Following the Outline Business Case (OBC) approved in March 2025 and building on the 2024 Strategic Assessment, which considered 17 delivery options the Mega Project is expected to cost £500 million between 2026 and 2031. The programme budget comprises £380 million of capital funding and £120 million of resource funding, of which £85 million has already been allocated. The cost profile is £40 million in 2026/27, £95 million in 2027/28, £120 million in 2028/29, £135 million in 2029/30 and £110 million in 2030/31. The estimates are presented in 2025/26 prices and include optimism bias adjustments in line with Treasury Green Book guidance.

Example

Q1: How much will the Mega Project cost

The Mega Project is expected to cost £500 million.

Q1: How much will the Mega Project cost

Following the Outline Business Case (OBC) approved in March 2025 and building on the 2024 Strategic Assessment, which considered 17 delivery options the Mega Project is expected to cost £500 million between 2026 and 2031. The programme budget comprises £380 million of capital funding and £120 million of resource funding, of which £85 million has already been allocated. The cost profile is £40 million in 2026/27, £95 million in 2027/28, £120 million in 2028/29, £135 million in 2029/30 and £110 million in 2030/31. The estimates are presented in 2025/26 prices and include optimism bias adjustments in line with Treasury Green Book guidance.



Q1: How much will the Mega Project cost

Response: The Mega Project is expected to cost £500 million between 2026 and 2031.

Background:

Programme Budget	
Capital funding	£380m
Resource funding	£120m
Total	£500m
Cost Profile	
2026/27	£40m
2027/28	£95m
2028/29	£120m
2029/30	£135m
2030/31	£110m

NB: estimates presented in 2025/26 prices include optimism bias of 26%



4) Don't leave your reader guessing

- Be explicit about the problem, the implications, and what action is required.
- Avoid vague or overly cautious language.
- Being clear on risks won't hurt their feelings.

Risks:

1. The minister has proposed adding a meeting with the Northern Snake Owners Alliance to the engagement programme.
2. This would provide an opportunity to broaden stakeholder engagement and gather additional perspectives. However, there may be some sensitivities among key partners, and alternative engagement routes could achieve similar objectives.
3. Officials therefore recommend not including this meeting in the programme.

Example

Risks:

1. The minister has proposed adding a meeting with the Northern Snake Owners Alliance to the engagement programme.
2. This would provide an opportunity to broaden stakeholder engagement and gather additional perspectives. However, there may be some sensitivities among key partners, and alternative engagement routes could achieve similar objectives.
3. Officials therefore recommend not including this meeting in the programme.



Risks:

1. On 6 June you proposed adding a meeting with the Northern Snake Owners Alliance to the engagement programme.
2. Officials in the Department for Small Animals has advised that their minister is unwilling to participate in a programme that includes this meeting and may **withdraw from the project if it proceeds**.
3. As this would remove a key delivery partner and put the programme at risk, **we recommend not including the meeting** and seeking alternative ways to gather the Alliance's views.



5) Leave no doubt about next steps

- Provide clear, practical recommendations that specify who should do what and by when where possible.
- Avoid ambiguity in action.

Next Steps:

1. Conversations should take place with relevant teams regarding potential resource options.
2. Suitable candidates should be identified and discussions progressed.
3. Resource requirements to be reviewed and agreed.
4. Recruitment should be completed as soon as possible.



Dear Peter,

Thank you for your wonderful paper, the Director was thrilled by your work and appreciates you so very much.

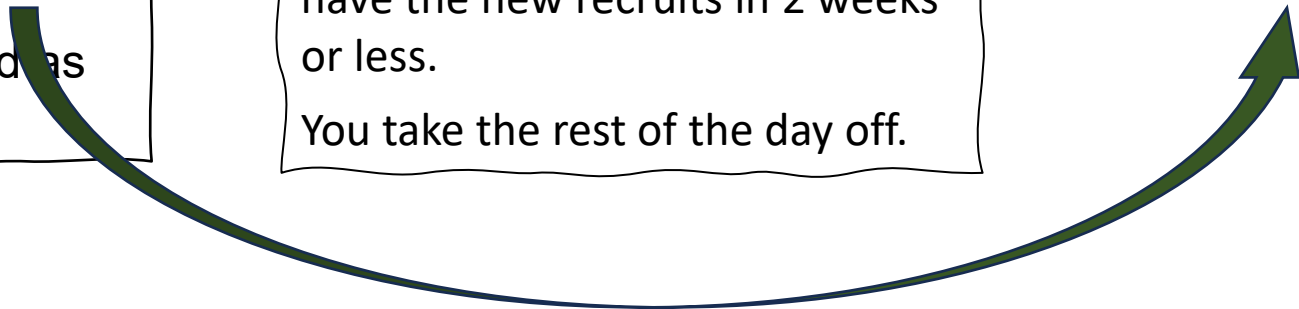
The Director's office will handle everything from here and you'll have the new recruits in 2 weeks or less.

You take the rest of the day off.

Hi Peter,

The Director said yes.

Regards



Example

Next Steps:

1. Conversations should take place with relevant teams regarding potential resource options.
2. Suitable candidates should be identified and discussions progressed.
3. Resource requirements to be reviewed and agreed.
4. Recruitment should be completed as soon as possible.



Recommendation:

1. That you **agree** to release two Grade 7 Policy Officers from the central strategy team by 31 July.
2. That you **place a funding request** with group HR to cover the additional headcount.

[...]

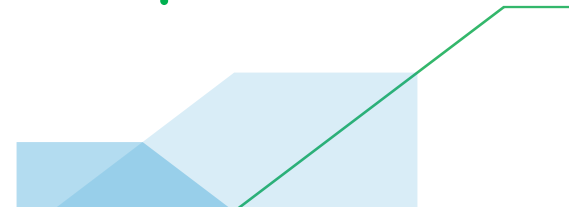
Next Steps:

1. **We will** liaise with the strategy team leaders to identify suitable candidates.
2. **You will** place a funding request with HR for the roles

Hi Peter,
The Director said yes.
Regards



Hi Peter,
The Director said yes.
Regards



Summing up:



1. Your reader wants the answer, not the story



2. Your reader is having a busy day



3. Your brief is (probably) not their top priority



4. Don't leave your reader guessing



5. Leave no doubt about next steps

