

GovTalk

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2.1 Briefing Notes Style Guide

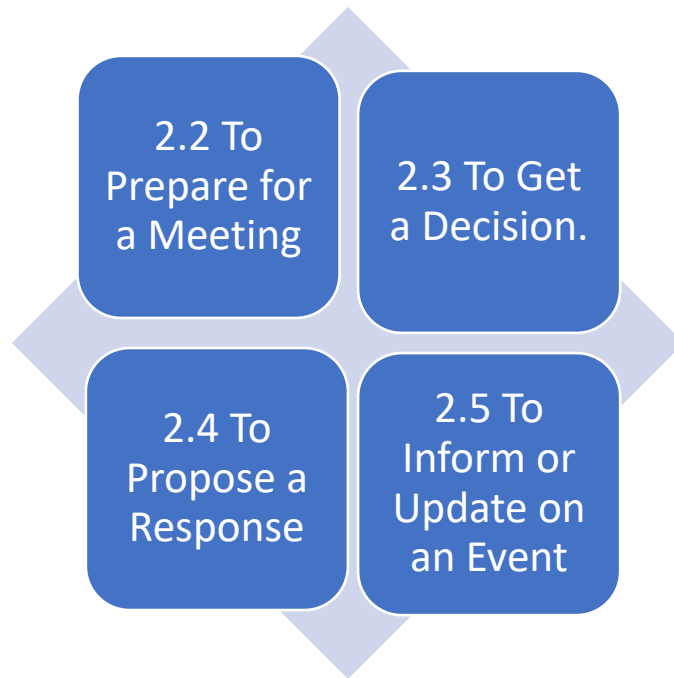
Structure of the Briefing Note Module of GovTalk

2.1 Briefing Notes Style Guide
2.2 To Prepare for a Meeting
2.3 To Recommend or Obtain a Decision
2.4 To Propose a Response
2.5 To Brief or Update on an Event

Part 1. Structure and Style Guide

“It takes a long time to write short.” – based on the quotation from Blaise Pascal, 1665, “I only made this letter longer because I had not the leisure to make it shorter.”

Briefing notes are a much used-tool within government. They are intended to provide, in summary and easily used format, the recipient with information you and your organization have to:



Each form will be addressed in a subsequent sections of the Briefing Notes module.

The Reader Comes First

In government, briefing notes are used throughout the organization. They are tools to inform political leaders and senior public servants of what they need to know for the four purposes mentioned. The reality is that most leaders in public organizations are very busy and are handling many issues at once. They may not have the in-depth understanding of an issue as the writer of the note – or may well have but benefit from being updated or having the event set in a policy context – but play a vital role in making decisions about the topic, representing the organization to the public or other colleagues or will be asked to comment as the item comes under their purview. The writer supports the user of the note in being successful at this. The key advice is to focus on the user’s needs, not the writer’s desire to be stylistically or substantively outstanding.

Professional and Organizational Communication Not Personal

In government, briefing notes provide a department or organization’s advice and information to the intended reader, be it a Minister, Deputy Minister or other senior official. As such, a briefing note conveys professional advice or information not personal opinion. Considered advice is policy, operational and communication advice based on the collective processes that an

organization uses to create it. This sounds bureaucratic and is, in all the best senses. What this means for the writer of a briefing note is:

- This is professional, not personal writing.
- Briefing notes seldom originate with the writer thinking it would be a good idea to write one. Rather, it is asked for by a superior or central office, such as the office of the Chief Executive Officer, Deputy Minister or Chief Administrative Officer. Alternatively, it can be part of the routine way in which organizations operate when they advance policy matters or identify the need for the intended user to be informed, especially on an urgent basis.
- While the originator of a briefing note may be the best person to initially frame the advice, it will pass through many layers of editing and approval before reaching its reader.
- Notes will follow an established format each organization uses. There is little freelancing on form.

Structure of Briefing Notes Varies with Use

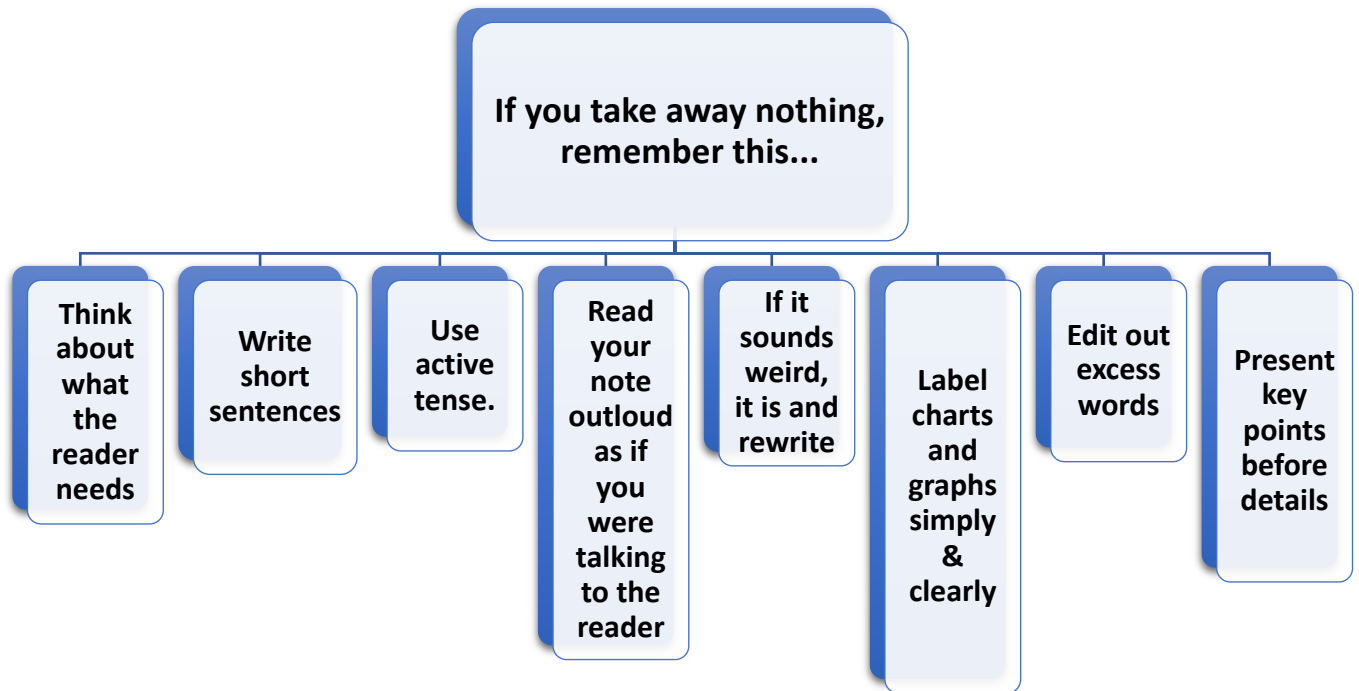
The structure of notes will vary based on their intended use. The four main uses, as shown above, will be addressed in subsequent sections. Structure will also vary from government to government and even from department to department. In the subsequent sections, recommendations are provided for a format for each of the four main uses, as well as examples. There will be cases when there is more than one use for a briefing note and, in that instance, form should follow function. For example, in anticipation of a meeting with key stakeholders, the department may recommend that the Minister agree with their proposal and deliver a certain message to support his decision. In that instance, there will be a recommendation for decision, but also draft speaking notes for the Minister.

All briefing notes will have elements of the following structure:

- **Briefing Note for.....** Who is the intended reader? Example: Minister
- **Subject/Issue:** This is your title only. For example, Flooding Situation in Manitoba
- **Purpose:** Why is this here? For example: For Decision, Update on the Situation.
- **Summary:** This should be a true summary. Think of this as what you would say to the reader if that person said: "I don't have time to read this right now. Give me your elevator version." Alternatively, think of this as your **B.L.U.F. : Bottom Line Up Front.**
- **Background:** This sets the context for this note. This is also the swamp in which many briefing notes get lost with too much detailed background that the reader probably already has. The key here is to find how this note links to a probable string of notes and decisions already on the record without too much detail. For example, "Since we last reviews the issue of the tariff on cranberries, there have been some developments in negotiations that require further direction. This note makes some suggestions for your review."

- **Considerations:** This is the second swamp and careful thought has to be given to what is absolutely needed. It depends on the use and context. It also depends on how versed the reader is in the issue. Some of the elements that this section may contain are:
 - Key and relevant strategic issues: avoid being grandiose and not every issue relates to the unity of the country.
 - What options might exist, real options not what has been called the Phony Three in which there is only one option and the others are not viable. If no options exist, say so.
 - What the risks are that are mitigated or might emerge from the issue and why.
 - Feasibility of approach.
 - Relevant costs: if there is a detailed capital proposal, a briefing note can only summarize attached detailed documentation.
 - Communications issues: this focuses on the process of communications
- **Recommendation:** The reader should already know this from the Summary.
- **Speaking Notes or Key Response Statements:** This section may contain actual speaking points for the reader or messages that the organization believes are important for the issue in response to an event, initiative or criticism.

Part 2: Keys to Successful Briefing Notes



Here are some of the characteristics of a good governmental briefing note:

- They are **brief enough**. The ideal is 1-3 pages. After that, they are background notes or policy proposals.
- They quickly answer the question: **“Why am I reading this now?”** . Recipients of briefing material are often bombarded with information from many sources and must see the utility of the note to them as well as its timeliness.
- They are **concise**. This is hard to measure but is characterized by being to the point, avoiding side-issues, linking the reader to previous events or decisions and quickly gets to the point. Churchill called this short-winded-ness.
- Avoid, above all **complicated or stuffy language**. This chart is but an example of what this means.

Avoid	Try Instead
A considerable amount/number of..	Much, many, numerous
In addition..	And
Regarding, in regard to, concerning, in reference to...	On, about
In the event that	If
Due to the fact, In light of the fact that	Because, since
Given the information presented here	As noted above/below
To a certain extent, to some extent	XXXX – use nothing
The view has been formed...	I, we, they, the group concluded..
Persons	People
A male/ female person	A man/ woman
A sufficient number of..	Enough
At this point in time	Now
A number of	Some, a few, many
Is able to	Can
On a monthly basis	Monthly
On the grounds that...	Because
In order to	To
Cease and desist	Stop
No fewer than	At least
Not yet attained	Is under
May not...until	May only...when
Is not...unless	Is...only if
The risks/costs/concerns associated with...	The risks/costs/concerns of
On a regular basis	Regularly
Is responsible for the management of...	Manages
In a timely manner	Promptly
For a period of three years	For three years
During the course of	During
Utilize or utilization	Use
At the conclusion of	After
For the purpose	For, to

- They capture the **strategic context** that matters for the reader. This means:
 - As before, they link to other events, decisions or developments in an issue. *“This development will affect the department’s commitment to its employment equity targets.”*
 - They are politically sensitive without being political. *“This issue has been raised in the House by M.P. Plunkett who has expressed her views on this matter at Committee as well.”* Not *“Opposition M.P. Plunkett from the marginal riding of Barrie South continues to press the Minister and staff on this issue and is expected to seek press attention as well.”*
- They are **professional** in that they are impersonal, reader-centered not writer centered, objective, consistent and focused on their intent, not needless asides or arguments. *“The departmental recommendations for your talking points are consistent with the position paper you tabled at committee. It contains a comprehensive defense of your policy position”* Not *“My view as an expert in this field is that you would be wrong to advocate this poorly conceived policy.”*
- They are intelligently **written with an eye to possible release to the public** either through some form of leak or through access to information. The briefer, with experience and advice from accessibility to information advisors, will understand what can and cannot be written down. Further, the briefer will ensure the **appropriate security classification and distribution** of the note. On the other hand, those working in areas of security or where information is classified as it affects individual citizens or employees, will understand that they need to be as **informative** as they can in this written medium.
- They are **useful**. The question to ask is “Does this meet the information needs of the recipient and equip her to make a decision, come to an understanding of the situation, contribute to a meeting or gathering as needed with salient messages to convey?”
- They avoid **jargon**. Jargon is not specialized language relevant to a particular government activity. That is a necessary part of briefing. Rather jargon involves using lofty phraseology, catchphrases and just plain clichés that are not relevant. For instance, *“The introduction of this new pay scheme will improve efficiency and save money, based on our detailed study.”* Is plain language. However, *“The new pay system, an integral part of valuing people, will enhance our corporate capacity to meet the aspirations of our staff, increase the value for money of investments in this area and link to and leverage our strategic vision.”* is blatantly superfluous.
- They **minimize acronyms**. There is nothing wrong with the use of acronyms. They are vital to brevity, as long as:
 - You are certain the reader will understand them,
 - They do not create an **acronym forest**, e.g. *“The DMO approved the BN on the OAG report on the EAA.”*
 - They are acronyms and not short forms, e.g. BN above means briefing note, not an acronym.

- They avoid **insider references**. Everyone in the bureaucratic chain may understand the following, except the reader. “To bring on an SVS, we will need to complete an SF-40 process and then revert to compliance with rules SF-40-337 and, of course, SF-40-337 (a).i.”
- They present **data graphically** but simply. For more on this, go the **GovTalk** section, **Using Data**.
- They do not create a **wall of words** filling the page with dense material, not broken into paragraphs, trying to cram as much into a confined space as possible. Instead, break up the material into shorter paragraphs and reduce the length.

How to Not Write a Useful Briefing Note

