



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

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# Parliamentary Research Handbook





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## About this Handbook

**The Handbook aims to provide a valuable resource for research officials in other parliaments, drawing on experience from the UK Parliament.**

The House of Commons Library led in the production of this Handbook, but drew extensively on experience, knowledge and best practice from across the UK Parliament and beyond. The Handbook was drafted by an expert project team drawn from the House of Commons Library and Committee Office, the House of Lords Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

The project team coordinated closely with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). Elements of this Handbook were developed in conjunction with WFD and in consultation with the network of Parliaments it works with around the world.

The project team would like to thank all those who contributed their time and considerable expertise.

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## How to use this Handbook

**Parliamentarians need access to up-to-date and accurate information and research in order to effectively perform their parliamentary duties. All research produced by parliamentary officials shares key characteristics such as impartiality, accessibility and relevance.**

This Handbook has been written for all parliamentary officials that prepare research, to help them to meet the expectations of parliamentarians. It has been written as a number of standalone, but interrelated, chapters. Each chapter focuses on an important aspect of parliamentary research work.

You can use the Handbook in a number of ways, for example:

- You can choose a chapter to help you strengthen an area of your work this month.
- You can use it to ensure you are meeting professional standards for research.
- You can use it to help you to train staff you may be responsible for.

Chapter		Summary
1	Research in the UK parliament	The UK Parliament employs researchers across a number of teams to ensure that parliamentarians have access to the information and research that they need.
2	Fundamentals of parliamentary research	Parliamentarians need access to up-to-date and accurate information in order to perform their parliamentary duties. Research produced by research officials should be: impartial; clear and authoritative; accessible; timely; relevant; and, in some cases, confidential.
3	Foundation skills and knowledge	This Handbook does not contain all the information that you need to do your work. Depending on your previous experience, you are likely to have some skill or knowledge gaps. These may include understanding how parliament works and some computer skills.
4	Sourcing information	Researchers have to be able to find information on a huge range of subjects, at often short notice. Important sources of information include colleagues, internet search engines and specialist resources.
5	Evaluating sources, evidence and information	A key task of researchers is to ensure that parliamentarians have access to the best evidence and information. Use 5 criteria to help you find sources that get you to the heart of the matter: Authoritative, Objective, Relevant, Timely and Accurate (AORTA).
6	Analysis	Parliamentarians often need help to understand the implications of the information that you provide. You can do this by analysing the information. This normally involves: explaining the problem; clarifying the Government's position; identifying the main positive and negative impacts; describing alternative policies; and, summarising, assessing the evidence and drawing conclusions from it.
7	Writing effectively	How you explain things is almost as important as what you say. Effective communication enables the reader to quickly understand the content. No-one, even if they know a lot about a topic, should have to work hard to understand your key messages!
8	Using statistics, tables, graphs and charts	Statistics and visual ways of presenting numbers are often crucial in helping parliamentarians to understand the issue. Statistics, when used well, can tell simple stories even if the underlying data are complicated.



Chapter		Summary
9	Techniques for impartiality	It is critically important for you to understand impartiality. Parliamentarians will expect and demand impartiality in your work. Simple techniques, such as using careful language or reflecting different sides of an argument, can help you to demonstrate that you support parliamentarians regardless of their political affiliation.
10	Taking questions or enquiries	Answering questions from individual Parliamentarians, their staff or other colleagues, is a core part of the work of many researchers. The key to providing a response to a specific question is to get a full picture of what is wanted, and why, through discussion with the enquirer.
11	Selecting subjects for research briefings, and deciding what to write about	Any research that you produce should be clearly in support of parliament. When writing, think about the questions that Parliamentarians have or are likely to have on the subject. Common questions include: the scale of the problem; what the Government is doing; what stakeholders think; and, what the current law is. Writing an outline of your research can help you to decide what to include.
12	Legislation briefing	Legislation is the backbone of the work of parliaments and helping parliamentarians understand legislation is one of the most important aspects of the work of many parliamentary researchers. This chapter provides some additional tips on how to produce briefings on legislation.
13	Quality control	Quality control is a key stage in the research process. The basic aim of quality control is to get a dispassionate opinion on whether your work is as good as it can be. There are generally 4 key steps in quality control: self-review; peer-review; editing and proof-reading.
14	Committee research	Answering questions from individual Parliamentarians, their staff or other colleagues, is a core part of the work of many researchers. The key to providing a response to a specific question is to get a full picture of what is wanted, and why, through discussion with the enquirer.
15	Further reading	Links to additional resources.

# 1

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## Research in the UK Parliament

## **The UK Parliament employs researchers across a number of teams to ensure that parliamentarians have access to the information and research that they need.**

Different teams in the UK parliament produce research. They have different ways of working because they support Parliamentarians in different ways:

**Parliamentary research services**, such as the House of Commons Library and the House of Lords Library, seek to provide research and information services to all Parliamentarians in support of their parliamentary duties. The research work conducted by these teams tends to be fast-paced and driven by the short to medium term work of the parliament. Researchers in a research service can either be specialists in a particular policy area or generalists, and they can provide a range of services including:

- publicly-available briefings for all Parliamentarians on the impacts of proposed legislation, policies and programmes and other topical issues;
- the provision of a confidential question-answering service for individual Parliamentarians. Answers can be: over the telephone, face-to-face or written; very short; provided within tight deadlines; and are provided in confidence to the Parliamentarian;
- information services, such as the provision of expert resources e.g. academic papers or media articles.

**Committee teams in Westminster** often have specialist staff with knowledge of the subject that the committee scrutinises. These staff seek to provide research and information services tailored to the specific needs of the committee as part of the wider range of services to support the committee's work. This research is provided confidentially to the committee. These staff also play an important role in managing the work of the committee. Key research services include:

- briefings to advise members of the Committee on potential future subjects for inquiry;
- briefings for evidence sessions to help in the cross-examination of witnesses;
- analysing the evidence received by the Committee and the drafting of committee reports to reflect that evidence.

**Specialist research centres.** These include the bicameral Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and the House of Commons' Scrutiny Unit. These centres aim to provide additional expertise on issues of a more specialist or technical nature, such as financial scrutiny or longer-term horizon-scanning. The Scrutiny Unit provides expertise on legal and financial assistance to Select Committees, Joint Committees and Public Bill Committees. Key research services provided by POST include:

- proactive, publicly-available peer-reviewed briefings for all Parliamentarians that provide an overview of research evidence or emerging scientific or technological issues, placing them in a policy context.
- responsive support to other parliamentary services in dealing with complex scientific and technological issues or research evidence.
- events focused around topical issues in research, science and technology to build links between Parliamentarians and staff and external stakeholders.



# 2

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## Fundamentals of Parliamentary Research

**Parliamentarians need access to up-to-date and accurate information in order to perform their parliamentary duties. Research produced by research officials should be: impartial; clear and authoritative; accessible; timely; relevant; and, in some cases, confidential.**

Parliamentarians need access to up-to-date and accurate information in order to perform their parliamentary duties, whether as individual representatives or as part of committees, delegations and other groups. Access to information and research improves the effectiveness of parliament by:

- **improving decision-making.** Facts and analysis may contribute to a better understanding of problems and to more effective solutions to those problems.
- **supporting information exchange between parliamentarians and stakeholders** to enable a better understanding of issues beyond parliament;
- **supporting parliament to check and oversee the actions of government**, which often has considerably greater access to support and information;
- **improving the legitimacy of its actions.** The use of high quality analysis can support the legitimacy of decision-making;
- **helping to manage change.** The membership of parliament can change substantially after elections. Research can help new Parliamentarians to get to grips with their work quickly, and parliamentary researchers themselves provide a collective memory and experience beyond the length of a parliament.

Parliament is a highly political and high-profile institution, with a unique set of customers with distinct needs. Your role as a researcher is to provide information and research in such a way that it meets the needs of parliamentarians.

## Key elements of parliamentary research

Parliament is a highly political and high-profile institution, with a unique set of customers with distinct needs. Parliamentarians have multiple roles—from scrutinising legislation, making speeches, examining government policy, questioning ministers, raising issues of importance to the public, or, in the House of Commons, responding to constituents' enquiries. Because of these varied roles, their research and information needs also vary.

Your role as a researcher is to provide information and research in such a way that it meets the needs of parliamentarians. Research in this context primarily involves the analysis and communication of others' research and available information, rather than academic research as it is traditionally thought of.

While the format of your research will vary, for your briefing to meet the needs of parliamentarians it must be:

- 1 Impartial.** Parliamentarians are faced with information from a large number of stakeholders with often conflicting views. Parliamentarians need to be assured that your research is politically impartial, and that it takes into account the political context.
- 2 Clear and authoritative, even on technical subjects.** Parliamentarians cannot be experts on everything. But they are expected to have a view on almost any subject, and they often have to give those views at short notice. They also have to scrutinise sometimes complex legislation and the performance of government on topics on which they may have no prior knowledge. Your research needs to fill the gap between what Parliamentarians know and what they need to know. You should write with non-experts in mind using clear language to simply explain technical subjects, using the most authoritative evidence available.
- 3 Accessible.** Parliamentarians are often time-poor due to their exceptionally challenging workloads. Occasionally a Parliamentarian will require longer in-depth briefings, but most often your work should be succinct, focused on the most important issues and easy to navigate.



- 4 Timely.** Parliamentarians often need research within very demanding deadlines. You need to anticipate the research needs of Parliament so that information is ready in advance where possible. In some cases you might be required to be expert at finding information and producing briefings at very short notice.
- 5 Relevant.** Parliamentarians have a unique representative, legislative and scrutiny role. Your briefing should be designed specifically to support them in being effective in their work.
- 6 Confidential.** Parliamentarians may be unable to openly conduct their own research, or it might be used to inform private discussions. Depending on the rules of your team, you may be available to conduct confidential research on behalf of parliamentarians, who can be confident that you will never divulge information about who you are working for without prior permission.

A challenge in research work is to balance these criteria. Sometimes giving voice to all opinions (impartiality) can clash with authoritativeness; sometimes detailed accuracy works against accessibility. Resolving these issues is a core part of your work.

You can use this Handbook to help you to produce research that meets these criteria.

# 3

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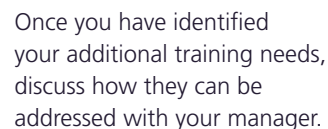
Foundation  
Skills and  
Knowledge

**This Handbook does not contain all the information that you need to do your work. Depending on your previous experience, you are likely to have some skill or knowledge gaps. These may include understanding how parliament works and ICT skills.**

To help you identify your training needs a skills and knowledge checklist is provided below. Go through the checklist to identify skill or knowledge gaps. Some of the skills listed apply generally to all researchers; others may only apply to those in particular roles.

Once you have identified your additional training needs, discuss how they can be addressed with your manager.

You can address them in a number of ways such as: reading this handbook; asking to be mentored by a colleague; shadowing other teams; and reading your colleagues' work.



Once you have identified your additional training needs, discuss how they can be addressed with your manager.

## Foundation knowledge

### The fundamentals of parliamentary research (impartiality, balance, confidentiality, etc.)

#### Parliamentary knowledge

understanding legislation  
understanding government  
understanding parliament  
understanding debates and other business  
understanding MPs and Committees  
Wider awareness – how to keep up to date about parliament

#### Subject knowledge

becoming informed on a new subject  
keeping subject knowledge up to date  
being familiar with online resources and hard copy materials  
available to you know how to request other materials

## IT skills

### Word

using templates relevant to your role  
styles and formatting  
footnotes  
headings and tables of contents  
copying and pasting from other sources – tidying up formatting  
comments, track changes and other tools for reviewing / working  
collaboratively

### Excel

for statisticians  
for others

### Outlook

Email and attachments  
Calendar appointments

### Web

Search techniques  
Favourites / Bookmarks – getting the best from your browser

### Role-specific applications

Enquiries database  
Web publishing applications  
Electronic Filing System

### File management

Where drafts and finished versions are stored  
File name conventions  
Version control (what happens automatically, what you have  
to do yourself, accessing earlier versions)

## General research skills

Taking an enquiry

Identifying subjects for briefings

Planning your work (planning, prioritising, delegation, collaboration, forward planning, setting deadlines)

Scoping the briefing – what key issues / questions does the research have to answer?

### Finding and evaluating information

enquiries database, Internet searching, Library and other sources  
evaluating sources

How to identify useful information in large documents (Speed reading etc.)

Dealing with external stakeholders

## Committee researcher skills

Managing committee inquiries

## Presenting information

### Writing skills

Effective writing techniques  
Writing for the internet

Images, charts and graphs

Numbers (key statistical skills)

Analysing the information (Key components of policy analysis)

## Finishing research

Conclusion writing  
Summary writing

### Reviewing

Proof reading  
Editing – internal and external editing

### Promoting / publicising research

Who do you need to notify to get research promoted – what details do they need from you?  
What can you do yourself e.g. Twitter?

## Presenting, publication and events

### Giving talks

Presentation skills  
PowerPoint

### Events

Organising  
Facilitating / chairing

### Marketing your work

Publishing your work  
Using social media

# 4



## Sourcing Information

**Researchers have to be able to find information on a huge range of subjects, at often short notice. Important sources of information include colleagues, internet search engines and specialist resources.**

This chapter describes sources and strategies to quickly find relevant and reliable information, on any subject. Don't expect to get the right answer immediately. Pace yourself and build a picture of the context for the information you seek, making use of any threads you can find. Wrong results can be almost as useful as the right ones, if you react to them the right way.

It is important to note that parliamentary researchers, in general, do not collect primary data themselves. Instead researchers work to access, review, summarise, analyse, evaluate and synthesise the best evidence and information available to directly address the key questions and issues of interest to parliamentarians. Nevertheless, new tools are being developed to gather evidence. Committees, for example, are increasingly using commissioned research, online forums, online consultations and outreach events to gather evidence, although traditional evidence gathering is still the bedrock of their work.

## Source 1: *Colleagues*

Your first source of information for many briefings is work that has been done before by your colleagues. Parliamentarians often ask similar questions, so work on that subject will often have been conducted previously that you can re-use or update. Don't waste your time by repeating other people's work!

Ensure that you consider who else in parliament may have already conducted relevant research, such as a predecessor or a colleague in your team or another team.

A good source of existing information are enquiries databases and existing briefing papers. The House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries use their own databases to record enquiry work for Parliamentarians and others. The archive of enquiries goes back to the 1990s and is fully searchable. Looking at answers to previous enquiries is a very useful way to see what sources of information have been used by Library officials.

Information from enquiries can be updated and re-used, provided the identity of the enquirer is not disclosed. Who uses the Library and who asked what must be kept confidential, including from other Members. This is also true for any location-specific or personal information held.

Researchers work to access, review, summarise, analyse, evaluate and synthesise the best evidence and information available to directly address the key questions and issues of interest to parliamentarians

Parliamentarians often ask similar questions, so work on that subject will often have been conducted previously that you can re-use or update. Don't waste your time by repeating other people's work!

It is also best practice to speak to the author of the research before you use it. They will be able to tell you of any shortcomings they may have subsequently identified in the research, or refer you to a more recent document.

### *Keeping up to date*

Most researchers also spend time keeping up to date with subjects that they are responsible for and politics more generally. This is important for ensuring that you can write about what parliamentarians are likely to be interested in.

For example, if there is a big political disagreement about the impact of budget cuts, it is likely that parliamentarians will be interested in budget issues. You should therefore think about whether there is a budget or funding angle to any subject you are researching.

There are a number of ways to help you to keep up to date:

- News bulletins prepared by your team or organisation
- Blogs
- RSS feeds
- Mailing lists from external organisations
- Web page alerts
- Keyword Alerts
- Daily current affairs TV and Radio shows
- Stakeholder websites and bulletins
- Catch-up meetings with colleagues and stakeholders



## Source 2: *Internet search engines*

The second most important source for many briefings is the internet. Search the internet using a search engine such as Google. Most organisations, academics and news sources publish documents online, so a search engine is an excellent way to find documents and information from:

- Government and other official bodies;
- Civil Society and non-governmental organisations;
- International organisations;
- Industry and trade bodies;
- Learned Societies and Professional bodies;
- Academics, universities and other research organisations and funding bodies;
- Online news sources.

Choose appropriate keywords based on your questions. If you get too many results, you may want to add more keywords to your search; this will make it more specific. If you find too few relevant results, try removing one or two words to make your search broader. Use past research to help establish some of the key words.

Google is a powerful search tool, and often a simple keyword search is all that is required to get the results you need. But sometimes your search may not return relevant results, or you might have to scan through pages of results to find something useful. If you find this, it's worth being aware that Google provides a range of advanced search options. These advanced options allow you to create more targeted searches, helping you to find the most relevant information quickly (see Box on page 26).

It is also important to remember to be sceptical of the search results. Given how easy internet searching is, it can be tempting to settle for the first answer you find. However, the first answer is not always right – and it might not be what your customer needs.

Google is a powerful search tool, and often a simple keyword search is all that is required to get the results you need.

## *Targeting information searches using Google Advanced Search options*

Google automatically searches for variations of a word, e.g. if you search for 'child' Google will return pages that contain 'child' or 'children' or 'childless' etc. The default setting is AND, e.g. if you search for 'child obesity' Google will return only pages that contain both 'child' and 'obesity' (or variations of these). You can refine your search by date or country using the search tools option below the search box. To target your search more specifically, you can access the advanced search screen by clicking on the settings button in the top right hand corner, then on the 'Advanced search' link.

**Exact words:** Use quotation marks ("x") to search for an exact word or phrase, e.g. "childhood" finds pages that contain only "childhood", not "child" or "childless" or any other variation of the word. "Childhood obesity" finds only pages that contain the exact phrase such as "the new childhood obesity strategy..." but ignore a page that reads "my child is obese".

**Either word:** Use OR (in caps) between search words to search for pages that contain either one or both terms e.g. childhood OR adult.

**Exclude a word:** Add a dash (-x) before a word to exclude all results that include that word, e.g. 'obesity -children' will find pages that mention obesity, but ignore pages that contain 'childhood obesity' or texts such as 'obesity is widespread among children today'.

**Search within a site or domain:** Using ':' before a site or domain limits your searches to a particular site or domain, e.g. 'childhood obesity: .gov.uk' tells Google to search only the government website for pages that contain the words 'childhood' and/or 'obesity' and their variants. Adding ':.ac.uk' will restrict searches to UK academic websites. Adding ':parliament.uk' will restrict searches to parliament's website. Searching for 'flooding: www.theguardian.com' or 'flooding: www.thetimes.co.uk' would return only articles from the Guardian or The Times respectively that mentioned 'flooding'.

### Source 3: *Specialist resources*

Sometimes information will not be easily available. A search of the internet may not return any relevant results, even using advanced search tools.

In that case you will have to use more targeted searching to find the information you may need. Before you do this, consider what type of information you need to answer your question(s), and select the most appropriate information source:

- **Parliament.** This is a fundamental source of information. By searching the parliament website and records you can find:
  - answers to Parliamentary Questions, which provide the Government's position on an issue and contain important data and information held by the Government;
  - what has been debated and decided previously in Parliament on a particular issue. This is useful for finding out government and opposition party views on an issue, and can be very important for explaining why a law was passed;
  - reports of committees, agendas and other business papers;
  - Bills and proposed amendments to them;
  - publications produced by research teams;
  - documents and papers deposited in Parliament by various bodies, such as those required to do so by law or the Government. These can include:
    - annual reports of government departments;
    - explanatory memoranda (documents that explain in simple language what legislation is seeking to do);
    - reports of inquiries into particular events (e.g. the Home Office report on the London bombings);
    - response to requests for information by parliamentarians in the form of parliamentary questions or requests during debates.

- **Analysis related to committee inquiries.** Committee researchers should also consult the chapter on Committee research. In the UK Parliament, Committees gather information in both written and oral form in order to inform their inquiries. This evidence is essential for research related to Committee inquiries, and it comprises the main source of information upon which Committee staff draft Committee briefings and reports. This information, and any resulting Committee inquiry reports, are very valuable sources of information for other parliamentary researchers. Evidence and Committee reports are published on Committee websites
- **Parliamentary Libraries.** These hold specialist resources and databases. They can provide: books; eBooks; specialist journals; historic papers; and news, academic and legal databases that are otherwise behind a pay wall. Library staff may also be able to conduct some research for you.
- **Freely available specialist databases.** There are a number of specialist databases that can be used to search for research evidence. Google Scholar provides access to a huge amount of freely available academic research in a variety of forms including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, blogs and policy briefs. It will also return results from 'grey' literature, which is research undertaken outside of universities, including by government, business, think tanks or third sector organisations. It is worth noting that for copyright reasons the results you obtain from Google Scholar may not always be the final version of a published journal article, so do bear this in mind when evaluating the information (see below).
- **External organisations and experts.** These include government departments and agencies, industry and trade bodies, learned societies and professional bodies, research organisations and NGOs. You can first check the website of these sources. If you cannot find the information quickly on their website, give them a call or send them an email. Where appropriate it can be useful to build relationships with key external stakeholders, for example by sending them publications you have produced, signing up to their mailing list; inviting them to parliament to discuss the issue or meeting them at external seminars.

- **Other parliaments.** Parliamentarians are often interested in international comparative analyses of public policy issues or legislation. The publications of the United Nations and other international agencies (almost all of which are available online) are a rich source of information. The research services of other parliaments and assemblies are often well-placed to provide background and help. Networks of parliamentary research organisations, such as the European Centre for Parliamentary Research & Documentation (ECPRD), are extremely helpful for conducting international comparisons on obscure subjects. Colleagues in the parliamentary Library can often advise on how to make contact with other parliamentary research services.
- **Conducting or commissioning your own research.** If the data you require is not available, you may be able to conduct or commission research if budgets and timing permit. For example, staff in Select Committees may commission research or undertake their own research, such as focus groups or online surveys, to inform an Inquiry.
- **Social media and online forums.** These can be used to gather information as well as disseminate parliamentary work. For example, Select Committees are increasingly using online forums/e-consultations and twitter to gather information from a range of stakeholders.
- **Events, conferences and visits.** Attending, or even organising, events, conferences and visits can be a good way to understand an issue in more depth, to build connections and to find out more about stakeholder perspectives.

## *Contacting external stakeholders for information*

You will often have to make contact with organisations outside of parliament to access the information you need. For some types of parliamentary research, such as in-depth analysis of issues where there is a lack of relevant evidence, or the evidence is inconclusive or debated, then engagement with a range of stakeholders can be important to ensure balance and accuracy.

But remember that experts may be subject to bias and consciously or unconsciously use evidence selectively, or they might have personal political views that colour the information that they provide or be seeking to advance the interests of their organisation in a way that affects how they respond to your request. It is therefore important to ensure that they do not in any way try to control your actions or the content of your analysis.

### **When you make contact with an external organisation:**

- never give any information about a Parliamentarian to an external organisation, unless you have permission to do so;
- explain the purpose of the briefing, and make the organisation aware if you are planning to make the briefing public and to reference them;
- explain that you must be impartial and that any information provided by them will be considered and not necessarily incorporated into the briefing.

In your final briefing it is good practice to give a bit of background information on any external experts and organisations cited in your briefing to help your customers understand their political standpoint.

## what if no information is available?

If you have been unable to answer a question you may need to think about who you might ask for help, or you may need to refine the scope of your briefing.

Sometimes it is simply not possible to find the information needed to answer a question, either because there is insufficient time to find it or simply because the necessary information does not exist in the public domain.

In such cases, it can be useful to make clear to Parliamentarians that the information cannot be found. This can be just as important as providing an answer. For example, it might suggest that there is little or no evidence justifying a statement that has been made or a policy that has been proposed, and this fact will help to inform debate on the issue.

On occasion, telling a user that no information can be found will prompt them to ask a question to ministers; any substantive answer will, in turn, potentially be a useful future source.

Sometimes it is simply not possible to find the information needed to answer a question, either because there is insufficient time to find it or simply because the necessary information does not exist in the public domain.

### *Identifying useful information in large documents*

**Skim reading:** When you skim, you read quickly to get an overview before you start to read in depth. Scanning involves running your eye quickly down the text to locate specific words or phrases that you are interested in. Scanning will help you to decide whether you should read further, and how useful the website or document might be. You can scan: contents pages, headings and subheadings, images and artwork, summaries, the body text itself or a sitemap.

**Ctrl+F:** Pressing Control ("Ctrl" on a PC keyboard; on Macs, it's the Apple Command key, next to the spacebar on the keyboard) simultaneously with the F key produces a "find" box on your web browser or in Word or Adobe. If you type in your keyword and then press Enter every instance of that word on that webpage or in a document is highlighted, allowing you to skim the page or document to determine if it means your needs.

# 5

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## Evaluating Sources, Evidence and Information



**A key task of researchers is to ensure that parliamentarians have access to the best evidence and information. Use five criteria to help you find sources that get you to the heart of the matter: Authoritative, Objective, Relevant, Timely and Accurate (AORTA).**

You can use 5 criteria to assess sources. Use these criteria to find sources that get you to the heart of the matter: **Authoritative, Objective, Relevant, Timely** and **Accurate** (AORTA). However, judgment and experience are often needed so if you are in doubt ask a more experienced colleague for advice:

**Authoritative.** Who produced this information? What are the qualifications or achievements of the author or organisation that the information comes from? Knowing about the organisation can help you to understand what their main 'business' is (e.g. commercial, voluntary, research), how well-established it is, who the people involved are, and who they are linked with. If the source is respected, it can usually be relied on (though beware that governments and other official bodies also often seek to advance their own perspective). Knowing how something was published can help you identify how reliable it is. For example, has it been through an editorial or peer review process by experts in the field? Even if this is the case, you should still evaluate it. Being published in a prestigious academic journal is not an automatic indicator of quality. Otherwise, ask whether the source is primary or secondary – authors can add spin when reporting the work or views of others. Try to use primary sources wherever possible.

**Objective.** It is important to develop an awareness of the positions or interests represented in what you read. This is especially true for controversial topics. However, even information which purports to be 'balanced' may have hidden agendas or vested interests. Sources that argue a particular point of view can be useful as long as you are careful in presenting them, for example as part of a summary of different views on an issue. Sources such as blogs can be very useful when you are trying to get a quick understanding of a subject, but always cross-check what they tell you and consider whether it is the best source to reference. Wikipedia may be useful in providing links to external sources at the very first stage of your research, but Wikipedia should not be cited as a source in its own right.

### **AORTA**

*use these five criteria to help you get to the heart of the matter.*

### **Authoritative**

*Who produced this information?*

### **Objective**

*It is important to develop an awareness of the positions or interests represented in what you read.*

### **Relevant**

*They may be interesting, but are they really going to be useful to your readers?*

**Relevant.** Make sure that the sources that you use are relevant. They may be interesting, but are they really going to be useful to your readers? Does it relate to the countries or areas of interest to Parliamentarians? Is it at the appropriate level – you do not want to provide information that is too detailed/specialised or too general/simple for your question. Be careful especially of highly academic sources – direct quotations from them may be hard to follow for busy non-expert readers.

### **Timely**

*Could something have happened since it was written?*

**Timely.** Start by checking whether the information provided is up to date. Could something have happened since it was written? While most paper documents include details of the dates that they were written, some websites are undated and these present particular risks. Watch out for phrases such as 'recently' or 'last week' which might be true, if the article is very recent, but could be very out of date. How important it is to have the very latest information depends on what you need it for.

### **Accurate**

*Is the information you are using accurate?*

**Accurate.** Is the information you are using accurate? For example, newspapers and internet articles, in particular, are easily-available ways of getting a quick understanding of a subject, but they can be inaccurate, biased or incomplete. Sometimes there is only one source of the information you need, but often it can be cross-checked with another source. If reviewing statistics or research evidence, ask whether the methods used were appropriate and rigorous. For example, how the data were gathered, the sample size and representativeness, questionnaire design or the use of control groups. If you are evaluating single research studies, there are a number of different versions of formal **research evidence standards** that can help you. If you are looking for reviews of literature, try to use systematic reviews to reduce conscious or unconscious bias and the cherry picking of findings. Systematic reviews use set criteria to review and summarise collections of primary research to ensure they are as representative as possible of all the research. If systematic reviews are not available, you can look for 'Rapid Evidence Assessments' – a pared down version of systematic reviews undertaken in a shorter time frame. Government departments and agencies, as well as NGOs, CSOs and business often commission REAs or systematic reviews on policy relevant questions. Always cite your sources, so readers know where the information came from.

If you have to use a source that may not be particularly good because there are no others, such as if it is out of date or if the source appears one-sided, always be clear about the fact. You can let Parliamentarians judge for themselves what weight they place on the evidence.

More information about assessing evidence can be found in the Green Book, which gives a comprehensive account of the UK civil service's approach to policy analysis.

### *Primary and secondary sources*

Try to use primary sources wherever possible. A primary source is a record that gives a first-hand account about something. This might be a transcript of proceedings in the Chamber, a video of an interview with a politician, or some original academic research.

Secondary sources tend to be records that are based on primary sources, which they analyse or interpret. Examples of secondary sources are newspaper articles or some books.

You should be more cautious with secondary sources as they are more likely to be biased. For example, if you use a newspaper article on the debate as your source, you run the risk that the author of the article has selectively chosen quotes from the debate that support their own views. Instead you should read the original transcript of the debate, which is the primary source, to draw your own conclusions.

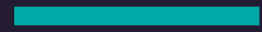
Remember that a single document may be a primary source in one context, and a secondary source in another. A newspaper report of a Minister's statement in the House is a secondary source for that statement, but a primary source as an indicator of that newspaper's views.

Likewise, the Minister's comments on Government policy are a primary source, but her characterisation of Opposition policy is not.

## **Citing sources**

The sources you use should all be cited, ideally in footnotes or as hyperlinks (so the references do not get in the way of the flow of the main text and because web pages can change at short notice). Citations should be clear, consistent in style and be capable of enabling a reader to follow up and check the source if they wish. Follow any style guides that apply in your team.

# 6



## Analysis

**Parliamentarians often need help to understand the implications of the information that you provide. You can do this by analysing the information. This normally involves: explaining the problem; clarifying the Government's position; identifying the main positive and negative impacts; describing alternative policies; and, summarising, assessing the evidence and drawing conclusions from it.**

When you have collected information to answer the key questions that a Parliamentarian has, in many cases you may need to analyse that information. Often your analysis will be focused on helping Parliamentarians to determine how effective the Government's approach is on an issue.

### *What is analysis?*

You might be asked to write a briefing on road deaths. You discover that the government is proposing to address the problem by repairing roads.

But how do Parliamentarians know that repairing roads will reduce road deaths? What evidence is there to support this policy? Does everyone agree that this is the right approach? Might there be better or more cost effective ways to reduce road deaths?

Your role is to analyse the evidence to help answer these and similar questions for Parliamentarians. You help Parliamentarians to use evidence and information in order that they can be effective in their role.

You do not have to be expert in a particular subject to be an effective analyst (although it can help). However, you do have to be expert at:

- understanding the political context;
- identifying the key questions that need to be answered;
- finding the best evidence needed to answer those questions;
- explaining, summarising and, where appropriate, writing a conclusion impartially on the basis of the evidence.

You can conduct analysis in a number of ways, and there is a large amount of information available on the subject. For example, the **Green Book** gives a comprehensive account of the UK civil service's approach to policy analysis.

However, the key elements of policy analysis with regards to parliamentary research are:

- **Explaining** the problem that the policy is trying to address;
- **Clarifying** the Government's position and how it will be delivered;
- **Identifying** the main positive and negative impacts of the policy, or the main value positions;
- **Describing** alternative policies for addressing the problem;
- **Summarising, assessing the evidence and drawing conclusions** on the policy and its alternatives.

Remember that some research will concern facts or events, or will explain technical processes, in which case slightly different matters will come to the fore.

Also remember that some subjects, e.g. abortion, human rights or animal experiments, will not be addressed solely in terms of "evidence". These are value-based policy issues, and they should be approached with particular care. With these value-based issues you are to some extent trying to contrast policy options which are based on incompatible value judgements (such as views as to the primacy of human life etc.). It is also important to be aware of issues where reliance on particular facts or arguments is driven by value judgements.

## Explaining the problem

This part of your analysis can be covered in your introduction. Your aim is to explain why there is a perceived need to tackle the issue. This can be important in helping Parliamentarians to assess whether they believe the costs of the policy are worth it.

One of your key objectives in this stage is to clearly define the problem that you are analysing. This can make it easier to identify effective measures to address it, and it enables the reader to understand the subject of the briefing.

### *Explaining the problem*

Help explain the problem by answering questions such as:

- What is the problem?
- How big is the problem? What facts and figures are available?
- How does the UK compare to other countries?
- Do current and projected trends indicate that the problem is getting worse? What would happen if nothing changed?
- Give a history of the problem – what has the government already done to try to address it? What has parliament said about this in the past?

## Clarifying the Government's position

The next stage is to clearly explain the Government's position on the problem, and its justification for it.

You should clearly state how the government believes its approach will work in practice. As many policies can be quite complex, it is your job to explain them in simple terms so that Parliamentarians can quickly understand them. If it is not clear how the policy will be implemented – perhaps because the proponent has not given enough information – you can make that clear to Parliamentarians.

You should also state the reasons why a specific approach has been put forward as a solution. This rationale should be provided by the Government.

If little or no quantifiable rationale has been put forward, you can state that fact to Parliamentarians. This may be something that they wish to take up with the government.

### *Clarifying the government's position*

Help to clarify the position by answering questions such as:

- What is government policy on the problem?
- What evidence has been presented to show the policy will address the problem?
- How will the policy be implemented?
- How much money will be spent?
- Who will implement the policy?



## Identifying the main impacts

The positive and negative impacts of a position are key to assessing its effectiveness. Policies can have a variety of impacts, beyond addressing the problem they are aimed at. These wider impacts can be positive and negative and impact different people in different ways.

You should try to identify the main positive and negative impacts of a position, and how big they are. If the negative impacts of a policy are large, they might undermine its justification.

Where possible you should try to quantify the impacts. You should think of costs in terms other than just economic – also think about environmental and social costs which others might not have considered.

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### *Identifying the main impacts*

You can identify the main impacts by answering questions such as:

- What are the positives of the policy?
- What are the negatives of the policy?
- What economic, social and environmental impacts might there be?
- Are there different impacts across the UK?
- Has the policy been tried in other countries? What happened? Is it international best practice?
- How will it interact with other legislation such as on human rights?
- Will certain groups of people be particularly negatively impacted (gender, geographic, age, minorities etc.)?

As different policies can have different positive or negative points and can impact people in different ways, there might not be a consensus on the best approach to a problem.

Impartiality is not just about including a wide range of views on an issue, as this can lead to a 'false balance' where people whose views do not accord with established or dominant positions are given equal weight just for the sake of appearing balanced.

## Describing alternative positions

Parliamentarians are often interested in alternative positions – i.e. how else might the problem be addressed? There are likely to be a variety of policies that can be adopted that might resolve a problem. As different policies can have different positive or negative points and can impact people in different ways, there might not be a consensus on the best approach to a problem.

The key alternative policy you should consider is the 'do nothing' policy. If there is little evidence to support a policy, or if the evidence suggests that there is little justification for a policy due to its impacts, you should think about what might happen if the policy was not introduced.

The other alternative policies that you should consider are the main ones put forward by other stakeholders, and in particular opposition parties and parliamentary committees. Therefore, it can sometimes be useful to address alternative positions in your briefing in a section on stakeholder views.

It is important to present information about stakeholder opinion on all sides of an issue. However, impartiality is not just about including a wide range of views on an issue, as this can lead to a 'false balance' where people whose views do not accord with established or dominant positions are given equal weight just for the sake of appearing balanced. Scientific evidence can often be inconclusive or contested, but try to reflect the balance of mainstream consensus, especially when reporting research evidence.

## *Describing alternative positions*

Help to describe alternative positions by answering questions such as:

- What would happen if the policy was not introduced?
- What alternative policies have been put forward by the opposition parties and other stakeholders?
- What are the pros and cons of the main alternative policies?

## **Conclusions and summarising**

Researchers working for Committees should also consult the Chapter on Committee Research for further information about drafting Committee report conclusions.

The final stage in analysis is to summarise and assess the evidence you have gathered and identify what conclusions and, for Committees, recommendations to draw. This stage is often completed in the summary and conclusion of your briefing.

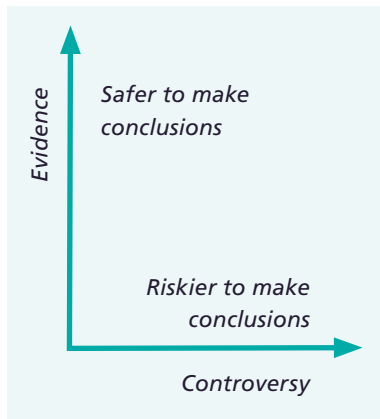
Conclusions for more complex briefings or enquiries can be difficult – there may not be a simple answer. There are also circumstances in which a conclusion might not be suitable – such as if you have been asked to advise about a legal matter involving a specific constituent.

Either way, your main aim is to provide, on the basis of all the evidence, answers to the key questions that Parliamentarians have or will have.

Your main aim is to provide, on the basis of all the evidence, answers to the key questions that Parliamentarians have or will have.

This stage can be challenging for parliamentary researchers as they have to be careful not to be biased. As a result conclusions must be clearly drawn from the (good) evidence you have found. You can generally make strong conclusions about:

- a factual point;
- the usefulness of a study;
- the likelihood of an event;
- a lack of clarity or inconsistency;
- what evidence is missing;
- the possible impacts of a proposal.



If there is not good evidence available, you can say that it is not possible to give a conclusion and why. In that case you can simply summarise the evidence.

However, you should be more cautious coming to conclusions when dealing with controversial subjects. To help you to identify when to be careful about making conclusions, consider how controversial the subject is, and how much evidence there is on the matter. You can generally give strong conclusions on subjects that are not controversial and for which there is good evidence.

Sometimes there is no evidence, as the question at issue is not about the "success" or "failure" of a policy, but about a core value position. In that case, set out what the different views are. You may find that direct quotation is more useful in these cases, to give a flavour in their own words of what the different actors think.

On subjects that are controversial and for which there is not good evidence, be particularly careful about giving conclusions (see chart). In such cases you might chose simply to present the evidence and arguments, to enable the Parliamentarian to draw their own conclusions.

On subjects that are controversial and for which there is not good evidence, be particularly careful about giving conclusions.

## Summaries

In all but the shortest documents, summaries are essential. They can be very helpful for readers and are sometimes all the reader needs. A good summary is useful for the reader who has little time, so wants an overview of a subject very quickly, and for others, as it shows them what they will find if they read further into the briefing.

While the summary appears at the beginning of the report or briefing, it is usually easier to write it last. Summaries of Committee reports are sometimes not written until after the rest of the report has been agreed (either formally or informally) by the Committee, to ensure that it is summarising a final or near-final version.

Summaries should:

- be able to stand alone and be read without the need for looking at the main text;
- not contain detailed references to sources. Any reader who wishes to follow up a point should be able to do that using the references in the main text;
- be short – one or two paragraphs in a short briefing and a page or two at most for a lengthy paper;
- cover only the most important issues. Bullet points can be helpful but can also be less readable than normal writing – judgment will be needed as to the best approach, given the subject;
- be as clear and impartial as everything else, avoiding jargon wherever possible.

# 7

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## Writing Effectively

**How you explain things is almost as important as what you say. While the factual content of any parliamentary research must be as good as it can be, the way in which it is communicated is also important. Effective communication enables the reader to quickly understand the content. No-one, even if they know a lot about a topic, should have to work hard to understand your key messages!**

**This chapter sets out the essentials of good writing.**

### ***Key tip: write what you would say!***

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to write in the “official style” of writing that used to be common in the civil service and other sectors. This language tended to be obscure, confusing and longwinded.

Instead you should think about the message you want to get across, and how you can most clearly and concisely state it.

To do this it can be helpful to imagine your reader sitting opposite you at your desk. You would be unlikely to say:

*The Government decided that it was essential to formulate an improved means of securing practical progress.*

Instead you might say:

*The Government decided it needed a better plan.*

For further information on how to write well, please consult the House of Commons Library's *Writing for Readers; A guide to good writing* and the House of Lords Library's style guide.



*write what you would say!*  
*You should think about the message you want to get across, and how you can most clearly and concisely state it.*

The most important factor in ensuring that you write well is being aware of who will read the briefing and what they intend to use it for.

The most important factor in ensuring that you write well is being aware of who will read the briefing and what they intend to use it for.

Parliamentarians are busy and often demanding people with many responsibilities, and it is crucial always to bear their needs in mind when writing for them. This applies whether you are writing a response to a specific question or writing a substantial piece of analysis of a controversial public policy issue.

A good starting point, therefore, is to think about who the reader will be. Why do they need to know about the subject? What do they already know about the subject? What, as a result, can you help them with? Do they need to see the key points easily in a meeting? Or are they preparing a contribution to a debate?

Writing a briefing follows your initial research about the subject of concern. This might be quite brief, in the case of a quick response to a question; or lengthier, if you are writing a longer briefing. In many cases, the processes of writing and research will happen in parallel.

### Good writing:

- is logical, direct and unambiguous, so it does not lead to misinterpretation;
- tells a story that engages the reader's attention;
- is well-structured, so as to break down complex messages or large amounts of information, in order that they can be easily assimilated;
- uses, wherever possible, necessary and familiar words, and tries to avoid jargon that most readers will not understand.

A number of principles underpin this. Some of these apply more to substantial briefings than short answers to specific questions, but most are relevant to all types of written work.



**1 Put the main point or the answer first.** Always directly answer the question! Parliamentarians are busy people and may spend only a few seconds to glance at a document before deciding whether to keep or discard it. It is sensible, therefore, to show the reader why the document is worth reading, by:

- starting with a heading or title which says unambiguously what the document is about
- making the first sentence or paragraph a brief and clear overview of the subject
- if your briefing is a response to a specific question, put that question and a brief summary of the answer in the first sentence.

**2 Guide your readers through what you have written:**

- Set out the main points prominently, using plenty of headings and sub-headings as signposts, with the main point or conclusion of each section before the analysis which supports it. These headings can also be used to create the contents page of longer briefings.
- Lead your reader through the argument, is it clear why you have moved on to the next issue or why you have covered certain issues?
- In longer papers, use a structure which meets the needs of different kinds of reader. The title and contents page will be skimmed by the 'one-minute' reader. The 'five-minute reader' will go on to look at an overview or summary of the topic. Readers with more time will read on further into the full document, because it is clear that the briefing covers what they need.
- Include a summary in all except the shortest papers. Summaries can satisfy both the reader in a hurry and show others with more time what they will get if they read on. A good summary will stand alone and tell the story of the subject, in the same order. It will be short and cover only the most important issues. And it will be clear and as impartial as the remainder of the paper.
- Don't forget the ending. The endings to sections of a briefing can summarise the main points, point to what will happen next, or raise further questions that readers may wish to consider.

### 3 Use statistics well wherever they illuminate the issue.

Don't simply relegate data to an appendix as relevant tables and graphics can add to your analysis at various points, including at the start, for context. See Chapter 8 for more on the use of statistics.

### 4 Break up the text from time to time with:

- Bullet point lists, which help readers identify key issues and also allow busy readers to assimilate major points quickly.
- Numbered lists or flow charts, to show the stages of a process or procedure.
- Tables for content other than statistics, for example to present 'for and against' arguments.
- Text boxes, which are useful to draw attention to issues that do not fit neatly into the flow of your analysis, or for material that only some readers will want to read, such as quotations, case studies or technical explanations.

### 5 Keep to the point and, in particular:

- Make your document as short as possible without sacrificing clarity.
- Try to write short sentences, which are easier to understand.
- Keep to one issue or topic for each paragraph.
- Leave things out – not everything you find will be important to your readers. Make sure each word or phrase adds something relevant, and look for the shortest way to express something.
- Where background information is useful but quite lengthy, put it into an appendix rather than the main text.

- 6** **Use language that readers will understand.** If jargon or technical wording is important, explain what it means and, if appropriate, explain concepts in a glossary or appendix.
- 7** **Cite sources and references** clearly and consistently. Some readers will wish to follow these up, so make it easy for them to do so.
- 8** **Use active verbs** as often as possible as this helps readers grasp what you are saying more easily. For example, say “The Government will publish its proposals at the end of March” rather than “The proposals will be published at the end of March;” or “The committee recommended several changes” rather than “Several recommendations for change were made by the committee.”
- 9** **Show your impartiality.** Chapter 9.
- 10** **Write confidently.** This includes pointing out what is important and interesting in what you are writing – perhaps briefly in an initial summary, or maybe in the headings and sub-headings you use. Being impartial does not mean being boring, and readers will value evidence-based judgments about the usefulness of a study, a lack of consistency or clarity in a government statement, or the potential impact of a proposal. If, for example, a report contradicts every other report on the subject, say so; but make sure that is justified by evidence. Be particularly careful on controversial issues. For example, although the vast majority of scientific evidence supports the negative effects of climate change, there is a small number of politicians in most countries who do not accept that. The contrary view needs, therefore, to be acknowledged, without giving it undue prominence.

Editing is key to writing well. Consult the chapter on quality control.

# 8

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Using statistics,  
Tables, Graphs  
and Charts

**Statistics and visual ways of presenting numbers are often crucial in helping parliamentarians to understand the issue. Statistics, when used well, can tell simple stories even if the underlying data are complicated.**

Almost all Parliamentarians like to use numbers to support their arguments. They also like to make comparisons – such as comparing their constituency with the national average or comparing their country with others.

Statistics, when used well, can tell simple stories even if the underlying data are complicated.

They can also help to make figures seem real. For example, while it might be technically correct to say that around 31 million people in the UK have blue eyes, it may be more understandable to say that nearly half of the UK population has blue eyes (48%).<sup>1</sup>

All researchers can use statistics to support their analysis and modern software packages make it relatively easy to produce helpful charts and tables. However, badly-used statistics can be confusing or misleading.

## Statistics

At the most basic level, simple percentages can be used to compare groups of different sizes. For example, if we want to know how smoking varies between countries, we could compare Jordan, where 31% of those aged 15 and over smoke daily, with Morocco where the figure is 18% and Oman where it is 11%.<sup>2</sup> This is a more useful way of comparing rates of smoking than looking at the numbers of people in these countries who smoke, as the countries concerned have very different populations.

Figures should generally be rounded. Most sources of data, for example surveys, provide estimates rather than exact figures. The risk in not rounding is that you convey spurious accuracy that is not justified. Rounding should always be consistent (in other words, make sure that all the figures in a sentence or table are rounded to the same number of decimal places).

When the source figures are particularly unreliable, it can sometimes be better to use phrases like ‘about a half’ rather than percentages. So the example above could say that about a third of adults in Jordan smoke, compared with one in five in Morocco and one in ten in Oman.

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1 The Times, Blue eyes are peeping across Britain, 31 August 2014

2 World Health Organization Report on the global tobacco epidemic 2015 Appendix 1 ([www.who.int/tobacco/global\\_report/2015/report/en/](http://www.who.int/tobacco/global_report/2015/report/en/))

## Tables

Tables and charts are especially helpful in conveying more complex data, for example in making comparisons across time or between countries. There are two main types of table.

Presentation (or demonstration) tables can be used to highlight key figures, often within the main text of a paper. It is often best to use a small presentation table instead of putting numbers in the text of a report where you have more than two numbers. In these tables, data should be presented in a concise, well-organised way to support the accompanying analysis.

Reference tables tend to be larger and are more analytic. They are often best placed at the end of a publication or on a separate page from the body of text.

Tables should be able to stand alone. Each table should have enough information, such as a descriptive title and indication of source, to allow it to be copied and pasted into another document and still make sense. If you ensure that your tables can stand alone, they are more likely to be understood correctly, within or outside their original context.

### How to describe data in a table

- 1** The **table title** should give a clear and accurate description of the data. It should answer the three questions "what", "where" and "when".
- 2** **Column headings**, at the top of the table, should identify the data presented in each column of the table and provide any relevant metadata (e.g. unit of measurement, time period or geographic area).
- 3** **Row labels** should identify the data presented in each row of the table.
- 4** **Footnotes**, at the bottom of the table, may provide any additional information needed to understand and use the data correctly (e.g. definitions).
- 5** **Source**, at the bottom of the table, should provide the source of the data, i.e. the organization and publication details

Try to avoid unnecessary text, lines and shading. Any lines in a table should be for a reason, such as a change in the basis of the data; or to separate headings from data or totals from their components. Order data logically, such as chronologically or according to a standard classification. And do not leave data cells empty. A cell with a value of zero is different from one where the data is not available or not applicable. In these cases "n/a" (for 'not available') can be put in the cell and explained in a footnote.

## Example of bad presentation of table:

Final energy consumption, by sector – Percentages

	1980	1985	1990	2000	1995	2002	2003
Transport	27.8	27.9	28.2	31.1	36.8	39.5	39.1
Residential	31.8	33.9	30.4	27.6	24.3	23.7	24.0
Industry	31.5	27.2	23.9	22.1	21.4	19.5	18.8
Agriculture	n/a <sup>1</sup>	n/a <sup>1</sup>	3.5	3.7	3.1	2.9	2.8
Services	9.6	11.0	14.0	15.5	14.4	14.4	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Example of good presentation of table:

Note that the columns here are narrower, all numbers are right-aligned, unnecessary shading and lines have been removed, the title has meaning, a footnote explains the data that are not available, the data source is included, and decimal places are consistent throughout.

### Share of total energy consumption, by sector (in percent)

Ireland, 1980-2003

	1980	1985	1990	2000	1995	2002	2003
Transport	27.8	27.9	28.2	31.1	36.8	39.5	39.1
Residential	31.8	33.9	30.4	27.6	24.3	23.7	24.0
Industry	31.5	27.2	23.9	22.1	21.4	19.5	18.8
Agriculture	n/a <sup>1</sup>	n/a <sup>1</sup>	3.5	3.7	3.1	2.9	2.8
Services	9.6	11.0	14.0	15.5	14.4	14.4	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>1</sup> Data on energy consumption for the agricultural sector was not collected until 1990.

Source: Department of public Enterprise, Ireland

Tables and charts work best when they have text alongside them that explains the main points.

## Charts and graphs

Charts can be used to illustrate patterns in a large amount of data or to communicate key findings or messages. They are a good way to break up long passages of text and to illustrate a point visually.

Different types of chart are useful for different purposes but, generally, the rule is 'the simpler the better,' with line and bar charts generally being more useful than more complex graphics. Some of the 'extras' available in common software packages such as Excel, like 3D effects, are usually best avoided as they tend to distract the reader from understanding the underlying data.

Charts also need informative titles, clear axes and data labels.

If a chart looks too complicated, use another method to present the data, such as a table.

## Explaining tables and charts

Tables and charts work best when they have text alongside them that explains the main points. This might summarise what the numbers show, what the key changes are, whether the most recent data are in line with past trends, or whether the story is that there hasn't been any significant change.

Try to add insight when writing this commentary: if someone who knows very little about the topic could write what you have written, you have not added any value.

## Sources of statistics

The sources of the most useful statistics will vary from subject to subject and country to country, but some of the most useful general sources of data are listed in Chapter 4 on sourcing information.





# 9

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## Techniques for impartiality

**It is critically important for you to understand impartiality. Parliamentarians will expect and demand impartiality in your work. Simple techniques, such as using careful language or reflecting different sides of an argument, can help you to demonstrate that you support parliamentarians regardless of their political affiliation.**

Complete impartiality in the eyes of all potential users is probably impossible to achieve; your work is done in a highly political context and it can therefore be used to support party political points. However, you can use a number of techniques to demonstrate that you support parliamentarians regardless of their political affiliation:

- **Use careful, un-emotive and respectful language.** It is easy to destroy trust by a few badly chosen words. If a policy seems to have little evidence to support it, use questioning rather than condemnatory language. For example, say “there is evidence to suggest that the proposal will not work” rather than “the proposal is unjustified”. Try to avoid colourful adjectives, and phrases like “the most important” or “the origin of the problem” – these are often contentious.
- **Ensure that work is useful to all Parliamentarians that will use it,** not just one or two groups. Ensure that your briefings are useful to those on both sides of an argument if appropriate. All sides need to know what arguments they will be faced with, sometimes even if they haven’t asked for them.
- **Try to reflect different sides of an argument,** giving reasonable weight to different points of view. As a minimum, you should reflect the viewpoints of the government and the leading opposition parties. Depending on the subject, consider including the viewpoints of other stakeholders such as pressure groups, academics, business groups etc. However, judgment will always be needed about what is and is not included in order to avoid producing unnecessarily long, misleading, confusing or boring briefings.
- **Use quotations to illustrate viewpoints.** Paraphrasing sources is very important for keeping briefings short and focusing on the most important facts. It is better to avoid long quotations where possible, as the reader tends to skip over these. However, you could use quotations where it is important to show clearly who is saying what, or where the source is ambiguous. In these circumstances, using a quotation can avoid the risk of misinterpreting a statement or causing it to be associated with you.

- **Use a range of reputable evidence.** Take particular care with information coming from those who may have a vested interest. Always be clear about where your information comes from and any shortfalls it may have.
- **Ensure that sources of evidence are clearly cited in your references.** Readers should be able to verify any statement made from the sources quoted and follow them up if they wish.
- **Distinguish where possible between fact and opinion.** Opinion is valuable but it is not the same as facts based on evidence.
- **Be careful about drawing conclusions.** Conclusions are important if an event or outcome is very likely or unlikely, or if they are supported by strong evidence. However, you should be more careful in drawing conclusions when issues are controversial. If in doubt, present the evidence so that the Parliamentarians themselves can come to their own conclusion. There are specific guidelines for Committee staff on this point in Chapter 14.
- **Take care with statistics.** If you are using numbers from an interest group, say where they come from, be aware of the source's position on the issue and query whether the data give an accurate balanced and up-to-date picture. Be careful about the use of words such as 'typical', 'average' and 'significant' and remember that financial data can be presented in cash or adjusted for inflation. Remember that a very different statistical picture can be painted by the choice of different start or end dates for a comparison.
- **Peer review.** Asking colleagues to read your work or (where confidentiality and timing permits) asking a range of external experts to review your work, will help to highlight whether you are giving a fair hearing to all sides of the debate. See Chapter 13 on quality control. In the Lords Library, a mandatory review for all published briefings considers impartiality as part of the editorial process.

## **Impartiality in confidential work**

If work is provided in confidence to a Parliamentarian the focus may be less on balance and reflecting different arguments, and more on what you know the Parliamentarian wants from your particular response. For example, you might only provide the Parliamentarian with arguments in favour of a particular policy if that is what they want, though you may wish also to include the counter-arguments in order to help them in any debate.

But still be careful – what you have written may be released to the media. Although doing that would be the responsibility of the Parliamentarian concerned, there is a risk that this may damage your reputation for impartiality.

To minimise that risk, you should still ensure that the information provided is based on fact or clearly attributed to sources – do not give the impression that you share the views of the politician you are writing for. And you should always state the question you were asked or what you were asked to do.

## **Impartiality in Committee reports**

Research staff that are involved in drafting Committee reports and suggesting recommendations should always apply the above techniques for impartiality and base their work on the evidence available. However, because committee reports are political in nature, research staff need to have an awareness of the views of the committee. Ultimately your job is to ensure that the committee can present its views in the most effective manner – even if they appear to contradict evidence or specialist advice.

## *Managing bias*

Bias is a tendency for an individual to think in a certain way. It is useful for parliamentary researchers to understand their biases, as it might lead to a lack of impartiality in their work. There are various types of bias, including:

- **Confirmation bias** – the tendency to select and recall evidence that confirms your pre-existing opinions. This can also lead to applying less stringent standards when assessing evidence that fits with what you already believe, and more robust standards when assessing evidence that contradicts what you believe.
- **The backfire effect** – the tendency to strengthen one's belief when presented with evidence that conflicts with that belief.
- **The halo effect** – the tendency to over-generalise positive attributes.
- **The bias blind spot** – the tendency to underestimate your own susceptibility to bias.

While it is probably not possible to eliminate your biases, there are safeguards that can be put into place to prevent them from influencing your research. Some practical steps that you could take include:

- **Being aware of the signs that you might be subject to bias** such as having strong opinions or emotions before considering the evidence, having opinions that don't change as you work through the evidence, collecting information from sources you know you already agree with and assuming people that you disagree with are wrong.
- **Informing yourself** – before starting a piece of work, if you have time, it is worth spending time reading specialist press and published papers as well as attending seminars and events. This will help to ensure that you are aware of the different lines of argument.

- **Avoiding formulaic approaches to work** – if you find your work always follows the same pattern you might be missing out on some key information. Think through at the start of each piece of work what the important arguments are and who is making them.
- **Avoid labelling your views** – if you commit to a view in advance of considering the evidence, it can make you more resistant to evidence that contradicts that view.
- **Read the evidence** – Committee researchers in particular should read all the evidence presented to the committee at the start of an inquiry and then again, later on, to make sure they didn't dismiss something important. Be aware that just because something is well written, it doesn't mean it is right. And vice versa.
- **Read the transcripts of videos, rather than watching them** – this can help you to avoid being swayed by someone's presentational style.
- **Peer review** – ask colleagues to read your briefings and reports. You can flag any areas that you are particularly concerned about (for example, areas where you hold strong views yourself) and ask colleagues whether you are giving a fair hearing to all sides of the debate. In the Lords Library, a mandatory review for all published briefings considers impartiality as part of the editorial process.
- **Use experts** – experts are likely to have a good understanding of all sides of the debate, so can help to make sure that all views are represented. It may be worth contacting one or more experts to ensure a balanced view.
- **Consider how many sources of evidence you have used** – if you have relied heavily on only 2 or 3 sources, or you find that some sources have not been referred to in your document, ask yourself why this is. Could you justify it if someone complained?

# 10

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Taking  
Questions  
or Enquiries



**Answering questions from individual Parliamentarians, their staff or other colleagues, is a core part of the work of many researchers. The key to providing a response to a specific question is to get a full picture of what is wanted, and why, through discussion with the enquirer.**

Answering questions from individual Parliamentarians, their staff or other colleagues, is a core part of the work of many researchers. For example, the House of Commons Library answered over 30,000 such enquiries in 2015. However most, if not all, researchers will from time to time be asked to provide answers to specific questions from parliamentarians.

The key to providing a response to a specific question is to get a full picture of what is wanted, and why, through discussion with the enquirer. Relying on what is initially asked for is not necessarily enough. Sometimes Members do not know what they want or exactly how they wish to deal with an issue, so intelligent questioning is needed. If you are not clear about the question and its scope and context, it is much harder to provide a satisfactory response.

The key to providing a response to a specific question is to get a full picture of what is wanted, and why, through discussion with the enquirer.

## *Intelligent questioning – examples*

Parliamentarians, who are often not experts on many of the issues they are called upon to deal with, can need help in framing the questions they put to you. Helping them do this is important, both so they get briefing that is useful to them, and so you avoid wasted work.

You can ask the enquirer questions to help identify what it is that they are really interested in.

For example, a Member might initially ask “Can you tell me about the education system in India?” Intelligent questioning will seek to find out if he or she is interested in a particular part of the education system (primary, secondary, university), whether they want to make comparisons with their own country; whether they are particularly interested in aspects of the education process (such as how it is funded; what proportion of young people are enrolled; what are the ages for compulsory education), or outcomes (for example, literacy levels, or the numbers going on to higher education, or work).

Another question might be “Can you provide a briefing on water resources?” Intelligent questioning will try to find out whether the enquirer is interested in the state of current natural resources, or government policy on the issue, or whether they are interested in a recent drought.

Knowing what the enquirer wants to do with the information can also be very helpful, as would knowing whether they have engaged with the subject previously. If the questioner is already knowledgeable about the subject, they won’t need basic background information which might, however, be useful to someone else.

Don’t be afraid to ask these additional questions. MPs and their researchers are busy but a few minutes spent defining the question and managing expectations means that you can provide them with the best briefing possible to their timescale. Although you should be sensitive – if the enquirer seems uncomfortable or is in a hurry, do not keep asking questions!

Try to do the following when you are taking enquiries from Parliamentarians:

**1 Note names, places and key phrases.** If the Three Gorges Dam in China is mentioned, make sure you write down "Three Gorges Dam". Ask how names are spelt. Ask them to spell out acronyms or explain jargon.

**2 Ask questions so that you understand what the customer is really interested in.** Here are some example questions:

- What is the answer needed for? There is a substantial difference between the information needed for a one-minute radio interview, a meeting and what is needed for a major speech.
- How much detail is needed, and what does the enquirer already know about the subject? There is no point in telling someone what they already know or can easily find from Google. Do they want a short, to the point, briefing or something more substantial?
- If statistics are required, what timescales and coverage would be helpful? Would they like international comparisons?
- What background information do you want on the subject? Are you interested in the law, or how the Government decided its policy?
- Is this a constituency issue? Is there correspondence you can show me?
- Are you interested in a specific case? Can you tell me more about it?
- Are you interested in a specific place, region or country?
- Would you like to know what different stakeholders such as political parties and NGOs have said about this?
- Is your enquiry related to a draft law, committee or a debate in the Parliament?
- Did you read about this in a newspaper? Do you know when the article was published and the name of the newspaper?

**3 Make sure you keep up to date on current affairs and what is happening in parliament.** Customers will often ask about topical issues. Knowing what is important to your customers will help you to intelligently question the parliamentarian.

**4 Get a deadline.** You want to find out when the information is most useful to the Parliamentarian. If you get it to them too late, the research will be useless:

- Always ask what “as soon as possible” means. Focus on asking enquirers when they need the work. If they are not certain what deadline to give, suggest a deadline that appears realistic to you.
- If they only give you a little time, or if the enquiry seems very difficult, you will need to negotiate what you can do in the time available. You can always agree to send some key material immediately and further research later. See the box on “Negotiation and saying No” below.

**5 Get their details:**

- their name
- contact details (Telephone, Email, Address)
- how they want to receive their briefing

**6 Manage expectations.** Explain if you might not be able to do something – but explain what you can do too!

**7 Repeat the enquiry back to them if you are able.** Summarise what they have asked you and say it back to them. This ensures that you both understand what the enquiry is.

In addition to speaking to the customer at the time of taking the enquiry, before beginning the research it can be helpful to check the Member’s biography to see if they have a background in the subject, or whether they have previously spoken in debates on the issue. This helps to ensure that you pitch your research at the right level of detail.

You also need to identify what part of the country the representative is from as the answer you give may be dependent on specific local or regional issues.

Finally, it is important to ensure that you have appropriately followed your team’s rules regarding the recording and management of enquiries. That often includes the recording of the enquiry in a database, notifying colleagues about the enquiry as needed, and acknowledging receipt of enquiries received electronically.

## Negotiation and saying No

There will be occasions when you will need to negotiate with customers because the enquiry is not your responsibility or impossible to answer.

When you receive such requests, in most cases it is best not to refuse to help outright. The circumstances vary, but you can try the following to ensure that your customer remains happy, even if it is not possible for you to do exactly as they have asked:

Problem	Suggested response
<p>A research request is not valid. An invalid request might be where it is clear that the request is unrelated to parliamentary work – such as help for a student who is writing an essay, or advice about a personal business.</p>	<p>Explain why you are not permitted to help, and refer to service standards if needed, but offer to provide something ready-made that will provide a degree of help. This could be a link to a relevant website, an existing document or contact details for an outside expert who may be able to help.</p>
<p>You are not the correct person to answer the question.</p>	<p>Ideally you should give the enquirer the contact details of the correct person, or transfer them directly if possible, so that they can discuss their question directly with them. If they need you to take their question, you should record the information but let them know that someone else will respond and that they may be in touch to discuss.</p>
<p>The deadline of a request may be impossible. There will be times when it is just not possible to answer a request in full, especially when the deadline is very short.</p>	<p>Offer to provide a partial answer soon, and the rest later. If you do this, find out what is the most important part of the question from the person asking and answer that first.</p>
<p>It is not possible to find or supply the information.</p>	<p>Avoid pressure to seem omniscient. If the question cannot be answered, be honest and say so, quickly, explaining why.</p> <p>Always express things positively, for example “We have found answers to three of your five questions” rather than “We couldn’t find answers to all your questions.”</p>

## Answering confidential enquiries

Once you have taken an enquiry, the next step is to find and compile relevant information to answer the question. Enquiry responses should be, impartial; clear; timely; and tailored to the specific needs of the enquirer.

### How does enquiry work differ from writing a research briefing?

Research for confidential enquiry work is similar to, but distinct in several key ways to that done for public research briefings.

Enquiry work	Research briefings
Often has lots of short deadlines as different Members request information for their particular needs.	Tend to have longer deadlines, or are produced ahead of a specific debate or meeting in Parliament.
Provides answers to specific, distinct questions. Enquirers may already know the background to an issue, and so a response would only need to cover recent developments. Alternatively, the enquirer may only be interested in a particular effect of a policy.	Ideally cover all aspects of a topical subject. Research briefings tend to be longer than enquiry responses as they will aim to address all of the issues in a particular subject area. For instance, a briefing on flood defence spending would provide information for the whole country, and not just a specific region or constituency. This way the briefing is useful to all Members of Parliament.
Normally undergoes a less formal review process because of the short deadlines and lower profile publication—only one Member is likely to read the response.	Will normally involve a formal review and editing process to ensure the briefing is rigorously impartial, clear and authoritative. By publishing a briefing on the website for all Members and members of the public to read, research briefings are high-profile and must meet exacting, high standards so that trust in the service is not lost.
Is confidential in most Parliamentary Research Services. Parliamentarians may be unable to openly conduct their own research, or it might be used to inform private discussions. In these situations, Parliamentary Research Services can helpfully provide confidential research which will never be revealed without prior permission.	Are publically available, or at least available to all Members of the Parliament. This means they will be read by more than just one customer of the research service.

## **Answering the question, or reaching a conclusion...**

Members often ask very specific questions about the effect of a policy, or what is allowed (and not allowed) by a particular set of rules or regulations. In these cases it is important that you are careful in the information you provide (see box), but up front with the information the Member has asked for. There will also be circumstances in which there is no definitive answer, because: the information is not available, the Government hasn't got a policy in place or no one has looked at the issue before. Explaining that there is no information available to answer these questions is a useful response for Members who may decide to ask the Government why they don't have a policy, or when the information will be available.

## *Conclusions in briefings for constituency issues* *– legal issues*

Members of Parliament often regard helping their constituents with problems as a legitimate and rewarding part of their parliamentary duties. Some research teams, such as the House of Commons Library, provide information and advice so that parliamentarians can respond to these requests for help.

However, there are risks in writing briefings related to a specific cases. If someone felt that advice originating from you was wrong or inaccurate, they may decide to litigate against you. To manage this risk:

1. **Do not provide information or advice in ways that might lead the reader to assume that you are providing an authoritative professional opinion on a specific case.** Trying to address the detailed specifics of a case may imply to the reader that you are advising them on a course of action. You need to find an appropriate balance between providing useful information, recommending documents to read, sources to use, contacts to make etc. and using and distilling those same sources so that they relate directly to the specific circumstances of a constituent. If you are in any doubt, you should seek the advice of your manager.
2. **Use a disclaimer.** A disclaimer is a statement that specifies to the reader how the information provided can be used. It should be used where there is a reasonable expectation that individuals may contemplate taking a course of action based on the information contained within it. If the nature of the case warrants it, for example if the next step is likely to involve the constituent in litigation, the message of the disclaimer should be reinforced at an appropriate point. The precise formulation will depend on the circumstances but the following example may help:

This is a matter which is likely to evolve into a dispute and subsequent legal proceedings in a tribunal. Accordingly, proper legal advice needs to be obtained from a person who is competent, qualified and insured to give such advice in light of the current law and the factual details of the case. This note should not be relied upon as legal advice or a substitute for legal advice.

3. **Suggest where they can get professional help.** Provide advice about where to get professional advice from bodies that are qualified to help.
4. **Do not enter into direct contact with constituents.** Occasionally you may be directly approached by a constituent, who may have found your contact details. Such approaches should always be referred directly to their parliamentary representative, without discussing the case. It is for the parliamentarian to decide if any further action is appropriate.





# 11

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Selecting  
Subjects for  
Research  
Briefings,  
and deciding  
what to  
write about

**Any research that you produce should be clearly in support of parliament. When writing, think about the questions that Parliamentarians have or are likely to have on the subject. Common questions include: the scale of the problem; what the Government is doing; what stakeholders think; and, what the current law is. Writing an outline of your research can help you to decide what to include.**

Any research that you produce should be clearly in support of parliament.

Any research that you produce should be clearly in support of parliament. This will help you to avoid accusations of trying to influence or create debate on issues of interest to you, as well as help you to ensure that resources are being used efficiently.

Good reasons for selecting a subject for research include:

- The subject has significant political interest, as evidenced by parliamentary questions, media coverage or debates.
- There is proposed legislation on the subject, and you believe parliamentarians will need help to scrutinise it;
- A major campaign has been launched on the subject, and a number of parliamentarians are supporting or opposing the campaign;
- A number of parliamentarians have asked you about the same subject. Writing a public briefing about the subject is likely to be useful for parliamentarians more generally, and it will help you to manage your enquiry workload;
- A subject is likely to be politically important or appear on the parliamentary agenda in future.

To help guide you in selecting subjects, most teams have service standards for what they expect research to be prepared on. For example, a briefing might be expected for all Committee meetings, or a briefing might be needed for a debate on a Bill.

There may also be limits to what you are permitted to do. For example, you are generally not permitted to do research for parliamentarians that is not related to their parliamentary duties. Check with your manager to confirm what your standards are.

It can be helpful to think about what someone might ask you about the subject if you were to meet them in the queue at the canteen.

## Selecting sub-topics

Even when you have identified a general subject to write about, it can be difficult, and daunting, to know what specifically to look into.

To get started you should think about the questions that Parliamentarians have or are likely to have on the subject. It can be helpful to think about what someone might ask you about the subject if you were to meet them in the queue at the canteen.

Common questions that Parliamentarians have include:

- What is the issue? Defining the issue is not always straightforward. For example, a question about health care might be about funding (how much does it cost and who pays for it?), who provides it (doctors, nurses, administrators), where it is provided (specialist or general hospitals, local drop-in centres, in the home), its impact (what are the outcomes?), or something else. Or it could cover all or some of these questions.
- What are the parameters of the issue? What is the scale of the problem? Is it urgent? Is the problem getting better or worse?
- What is currently happening, in terms of public policy, the current state of the law and so on?
- What do people say about the issue (government; political parties; business; trade unions; academics, the media; NGOs; others)?
- Have there been campaigns, petitions or consultations on the issue?
- What statistics are there on the issue?
- What do other countries do? Are there international treaties, agreements or standards?
- What is the history of the issue?
- What do these technical terms mean?

When you have thought about what questions the parliamentarian is likely to have, conduct a quick internet search based on your questions. This will help you to identify whether the questions you have come up with are relevant and topical.

At this stage you may also want to think about:

- Whether you need to collaborate with a colleague or colleagues on a briefing;
- the merits of a larger, one-stop briefing on a topic, versus a quick, focused account of one aspect;
- if you need to update an existing briefing or write a new brief from scratch.

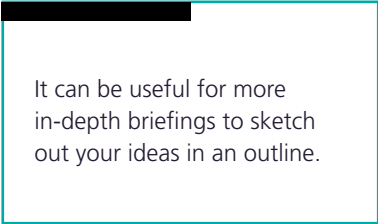
These are judgement calls, and there is no fixed answer. Talk to colleagues to see what they think.

## Write an outline

When you have thought about what your briefing should cover, and before you start writing, it can be useful for more in-depth briefings to sketch out your ideas in an outline.

The outline should tell the story of the briefing. Look critically at what you have sketched out and move things around if that makes more sense. As you draft the briefing, you may sometimes realise that your initial structure doesn't work, so don't be afraid to re-order it if necessary. It doesn't have to be chronological.

You can adapt the example outline below for almost any research briefing on a policy issue, although any two outlines are unlikely to be the same. It is also important to note that you should only use the suggested headings below where they genuinely add value to the briefing.



It can be useful for more in-depth briefings to sketch out your ideas in an outline.

## Example briefing outline

### *Summary*

A summary of the main issues and information in the briefing. This is the last section written. Ideally a maximum of one page.

Think about the main points you would explain to someone if they asked you in passing what the key issues were.

### *Introduction*

Explanation of what the briefing is about:

- Why is the subject of the briefing important?
- Who is affected?
- What is the history of the subject?
- What facts or figures are useful?
- Definitions.

### *Government policy*

Explanation of what the government has said or is doing on the subject. Give details of the evidence presented by the Government, and the degree to which this is supported by other sources.

Consider whether there are any differences in devolved, regional or local governments?

## *Stakeholder views and evidence*

Identification of what stakeholders think about the subject and what the Government is doing about it. This focuses in particular on where stakeholders question or challenge the Government's approach and explains the reasoning for this disagreement. Remember that evidence is not always conclusive; try to reflect the balance of opinion and highlight where there is consensus and where there is ongoing debate. Important stakeholders include:

- Opposition parties
- NGOs
- Industry
- Academics
- Journalists
- International bodies
- The wider public

## *International comparisons*

What do other countries or administrations do on the subject? This can be important for helping the reader to identify whether alternative approaches to the subject have been tried and whether they were successful.

## *Next steps*

Explain the next important step for the subject. Is there something Parliamentarians might need to do or know about in future, such as when a Bill is going to be published?

## *Conclusion*

What conclusions can be drawn from the information that has been found? It may not always be appropriate to draw a conclusion, depending on the type of briefing you are writing and the type of material you have to work with.

## *Appendices*

For a more substantial briefing you may want to include some appendices. These might include more technical material, reference statistics, a bibliography or guide to further reading on the subject.

An outline for a briefing on another issue may need a slightly different emphasis. For instance, a description of events such as a development in a political party or the politics of another country may require a greater focus on historical background and events and any treaty or political agreements reached.

For a briefing that explains a technical process, such as the rules for a referendum or how to complain about maladministration, you should state the authoritative source of the rules, and quote them if possible, but also make them intelligible in layman's terms. Give concrete examples, explain the process in more than one way (for instance, in detail and as an overview), and break your explanation into steps if it is particularly complex.

### *Updating research briefings*

There are topics which recur as likely subjects for producing publicly-available briefing. In this case, consider whether it would be most effective to update an existing briefing or to create a new one.

For example, if there is a new development in a policy area, you might simply need to update an existing briefing by adding a new section to cover recent events. But if this is repeated multiple times, the briefing could become unwieldy, and end up focusing too much on out-of-date policies.

Often it is better to produce a new briefing focused on the most recent information, with a shorter overview of past developments where necessary, for instance when a new government comes into power.

If your briefings are published online, you need to determine when older or superseded briefings should be withdrawn.





Research Papers

Research Papers

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LIBRARY

Social Indicators

RESEARCH PAPER 1754 28 April 2011

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Final Edition  
RESEARCH PAPER 1626 1 February 2011

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Local elections 2010

RESEARCH PAPER 1684 22 June 2010

# 12

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## Legislation Briefing

**Legislation is the backbone of the work of parliaments and helping parliamentarians understand legislation is one of the most important aspects of the work of many parliamentary researchers. This chapter provides some additional tips on how to produce briefings on legislation.**

This chapter looks in more detail at how to provide briefing on legislation and bills. It aims to help you produce a general paper on a piece of legislation produced for general distribution, in other words for all Parliamentarians or for one or more committees.

So that the briefing can be drafted, reviewed and published in good time, before you start producing it you should consider:

- timings such as when and how the committee or parliament will be considering the bill;
- the scope of the legislation in case colleagues with specialist knowledge will be needed to help write parts of the briefing.

The contents of a legislation briefing may include all or some of the following, not necessarily in this order. It is generally best to start with basic facts before moving on to the more detailed analysis.

- Basic facts, for example: What is the legislation called? Who is responsible for it? What parts of the country will it apply to? When was it published? Where can the text be found? When will it be considered by the Parliament?
- What, in brief, the legislation seeks to do.
- Why the legislation has been introduced.
- What has happened previously in the same subject area? For example, have there been previous attempts to legislate and, if so, what did they achieve? Have there been any recent policy reviews or government consultations on the issue? Have parliamentary committees already produced any reports on the subject?
- What the legislation says, in more detail. Whether you try to deal with every aspect of the Bill or just parts of it is likely to depend on the time and the staff resources available to write the briefing. If time is limited, it is often best to give an initial general description of the legislation but concentrate on the more controversial or difficult issues in the analytical part of the paper. If you are writing a briefing when the Bill is part-way through its legislative stages, it may be helpful to the reader to highlight if/how the Bill has been amended since it was first introduced. It is sometimes possible to refer to other descriptive sources for further information about a bill's content.

It is generally best to start with basic facts and go on to the more detailed analysis.

- Once you have decided which aspects of the legislation to focus on, use as good a range of sources as you can to look at and summarise the following:
  - The views of government. For government legislation, these can often be found in official statements accompanying the publication of legislation.
  - The views of opposition parties. These can often be found in parliamentary debates on the issues and can often best be summarised using quotations from Parliamentarians from those parties.
  - The views of other interested parties, including other parliaments or assemblies, civil society organisations, business, local government, employees' organisations and so on. These may be available from media reports or press releases from the organisations concerned, many of which may be available online. In some cases, a telephone call to an organisation will encourage them to provide a view.
- The comments that these groups make might include views on some of the following:
  - Is there evidence to show that the policy will be successful?
  - Are there better ways of achieving the same aims?
  - What would happen if there were no legislation?
  - Might there be unintended consequences?
  - Will the proposals have a disproportionate effect on one section of society over another (for example, gender, age, people in particular regions etc.)?
  - The costs and benefits of each option – financial, environmental, social and so on.
  - How the proposed legislation will interact with other existing legislation, for example on human rights.
  - Whether there are any treaties or other international obligations underlying the proposals.
- It is important to attribute any comments to the group or person making them, with clear references to the source of the information. This will mitigate the risk of readers associating the comments with you. Judgment will be needed on how much weight to give any one viewpoint.

- What is the situation in other countries, in the region or elsewhere?
- Relevant statistics, maps, illustrations and so on. Their inclusion will depend on the subject under consideration but illustrative material helps break up otherwise dense text – thus making a paper easier to read - and can be a simple way to explain a complex point. Useful graphics can sometimes be cut-and-pasted from other sources (make sure that these are acknowledged) if they are not biased. Small statistical tables usually best included alongside the section of text to which they are relevant. Detailed statistics, in larger tables, can provide useful background but are usually best placed in an appendix, though these should be referred to in the main text.
- Some legislation inevitably involves technical terminology. While some parliamentarians will understand this, others will not, so it is a good idea to explain it in simple terms where possible. This can be done in a separate glossary towards the end of a paper or, if relatively brief, in the main text, ideally in a text box.

If you feel that a conclusion is not possible for the briefing, you can finish it by summarising what will happen next with the Bill, for example which committee will deal with it and what will be done with their reports.

A different approach can be taken if you are assisting a committee to produce a report on a piece of legislation. In this case, part of their role may be to have opinions on the legislation, in order to inform subsequent parliamentary consideration. Any conclusions should be agreed by the committee and should be evidence-based.

# 13

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Quality  
Control

**Quality control is a key stage in the research process. The basic aim of quality control is to get a dispassionate opinion on whether your work is as good as it can be. There are generally 4 key steps in quality control: self-review; peer-review; editing and proof-reading.**

Receiving comments on your work can be uncomfortable. However, it is important to remember that even the best authors in the world have their work reviewed; a reviewer is the reader's advocate and the writer's ambassador. Researchers need to be open to suggestions. Comments shouldn't be taken as a criticism but as a helpful way to improve your work and make it the best it can be.

Different teams have different quality control processes that they follow. These processes depend on time pressures, the nature of the briefing, the risks surrounding the work and other team-specific guidance. However, there are generally 4 key steps in quality control:

- 1 Self-review.** You should do this for all your work.
- 2 Peer-review.** This can be done by internal and external peers. It ensures briefings are impartial, balanced and accurate. This is particularly important for briefings that aim to provide in-depth analysis.
- 3 Editing.** Editing is when the text is made clearer, more precise and more effective.
- 4 Proof-reading.** Asking a colleague to find typing errors and mistakes in grammar, style, and spelling.

Sometimes, particularly if you work in a research service, only one of your colleagues will do all or most of the quality control steps due to time and resource pressures. However, quality control tends to be more effective when different individuals are given different tasks. It is more difficult to peer-review and edit a document at the same time.

Even the best authors in the world have their work reviewed. You need to be open to suggestions.

Sometimes it helps to leave your desk to review a hard or digital copy in a quieter or more relaxing space where you can reflect on your work.

## Self-review

The first step is to review your own work. A reviewing checklist can help you to review your own briefing more effectively; a checklist can be found in the box below.

In general, in parliamentary research services, the reviewing process for answers to individual Parliamentarians' enquiries is focused on self-review because of the very short turnaround required. You must always read and edit your work before sending it to a customer.

For longer or more technical briefings it can be harder to do self-review. After days and weeks immersed in the technicalities of a subject, it can be hard to take a step back and put yourself in the shoes of a Parliamentarian who is not immersed in the topic.

If possible, leave a day or two to go back and review your brief with a fresh pair of eyes. Sometimes it helps to leave your desk to review a hard or digital copy in a quieter or more relaxing space where you can reflect on your work.

If you are new to a subject, or working on a particularly sensitive or complex enquiry, you should always try to do more than just self-review.



## Peer Reviewing

Peer-review refers to the evaluation of work by peers in relevant fields. It helps to increase the quality of the work, and ensure it is well written, accessible, impartial, balanced and accurate.

You can ask a colleague or external expert to do peer-review for you:

- **Internal.** Colleagues can provide a ‘fresh pair of eyes’ and focus feedback on structure, accessibility and impartiality, or where they are more familiar with a subject, they can help to ensure balance and accuracy. People who might help you include colleagues in your team, and in other research teams. You may need to ask your team leader before circulating drafts outside of your team.
- **External.** You can ask external experts in related fields, such as an academic or someone in a civil society organisation, to review your document. External peer-review with a range of stakeholders can be important to ensure balance and accuracy. You may need to ask your team leader before circulating drafts to external experts. Be aware that external reviewers will often have their own political views or organisational interests and when contacting external reviewers, it is important to make clear that you retain editorial control. It is, therefore, sensible to ask external reviewers to focus on issues where their expertise can add value. This may include:
  - identifying factual errors;
  - pointing out major issues or viewpoints that have not been covered sufficiently;
  - whether the best and most authoritative sources have been used; and,
  - the accuracy of any technical descriptions.

## Editing

The aim of editing is to make the text clearer, more precise and more effective.

You can provide your editor with the following questions to help them to assess whether a piece of writing will have the biggest possible impact:

- Can you tell who the intended audience is?
- Is the purpose of the briefing clear?
- Does the main point or answer come first?
- Are readers guided through the writing and are all the important components present (these may include title, headings, overview, summary, main text, conclusions)?
- Are statistics used well?
- Is the text too dense? Is it helpfully broken up with headings, tables, text boxes and so on?
- Does the paper tell a story, keep to the point and use suitable language?
- Is the writer's impartiality clear and is the paper balanced?
- Is the writing confident?

The review checklist in the box below can be used by editors.

## Proof-reading

The role of the proof-reader is to check:

- That there are no mistakes in spelling, grammar and punctuation;
- That quotations and 'borrowed' content is correctly cited;
- That the language and styles used are consistent throughout the document.

Proof reading by a colleague is essential for most publicly published briefing papers. It is generally better to have someone other than an editor conduct proof-reading. Trying to review content and proof-read at the same time can make both less effective, although sometimes you have no choice.

Proof-reading is an important element in ensuring the confidence of readers in a briefing – documents with spelling errors and inconsistencies can damage users' trust. The review checklist in the box below can be used by the proof-reader.

Proof reading by a colleague is essential for most publicly published briefing papers.

## *Editorial process in the Lords Library*

Briefings published by the Lords Library go through an established quality control process.

After the researcher has self-reviewed his or her work, a sub-editor performs a peer review looking at accuracy, impartiality and balance and makes editorial suggestions to improve the clarity of the text. After any amendments have been made, an editor (either a Senior Library Clerk or the Head of Research Services depending on the type of the briefing) does a second review. A production assistant makes final proofing and formatting checks before publishing the briefing.

Sub-editors/editors are assigned deadlines for each stage of the process, and are agreed before the author begins work. This ensures that all roles are clear and enables the Library to publish briefings in good time for parliamentary business.

## Making a success of quality control

Much research for parliamentarians is produced under considerable time pressures and researchers often feel that they do not have time for a substantive review of their work. There is undoubtedly some trade-off between reviewing work and the pressures of a deadline.

However, good planning can often provide sufficient time for a review involving all or some of the four steps outlined above. For substantial pieces of work, review involving all four steps outlined above should be seen as an integral part of the writing process.

It is important that you review at an appropriate level; the amount and type of review needed will depend on the nature of the briefing and team-specific guidance. A short briefing for an individual recipient might only need review by its author or, if the author is relatively inexperienced, a quick review by a more experienced colleague.

More substantial review is preferable for longer documents with multiple potential readers; and for many teams may be mandatory. For such papers, authors should approach one or more colleagues (or external experts) as early as possible in the drafting process to ask them to agree to review the document when it is drafted, and to agree how they would like to work together.

To help your reviewer and get constructive feedback it can be helpful to consider:

- Deadlines. If your deadline is tight you might ask a reviewer to focus on issues you are most concerned about.
- Should the reviewer be involved in the initial planning of the paper, as a 'critical friend', or just once it is drafted?
- Will the reviewer use a hard copy or an electronic version?

Where you disagree with a suggestion, or seek another opinion, such a decision should be justifiable and be taken in line with the procedures established for your team. You may need to ask your line manager to help you to decide on a point.

## Proof-reading and editing checklist

A checklist is a useful tool for authors, editors and proof-readers to help them to effectively review a document. The checklist below can be used for most types of briefing:

### General checks

- On the first page:
  - There is a title and date
  - The first paragraph clearly explains what the briefing is about, or what the Parliamentarian asked for
  - There is a short summary of the key points of the briefing (for longer briefings only)
  - The key question or questions have been clearly answered
- The pages are numbered
- Fonts and sizes are correct
- There is a contents page for longer briefings

### Impartiality

- No use of emotional or opinionated language, unless it is a direct quote
- A range of viewpoints are given
- Conclusions are only given if they are well supported by good evidence.

### Useful information for Parliamentarians

- Relevant parliamentary information is given, such as debates, committee reports, parliamentary questions
- Government policy is clearly stated
- Only the most politically important information is included

## Spelling

- Use the spell checker on the computer – spelling mistakes ruin a briefing
- Double check the spelling of names and technical words

## Grammar and punctuation

- Correct use of apostrophes, commas, full stops, colons
- Correct tense – generally use past tense
- Are the sentences too long? Is the meaning clearer when they are split into shorter sentences?

## Vocabulary

- Know the meaning of the words you've used and avoid jargon
- If you have to use a technical word, give a definition
- Do not use slang or very informal language

## Layout

- Does the briefing have a logical layout? Does it tell a story?
- Headings used for all major sections
- Sub-headings used when needed

## Expressing information clearly

- All the main questions have clearly been answered
- All paragraphs have one main idea, which is introduced in the first sentence
- Does the writing flow smoothly from one section or paragraph to the next? This is particularly important when a number of people have contributed to a briefing

### Acknowledging supporting evidence and references

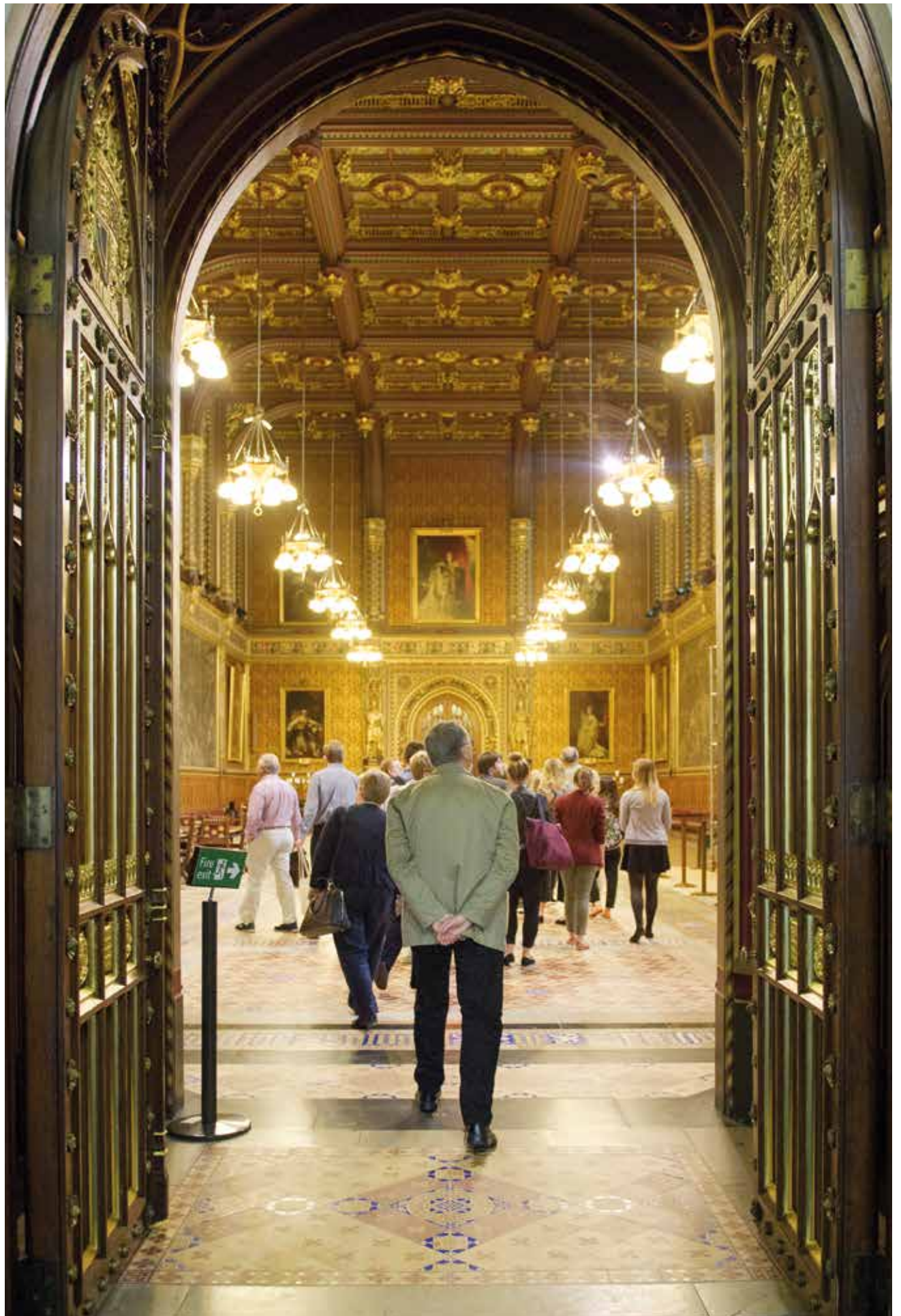
- All ideas and information are referenced
- Quotations are used correctly
- The correct style for references is used: Author (or organization name), Title, Publisher, Date Published, page number. For web documents hyperlink the title of the document with the “[accessed on date]” at the end of the reference
- Diagrams and charts have a title and are clearly labelled and referenced
- Sources are good quality

### Reviewing in a hurry

Sometimes deadlines mean we have no choice but to review quickly. To review in a hurry ask your reviewers to prioritise the following, as mistakes here may in particular damage your reputation:

- front pages and summaries
- impartiality and balance
- sense and credibility





# 14

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Committee  
Research

**The principles in the rest of this Handbook also apply to Committee briefings. However, additional principles apply to the scoping of Committee inquiries, writing Committee meeting briefings and writing Committee report conclusions.**

Committee work is often much more collaborative in nature. It is important to note that the work described in this chapter is largely done with the supervision and support of senior Committee staff, and the way in which the work is done will vary with the particular needs and approaches of the Committee in question. It is essential for you to ensure that you give your manager and colleagues adequate time to provide guidance and input into your work.

There are slightly differing practices between the House of Commons' Committee Office and House of Lords' Committee Office. You may wish to develop your own approach in order to best meet the needs of your Parliament.

## **Scoping and researching terms of reference**

It is part of the responsibility of committee researchers to help Committees to identify possible subjects for inquiry. You should draw on your specialist experience and any external networks and contacts you have in your field to identify new and emerging issues which the Committee might wish to explore.

It is a good idea to have a rolling list of potential inquiries which can be suggested to the Committee as appropriate. You may also need to present a short research briefing on your new inquiry suggestion to the Committee. Ultimately though, it is up to the Chair to secure a consensus among the Committee about the future programme.

The Committee formally agrees the Terms of Reference for an inquiry in a private meeting. In preparation for this discussion, you may be asked to prepare a scoping note for the Committee providing background information on the topic and covering some of the points and questions set out below – you can also refer to Chapter 11 above:

- What is rationale and factual basis for the inquiry?
- Is the inquiry in line with any overriding Committee strategy?
- What is it intended to achieve? Objectives might include any or all of the following:
  - Influence development of policy
  - Audit policy outcome
  - Input into a major meeting or consultation
  - Raise profile of an issue/initiate debate
  - Review effectiveness of an existing policy/Act
  - Force government to give a public view or take action
  - Meet one or more Committee core tasks
  - Gain media attention
  - Link to debate or other proceedings in the House
- How realistic are these objectives, and is there clarity/consensus about these objectives?
- What is the intended output? This may include a report, or oral evidence session(s) only, with publication of evidence, or other outputs including a seminar.
- What expectations do the Chair and Committee have? How do expectations need to be managed?
- Who are the key witnesses?
- What is the target audience? Who will need to be engaged, and what is the best way of engaging with different groups? Who are the audiences that we are seeking to influence through the final outcome and beyond?

Getting the draft Terms of Reference right increases the chances of receiving a good number of useful written evidence. The terms of inquiry should usually be as short and as specific as possible, bearing in mind that the Committee will ultimately want to use the evidence to draw conclusions and to make recommendations to Government.

The Terms of Reference are published and emailed to relevant stakeholders with a call for written evidence. You might want to check that important stakeholders have been notified.

## Committee meeting briefings

A committee meeting briefing is a document prepared by staff for committee meetings. It provides information about the meeting itself, and about issues that will be discussed in the meeting. The Committee briefing is a private document that is prepared for committee members only, and is usually circulated to members a few days before the meeting to help them to prepare.

Committee briefings can vary in length from just a few pages to a more substantial document, depending on the topic and the amount of time staff have to prepare. Whatever the length, a well-written committee briefing can improve members' knowledge of the topic and support their work as committee members and participation in committee meetings.

Committee staff in many parliaments produce briefings for most committee meetings. The format and content of these vary even from committee to committee in a single parliament, but most briefings usually:

- Provide essential information about the meeting and invited guests
- Set out information about the issue under consideration at the meeting
- Summarise any written information from stakeholders / the government / the public that the committee has received
- Suggest questions for members to ask when they talk to stakeholders, especially government ministers and officials.

Your committee should have a standard format for these briefings, based on the needs and preferences of the committee members and staff.

A well-written committee briefing can improve members' knowledge of the topic and support their work as committee members and participation in committee meetings.

You should always consult your manager to agree priorities for a briefing, based on the time available and resources available on this particular topic. But generally it can be helpful to think of the content of briefings as a collection of key sections that can be included or excluded from any given briefing.

These key sections are:



**Basic information about the meeting and topic:** for example: date and time, location, topic, names of stakeholders (if any).

**Stakeholder biographies:** Members should know who they are meeting. The brief should include short professional biographies (usually one paragraph) of any stakeholders invited.

**Background to the meeting / topic:** A clear factual description of what has already happened in relation to a bill or policy that the committee is examining.

**Summary of submissions:** If the committee has received any information from outside, staff should include a list of submissions and summary of their content.

**Summary of key issues:** a summary of the important / controversial issues and concerns about the topic.

**Relevant articles:** a set of useful and relevant articles or opinion pieces on the topic.

**Suggested questions:** Based on the submissions, key issues, and press cuttings, staff could suggest some questions that the Members may want to ask stakeholders, or to consider in private meeting.

## Writing Suggested Questions

### What are suggested questions?

The suggested questions in a briefing are for the committee members to ask stakeholders or representatives of the government. They are intended as suggestions only, members can choose to ask different questions as they wish, but many members find a list of suggested questions helpful.

Suggested questions are not usually required in a briefing for a private meeting which only committee members will attend.

### Writing suggested questions

These questions must be unbiased and factual, but that does not mean they will be boring! This can be one of the most interesting tasks in writing the briefing.

To help you draft effective questions, consider two main points:

- What information you are seeking; and
- To whom the question is addressed.

## 1 What information you are seeking

When writing questions consider what information does the committee need in order for it to make an informed decision? Then strive to draft questions that will draw out this information from stakeholders and government representatives. For example, questions can:

- Ask for evidence (facts and details) to support an assertion;
- Ask for opinions and views;
- Ask for personal experience;
- Ask for an explanation of differences of opinion between stakeholders;
- Ask for an explanation of a complicated or unclear issue.

If the stakeholders invited to the meeting have already submitted written evidence, this can help you to write effective questions that draw out any additional information you believe will be required.

## 2 To whom the question is addressed

Different stakeholders can prompt different types of questions. It would not be helpful to ask an NGO which ministries have been consulted on a bill; they would not know. Nor would it be useful to ask a government representative for their personal experiences or views. Questions should be drafted according to the type of stakeholder that will be present at the meeting. For example:

- **NGOs / Experts:** Questions to these stakeholders could be about their expert views on a policy or bill (or a detail of it); why they hold their views (especially if they disagree with other's views); what evidence they have; what is international best practice; what changes they want; and what recommendations they have.



*For example: Some questions to  
a Maternal Health NGO*

Why are you calling for a change in the government's approach to maternal healthcare? What are your biggest concerns about this policy / this bill?

What do you think of the Government's promise to invest 30% more money toward improving maternal healthcare?

- **Members of the public affected by an issue:** Questions to these stakeholders could be about their personal experiences and views on the bill or policy area.

*For example: Some questions to  
a midwife*

In your experience, what are the main problems with maternal healthcare?

What affect would this new bill / policy have on your work as a midwife?

- **Representatives of the Government:** Questions to government representatives could include precise questions on the wording of the bill or the details of the policy, and what process it has gone through in order to produce the bill or policy.

*For example: Some questions for a representative of the Health Ministry*

What evidence is there to support the Government's claim that the number of maternal deaths has gone down?

Maternal Health international claims that the government must provide more support to rural midwives. How do you respond to this?

How will this policy be implemented in each region?

## Tips on writing questions

**Order of questions:** Put general questions first, then group the following questions by subject.

**Use short sentences and plain language.** Questions should not usually be longer than 2 sentences. Try reading them out loud to colleagues to test how easily they are said and understood.

**Provide some context:** Some questions require members to be familiar with a particular fact or are relevant to a particular section of a bill. Either explain this in the question, or include a paragraph of explanation above the question text.

**Include focused questions:** As well as broad questions such as 'What are your main concerns about the bill'; ask focused questions about details of the policy or bill, such as 'The government states it will raise the budget by 30%, why do you say in your written submission that this is not realistic?'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The above guidance is extracted from the 'Writing Committee Briefings: A Guide for Myanmar Hluttaw Committee Staff' produced by HoC staff working in the Myanmar Hluttaw, in cooperation with senior Hluttaw staff. Published by WFD & UK Aid in January 2017.

## Conclusions and recommendations in Committee reports

Committee research staff are required to draft Committee Reports and the conclusions they contain for consideration by the Committee. Effective recommendations should be:

- **as challenging as possible**, subject to the need to secure consensus in the Committee, while still being achievable;
- **as precise as possible**, such as including timescales and SMART targets. This is important because you will get a better government response if civil servants understand what is intended and how it might be done;
- **free-standing**. They should be whole and self-explanatory sentences. In addition to providing clarity, this enables them to be incorporated into the summary of conclusions and recommendations without extensive changes.

In general it is better to draft conclusions and make recommendations as you go along, so they are as close as possible to the evidence they are based on, rather than leaving them to the end of each chapter. But where the recommendations emerge from a complex argument, it may be necessary to examine all aspects of the matter before making a series of related recommendations.

Try to avoid making trivial or minor recommendations, as they divert attention from the more important ones. Reports should identify the most important recommendations. How this should be done will vary, but it is important that the Committee's main messages (conclusions as well as recommendations) are not lost among a mass of minor recommendations.

It is important that the Committee's main messages (conclusions as well as recommendations) are not lost among a mass of minor recommendations

# 15

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Further  
Reading

- **Writing for Readers**, House of Commons Library, 2011. This is the core guidance for effective writing in the House of Commons Library. It includes 10 good writing principles.
- **How to write in plain English**, Plain English Campaign, 2016
- **Guidelines for parliamentary research services**, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 2015. The guidelines provide useful context on the role of parliamentary research services and how they can function effectively.
- **The Magenta Book: HM Treasury guidance on what to consider when designing an evaluation**, HM Treasury, 2011. Provides practical information on how to evaluate the costs and benefits of different policies.
- **The Green Book: appraisal and evaluation in central government**, HM Treasury, 2015. HM Treasury guidance for UK public sector bodies on how to appraise proposals. It provides more information on how to analyse evidence.

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