

How to write a paper

Training

Centre
Rebuilding the centre ground

This document explains how to write a paper, what it should include and how to format a paper.

Part one

Creating an idea and your aims

General rules

- Make sure to include sources where you include statistics, quote other people or quote other peoples work. Sources should be fully referenced using our referencing guide.
- Try to write the article in plain English. If you do need to use terms, theories or ideas which you think an ordinary person would not be able to understand then make sure to explain them. This ensures that our work is accessible to as many people as possible.
- Once you have written your paper it is best to get someone who can check the document over for minor spelling mistakes. This can either be someone you know personally or our Head of Publications.
- When writing a paper try to include your own opinions on an issue, whilst quotes are important they should mainly be a way to supplement the argument you are making.
- Papers have authors, researchers and editors. To be an author the individual must have written over 25% of the paper.

Creating an idea

Start by deciding the subject you want to write it about. Often this is an issue you feel passionate about, something you have a particular interest in, or an area you have first-hand experience of. At this stage, all you need is an idea of what area of policy you would like to focus on, for instance, Health, and what your specific policy area is, for instance, drug laws within the UK.

Submitting an idea to us

Whether you are a member of our team, a regular writer, or someone who wants to write for us, the first step is to submit your idea to us. We tend to accept policy-focused papers more than any other type but feel free to send us submissions for other types of papers if there is anything you would particularly like to look at.

First, write an email or message to let us know what you would like to write about. This should include what the paper would focus on, your solution to any policy issues you have identified, and whether you have any specialisms in the area. Ideas can then be submitted to us either by emailing us directly at info@centrehinktank.co.uk or speaking to our Head of Policy or Director. The Director or Head of Policy needs to approve the article and the person writing it.

Creating a research area and question

Whilst creating an idea for where you want to focus your research is relatively easy, the harder process is to narrow down what you want to research. For instance, a broad area such as health or even drug laws is very broad and would take far more than one paper to cover. However, you also want to ensure your topic is not too small. An area such as understanding social care in Hertfordshire, for instance, may be too narrow and would likely not have enough information for a full paper. The aim is to find the right balance where the topic is large enough for a paper but not so large that it cannot be tackled within a single paper.

There are a few steps you can use to take a general idea and turn it into a specific research area which will limit how wide your research looks:

- First, decide the area of policy you want to focus on; in this example, it would be health.
- Second, decide a particular policy or issue you want to focus on within that area, for example, drug policy.
- Third, choose a specific issue within that, that could be the impact of drug legislation.
- Fourth, if you would like to focus further on the topic or there is too much information on an area in step four, then you can look at a smaller area, for instance, the impact of drug legislation on criminal gangs.

You can then turn this into a question; in this case, it would be "how has recent drug legislation impacted the behaviour of criminal gangs" or, if you would like a broader area, "What is the impact of present drug legislation on the UK"?

Deciding on how you would like to look into the issue

Once you have a question, you can then use this to decide how you would like to look into the issue. There are four ways of doing this, each of which with a distinct style:

- **Policy Discussion Document:** A policy discussion document is an open-ended paper that often does not propose a single course of action. Instead, it is simply a way to weigh up existing or proposed policies. This paper normally looks at the background and history in a particular area of policy, existing laws that you would like to focus on, whether that policy has been successful, possible courses of action or possible interventions that could be taken, and what issues need to be considered when creating new policies in this area.
- **Case study paper:** A case study paper looks at a specific case study and tries to understand what lessons can be learnt from it. These papers normally include a broad explanation of how different countries tackle a particular issue, an in-depth look at the specific case study, and what lessons that case study has to teach the government when creating new policies or what policies we should use from that area.
- **Briefing papers:** A briefing paper explores a policy and then offers a policy proposal. In these papers, we tend to offer multiple policy solutions, which can include recommendations for the government, agencies, charities, the media, or any other group with an impact in the area. In some situations, we also propose more than one type of policy. For instance, we may propose a stretch policy, which is what we would do in a perfect world, and a manageable one, which we feel is politically feasible and could be carried out today. This type of paper normally has a section setting out what the issue is that needs to be fixed, a case study of a country or area that has solved this issue, interviews with those who are involved or knowledgeable in the area, and then a policy proposal which takes into account how a policy would be put in place within the UK.
- It is important to note that not all papers follow these exact formats and that they are meant to guide papers rather than control them. If there is a format that works better for you or suits the subject better, then it is normally best to use it.

Deciding the aims of the research

Now you know what your area of research is and how you want to research it, the next step is to decide what the aims are for your research. Is it to better understand an area of policy, or is it to understand how a policy has affected a certain group of people? There are a few aims you may have for a paper:

- It could be that you aim to propose new solutions to an existing issue if it is already a known and researched area of policy.
- It could be that you aim to propose new solutions to an existing issue if it is already a known and researched area of policy.
- Expand the amount of research on the issue you want to solve to help with future policy solutions.
- Your aim may be to support a particular policy solution which has already been proposed, such as “investigating why we should legalise cannabis” whilst also looking at some of the arguments against this move.
- You may propose a new policy, such as “a new system of drug regulation within the UK”.
- The focus could instead be on research rather than policy and look at a particular topic, which could be “the impact of drug laws on gangs within the UK”.
- Responses to new laws or policy developments, such as “Passing the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will harm minorities, not help”.

Examples

1. A roadmap for reform: Our paper on devolution focuses on a roadmap for reforming the system. This mainly focuses on explanations of current policy and then a large number of specific policy recommendations. Read the full paper here:
<https://centralthinktank.co.uk/2023/04/devolution-revolution/>

2. New data: By looking at over 100 think tanks, we created new data on the think tank sector alongside polling. Read the full paper here:
<https://centralthinktank.co.uk/2023/11/following-the-money/>

3. Interviews: Some papers base their contents on interviews with experts in the area and those with experience. Our paper on the Australian Model for assisted dying included interviews with practitioners, loved ones, and politicians. Read the full paper here:
<https://centralthinktank.co.uk/2025/06/the-australian-model/>

4. Polling: Some papers focus on polling and exploring the results. Our paper on centrism explored the political views of the general public and how many people aligned with more centrist ideologies. Read the full paper here:
<https://centralthinktank.co.uk/2023/02/polling-the-political-centre/>

Part two

Building the structure



Planning your core arguments

Your first step in taking your idea and turning it into a paper is to first write down the question you came up with previously. Then you need to create four or five sub-questions or central arguments that will get you to the answer to that question. These could be:

- What are the current drug laws within the UK?
- Have our current drug laws failed?
- What alternative systems are used in other countries?
- Could these be used within the UK and what challenges would we have in adopting these systems?

By the end of this section, you should have your main research question written down alongside the sub-questions.

Types of structure for sections

The next step is to set out the main points within each section, essentially what you would like to cover within that area of research. There are a few ways in which paragraphs can be structured based on what the purpose of the paragraph is:

Understanding a current law

How the issue has previously been approached by lawmakers: This is where you explain what policies have been used in the past within the UK to tackle a particular issue or what options the government has not used. For instance, within drug policy, there are three main approaches. First is legalisation, where the sale and usage are legal and will not result in any sanctions; second is decriminalisation, which often sees the system move towards treatment rather than arresting people for usage, but selling it is still illegal; and finally, is criminalisation, where the substance is prohibited by the government, and use or sale can lead to criminal charges.

Within these paragraphs, you would first identify the specific approach the government has taken or could take, what it involves, what your view is on that particular policy, where the approach has been used around the world, what the supposed benefits of that policy are, and what the potential drawbacks are.

How the issue has previously been approached by other organisations and individuals

This involves engaging in debates on a certain topic, such as an article or another paper which has been written on the subject. This type of section is often used at the start of a paper, but can also be useful when trying to engage with a topic which has seen large amounts of debate. If you agree with a particular article or paper, then use the conclusions to back up your case and show how it supports your argument. If you disagree, then explain whether you think the original author has overlooked any important points. To engage with the work, you can quote directly from articles or papers. You can also conduct your interviews with those who have written work on the subject or ask individuals for quotes about a particular issue.

The history and background of a policy

This is where you set out some of the history behind why a policy was introduced. With drug policies, it could mean explaining the issues that led Portugal to decriminalise drugs. This includes the background before the policy was introduced, which was high drug use in Portugal a high number of deaths from drugs and increasing HIV/AIDS rates. The section would then look at what the aims of the new policy were, which in the case of Portugal could be said to be reducing drug usage and deaths as the country had seen under criminalisation. It was also a focus on harm reduction.

The main aspects of a policy

This is where you briefly list the main aspects of the UK approach to implementing a policy or the approach of another country. This includes what policies they have in place to deal with an issue. For example, in Portugal, it could be expanding drug treatment centres to get people away from using drugs and to ensure they could get help if they needed it. Their policy also included dissuasion commissions to show people why using drugs is harmful and to move them towards not using drugs in the future, rather than arresting for small quantities of drugs, viewing the consumption of small amounts of drugs as an illness rather than a crime. Finally, if the country you are looking at is not the UK, explain the background of the policy and how it differs from our policy within the UK.

The advantages and disadvantages of a policy

You can look at whether the policy has worked and the advantages or disadvantages of the policy. In Portugal, this could include how the policy of decriminalisation has impacted the number of people using drugs. In this case, most sources say it decreased the number of people who took drugs, but some argue that it has increased.

This section would aim to answer who is right. For instance, you could discuss how the policy has affected hospitalisations, which could include a chart of hospitalisation rates alongside an explanation of how the policy affected rates. Another statistic is the death rates from drug usage before and after the policy was adopted, proving that it was the decriminalisation policy itself that caused the change, rather than other policies or factors. For instance, could the change in government after 2002 have impacted the outcomes?

In short, you want this section to identify and understand what the advantages and disadvantages of a particular policy have been. This can either be used to understand an existing policy within the UK or the impact of a policy on another country.

Whilst you may only use some of these sections, it is a good idea to copy and paste the ones that you do want to use and to edit them, so they fit the subject you are looking at. By the end of this section, you should have your main research question written down alongside the sub-questions, key sources you would like to use for that section, and a clear structure you would like to use for that section.

Researching each section

Now you have the main questions, you can then expand on these. You aim to create the framework for the individual sections of this paper. First, briefly write down your answer to each question. In this example, we will take “Have our current drug laws failed?” as the question.

Your answer to this question may be that the current drug laws have failed. However, this is just a statement which is not backed up by evidence and may not be correct.

The first step to creating a section is to build up a list of key pieces of evidence, both those that support your argument and those that disagree with it. The aim is to understand what has been written about this argument and whether your original idea is correct.

Once you have evidence, you can then bullet point how you would like to summarise or interact with this research. That could be to use the structures for sections set out below, or you can build on the research with new material such as interviews or your research in the area.

By the end of this section, you should have your sub-questions, each of which contains bullet points of previous research and how you would like to build on this, such as through the use of interviews.

Part three

Writing the paper



Creating a title

Now you have a structure for your paper, the first step is to create a title and a subtitle. It is often best to come up with the sub-title first, as this is a longer and often easier title. This could be “understanding the Portuguese decriminalisation programme for drugs,” but it simply acts to state what the paper is looking at.

The main title is a shorter, catchier title which draws attention to the paper whilst also being related to the topic. For instance, for our paper about dark money in think tanks, we called this “Following the money”.

Adding an Executive Summary

The executive summary sums up your main policy proposals or the main points you make within your paper. Each point is two or three sentences in length, briefly stating the policy.

Writing your introduction

Your introduction is normally around a page long. It includes

- An outline of your subject, including what your paper will and will not focus on.
- A description of why the issue is important both generally and in politics today. In politics, there are hundreds of issues in the news, on social media, and in peoples daily lives. You need to tell them why this issue is one they should specifically care about. For instance, this can include how many people are impacted or how the issue impacts a certain part of society, such as public services or a specific group of people. Then, briefly tell the reader what we stand to gain by looking at this area or why solutions can have a large benefit.
- A brief section that gives some context and background to that debate or issue. This could be previous articles or papers written on the subject, previous laws passed in that area, or policies which have been proposed in that area. In short, you want to give the reader some background knowledge on the subject so they know where your article fits into the wider debate on the topic.
- An outline of each section you will include with a brief description of what the section will cover and what it will conclude.
- What the overall argument of the paper will be?

It should also include any definitions that you may need and a small summary of the argument that you are putting forward in the paper.

Writing the individual sections

At this point, the individual sections of the paper should be planned out and simply require writing out. The sections should look like this:

- Introduction explaining the aim of the section and what it will cover.
- The main section as planned.
- Conclusion summarising the key points and takeaways from the section.

Finally, ensure any interviews are conducted and add them to the individual section you have written.

Writing the policy solutions section

You should aim to keep your policy solutions and the main body of your article separate from each other. Once you have finished the main paper, you can then add a new heading called “policy proposals”. You can either detail a single change the government could take as a result of the paper or multiple policy changes impacting the government and any other organisations. For drug laws, this would be:

- You could use a direct policy solution such as decriminalising drugs, which will need to include how this will be done and what laws would need to be changed or abolished.
- You could also support creating an independent review of drug laws and how they can be changed. There is also the option to test a policy such as trialling decriminalisation in small areas of the UK.
- You could also suggest the creation of a new parliamentary committee or ministerial position, in this case focusing on drug laws. Finally, you could also introduce “non-statutory guidance”, in other words, guidance which does not need to be followed by law.

If the issue requires multiple policy solutions, then bullet point them out in a list. Each bullet point should include the first sentence in bold outlining the specific policy, for instance, “Increase pay for NHS workers”. Any additional sentences after this should explain why the policy will work and the benefits.

Writing a conclusion

The conclusion simply wraps up your argument with some concluding thoughts. It is your chance to tell a reader what you would like them to take away from your paper. The conclusion is designed to summarise your arguments and policy proposals in a short paragraph. It normally has the following components:

- A single sentence should state the overall conclusion of the article. For decriminalisation, it would be “This paper shows how decriminalising drugs has not just worked in Portugal, but it can also work in the UK”.
- Restate the main arguments you made in the paper within each section.
- Whether there is any possible future research that we may be able to do on the topic, or what other research you would like to see next on this issue.
- Papers with policy proposals often end with a short sentence on what policy should be pursued as a result of the paper.

The conclusion should not include new sources or arguments.

Releasing the paper

Once the paper is completed, email either the document or a link to the Google document to info@centreforthinktank.co.uk and we get back to you about any possible changes or when the paper will be released. We try to release no more than one paper per month and alongside papers we may also ask for quotes from you about the conclusions, for you to appear on our podcast or for you to record a video on the paper.

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