

Briefing and Debriefing

What is a briefing?

Briefing, according to Wikipedia, is a short meeting among stakeholders of an activity immediately before (briefing / in-briefing) or after the activity (debriefing). Briefings are most common in sports, army, and aviation, but also used in advertising, teaching, psychology, etc. Briefings are often made based on checklists. The aim is to inform about (or to recall on) important issues.

Briefings, whether in the form of briefing notes, longer briefing papers, or oral briefings, are used to keep decision makers informed about the issues they are responsible for. In public and private organizations, briefings are the principal means of communication between managers and CEOs or other senior officials.

Senior officials must constantly learn and retain information about an enormous range of topics and issues, which change rapidly. The only way they can do this is to rely on concise, clear, reliable briefings.

In development cooperation, briefings are used to update consultants and other staff with newest context information, debriefings to inform decision makers about findings of evaluations and studies and respective recommendations.

The briefing note is key for every form of briefing, be it oral or written, face to face or distant.

What is a briefing note and when is it used?

Written briefings are usually done in the form of briefing notes. A briefing note is a short paper that quickly and effectively informs a decision-maker about an issue. A useful briefing note distils often complex information into a short, well-structured document.

Briefing notes usually deal with “issues” – subjects of debate. But briefing notes are also prepared for any topic someone needs to be informed about. It might be a policy matter, a situation, a report, action by the government or another organization.

Briefing notes are typically written for those senior-level decision-makers who

- have to keep track of many, often unrelated, issues;
- may not be familiar with the issues and may not have any related background;
- for whatever reason, cannot spend time doing their own research;
- need a capsule version of the key points and considerations about an issue.

What are the characteristics of a good briefing note (BN)?

A well-prepared briefing note quickly and efficiently fills a person in on an issue. The most valuable BN is clear, concise and easy to read. To succeed, a briefing note should be:

- Short: One to two pages, and always as short as possible.
- Concise: A short document isn't necessarily concise; concise means every word is used as efficiently as possible.

- Clear: Keep it simple and to the point; always keep your reader firmly in mind and include only what matters to that reader.
- Reliable: The information in a briefing note must be accurate, sound and dependable; any missing information or questions about the information should be pointed out.
- Readable: Use plain language and design your BN for maximum readability (use empty space, subheadings, lists, font, and other means of making reading easier).

How is a BN structured?

Briefing notes often follow a standard format, but THERE ARE MANY VARIATIONS on that format. We will look at a variety of sample briefing notes and briefing note templates in class. The most important point to remember about the structure of briefing notes is that they have three main parts:

- The purpose (usually stated as the issue, topic or purpose).
- A summary of the facts (what this section contains and the headings used will be determined by the purpose of the briefing note).
- The conclusion (this may be a conclusion, a recommendation or other advice, or both).

These three main parts are presented under some or all of the following section headings. Remember, any briefing note you write will only have the sections that are relevant to your purpose and audience.

Issue (also Topic, Purpose): A concise statement of the issue, proposal or problem. This section should explain in one or two lines why the BN matters to the reader. It sets out in the form of a question or a statement what the rest of the note is about.

Background: The details the reader needs in order to understand what follows (how a situation arose, previous decisions / problems, actions leading up to the current situation). Typically this section gives a brief summary of the history of the topic and other background information. What led up to this problem or issue? How has it evolved? Do not repeat information that you're including in the Current Status section.

Current Status: Describes only the current situation, who is involved, what is happening now, the current state of the matter, issue, situation, etc.

Key Considerations: A summary of important facts, considerations, developments – everything that needs to be considered now. While you will have to decide what to include and what to leave out, this section should be as unbiased as possible. Your aim is to present all the details required for the reader to be informed or to make an informed decision. Keep the reader's needs uppermost in your mind when selecting and presenting the facts. Remember to substantiate any statements with evidence and to double check your facts. Additional details may be attached as appendices.

Options (also Next Steps, Comments): Basically, observations about the key considerations and what they mean; a concise description either of the options and sometimes their pros and cons or of what will happen next.

Conclusion and/or Recommendations: Conclusions summarize what you want your reader to infer from the BN. Many readers jump immediately to this section, so be sure it covers the points you most want your reader to be clear about. Do not introduce anything new in the Conclusion. If you are including a recommendations section, it should offer the best and most sound advice you can offer. Make sure the recommendation is clear, direct and substantiated by the facts you have put forward.

Before you start writing, be sure you are clear about:

- Why you're writing the BN (your purpose)?
- Who you're writing the BN for (your reader)?
- What that person most needs to know?
- The points you will cover?
- How you will structure your information?

After you have drafted your BN, use the following questions as an editing guide:

- Is the purpose of the briefing note clear?
- Is the language simple, economical and clear?
- Is everything there that needs to be there?
- Is anything there that isn't essential to the purpose?
- Is the BN easy to read, understand and remember?
- Do the sections lead logically from one to another?
- Is the BN designed so that it is inviting to the reader?
- Is there a good balance between empty spaces and text?
- Has the briefing note been carefully edited and proofread?

Written briefing note or oral briefing?

A written briefing note is the best way to prepare an oral briefing. In your briefing note, select the issues to present orally. Be prepared to go in-depth according to the interest and questions of your partner.