

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE ISSUE BRIEF

WHY AN ISSUE BRIEF

The “issue brief” assignments are meant to prepare you to present your thoughts and arguments on an environmental issue in a concise manner. This is helpful in communicating to politicians at the local, state and federal levels. It is also helpful in conveying information in the various forms of the media (to different groups of people). You can write an issue brief on anything that “gets to you”. You will do one issue brief this semester.

CONTENT:

An Issue Brief begins by stating the question or problem:

- Explain in a paragraph the nature and important causes of that problem. Clearly identify your locality and the decision maker(s) whom you are addressing.
- Give the reader the major background facts and figures that show the dimensions of the problem. Explain clearly the impact on the locality you are concerned with.
- Cite relevant legislation, rules, etc.
- Avoid doomsday language, unless it really is doomsday. Remember, possible harm and actual harm are not the same. Make clear where there are uncertainties.
- Avoid picking a huge issue, if you are only going to suggest a partial solution. Focus on the aspect that your solutions are intended to address.

The brief then lists and explains several alternative courses of action proposed to deal with the problem:

- Doing nothing (always an important alternative) or taking a series of specific actions.
- For each option describe the probable effects, positive and negative, of following that plan. Be as specific and quantitative as possible. Explain what aspects are uncertain.
- Say what values or interests are benefited by each alternative and which are harmed. This is important so your reader can see why the problem is really an issue. If it’s just a matter of choosing the best solution, maybe it isn’t really an issue.
- Avoid a list of solutions that are not really alternatives: this happens when you end up recommending several of your “alternatives.” It means they were not really alternatives, merely different parts of one overall solution.
- Avoid slanted descriptions that prejudice the outcome. Try to describe each alternative in an even-handed way. Save editorializing for the end.

Your brief should conclude by recommending one of the proposed courses of action:

- Be sure your solution is commensurate with the problem. If it is only a partial solution, maybe you need to narrow down your original issue.
- Explain your reasons for choosing that one.
- State clearly what principles you are upholding by choosing as you do.

GRAMMAR AND SPELLING ERRORS TO AVOID:

- Run-on sentences; sentence fragments
- Spelling or word confusion: eg. *their* for *there*, *it’s* for *its*, not caught by spell checker.
- Lack of paragraph breaks when new topics are introduced
- Awkward phrases and sentences; needless repetition; topics and ideas out of order
- Other stuff _____

ALL SOURCES MUST BE CITED IN THE TEXT AND AT THE END OF THE BRIEF

LITERATURE CITED MUST BE LISTED AT THE END (do not worry about reference style for now)