

Writing Briefing Notes

This Guide was developed in partnership with Cabinet Secretariat, Communications and Consultation Branch, and the Centre for Learning and Development

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I OVERVIEW

The Premier and all Cabinet Ministers must be briefed on significant developments and issues within departments in the event that they are asked to address such developments in a public forum. A concise, well-written briefing note is an effective communications tool for that purpose.

Briefing notes are intended to provide the Premier/Minister/Senior Executive with an at-a-glance clear understanding of a specific issue, as well as a suggested approach to addressing the issue publicly by focusing on key messages.

II WHEN TO PREPARE BRIEFING NOTES

Briefing notes are usually prepared upon request from the Executive, but should also be generated by other staff as appropriate. Circumstances generally determine when one should be prepared. These include:

- When informing the Minister/Executive of new developments, or new developments on an ongoing issue
- When a Ministerial or Executive decision is required on a client or project file
- When an issue has not yet been made public, but is of such a nature that
 Government should be prepared to take a position if it does become public
- When issues have been raised publicly (e.g. in the media, the House of Assembly, at a public meeting)
- When preparing the Minister for interviews or news conferences on some issues; in this context, a briefing note would likely be one of several communications tools used

Ideally, briefing notes are prepared in advance of an issue being made public -proactive communications management. Frequently, however, an issue is already
public or is about to become public when briefing notes are prepared -- "crisis"
communications. In the latter circumstances, there are inherent time constraints
imposed upon everyone involved -- from the person who drafts the note to the person
who gives final approval.

III TYPES OF BRIEFING NOTES

There are two types of briefing notes used within Government:

- ➤ General Issues- Those used to brief the Premier, Ministers and others on general issues
- Question and Answer-Those designed specifically to prepare the Premier and Ministers for Question Period in the House of Assembly or for questions raised by the media.

Tight deadlines notwithstanding, the approved briefing note format must still be followed, with due care and attention to concise wording and accurate background information.

Both types contain a short background on the issues. Those used to prepare the Premier and Ministers for Question Period will also contain suggested responses to questions that may be raised in the House of Assembly or by the media.

IV POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR ALL BRIEFING NOTES

- Briefing notes should be no longer than one page (letter size) with 1" margins and using Times New Roman, 11 point font.
- Notes must be readable, to the point and address all the relevant issues.
- Sentence length is a key factor in readability. A sentence is more likely to be clear if it is short and conveys one idea. If a longer sentence is necessary, be sure that it relates to the same subject and the language is simple.
- Avoid departmental/bureaucratic jargon if at all possible.
- Use active voice.
- Be alert for words, phrases and sentences that will cause the reader to stumble.
- Include in the background only information that is relevant to the issue at hand and is critical to having an understanding of the issue.
- Briefing notes must be prepared in a timely fashion.
- All briefing notes prepared for the Premier must be signed or initialed by the Minister after s/he reviews it. If Ministerial approval is not possible, the department may indicate that Ministerial approval is pending to facilitate timely circulation of a briefing note, recognizing that ministerial approval must be sought at the earliest possible opportunity.

V FORMAT FOR "QUESTION AND ANSWER" BRIEFING NOTE

Briefing Note Department of.....

Title:		
Issue:		
Anticipated Questions: • •		
Key Message: •		
Other Suggested Response(s): • • •		
Background: • • • • •		
Prepared by/Approved by:Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Department of XX Month, Day, Year		

VI WRITING A "QUESTION AND ANSWER" BRIEFING NOTE

Briefing Note Department of.....

Title:

Bold, concise title that accurately describes the topic of the note.

Issue:

Clear, concise statement of what the issue is, why the note was prepared (e.g., Cabinet Secretariat requested the note), and the purpose of the note (e.g., seeking direction from the Premier, or for information purposes only). For example, "This note was requested by the Premier's Office", or "This note was provided by the Department of XX for information purposes only".

Anticipated Questions:

This section identifies questions most likely to be asked of the Premier/Minister by the media or in the House of Assembly. Questions could be broad-based questions relating to policy, or they could be specific to a situation or issue.

Use traditional journalistic questions: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY & HOW. For example:

- Who will be affected? Who will benefit?
- What is being proposed? What is being done about it? What has Government done about it? What will Government do about it? What is Government doing to ensure this won't happen again?
- When will it come into effect? When will it happen? When is Government going to do something about it?
- Where will the greatest impact be? Where is it being done? Where does
 Government stand on this issue?

- Why did Government intervene? Why did Government not intervene? Why did Government take a particular course of action? Why won't Government take a particular course of action? Why is Government allowing this to happen?
- How is this going to work?
- If you were a reporter, or a member of the Opposition, or a member of a lobby group or other stakeholder group with a vested interest in this issue, what questions do you think you would ask? This is not the time to be timid.

Asking yourself such questions will help determine the precise questions to apply to the issue/situation/development that is the subject of the briefing note.

In the briefing note, the specific questions should be asked in bullet form.

Key Message:

This section should include the key message that needs to be presented on this particular issue.

Other Suggested Response(s):

- This section suggests what Government's response should be to the questions anticipated. Like the Anticipated Questions, they should be in bullet form, with one message in each bullet point.
- There is usually more than one response for each question asked.
- Each response should be short -- one line if that is possible to convey a particular key message.
- Keep the language simple. "The report contextualizes the east coast industry through cross-jurisdictional comparison" just won't cut it.

Ask yourself some questions:

• Who is the audience?

- What are the key messages Government would want the public, or a particular audience, to hear?
- What will be the response of the public/stakeholders if a particular position is taken?
- What is Government's policy on this issue?
- Is there a link between this issue and the Department's/Government's overall priorities?
- Does this issue have some bearing on the policy of another Department? Work being done by another Department?
- Does Government have a good track record on this issue? Is this a precedent-setting case?
- What is Government trying to accomplish with a particular policy or course of action?
- Is this something the Minister/Premier would/would not want to be definitive about (ie give a yes or no answer)?
- Is there confidential information that should not be given to the public? How should that be handled?
- Is legal action involved? Likely to be involved? How does that affect what the Minister/Premier can say?

Background:

The background section provides the key elements of information that the Minister will need to have a quick but very clear understanding of the issue/situation. It must focus on those points directly relevant to the issue identified in the first section.

Use bullets to present concise pieces of information.

Prepared by/Approved by:Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Department of XX Month, Day, Year

VII FORMAT FOR "GENERAL ISSUES" BRIEFING NOTE

Briefing Note Department of.....

Title:
Issue:
Background:
Current Status:
Next Steps:
Action Required:
Prepared by/Approved by:Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Department of XX Reviewed by: Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Cabinet Secretariat Ministerial Review: (either "Received" or "Pending") Month, Day, Year

VIII WRITING A "GENERAL ISSUES" BRIEFING NOTE

Briefing Note Department of...

Title: Bold, concise title that accurately describes the topic of the note.

Issue: Clear, concise statement of what the issue is, why the note was prepared (e.g., Cabinet Secretariat requested the note), and the purpose of the note. For example, "This note was requested by the Premier's Office", or "This note was provided by the Department of XX for information purposes only".

Background:

• Relevant background should be outlined in a chronological and logical format using bullets.

Current Status:

- Provide an update of current information.
- This section should not repeat information provided in the Background section.

Next Steps:

• Outline the next steps to be pursued.

Action Required:

- Specify whether action is required from the Premier's Office.
- This section may include what action is needed, what will happen if action does not occur and what will the impacts of specific actions be.

Prepared by/Approved by:Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Department of XX

Reviewed by:

Initial. Last Name/Initial. Last Name, Cabinet Secretariat

Ministerial Review:

(either "Received" or "Pending")

Month Day, Year

IX STORAGE OF BRIEFING NOTES

- A copy of the signed note must be maintained in the Minister's files. For notes that are provided to Cabinet Secretariat, an original, signed version must be sent to Cabinet Secretariat.
- Draft copies of briefing notes should not be maintained in departments.