

### Guidelines for the Policy Brief

The major assignment for this class is a policy brief on a current issue in environmental policy. A list of topics from which you may choose is at the end of this document. The goal of this assignment is to apply topics raised in class to a current policy debate and to communicate these issues to a broader audience. Think of this as a document prepared by a think tank or advocacy group designed to inform the public about a current policy issue. The brief should be professionally presented, include figures and/or graphs when appropriate, and be suitable for posting on the web site of an environmental organization. You may work in groups of up to three students on each brief. I will ask each member of the group to submit a self-evaluation of the group's efforts along with the assignment.

Your paper should begin with a brief description of your issue: both the environmental problem to be addressed, and the policy or policies under consideration. The brief should review the theory that is relevant to your topic and provide examples of the implementation of related policies. Your brief should apply the theory to the topic at hand in a way that allows you to draw *your own conclusions* about the policy under consideration.

Note that you are free to cite the views of others in your paper. However, the final paper must be *in your own words*. You should not quote directly from another paper unless the exact wording of the author is important. Rather, you should incorporate materials from other sources into your paper using your own words. Finally, when you use ideas, facts, or analysis taken from another source, it is important that you cite the source. This is true *whether the material is directly quoted or merely paraphrased*. Be aware that failure to properly acknowledge the contributions of others can be considered plagiarism and will be severely punished.

To get you thinking about your topic, a short 1-2 page outline proposing what you will discuss in your policy brief is due on **Wednesday, March 30**. The short outline should briefly discuss the background on your chosen policy, including any relevant examples you have found, and include some preliminary ideas of how you will proceed with your analysis. You are encouraged to come talk with me about ideas for the policy brief before the March 30th deadline. *Even though the outline is not due until March 30, you should begin preliminary research on your policy soon! The late due date gives students a chance to see what topics covered in class are relevant for the brief and allows time to do preliminary research on these topics.*

The final policy brief will be due at the beginning of our last class meeting **Wednesday, May 4**. The brief should be roughly 10 and 15 pages in length, single-spaced (about 5,000 to 7,500 words). Figures, tables, and references do not count against the page limits or word count.

The last page of this document includes potential topics for policy brief. Each group will be assigned to one of these topics. I will ask each of you to rank the topics in order of preference and will assign groups based on these rankings.

Below are some guidelines for writing a good policy brief. Examples of policy briefs taken from various environmental policy think tanks are available in Blackboard.

- Content:
  - The paper should apply theories and techniques used in class to a *specific* policy problem. Avoid generalities.
    - For example, don't just provide a general summary of how a carbon tax works. Provide specific examples of how it has been used (or could be used).
  - Things I will look for:
    - Description of the problem
      - Is it clear? Are sufficient details provided?
      - Does it draw the reader in? Is the reader motivated to care about the environmental problem you are addressing?
    - Depth of analysis
      - The research paper should include more in-depth analysis than a policy memo. It isn't just longer – *it should include original thought*.
      - Does the paper simply describe what happened (or will happen), or provide analysis and recommendations?
      - Do the recommendations follow from the analysis? Are they consistent?
    - Figures and graphs
      - Do figures and graphs present information clearly?
      - Do they illustrate important information?
      - Are figures and graphs referenced in the text? Is sufficient explanation of each figure and graph provided? Including notes with the figures can be helpful.
  - Be sure to cite where your information comes from. Don't just include a list of references. You also need to show where those references are used in the paper.
    - When you use facts, ideas, or analysis from another source, they must be cited. This is true even if you paraphrase the argument in your own words.
- Writing
  - Presentation matters. Think carefully about how to organize your argument.
    - "Stream of consciousness" writing that bounces from topic to topic is hard to follow, particularly in a longer paper. It leads to your arguments getting lost in the confusion. Use section headings to organize your policy brief.
  - Is the writing clear?
    - Make sure that your arguments make sense.
    - Will the reader understand what you are writing about? Do you provide sufficient background information?
      - Your target audience is someone with a college education, but not necessarily an economics major.
      - It may help to have a friend who is less familiar with the paper read it. It is easy to take for granted specialized knowledge after you've spent a while researching a topic.
      - Think about what you would have known about the topic before beginning your research. If you wouldn't have known about something before, don't assume that your reader will know it.
  - Are there typos?
    - Proofread carefully. There should not be typos and grammar should be correct.
      - Is your final product something you would be willing to show to a prospective employer? If not, more editing is needed.

## Helpful Resources

To get started, you may find it helpful to check current events magazines, such as the *Economist*. A journal likely to be particularly helpful is the *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy*. This journal aims to review the latest environmental economics research in a way accessible to policy makers and other non-economists. In addition, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, which is the source of many of the articles on the reading list, is written to be accessible to a wide audience, and often have articles pertaining to environmental issues. Other more advanced journals that focus on the environment are the *Journal of Economics and Environmental Management*, *Land Economics*, *The Energy Journal*, and *Resource and Energy Economics*. Each of these should be available either at the library or on-line. In addition, general-interest economic journals such as *American Economic Review* and the *Journal of Political Economy* often include articles related to the environment.

A good source for journal articles in economics is EconLit. This is available on-line from the SU library. To access it, go to:

<http://library.syr.edu/>

Once there, click on the Databases tab to search for individual database titles.

Another good search option is Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>), which includes articles from a wide variety of disciplines.

Another useful database available through the library is ProQuest. ProQuest includes both professional journal articles and current event articles from newspapers and magazines such as the *Economist* and *New York Times*.

If you are looking for statistics, the Internet can be a great help, if you know where to look. In particular, when using the Internet, pay close attention to the source of your information. Many groups with specific agendas have sites on the Internet. ***Be aware of the policies being advocated at a particular site when examining their information and considering its credibility.*** When looking for data, the following are some useful sources:

- Perhaps the most useful page for economists is *Resources for Economists on the Internet*, found at:

<https://www.aeaweb.org/rfe/>

- The U.S. government also has many useful sites. For starters, the Environmental Protection Agency's home page is:

<http://www.epa.gov/>

- In addition, for energy-related data (including some pollution data), the Energy Information Administration is an excellent source:

<http://www.eia.gov/>

Links to these, as well as many other useful sites, can be found on the useful links section of the class home page:

<https://dcpopp.expressions.syr.edu/pai-777-useful-links/>

Should you need any assistance in finding a topic or a source, please do not hesitate to ask.

## Potential Policy Brief Topics

To minimize time spent choosing a topic, you will be asked to write a policy brief on one of the topics listed below. I will ask everyone to rate their preferences for each project and will assign groups based on those preferences.

### *Should New York State increase the use of offsets to encourage carbon sequestration?*

The New York State Climate Action Council is currently accepting public comments on its [Draft Scoping Plan](#). One initiative under consideration is the creation of a New York Forest Carbon Bank to facilitate the trading of credits generated by enhancing carbon sequestration on New York's farms and forests. This would enable landowners to more easily sell credits and participate in offset markets. Currently, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative only allows limited use of offsets. Otherwise, New York landowners can only make use of offsets if they participate in other carbon markets, such as in California.

This policy brief should consider whether facilitating the use of carbon offsets to support carbon sequestration in New York State is a good idea. It should explain how offsets work, discussing both the advantages and disadvantages of offsets. The policy brief should include examples of offset policies in place elsewhere and discuss what New York can learn from these experiences.

### *Environmental justice and climate policy*

Disadvantaged communities are often most at risk to the effects of climate change. At the same time, lower-income households will struggle to pay higher energy prices likely to result from policies designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This policy brief should discuss the environmental justice aspects of climate policy within the United States, considering how both the benefits and costs of climate policy may vary across income and demographic groups. The brief should discuss the extent to which any gaps observed are problematic and, if so, discuss how policy should address inequities in climate policy.

### *Water pollution reform?*

Over the last half-century, both U.S. air and water quality have improved significantly. Interestingly, while cost-benefit analyses show large net benefits for improvements in air quality, studies on the net benefits of improved surface water quality are less conclusive. This policy brief should discuss the results of these studies and determine what they mean for policy. Your brief should:

- (1) Summarize the results of cost-benefit analysis on improved surface water quality in the U.S.
- (2) Discuss the challenges these studies face trying to estimate the costs and benefits of improving water quality
- (3) Interpret the results and what they mean for policy. Is the lack of evidence for large net benefits for clean water policy a sign that environmental policy on water quality should be reformed? If so, what types of reforms are needed?

Please note that your brief should focus on *surface water* quality, such as efforts to reduce pollution in rivers and lakes. Studies on *drinking water* quality typically do find large net benefits for improving drinking water.

### *The potential for offshore wind turbines*

Advances in wind turbines led to dramatic expansion of wind energy during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most construction of wind turbines is on land. Offshore wind turbines are used less frequently, as they are currently more expensive. However, offshore wind resources are typically of higher quality, suggesting that further development of these resources could help in the transition to a low-carbon economy. This policy brief will evaluate the prospects of offshore wind technology in the United States. It should:

- (1) Describe offshore wind technology,
- (2) Discuss the additional challenges faced when installing and operating wind turbines offshore,
- (3) Provide examples of current policies to promote the development of offshore wind resources, and
- (4) Make recommendations for future policy and/or abandoning the development of offshore wind turbine technology

### *Mining for renewable energy*

Minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel are important for a transition to renewable energy. These metals are used in the production of energy technologies such as solar panels and batteries for electric vehicles. Yet obtaining these minerals has an impact on the environment. This policy brief should provide examples of the metals needed for a clean energy transition and discuss both the environmental impacts result from mining these metals and how that might change as demand for these metals increases. It should consider how, if at all, policy currently addresses these impacts and, if appropriate, make recommendations for further policy changes.

### *Accounting for natural resources*

Many environmental groups criticize the way that national incomes are calculated. For this policy brief, choose a low- or middle-income country and consider how incorporating environmental and natural resources into national accounts would affect perceptions of that country's economy. Your policy brief should:

- (1) Describe how calculations of national income are done,
- (2) Show how these calculations incentivize or disincentivize protection of environmental resources,
- (3) Provide an example of at least one alternative measure of national income, and
- (4) Discuss how incorporating alternative measures of national income in your chose country would alter perceptions of well-being in the country and/or lead to different policy outcomes.

Please note that you may not chooses the countries used as examples in the reading by Heal on April 20.