

### 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 will 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. Applying theory is important. It isn't enough to say that policy X reduces pollution. Different policies work in different ways and have different outcomes. The reader should understand how and why your recommended course of action works.

Note that you are free to cite the views of others in your policy brief. 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, each group should meet with me at least once **prior to spring break**. A short 1-2 page outline proposing what you will discuss in your policy brief is due on **Wednesday, March 27**. 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 27th deadline. *Even though the outline is not due until March 27, 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 **Monday, April 29**. 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 end 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. The survey where you will indicate project preferences will also allow you to indicate if you prefer not to work in a group on the policy brief.

On the next page are 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 policy brief make appropriate use of theory to explain how and why different policies work the way they do?
      - 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.

### The Potential for Carbon Capture and Storage

A controversial technology for reducing greenhouse gas emissions is carbon capture and storage (CCS). This policy brief should:

- (1) Describe CCS technology,
- (2) Discuss the barriers to implementing CCS technology,
- (3) Provide examples of current policies to promote CCS, and
- (4) Make recommendations for future policy and/or abandoning the development of CCS technology

### Policies to Reduce Plastic Waste

This policy brief should consider policy options to reduce plastic waste. This could be through increased recycling and/or by reducing the availability of plastics. The policy brief should include examples of policies currently in place, discussing both their strengths and weaknesses. The brief should include examples of best practices for government officials interested in reducing plastic wastes in their jurisdictions.

### 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, and
- (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.

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

Land use changes affect climate emissions. Because of this, some carbon trading programs allow the use of offsets. In New York State, the use of offsets is limited. While early drafts of New York's Scoping Plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions included creating a New York Forest Carbon Bank to facilitate the trading of credits generated by enhancing carbon sequestration on New York's farms and forests, the Carbon Bank did not make it into the final version of the Scoping Plan. 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 describe how land use decisions affect climate change. 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.

### State Financing of Green Investment

Raising funds for new businesses is challenging in any sector, and has been particularly difficult for new green businesses. To help emerging green businesses obtain funding, some states offer financing programs that make capital available for green investments. Examples include New York's [Green Bank](#) and California's [CalSEED](#) fund. This policy brief asks you to evaluate the performance of one such fund, deriving lessons for officials in other states that may be considering similar programs. Your policy brief should describe the types of investments supported by the program you evaluate, provide information on the outcomes of investments, including whether investments from the program helped leverage private sector financing. You should conclude by evaluating whether or not the program has been successful, and provide lessons for officials in other states who may be considering such programs.

In providing this analysis, your policy brief should explain the theory behind green investments. What roadblocks, if any, prevent the private sector from making these investments on their own? Does the program you evaluate provide new investment, or replace activity that could have been done by the private sector?

### Climate Regulation and U.S. Business

Concerns about the potential costs of climate policy for business and consumers has made passing nationwide climate policy in the U.S. difficult. Facing this political reality, the Biden Administration made use of subsidies designed to promote and protect U.S. business as part of its climate strategy. Both the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act include large investments in clean energy technology. Many of these are financed through subsidies that either directly support U.S. businesses or reward consumers for purchasing clean technologies (such as electric vehicles).

In addition to promoting clean energy, these subsidies are designed to promote U.S. business. Many include domestic content requirements designed to encourage the development of clean energy industries in the U.S. This policy brief should consider how subsidies focused on domestic businesses affect efforts to address climate change. Your brief should:

- (1) Provide an overview of policies in these two bills that specifically promote U.S. business and labor.
- (2) Describe potential impacts of these requirements on communities in the U.S. that currently play a role in the energy economy and/or that may play a larger role in a clean energy economy. Are these subsidies likely to ease the costs of an energy transition on affected communities?
- (3) Consider the potential impacts of domestic subsidies and domestic content requirements on the costs of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, both in the U.S. and globally.

Note that these bills include many programs that potentially affect clean energy. Your policy brief should include at least a brief description of the overall set of programs that both target clean energy and promote U.S. business. However, feel free to select representative examples from these to evaluate more in depth to evaluate the potential impact of these initiatives.