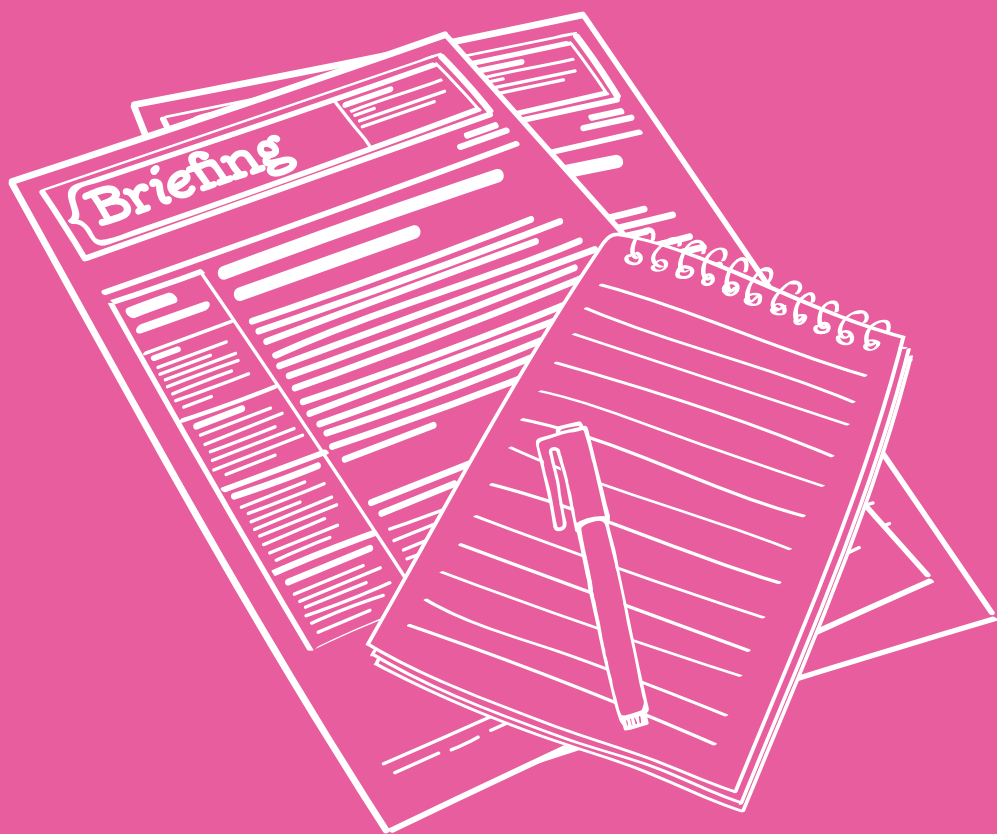


# Writing about biodiversity

Tips and templates for policy and media material



In November 2015, participants in the Mainstreaming Biodiversity in Development Policy and Planning Initiative from eight countries in Africa — known as the African Leadership Group — joined IIED and UNEP-WCMC in Harare, Zimbabwe to discuss how to embed (or ‘mainstream’) biodiversity issues in development policy and planning.

How to communicate effectively about biodiversity with policymakers and the media came up frequently in our conversations. We identified a variety of ways to do this: through face-to-face meetings, presentations, through media articles, social media and short films. This booklet focuses on written materials, and specifically on policy and media briefings and press releases, based largely on IIED’s experience.

Please share with us your experiences, tactics and ideas for reaching policymakers and the media, especially where what you have done has worked well and had a positive impact.

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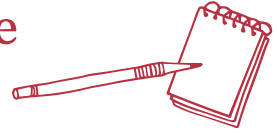
# Introduction

In November 2015, participants in the Mainstreaming Biodiversity in Development Policy and Planning Initiative from eight countries in Africa – known as the African Leadership Group – joined IIED and UNEP-WCMC in Harare, Zimbabwe to discuss how to embed (or ‘mainstream’) biodiversity issues in development policy and planning. Their aim was to use their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAP) as a tool for achieving the task.

It quickly became clear that there were some core groups with which people in the Ministry of Environment needed to interact: not only policy staff in other ministries but also journalists, researchers, and representatives from business and civil society. We discussed how important it would be to communicate in the right way with these audiences – they are busy people with little time. We realised that every interaction had to be focused, relevant and clear if it were to have a chance of creating an impact.

Not all communications can be in person – often we reach our audiences through written material. This booklet provides guidance on how written material can influence its audience by being targeted, short and easy to understand. While we talk particularly about policymakers and the media because they are two critical audiences for biodiversity mainstreaming, the guidance can apply to many others.

# Part 1: General writing advice



Whether you are doing the writing yourself or checking a piece of writing done by a consultant, there are best practice guidelines to follow:

**Write for your audience** – think about what your target audience will want or need to know. If you give them what they need, with a context that makes sense to them, they will want to read what you write.

**Tell a compelling story** – presenting just facts and figures may become boring – think what the data mean for your readers and the decisions they are making and create a narrative around that.

**‘Don’t make me think’** – write in plain language that your target audience understands at first reading, without having to pause, think, and work it out. The more complex your ideas and the less time your audience has, the more you need to do this.

**Formality doesn’t add weight** – writing a piece using language that is overly formal and uses lots of passive constructions (for example, ‘the report was written by the committee’ rather than ‘the committee wrote the report’) does not make the piece more important, authoritative or ‘high level’. It just makes it harder to digest, longer, and less likely that the reader will bother to read to the end.

**Write as you would speak** – a good tip is to imagine that you have one minute to tell someone from your target audience – a journalist or special adviser perhaps – about your work. You wouldn’t spend time on long-winded passive sentences and obscure technical terms. You’d pick out the top three most interesting aspects of the work, the things you think are really important for the person to know and you’d tell them direct. Write like that too. Your briefing paper may be read in the 20 minutes in a car from home to the office and you must make every word count.

**Be direct** – write in an active not passive tense. Don't say 'the road proposal was assessed in order to gauge its impact on the ancient woodland'; say, 'the transport committee assessed the road proposal's impact on the ancient woodland.' It's shorter and you know exactly who did the assessing.

**Aim to keep sentences short wherever you can** – don't use a convoluted sentence when a short, direct one could be more powerful. This may not be the way you are used to writing, but think what you prefer to read and try to copy it.

<p>'Rainfall patterns have changed in many parts of the region, with later onset of rains than in the past, and earlier cessation, more erratic rainfall, and more intense and often damaging rainfall episodes.'</p>	<p>Becomes: 'Rainfall patterns have changed in many parts of the region, starting later and stopping earlier, and becoming more erratic, intense and often damaging.'</p>
<p>'...this will have positive benefits for nutrition as these women, their families and their communities will have greater food security.'</p>	<p>'...this will improve food security for the women, their families and communities.'</p>

**Delete unnecessary words**

It can become a habit to repeat long phrases you have read elsewhere. Be the first to break the habit and choose shorter ways to say the same thing. So:

'It is possible that the biopiracy bill will be passed at the end of the week' becomes 'The biopiracy bill may be passed at the end of the week.'

'Articulating issues in an accessible way' becomes 'explaining them'.

If the local community is 'engaging in farming', it is farming.

## Cut out unnecessary jargon and acronyms

When is a term jargon? When it excludes your reader:

- When it is only understood by a small group of specialists and not by all the external audiences you are trying to reach
- When your readers have to look up what the term means before they can understand it.

If you have to use technical words, provide a glossary of terms. But remember that your reader shouldn't have to be looking things up to follow your argument.

Try not to over use acronyms. Does everyone know what an NBSAP is, or an EIA, the CBD or the NDP? A sentence with a stream of acronyms is off putting and could also exclude readers.

Where you do use acronyms, spell them out on first use and again after a significant gap (after several pages, for example – it's easy to forget).

### Biodiversity mainstreaming – jargon?

Even if everyone *you* work with uses the word 'mainstreaming', you should still introduce it subtly for a wider audience:

'We are trying to integrate biodiversity conservation concerns into mainstream government policy. This 'mainstreaming' activity involves ...'

In a short publication, such as briefing, you can include a 'jargon buster' box if you need it – as a resource for Ministry of Environment staff during budget negotiations with other ministries, for example. Try not to need it in the first place, and particularly avoid jargon in titles and headings. These are the elements aiming to be the 'hook' for potential readers. (See page 17 for tips on what makes a good headline).

### Other ways of saying mainstreaming

Converging                      Linking up biodiversity concerns with development plans

Connecting biodiversity concerns with                      Bringing together  
development plans

Integrating                      Harmonising biodiversity and development plans

## Clear writing and problem words

Small changes can make a big difference to flow and pace.

- Every time you find yourself writing ‘the XXX of the XXX’, try to rephrase it with a possessive:

‘The representatives of the community decided that ...’ becomes ‘The community’s representatives decided that ...’

- Watch out for ...tion and ...sion words:

‘The conviction was that the conversion of wetlands into agricultural land would be detrimental’ becomes ‘XXX was convinced that converting wetlands into agricultural land would be detrimental’.

- Use prepositions sparingly. Using ‘on’, ‘of’, ‘by’, ‘to’, and ‘with’ can make a sentence very wordy.

‘The proposed agriculture policy is of great concern to specialists in the Ministry of Environment’ becomes ‘The proposed agriculture policy greatly concerns specialists in the Ministry of Environment.’



## Part 2: Writing for policymakers



### General tips: know your audience

The first step is to be clear about your writing objective. What are you trying to achieve? Are you **sharing information** to update your audience on the progress of a bill; are you asking them to **take action** to prevent wetlands being drained; or are you trying to **persuade them to think differently** about a policy that has an adverse effect on genetic resources and biodiversity?

Then decide who can help with achieving your aim and write for them – it could be a policymaker, an opinion former or a member of the general public. In this booklet we're focusing on policymakers.

Policymakers are usually people who have the power to take decisions. Who that is exactly will vary from country to country and may depend on the issue at hand, but could include:

Government leaders	Members of Parliament	Business leaders
Community heads	Donors	Members of trade associations

If 'policymaker' is expanded to include people who may not take decisions, but who influence them – opinion formers – then the list grows to include:

Lobbyists	Faith leaders	Influential citizens
Journalists	Farmers	Investors

The point is, the term 'policymaker' can cover many different types of person or groups of people. Thinking about exactly who you are writing for will help you to use your time effectively and make the greatest impact with your words.

#### Ask yourself:

- What are you hoping to achieve and how can your audience help you?
- What's in it for them? Make it clear what your audience gains.

## How are policymakers influenced?

Once you are specific about the audience, you need to think about the right format for your content. Assume that for policymakers the format should be short – they have little spare time. What kind of formats do they normally see or like to have? Would an online blog be the right thing, or would a printed four pager or even ten bullet points be better? If it's a submission to a minister you are writing, do they expect to see an officially-agreed format and from a particular source?

The source or 'messenger' is important. An organisation or individual with professional credibility and established reputation will have more influence than an unknown. At the very basic, it could be the difference between reading a publication and putting it at the bottom of the pile. At another level, it could influence whether any recommendation or analysis is taken seriously or ignored.

### Factors that can influence how policymakers respond

Evidence	Transparency of sources, credibility and relevance
Pragmatics	Timing, setting, other workload, access to information
Policy context	Political structures and processes, prevailing concepts, policy opportunities
Experience	Expertise, process and subject knowledge
Judgement	Understanding of topic, empathy, prevailing concepts
Pressures	Institutional pressures, external pressures (donors), time constraints, lobbyists, personal, political
Habits and values	Culture, past behaviour, traditions
Networks	Relationships, trust, personal contacts, voice
Resources	Availability of staff, finance, equipment, technology

Adapted from Jones, N and Walsh, C. 2008. Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research. Overseas Development Institute, London

## Writing a policy briefing

In this booklet we are focusing on short, clear policy briefings available publicly (rather than being 'internal' briefings or policy submissions) but aimed at policymakers, containing evidence-informed opinions and actionable recommendations.

Policy briefings are short – often around four pages – visually engaging content, accessibly written. They contain a persuasive and coherent argument built around an issue that is relevant and timely for the target audience. Many organisations – like government departments, think-tanks, business associations, and NGOs – produce policy briefings and it is easy to see some common elements.

A good policy briefing may be short but each page is carefully structured:

- **The front page** contains key messages and recommendations and a first paragraph that summarises the briefing content. If the policymaker only reads this page, they will have got the message and suggested actions.
- **The next two pages** will set out the argument, supported with evidence presented in words and graphics, split up into manageable sections with clear subheadings.
- **The back page** usually has references and authors – giving authority to the writing and with contact details and website, an opportunity for debate and further information.

This content is usually framed by an organisational identity. If the organisation's reputation is known, this lends weight to the content.

Being able to present a detailed and persuasive argument in four pages takes practice and disciplined writing. On the next page is a typical writer's template used by IIED and links to the resulting designed policy briefings on the IIED website, as well as examples from other institutions. Think about the formats that have been effective in your context – can you develop those for your own work?

## Writer’s template for a policy briefing

TITLE	[maximum of 75 characters including spaces]
AUTHOR	[if more than one, in order of appearance]
PUBLICATION DATE	[Month year]
KEY WORDS	[add in 3–5 key words or terms associated with this briefing (particularly needed if being posted online – these become search terms)].

### SUMMARY, 50-130 words

- Aim to grab the reader from the first sentence, which should also state the central point. Present your conclusion right at the start.
- Make it clear why the subject is relevant and timely and outline the main issues in the order they’ll appear.
- Mentioning costs, a key statistic or a particularly gripping finding in the summary will boost its attention-grabbing quotient (but don’t try to pack everything in).
- Good way to order the summary is: describe the issue; touch on range of approaches; state observed problems with these; if appropriate, recommend a shift in policy.

### POLICY POINTERS, 4: short sentence for each

- 4 succinct bullet points that present an outline of the briefing’s main points of interest to policymakers.

### FULL TEXT, ~2000 words + 2 small ‘figures’ (case study boxes; tables; diagrams; pictures). For larger figures, you may need to reduce the word count.

- Have you constructed a logical line of argument for making your recommendations?
- Keep language simple, with short sentences and paragraphs and break up the text with subheadings.
- Avoid a lot of acronyms. If you need to discuss a particular aspect of an issue that involves a lot of acronyms, consider putting this material in a ‘jargon buster’ box.

## BOXES/VISUALS

- The briefing design allows for a range of boxes such as jargon busters, backstories, case studies etc.
- Graphics or tables can be effective ways of getting complex information across.

## NOTES

Briefings can include up to 15 endnotes (notes on the text, useful links, references – numbered rather than Harvard style) but, as far as possible, should be stand-alone.

## AUTHOR BLURB

Name, job title, affiliation and weblink (if relevant) for each author.

## CONTACT

For corresponding author only: name and email address.

## FUNDERS/DONORS

For all donors that require acknowledgement, provide disclaimer or acknowledgement sentence as necessary.

IIED: Beyond enforcement: engaging communities in tackling wildlife crime  
<http://pubs.iied.org/17293IIED>

Chatham House: Stuck in transition: managing the political economy of low carbon development

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/20140200LowCarbonBaileyPreston.pdf>

UN-REDD policy brief. Addressing climate change: why biodiversity matters  
<http://wcmc.io/d4ac>

## Part 3: Writing for the media



Most of the time journalists will write their own stories but you may want to supply them with background material in the form of a short briefing or a press release. As always, there are several things to consider before you start to write.

### General tips

Journalists have their own agenda and it's your task to try to fit into it. They may be working on a daily paper and need instant news; they could work for a monthly magazine, for a popular website or a publication with a more academic style. For all sorts of reasons a journalist may be having to push hard to get any kind of environmental story published – it could be politically sensitive or the editor simply thinks readers will not be interested. It is your job to supply information that is timely, relevant and newsworthy, expressed in as succinct a way as possible.

Do not assume that the significance of terms that are familiar to you – biodiversity, mainstreaming, NBSAPs, Convention on Biological Diversity – will mean anything to a journalist.

In Zimbabwe the NBSAPs revision committee worked with journalists for two years to raise their awareness of what biodiversity meant and why using it sustainably was an issue for the country.

The Biodiversity Office in the Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate ran a capacity building workshop for print, radio and TV journalists to tell them about the threats to biodiversity caused by activities such as mining in national parks, deforestation and the tobacco curing process.

In 2014, 18 journalists went on a field trip to the Chirinda Forest in Chipinge in the Eastern Highlands experiencing the landscape for themselves and seeing how people used natural resources to earn a living.

These combined efforts resulted in more reporting on biodiversity and the environment across all media and in all languages, with journalists understanding much more about the value of ecosystems and genetic and species diversity.

You can read the full story: <http://www.ied.org/biodiversity-stories-building-understanding-media-leads-richer-reporting>

So much about working with journalists is relationship building and subtle awareness raising. If you develop a track record of giving them good material, they may not only open your next email, but also read it!

**Timing is key.** Consider what else is happening in the world (which means your country or district, as much as globally) and how your story is relevant to that.

**Thoughtful and strategic targeting** makes all the difference to whether the story gets picked up and what happens after it has been published. Choose your journalist by seeing what they usually write about. Have they displayed an interest in biodiversity issues before?

**Think beyond the obvious,** what is the news hook or reason why a journalist would be interested in your work? Start with who the issue impacts and why, then work back from there.

**Journalists are time-poor people.** They get hundreds of emails a day and don't have long to get their head around an issue. There is rarely a second chance to get a journalist interested in the story.

**Generate trust.** If you follow these tips, journalists will trust that when you contact them, it will be with a relevant and interesting story for their media outlet and worth their time.

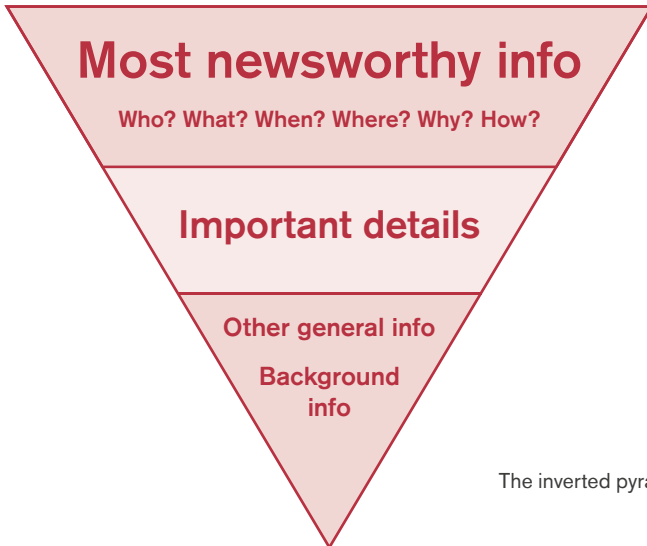
## Press release or media briefing?

There are several ways that you may want to interact with the media:

- You have a news story: something that is new, surprising, and/or controversial, adds to an ongoing news story and is time bound – in this case you would write a **press release**.
- You have an ongoing story, not necessarily time bound, usually with a strong human interest angle and pertinent to a wider issue – this might be a feature, written by the journalists but set up by you, potentially supported by a **media briefing**.
- You have a big event for which you want media coverage – either news stories or features – but the topic is complex and, again, with a media briefing you show why it might be of media interest.
- You just want to pitch an idea to a journalist and expect that they will write up the story rather than you.

## Press releases

These are written to a very clear structure and are, in effect, writing the story (tweaked for different target outlets). They follow the ‘inverted pyramid’ model with the most important information at the top, and the ensuing paragraphs covering the story in degrees of declining importance.



The inverted pyramid

Get the headline and first paragraph right and you've got the journalist's attention.

The headline should contain active verbs, use simple language and be short (preferably one line). There are more top tips about what makes a good headline on page 17.

The first paragraph should cover the **who, what, why, where** and **when** of your story:

'The new residential development completed last month by the Big Name Company in Eastern Lilongwe has destroyed the only breeding ground in Malawi for the rare bee hawk moth.'

Now you've set the scene, the next few short paragraphs should expand on the story and provide a couple of strong quotes from people associated with the story, which add insight or opinion.



If you have a key graph or table which adds value to the story, include that too. Or choose a good image (see page 19) to accompany the release it can make a big difference to whether the story is picked up or not. Use bullet points to put content across quickly and clearly and divide the content up using sub headings.

Finally, you should make it clear why the story is coming from your department or organisation and what makes you a credible source.

### A few further thoughts ...

**Distribution:** web page or email? A press release can go on a website as a web page and you can alert journalists to the page via text, email or social media. Or you can send them out in the body of an email (an attachment will be ignored). If using email, make it clear you are sending a press release and repeat the headline in the email subject box.

**Embargoed copy:** if you are launching something – a new policy initiative or significant report which you think will be of interest – and don't want a story to go out before the launch, but you do want a journalist to be ready to cover the launch, mark the press release '**Embargoed – not for publication before [a specific day and time]**'. This isn't a legally binding arrangement but generally, a journalist will respect it and realise they won't be given exclusive information again if they break the embargo.

The opposite of an embargo is achieved by marking the press release '**For immediate release**' and sending to a list of media contacts.

**Exclusives:** if you are keen that a particular journalist covers the report launch (they are well known and command respect or the publication they write for is read by your target audience), give them a call, tell them that you have some information they may be interested in, stress it is embargoed and then send the press release, arranging a follow up interview with the Minister or report author once they have read it.

Remember, however, that if you are offering an 'exclusive', you cannot send the press release to anyone else until after the embargo deadline. If the journalist decides not to cover the story, then you've missed out on coverage. You will have to judge whether it's a risk you want to take.

## Writer’s template for a press release

HEADLINE	[Attention grabbing, clear link to story, 7-10 words maximum]
AUTHOR	[This is optional – you may want it to be institutional rather than attributed to one person]
PUBLICATION DATE	[Day, month year. Note the information about embargoing a press release on page 15.]

### FIRST PARAGRAPH

No more than around 25 words, giving the essence of the story:

### SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH PARAGRAPHS – no more than 350 words

#### BOXES/VISUALS/CASE STUDIES to accompany the text

- Case studies, jargon busters, backstories, quotes from significant people that add insight or opinion
- Graphics or tables can be effective ways of getting complex information across.
- Do you have a strong image?

### END OF PAGE ONE – press releases should be no more than one page

#### PAGE TWO: NOTES TO EDITORS

- Names and details of people prepared to be interviewed
- Contact name for further information
- Explanation of the ministry, workstream or organisation that has sent the press release
- Explanation of any key background concepts (if not explained in the release).

Leaders join forces for productive and equitable artisanal and small-scale mining in Ghana (online example) <http://www.iied.org/leaders-join-forces-for-productive-equitable-artisanal-small-scale-mining-ghana>

## Media briefing

These are short (two-page) background documents for journalists who may not know very much about a complex topic or forthcoming significant event. The briefing should explain the topic or event, how it links to a bigger picture, and provide extra information such as quotes, statistics and graphs.

In a way, the front page of these is similar to a policy briefing. It contains a short summary explaining why the topic or event is newsworthy, might suggest further questions to get the journalist thinking and provides a good example, to base the story in reality.

The rest of the briefing sets out the situation, and may include further case studies and internet links to more information.

There is a media briefing template on the next page.

### What makes a good headline?

A good headline can make the difference between someone wanting to read more and not reading any further. Five top tips to remember:

- Use an active style

**Plunging oil prices: what happens to our oceans?**

- Aim for seven words (or less)

**Distilling the value of water investments**

- Grab your reader's attention

**Flaming parrots and palmetto palms [about new business opportunities in Belize]**

- Think about search terms (if your briefing is going online)

**Seeds of the post-capitalist forest**

- Ask questions or present explanations (it's more engaging).

**Where are the local indicators for the SDGs?**

## Writer's template for a media briefing

TITLE	[Attention grabbing but a maximum of 75 characters]
AUTHOR	[This is optional – you may want it to be institutional rather than attributed to one person]
PUBLICATION DATE	[Month year]

### SUMMARY, 100 words max

- Aim to grab the reader from the first sentence, which should also state the central point, and present the key questions for investigation up front.
- Make it clear why the subject is relevant and timely and outline the main issues in the order they'll appear.
- Similar to a policy briefing, mentioning costs, a key statistic or a particularly gripping finding in the summary will boost its attention-grabbing quotient.

### KEY QUESTIONS or MORE TO THINK ABOUT – short sentence for each

- Up to four succinct bullet points that raise key questions for the journalist to investigate. They serve as a prompt to get them to think in more depth about the story

### FULL TEXT, ~750 words + 2 small 'figures' (case study boxes; tables; diagrams; statistics).

- Have you explained why the issue or event would be interesting for the media (why should a journalist care)?
- Keep language simple, with short sentences and paragraphs and break up the text with subheadings.
- Avoid a lot of acronyms. If you need to discuss a particular aspect of an issue that involves a lot of acronyms, consider putting this material in a 'jargon buster' box.

### BOXES/VISUALS/CASE STUDIES

- Case studies, jargon busters, backstories, quotes from significant people
- Graphics or tables can be effective ways of getting complex information across.
- Do you have a strong image?

## NOTES

Briefings can include a few useful links and references to further information but as far as possible should be stand-alone.

## CONTACT

For further information only: name and email address.

Inextricably linked: climate change and biodiversity:

[http://tve.org/reframing-rio/cms\\_media/files/biodiversity\\_and\\_climate\\_change.pdf?static=1](http://tve.org/reframing-rio/cms_media/files/biodiversity_and_climate_change.pdf?static=1)

COP15 for journalists: a guide to the UN climate change summit

<http://www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=17074IIED>

### Choosing images for policy or media material

Every organisation has its own rules but there are some basic tips for choosing the right photo:

- Make sure that the subject of the image is relevant, clear and engaging and that the image adds value to the text
- Use action shots rather than passive and posed pictures
- Use good quality photography at an appropriate resolution (300 dots per inch for publications)
- Try to show impacts rather than problems
- Always check copyright and include a photographer credit or caption where appropriate
- Check that people and children have given permission for their photo to be used.

Graphics and illustrations can simplify a complex issue – it is often worth commissioning an infographic specially if it can help make your message stronger.

## Further resources

Writing for policymakers: training materials including tips for summarising a long document into something much shorter, as a starting point for writing a briefing.

<http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/107/>

Writing headlines: tips from the production editor of the UK's Guardian newspaper.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/09/secrets-great-headline-writing>

Writing press releases: step-by-step instructions from journalists themselves for what makes a good press release that they will read.

<https://www.journalism.co.uk/skills/how-to-write-the-perfect-press-release-for-journalists/s7/a535287/>

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Are you involved in trying to get biodiversity issues into development plans and policies? Are you wanting to raise awareness of the benefits of considering sustainable use of biodiversity with people in the Ministry of Finance or Planning, Health or Transport? Or perhaps you want to work with a journalist to see more discussion in the media of the importance of biodiversity for development? If so, then this booklet provides advice for writing for these audiences, with practical tips that will give your content a better chance of being read.

Read about general good practice for writing clearly, and then follow specific tips and templates for writing policy briefings, press releases and media briefings.

For further information please contact Dilys Roe at IIED: [dilys.roe@iied.org](mailto:dilys.roe@iied.org) or John Tayleur: [John.Tayleur@unep-wcmc.org](mailto:John.Tayleur@unep-wcmc.org)

IIED promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

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Knowledge  
Products

Tool

March 2016

**Biodiversity**

*Keywords:*  
Mainstreaming, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action  
Plans, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

