**Parliament for Researchers – how to write for a parliamentary audience**

**Online training session, 15th December 2020: transcript**

This training session was delivered by the UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit. The presenter is Naomi Saint, Knowledge Exchange Manager, UK Parliament and the expert speaker is Cristiana Vagnoni, Biology and Health Adviser, POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology). A recording of the session, the training slides, useful links and resources, plus other online training sessions from UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit can be accessed through this link: <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-parliament/training-and-events/online-training-for-researchers/>

“Welcome to Parliament for Researchers - how to write for a parliamentary audience. My name is Naomi. I am part of the Knowledge Exchange Unit here at the UK Parliament. We support and strengthen the exchange of information and expertise between Parliament and the research community, and we do that in lots of different ways. So we provide training for researchers about how to work with Parliament, as you know. We have lots of online resources to support you to know how to work with Parliament. We promote any opportunities we can find for researchers to work with Parliament. We run an Academic Fellowship scheme. And really importantly, we are a point of contact for anyone from the research community who would like to engage with Parliament or connect with someone at Parliament.

So I'm joined on the session this morning by my colleague Laura Webb from the Knowledge Exchange Unit and our colleague from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Cristiana Vagnoni, who will be talking you through how to write for a parliamentary audience in a little bit.

This is what we're going to be covering today. We're going to just have a very quick reminder of the difference between Parliament and Government, and then I'm going to pass you over to Cristiana to talk us through what is a parliamentary audience and what makes a good briefing. And then we'll stop and answer some questions. And then I'm just going to give you a few tips about how you target that briefing you've written at Parliament; where should you target it to have the most impact, and what resources and support we've got available for you as well.

I just wanted to reiterate that Parliament and Government are not the same thing. As you will know from your prior knowledge, Parliament is made up of all MPs, all Members of the House of Lords and the Monarch as well. And Government, down the road in Whitehall rather than in Westminster, is just some MPs, some Members of the House of Lords, who've been chosen by the Prime Minister to be Ministers. They run Government departments, they run public services. They introduce a lot of the new laws which come into force. They decide on the policy and the spending in Government departments. And that Government are accountable back to Parliament who conduct scrutiny of the Government's work and who must approve laws before they can be passed, as well as approving budget and spending proposals.

So you'll have remembered that I'm sure. I just wanted to reiterate it because it's really useful to know if you're going to write a briefing and then send it in to someone at Parliament or someone at Government. You could use it for either, but it's useful to know who you're talking to. Is it about the development of a policy, is it a Government department working up a policy or a new law? Or is it Parliament challenging and scrutinizing something the Government is doing? So I'm sure you can kind of see that you might use your briefing that you've written in a different way, depending if you're working with Parliament or Government.

So now I've refreshed your knowledge about that, I'm really pleased to introduce you to Cristiana Vagnoni, who is an Adviser in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. Cristiana is an absolute expert in writing for a parliamentary audience, and she's going to share some of her expertise with us today. So Cristiana it's over to you.”

“Here I am, thanks Naomi and welcome everybody. So let's start with the parliamentary audience. I think as many of you know already, the first rule of good writing and good communication is to know who you're writing for, and parliamentarians and policymakers, are very busy people and that is the main thing you need to remember. Members do not necessarily have the scientific or technical background on a specific topic, although they're really good at picking up information quickly because it's their main job. And another important thing to remember is that research is only one type of information that gets considered when making policy decisions. For instance, think about, I don't know, the impact on people that decision could make rather than only the science about it.

And another important point, when you write for a parliamentary audience, is the fact that MPs are elected to represent a particular constituency. So when you write about a subject, you can think about whether there is any local area, the original area that could be somehow affected by your science topic. So that you can think about how do we make that topic relevant for that area so an MP representing for that area would care about it.

Here we are. What makes a good briefing? So first of all I have a little disclaimer. Everything here comes from my experience at POST where we write specific briefings that are called POSTnotes, POSTbriefs and also more recently, Rapid Responses on COVID. So whatever I'm telling you today is going to be 100% true for POST. And then there are small variations on the topic which I’m going to go over with you. So you will have a clear idea what we write at POST and what you can write for MPs or Peers.

So there are four key elements that make a good policy briefing. First the content. Is the briefing a good summary of evidence? Does it cover what you expected it to. Second, the structure. Do the sections make sense in the order they are? Are they presented in the right order? Is it well structured? Third, really important, accessibility. Is the briefing easy to read, is it concise? Remember parliamentarians do not have time. They are very busy people so what you need to write is something that could be read quickly over a cup of coffee. That is the idea of a briefing. And finally, fourth, impartiality. Is the briefing politically and scientifically impartial? Are all the statements balanced and objective? And this is really important for us at POST, also for people that are writing a briefing in the staff of the Libraries or in committee meetings. However, for you as an academic is it OK if you move forward your own opinions as an expert on the topic? Because when you're writing a parliamentary briefing, you will write most likely something you're an expert about.

In terms of content, here we are. Again, we can borrow some rules from good writing and good communication, and I'm sure many of you already heard this one, is the five Ws, one H rule. So if a briefing is well written it should cover - What is the key issue? Why is it of interest? Who are the main stakeholders? When are the major impacts going to happen? Where is this happening? And how the stakeholders will be affected? So remember over a cup of coffee, your MP or Peer should be able to quickly answer all of these questions. This is something you need to keep in mind.

Another thing to keep in mind is that these five Ws, one H rules also apply to single studies you're going to present. So when you're writing about the general research on your field before talking about something more specific, you can say for each study, where the study took place, when did it take place, who took part in the study, how the measurements were taken and what were the results? And also why this study was done, to demonstrate XYZ for instance.

So here again, we have an example, as you can see here. I'm going to read it for you if you cannot see. A 2019 survey of 2,000 women aged 25 to 40 in the UK found that 60% use social media at least once a day. And as you can see here we have ‘when – 2019’, ‘how - the data was collected’, ‘who - 2000 women aged 25 to 40’ and ‘where - in the UK’. What was found? 60% use social media. And it's really important to be clear about the evidence you're using because of course a survey of 20 women rather than 2,000 women could give you a really different kind of information. Same if the survey was in 2010 versus 2019.

So next, let's talk about structure. That is very, very important and unfortunately, there is not really a protocol or the perfect formula, if you want, for a good structure and depends a lot on the topic you're working on. However, this structure presented here - the past, present, future - works for say, 90% of the topics. So past: background and context, what is the issue? How did we get here. Present: what is the current situation? And future: what are the challenges and opportunities? What is coming next? So these is a pretty good structure that work, as I said, 90% of the time. There are of course some variation.

Another really important part on structure is to make sure your document is really easy to read and have headings and sub headings, and break down blocks of text into small sections. That is really, really useful for parliamentarians. Another important point is to have an overview at the beginning of the briefing so that actually just reading the overviews, they should have an idea of what it’s about. And hopefully be drawing their attention towards a specific section, for instance, instead of reading it all.

And another really important part is using figures, charts or diagrams to make your briefing more eye catching, but also give more information. As you know, given that you're academics, a good figure can be more than a thousand words, right? So use the same principle, think about making good figure.

In terms of summaries, I wanted to give you two different examples from two different products at POST of how to write summaries. So on the left you have a POSTnote, that is a briefing which is only four pages long, and then on the right you have a Rapid Response. That is a new type of format that we have, that is HTML only. So we use different formats and it's very different, but the main principle of both these briefing are the same and the main principle of the summary is the same. If you read the summary, you shouldn't need to read the rest because, remember, parliamentarians are really busy. They want to quickly read something and figure out, OK this is what this is about.

So let's start with the POSTnote. These are the two overviews. If we zoom in on the overview of a POSTnote, you can see this is about food fraud. So it tells you what is food fraud? Why is it important? Who is responsible for it? How can we change things and what's likely or unlikely to happen next? So only in five bullet points they are able to answer the past, present, future structure that we talked about before.

Similarly for this COVID Rapid Response, this is an update I wrote in November, so is not anymore up to date unfortunately with COVID, but the principle is exactly the same. The structure of the summary is slightly different because it is a different subject that is rapidly evolving. However, again 5 bullet points here that are able to highlight where is research at in terms of COVID vaccine, what is important for the UK and what is important around the world? So essentially just looking at these parliamentarians know should I read this briefing? Yes, no and go further and start scanning the text afterwards.

Again, in terms of structure, there is a really good tip that we use at POST and also in the Libraries, pretty often, that is the use of boxes. So boxes are for those things that don't fit always in the text, but they should be there. For instance if you have a lot of definitions that are, kind of like, nicely tidied up all together in a corner, or if you have, for instance legislation that is relevant or if you have some case studies. Remember you need to make your topic relevant for a regional level or a local level and a nice case study about why an MP should care about fishing because there are fisheries around at his consistency, for instance. And sometimes we also use them for more technical and complex concepts. The idea behind the box is essentially that you should be able to read the brief without having the box, so the box adds that extra information that is not 100% necessary to have your briefing flow. Might be quite useful.

The third pillar about how to write a good briefing, as I said, is accessibility and that is probably the hardest one. Especially if you guys are used to writing for academics and write papers that are pretty dense and definitely not accessible sometimes, because they are written for a specialist audience, right? And you just take a thousand steps back from that way of writing and essentially think that when you write for a parliamentary audience, anyone with your briefing should be able to read it over a cup of coffee and then be able to tell you the five Ws, one H right after reading it. It is really, really tough. It’s probably the hardest part of writing a briefing.

But lucky for you, we have some tips. So at POST we follow these seven tips that are the main ones. So first of all, if you have to say something, and of course you have to say something, say it with fewer words with less complex language used. Use objective, precise language. Use the active voice rather than the passive voice, when of course it's possible, and try to be consistent with language, punctuation, and definition. If you give one definition, stick with it throughout the piece, because if you have synonyms of the same concept, it just makes it confusing because remember they are not expert, at least not all MPs are experts. Some of them have a science background, but you need to be read by everyone, right. And then jargon and acronyms. We know that science is full of jargon and acronyms. I would say select only the key ones, the ones that really you need to explain the concept and just explain them really clearly at the beginning and then keep using them and don't add anyone else but just the few key ones. And finally, again, think about your audience. You can use figures and facts that parliamentarians can use make use of.

So we have like some example of how to say something in fewer words. As you can see, these are really, really long sentence about “the speed of development of new DNA sequencing analytical technologies is bringing down the price tag for whole genome sequencing at vertiginous pace.” As you can see, impossible to read. How do we make it fast, quicker and easier to understand? Pretty simple, if my presentation works. “DNA sequencing is getting faster and cheaper.” Another tip to think about your audience, right, these are parliamentarians. You cannot say “bacterium is microscopic, 10 microns wide” because they don't have any, 90% of them that don't have a science background, don't know what micron is, so you can say in a different way. Such as that “each bacterium is roughly a fifth of the thickness of a sheet of paper so cannot be seen by the human eye”, and this is really easy to understand for a parliamentarian.

Finally, the last pillar for POST is impartiality, and impartiality is really important for POST, but also for people writing in the Commons Libraries and the Lords Libraries. So we cannot take any - we're not politically or scientifically partial. We need to present all the different range of perspectives and we cannot give any opinions about something. And it is really important for us, but it's not necessarily important for you guys, because you are writing from an expert perspective so it's fine that you have your own opinion.

Another important thing that you need to do is attribute and reference, so everything you say you need to add the reference so that they can expand, and if they want to know more information they have it and it’s there. Just a little tip, make sure to use references that are open access so that MPs can actually read it.

And finally that is super, super important is be clear about uncertainty. I mean we all know how scientists that science cannot give you always the simple one line answer, unfortunately right, that would be amazing. and you have to explain what's the context about it, why we're uncertain about something. Is it because of research, is it because of the measurements or how it's done, or is it because there is not enough research. So again, to make it slightly clearer, added here a couple of examples about how we can present uncertainties. So for instance if there is not a single number but there is a range of a certain measurement, you need to use that range and explain why instead of a single number we have a range for a measurement. For instance, sea level could rise 0.26 to 0.77 metres, blah blah blah, because modelling cloud cover is a major source of uncertainty. So you need to be clear and open about what we know and what is the source of uncertainty and what is the limitation. If there is not enough evidence about something, just say it, say there is there is insufficient evidence to show XYZ.

Similarly, if there is some disagreement or limitation of the research, again, be honest about it and say the majority of the studies shows X while other research indicates Y. And maybe the limitations are a big part, like the majority of the studies from the seventies in which they use these super old techniques shows X. But actually now we have much better research and it seems that there is a new avenue for this research and we know more stuff that before we didn't know.

And a final tip for you not to forget, is to make sure your briefing is dated and to provide the contact details so that people if they want to get in touch with you can do it quickly and easily. And this is all from me. I am just looking forward to the questions.”

“So Cristiana, some questions for you now. The first one is what is the most challenging aspect of creating a POSTnote?”

“I think the most challenging part is the four page limit, so a POSTnote is only four pages and to be honest I think four pages is the perfect length for a briefing, because remember it needs to be read over a cup of coffee so four pages is what you can actually do in a coffee break. However, it's really hard to figure out what is extra and what really needs to be there. So the way I do it is essentially start working on a four page document already, while I write up out. And then when I see that it's becoming easily seven pages, step back, read again and start taking away parts. And say OK, this is nice to know, but is it actually relevant for MPs and Peers? Would it make a difference if they know this extra detail and it's important to kind of like, think about the bigger picture all the time.”

“Brilliant. Another question we've had in here is if there is any tips you can give about how to practically balance writing concisely whilst also being precise, which I think is a is a challenging thing to do. Do you have any thoughts on how you approach doing that when you're writing for a parliamentary audience?”

“Again, really, really good question. I think that the key five W, one H rule always applies when you're writing about the single study and about everything, right? So if you know that you can write the same thing and say what, when, how, why, etc, etc. That is exactly the information you need, not more than that. And then like sometimes we get lost in details. I feel that if you come from a science background thaen you get lost into the nitty gritty details, and like who said that, what, these are the people that… You need to say no. Step away from it and, kind of like, try to make sense of the noise around it, and say OK what are the key points here and how can I answer to the five Ws, one H question.”

“And we’ll do one more question just for now. So do you have any tips on how you can conclude a good research briefing? So should you summarize your main points or is there another approach that it's good to take? What would you recommend?”

“That's again a really, really good question. The way in which we conclude our briefings is always about challenges - not always, but 99% of the time - challenges and opportunities for the future, because essentially when you write a briefing, you figure out that there are a series of open questions, right? And it's something that MPs and Peers can think about, when at the end of it, like kind of, the take home messages. Like this is what we know about now, what is the situation. This is what we can do next for the future, and that is definitely a good way to end. But definitely once you've written, I think the last thing to do when you write all of your briefing, is again take a step back and write your summary. So that is probably the conclusion of your work, is writing a good summary.”

“Cristiana, thank you so much for taking us through such an in depth look into how you translate research evidence into something which is useful for MPs and Members of the House of Lords.

I thought it would be really useful to spend 5 minutes talking you through what you do with this briefing. So you've spent a fantastic amount of time doing your five Ws, one H, doing your summaries, making sure you put your date and contact details on there, and you've got a fantastic briefing. What're you going to do with it? How do you target it at Parliament to make sure it's the most effective?

So in order to start taking you through that, I'll just give you a tiny overview of the different parts of Parliament who use research, the teams at Parliament using research. We've got House of Commons and House of Lords select committees who use research. We actually have an entire different training session, which is forty five minutes, all about how to work with select committees as a researcher, so I'm not going to tell you too much about select committees today. Parts of the legislative process use research. Again, I'm not going to focus on that today. I want to talk to you about the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries and POST, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. That is where Cristiana is based. POST are huge users and producers of research briefings. We've also got a more informal or more political side of Parliament that uses research, of course. MPs and Members of the House of Lords and their researchers - confusingly called researchers, these are members of staff who work for those MPs and Lords, helping them to carry out their parliamentary duties. And APPGs, All Party Parliamentary Groups.

The bits that I want to pick out and talk to you about this morning are those Libraries , POST, and the APPGs because I think those are the places that you might want to target a research briefing.

So to start with, the research and information teams in Parliament. We've got POST where Cristiana’s based. You know loads about how POSTnotes are produced now. POST are probably the closest bridge between research and policy. One of the biggest aims of POST is to make sure that research evidence is coming into Parliament, it's being used by committees, it's being used in the legislative process, it's being used by MPs and Peers. One of the main ways that POST does this is to produce POSTnotes, so kind of horizon scanning briefings. Also POSTbriefs, which are more reactive advice, and Rapid Response briefings which are extremely quickly turned around summaries of research evidence.

The Commons and the Lords Libraries are a little bit more reactive than horizon scanning. So if POST is looking ahead to the next big issues coming across the parliamentary agenda and producing research briefings on those issues, the libraries are looking at what is happening in Parliament right now. What's happening in the House of Commons Chamber? What's happening in the House of Lords Chamber? What is happening in select committees? What pieces of legislation are going through Parliament right now? And they are producing briefings on these pieces of business. And they're also answering questions which are being put to them by MPs and Lords. So an MP can get in touch with the House of Commons Library and ask for a briefing on a particular topic which the library will produce.

The briefings produced by POST and the Libraries are always impartial, and they're always written specifically for a parliamentary audience. The Libraries and POST are always looking for research and evidence and findings and information to base what they are telling parliamentarians on. So they are big consumers of research and the more accessible and concise and targeted you can present your research to these teams, the more likely it is that they will be using it when writing research briefings for Members.

And the other side of what I wanted to talk to you about was the All Party Parliamentary Groups. So remember, this is the kind of more political side of research use of Parliament. APPG are informal groups of MPs and Members of the House of Lords. There's one for nearly every country in the world. There are many different subject groups, from asthma to veterans. The point of these groups is for Members to develop their knowledge about a particular subject, meet other MPs and Lords who are interested, raise awareness about a subject. The groups are all different, so some of them meet up really regularly and hold events and run inquiries. And some of them work on a bit more of an informal basis. But you can have a look at the full list of groups on the Parliament website and you might find one or two that are of relevance to your research area.

So the ways to use these little parts of Parliament I've just given you a skim over - the Commons Library, the Lords Library, POST and All Party Parliamentary Groups. These are the things practically that I suggest you could do.

You've got your well written briefing. Send it in to the Commons Library or the Lords Library. You can contact them on [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Or send it in to POST and it will be given to the relevant subject specialist in either the Libraries or POST. And send that briefing in with an offer to contribute as they need. That means that the staff working in those research and information teams at Parliament are aware of your work. They've seen that you can write well. They may well get in touch with you, or they might just use your briefing and they will cite you if they've used that briefing.

You could also identify an APPG or maybe an MP or Lord who's a member of an APPG so you know they’re interested in a particular topic. And send them your well written briefing and offered to support any work they're doing in that area. And that just means that you are targeting your research towards a group of Members, a group of MPs or Lords who are potentially interested in that particular topic area.

Don't send in a paper with no context at all. Don't send a briefing to all MPs and all Members of the House of Lords, it's a real waste of your time and everyone's energy. Don't send a paper to a select committee unless you've written it to submit as written evidence in response to an inquiry. And remember we've got a whole session about select committees if you want to explore that a bit further.

OK, so that's some top tips about sending your research into Parliament. What I'm going to do is just go back over to Laura and see if there are any more questions that myself or Cristiana can answer.”

“So we'll start off with a question to you, Naomi, if that's alright. So we mentioned today in this session to make sure that the information that we're writing about is of interest to policymakers. Could you say a little bit more about what, well, how researchers can find out what policymakers and people at Parliament are interested in? Is there anywhere that people can go to find out more about that?”

“So lots of ways to find out what Parliament’s interested in at the moment and actually we've got a whole page on our web hub for researchers, which is just ‘what is Parliament interested in’. Some top tips though. Have a look at what is going on in the House of Commons and House of Lords Chambers at the moment, so what debates are scheduled at the moment? What laws are being passed at the moment? You can easily find that information on the front page of the Parliament website. There's a calendar and a section called what's on, so it's a pretty good bet that if there is a debate scheduled at Parliament on a topic, or if there is a law going through on a particular subject, there will be a lot of people at Parliament interested in that at the moment.

You can also have a look at what research briefings are being published. So you can search all the research briefings that are published from Parliament, whether they've come from the House of Commons library, the House of Lords Library or POST. So you can have a look at what topics are being covered. If the Commons and Lords Libraries are publishing briefings on a particular topic, that means there are people at Parliament who want to know about that topic.

And the final thing, the final tip I'd give you is have a look at what Parliamentary Questions are being asked. So MPs and Lords can submit written questions to the Government. There will be loads on many, many different topics. You can just have a scan through them, see if there are any of relevance to your research area. And the good thing about that is that you can also see who's asked that question and then you'll know that exact MP or the exact Member of the House of Lords is potentially interested in your research and you can contact them directly.”

“So Cristiana, I’ve got a question around if there's a specific referencing style that is expected of people writing for Parliament. And I think in particular, kind of, what referencing style you use might be interesting to hear and how you find using that.”

“Thanks Laura, and this is almost a tricky question, if you want, because as I mentioned before, we have different products now not only POSTnote and POSTbrief but also a Rapid Responses, and we use totally different ways to deal with references. In Rapid Responses we use links, but in POSTbrief and POSTnotes I would say keep it like the classic almost academic reference one, with all the authors, the DOI, and also put the hyperlink to the specific paper in the classic referencing style that you would use. So use hyperlinks but only in the reference list, not in the main text because I think it's a bit confusing.”

“We've thrown loads of information at you. We've taken you through the difference between Parliament and Government. We've taken you through loads of information about how to write a good briefing for a parliamentary audience, and I've thrown some information at you as well about what you do with that briefing once you've written it. So I'm aware that is a lot.

I just wanted to leave you with a reassurance that although we’ve thrown a lot of information at you there is plenty of support available for you to work with Parliament. We have a lot of online resources and ‘how to’ guides on our web hub for researchers - that's parliament.uk/research-impact. If you're on Twitter, follow us on @UKParl\_Research. We share on there any opportunity we find for you to work with Parliament as well as any advice and information we think will be useful for you as a researcher. And you've got a dedicated Knowledge Exchange Unit to help you. That's myself, it's Laura, who you've met asking the questions and it's our colleague Sarah as well, and you can reach us on [keu@parliament.uk](mailto:keu@parliament.uk). KEU, Knowledge Exchange Unit at parliament.uk. But behind that email address are some friendly faces of myself and Laura and Sarah. I hope you found the session useful and good luck with writing for Parliament.”