

DEFINITIVE GUIDE

Policy Research Guide: Process, Frameworks & Best Practices

How a policy question becomes a decision-ready document — the process professionals actually follow

SEO Title: Policy Research Guide: Process, Frameworks & Best Practices (2026)

Meta Description: What policy research actually involves — the process, evidence standards, and frameworks professionals use to turn a policy question into a decision-ready document. From OASIS Research Writing.

URL Slug: /insights/policy-research-guide

Reading time: ~14 minutes | Last reviewed: July 2026

QUICK ANSWER

Policy research is the process of gathering and analysing evidence to inform a decision about a law, regulation, or institutional policy — evaluating what a proposed or existing policy is likely to achieve, whom it affects, and what tradeoffs it involves. Unlike academic policy scholarship, professional policy research is built around a decision a specific body needs to make, on a timeline that decision requires.

Table of Contents

1. What Policy Research Is
2. Types of Policy Research
3. The Policy Research Process, Step by Step
4. Frameworks Professionals Use
5. Evidence Standards in Policy Research
6. Anatomy of a Strong Policy Brief
7. Accounting for Stakeholders and Tradeoffs
8. AI in Policy Research
9. Common Mistakes
10. Best Practices
11. Frequently Asked Questions
12. Key Takeaways
13. Working With OASIS Research Writing

A policy question rarely has one right answer — it has a set of tradeoffs, a body of evidence with gaps in it, and a decision-maker who needs a document that lays out the options honestly rather than one that pretends the evidence settles more than it does. Policy research is the discipline of building that document, and its quality is measured by how well it survives the room it's presented in, not by how confident it sounds.

1. What Policy Research Is

Policy research investigates the likely effects, costs, and tradeoffs of a proposed or existing policy, law, or regulation, using evidence to inform a decision. It sits at the intersection of empirical research, legal analysis, and institutional judgment: a strong policy brief evaluates specific options against stated criteria.

2. Types of Policy Research

- Problem-definition research: establishing that a problem exists, its scale, and who it affects, before any policy option is proposed.
- Options analysis: comparing two or more policy responses against defined criteria (cost, feasibility, equity, effectiveness).
- Impact and evaluation research: assessing how an existing policy has actually performed against its stated goals.
- Comparative policy research: examining how other jurisdictions have addressed a similar problem, and what resulted.
- Regulatory impact analysis: estimating the compliance burden and likely effects of a proposed regulation before it is enacted.

3. The Policy Research Process, Step by Step

1. **Define the policy question precisely.** Confirm who the decision-maker is and what decision they actually need to make.
2. **Establish the scale of the problem.** Using the best available data, before evaluating any solution.
3. **Identify the realistic set of policy options.** Not just the client's preferred one, and the criteria for comparing them.
4. **Gather evidence on each option.** Prior outcomes elsewhere, cost estimates, legal constraints, and affected-party impact.
5. **Analyse tradeoffs explicitly.** No option is free of downsides, and pretending otherwise undermines credibility.
6. **Draft the brief around the decision-maker's actual criteria.** Not a generic report structure.
7. **Have the analysis independently reviewed.** For whether the evidence actually supports the stated conclusions.

4. Frameworks Professionals Use

Framework	What It Evaluates	Typical Use
Cost-benefit analysis	Whether a policy's benefits outweigh its costs, in comparable terms	Regulatory and budget decisions

Framework	What It Evaluates	Typical Use
Multi-criteria analysis	Options scored against several weighted criteria	Complex decisions with non-monetary tradeoffs
Theory of change	The causal logic linking an intervention to its intended outcome	Program design and evaluation
SWOT / PESTLE	Internal and external factors affecting a policy's feasibility	Institutional and strategic policy contexts

5. Evidence Standards in Policy Research

Policy research draws on government statistics, peer-reviewed studies, prior policy evaluations, and legal texts — weighted by reliability, not convenience. Where evidence is genuinely thin, professional policy research says so, rather than filling the gap with confident-sounding assumption.

6. Anatomy of a Strong Policy Brief

- A one-paragraph statement of the problem and the decision required.
- The realistic policy options, stated neutrally before any recommendation.
- Evidence for each option's likely effect, sourced and dated.
- Explicit tradeoffs and who bears them.
- A recommendation that follows visibly from the evidence presented.

7. Accounting for Stakeholders and Tradeoffs

Every policy option benefits some groups and burdens others. Professional policy research names those groups explicitly rather than presenting a policy as universally beneficial.

8. AI in Policy Research

AI tools can accelerate the literature scan and comparative-jurisdiction research stages, surfacing prior studies and international examples quickly. They cannot reliably weigh political feasibility or stakeholder dynamics, and any statistic an AI tool surfaces must be verified against its original source before it appears in a brief.

9. Common Mistakes

- Starting from a preferred conclusion and selectively gathering evidence to support it.
- Presenting a policy option without naming who bears its costs.
- Treating a single study or jurisdiction's experience as generalizable without caveat.
- Using outdated data without checking for more recent figures.
- Skipping independent review of whether the stated conclusion actually follows from the evidence.

10. Best Practices

- State the decision-maker's actual decision criteria before gathering evidence.
- Present all realistic options neutrally before recommending one.
- Name the tradeoffs and who bears them, explicitly.
- Weight evidence by reliability, and flag where evidence is thin.
- Verify every AI-surfaced statistic or study against its original source.

11. Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between policy research and policy advocacy?

Policy research evaluates options and evidence neutrally to inform a decision; advocacy argues for a predetermined position.

How much evidence is "enough" for a policy brief?

Enough to support the specific decision at hand within the decision-maker's timeline — sufficiency for the decision is the standard, not comprehensive literature review.

Can policy research be objective if a client commissioned it?

Yes, provided the researcher reports unfavorable findings honestly.

12. Key Takeaways

- Policy research evaluates tradeoffs for a specific decision-maker — it is not the same as policy advocacy.
- Naming who bears the cost of each option is not optional; omitting it undermines the brief's credibility.
- Evidence should be weighted by reliability, with gaps disclosed rather than papered over.

13. Working With OASIS Research Writing

OASIS Research Writing produces policy briefs and regulatory impact research for legislators, NGOs, and institutional boards — built around the decision the reader actually needs to make.

START A CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION

Internal Linking Recommendations

- [/insights/what-is-research-writing](#) — foundational companion piece
- [/insights/legal-research-explained](#) — related professional research deep-dive
- [/insights/policy-briefs](#) — companion deep-dive on brief-writing specifically
- [/insights/monitoring-and-evaluation](#) — related M&E deep-dive
- [/research-writing](#) — primary service page
- [/about](#) — firm background

External Reference Recommendations

- National statistics offices and government open-data portals
- OECD and World Bank policy research and comparative-governance databases
- Peer-reviewed public policy journals

JSON-LD Schema Recommendations

Article Schema

```
{
  "@context": "https://schema.org",
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  "headline": "Policy Research Guide: Process, Frameworks & Best Practices",
  "author": { "@type": "Organization", "name": "OASIS Research Writing" },
  "publisher": { "@type": "Organization", "name": "OASIS Research Writing" },
  "datePublished": "2026-07-22",
  "mainEntityOfPage": "[CANONICAL URL]/insights/policy-research-guide"
}
```

FAQPage Schema

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      "acceptedAnswer": { "@type": "Answer", "text": "Policy research evaluates options neutrally; advocacy argues for a predetermined position." } },
    { "@type": "Question", "name": "Can policy research be objective if a client commissioned it?",
      "acceptedAnswer": { "@type": "Answer", "text": "Yes, provided unfavorable findings are reported honestly." } }
  ]
}
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SEO / GEO Checklist

Primary keyword: policy research guide

Secondary keywords: policy research process, policy research framework, how to write a policy brief

Long-tail keywords: difference between policy research and advocacy, how much evidence is enough for a policy brief

Search intent: Informational, with commercial intent for institutions evaluating policy research providers.

Featured image: Editorial graphic of a scales/tradeoff visual in navy/gold palette.

Social description: "Policy questions rarely have one right answer. Here's how professional policy research actually weighs the tradeoffs."