



University Secretariat

## BRIEFING NOTES

## WHY YOU SHOULD USE BRIEFING NOTES

- Informed decision-making
- Protects members and helps them meet their duty of care
- Clear and concise information
- Focuses the Body
- Better questions, better feedback, better decisions
- Greater satisfaction with the process by both the Body and the proponent
- The most important document in the package

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### Goals

Better engagement, better feedback, better decisions. Greater trust and respect, more collegiality and greater satisfaction for members and proponents.

### Why Briefing Notes are Important

Governing bodies are required to be reasonably well informed of the relevant issues when making decisions.

Any reliance on information provided by others must be reasonable under the circumstances, considering such factors as from what source the information was obtained, whether the information relied upon is a brief summary or an extensive analysis, whether the matter is routine or exceptional, and the time frame in which a decision must be made. **In all of the circumstances, is the reliance reasonable?**

Members cannot just say “That was the information we were given”, they must be able to establish that it was reasonable that they relied on the information before them and determined that they were adequately informed of the relevant issues when making a decision. It all comes down to trust, which is built, in part, from quality documents.

The Briefing Note (**BN**) is the most important document in the package:

- Packages can be very lengthy (300-500 pages)
- Members are often asked to read packages in a short timeframe (typically one week)
- If using a portal, members may be restricted from printing documents
- Help members and help yourselves get the decisions or feed back you want
- Members are relying on you to help and protect them (Members has fiduciary duties and can be held personally liable for their actions & decisions)

Members should be able to make a decision on the basis of the BN alone. It should contain all of the information the Body needs for its purpose.

A good BN builds the trust of the Body. It demonstrates that the proponent knows their item, understands the ask and the role of the Body and has brought the right information to the Body.

BNs also help proponents think through what and why they are bringing this item to the body. This analysis promotes clear governance and defined roles, and cuts down on unnecessary or inappropriate business for a Body.

- Make sure that you understand the matter and what you really want from the Body
- Make sure you understand the Body's role in the matter
- Determine whether you are the right person to be writing the briefing note

### **Do you understand the matter enough to draft the Briefing Note?**

If you understand the matter and the ask, you will:

- understand what are the key points
- be better able to focus and summarize the matter (clear and concise)
- be able to anticipate questions and answer them in the BN
- be able to tell the Body why they should make this decision and, if applicable, what other options were considered
- draft strategically (convince, know what information should be in and, more importantly, left out of the BN)

### **Do you understand the Body's role in the matter?**

If you understand the Body's role, the BN can help keep the Body on track, at the right level (oversight, strategic and not operational) and focused on the right things.

### **Based on this, are you the right person to be drafting the BN or should it be someone earlier in the chain or more familiar with the matter?**

Having the right person draft the BN makes it easier to draft and results in a better document.

If you aren't clear about what you want your briefing note to do, your reader won't be either.

Should not be an afterthought or simply the accompaniment to the supporting materials, it is the main document.

### **Action**

A body is being asked to make a decision i.e. to approve or recommend.

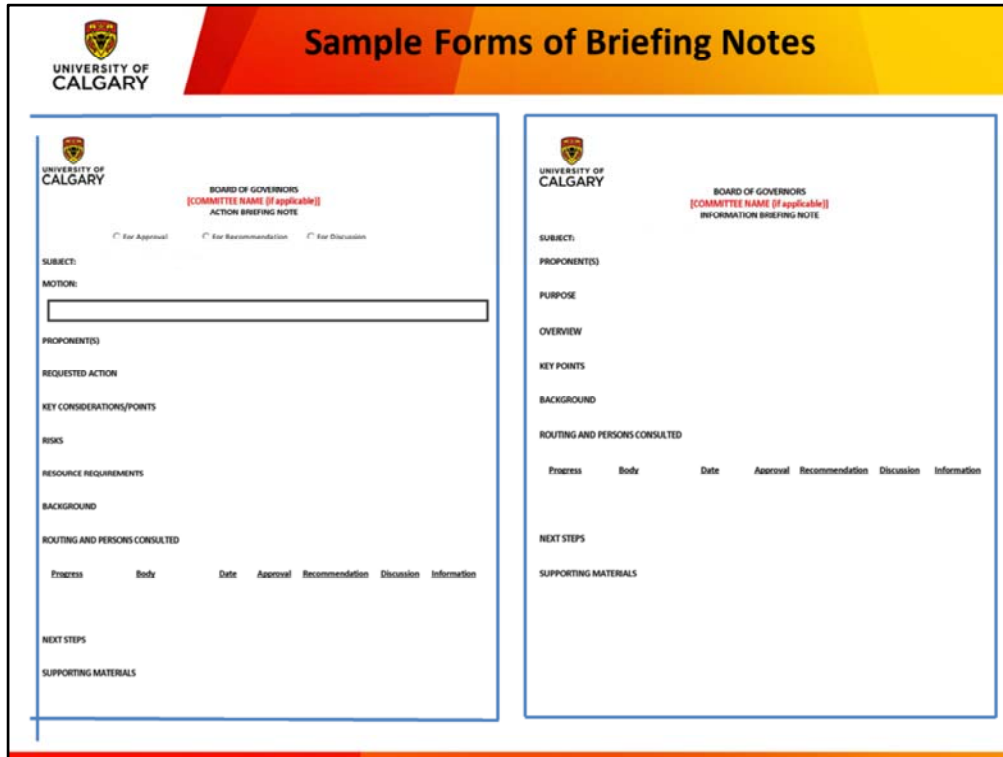
### **Discussion**

A proponent is specifically seeking a body's feedback.

### **Information**

To inform a body about an item.

*Taking an item for information does not preclude a discussion with the body about the item, but the proponent is not seeking specific feedback.*



## General Advice

- BNs should be concise, 1-2 pages – 3 max
- Don't include attachments within the body of the BN – it is meant to be an executive summary accompanying the documents
- Leave out sections that aren't applicable

### 1. Action:

We have ordered our BNs this way on purpose. Considerations before background – ask, recommendation, conclusion, important information first, then the explanation and background. When ordered this way, members read the rest of the document with this context and information in mind. Also, if pressed for time, members get the important information up front.

### 2. Discussion:

- Try to focus the discussion
- If you want specific feedback, put questions in the requested action section and, if applicable, refer members to specific sections of the attachments
- Set the context so members read the material with this in mind

### 3. Information:

Purpose - Why are you bringing this information to the body at this time? Why do they need to know this?

### 4. Defined Terms:

Treat the motion as a separate document. It is legal wording and so it is more formal. Spell out names and terms and only use a defined term if using the term within the motion further on. Motions get separated out and are often circulated outside of the BN. The motion is the true record of the decision and so has to be properly worded. Make sure that the wording actually reflects what you are asking for and includes all that you need to carry out the action.

### 5. Risks

Very important section because risk oversight is one of the most important functions of a governing body. Remember, there are also important risks to not doing something, so if there are no material risks associated with doing something, think whether there is a risk of not doing the proposed action.

Outline the material risks and consequences. Doing, or not doing, the action may have a cost and consequences, both financial and otherwise. Explain these costs, being specific and including all necessary information to convey that you have thoroughly contemplated the issues. Explain the material risks of doing or not doing the action and how you plan to mitigate the risks of doing the action.

### 6. Miscellaneous:

- Action BN – Why have a Requested Action section when a motion is included? It is better to have redundancy than to remove this section because motions can be long and written in legalese and the requested action section provides plain language and a quick snapshot. Members should always be clear on what they are being asked to do.
- Be strategic and targeted with attachments. Include the pertinent section or document only. Including the whole document when not applicable is not fair to members who assume that everything included is important and so feel obligated to read it all. This may work against the Body if members miss information buried in a document. Also, if material information is in the BN, attachments (or more lengthy attachments) may not be necessary because all important information is conveyed. It is better to pull it out and put it in the BN, then leave it buried within a document.



## TIPS FOR WRITING BRIEFING NOTES

- Clear, concise, reliable (accurate and complete for its purpose) and readable
- Make the requested action, recommendation or focus of the discussion immediately clear up-front
- Write with your readers in mind
- Use technical jargon and acronyms only as needed
- If you have one solution or course of action, persuade your audience
- If it is a new or difficult problem, present different options for consideration
- Outline the material risks and consequences
- If an outline of the steps taken to get to this point (the process) is included, make it very concise

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The most valuable briefing notes are clear, concise, reliable (accurate and complete for their purpose) and readable.

### Writing

- Make the purpose, recommendation and focus of the discussion immediately clear up-front. Doing this will allow members to read the balance of the information with the purpose in mind. Focusing your audience will also elicit the type of feedback that you want from the consultation.

This is your chance to convince members and get what you want. It also helps protect members. They get clear, concise, pertinent information from which to make their decision and this is their defense in judicial court (or the court of public opinion via media, if needed).

- Write with your readers in mind. Orient the information to your reader and use language they can understand. Keep it concise and focused, making sure that you have a clear narrative flow.

Put yourself in the shoes of the reader (a lay audience – not necessarily subject matter experts) and ask if you would be comfortable making the decision based on the information in the brief. Do you feel you have all of the right information to make the decision? Does it raise questions for you and, having anticipated the question, can you

answer it in the brief? Have you drafted for the right audience with their role in mind? Is there superfluous information that is taking you off track or irritating you?

- Use technical jargon and acronyms only as needed. Take the technical verbiage down a notch where possible. Spell out acronyms and bold and bracket the abbreviation at the first use. Acronyms should only be used if the word or phrase is stated more than twice in the document.

## **Content**

- If you have one solution or course of action, persuade your audience. Describe it and explain why it is the ideal path to take and what other options were considered and why they were discarded. Think strategically about what you are trying to accomplish and have data and facts to support your position.
- If it is a new or difficult problem, you might not have one effective solution in mind. Think of multiple possibilities and present each as an option with your preferred option indicated and why. If available, provide comparative data about effective implementation of the options in other situations.
- In the end, it is not about showing the Body what you know or all of the work that went into an item. It is all about what the **Body** needs to know in order to do what you are asking it to do.

- Is the motion worded to accomplish what I am trying to do?
- Is the requested action clear?
- What is the bottom line - Have you positioned the key pieces right up front?
- Have you spoken from your reader's perspective?
- Have you drafted strategically?
- Is the level of detail appropriate or does it include unnecessary information?
- Is the information accurate and complete for its purpose?
- Does it flow logically?
- Are all of the supporting materials targeted and appropriate or too much?

### Editing

Once you have completed the BN, re-read it with the following questions in mind:

- Is the motion worded to accomplish what I am trying to do? (Does it ask for the right things? Is it concise, clear and focused? Does it cover everything I need the Body do to accomplish my purpose?)
- Is the requested action clear and does it focus the Body and set the context?
- What is the bottom line? Have you positioned the key pieces right up front?
- Have you spoken from your reader's perspective?
- Have you drafted strategically? (Are you convinced? Was there a lot of information that you had to weed through to find the key points or information?)
- Is the information accurate and complete for its purpose? Is it missing any key points?
- Does it flow logically?

Have someone not familiar with the issue read the brief. This will tease out any problems that you have not spotted because of your familiarity with, or knowledge of, the issue.

## VISUALS ARE IMPORTANT

- Always use the same format
- Use tables, charts and pictures where possible to convey detailed and complicated information
- Is the layout easy to view?
- Is the writing readable?
- Are there errors that will jar the reader and cause them to lose focus on the narrative?

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- Develop a form and be strict about its use. Using the same form is a purposeful technique to help readers. Using the same format every time builds trust in the documents and the proponents, and helps members digest the information and prepare more efficiently. Members learn to trust that if information is not included, this was done on purpose because it is not applicable for the item. There is some psychology to all of this.
- Also, because members may not be able to print documents, the visual presentation and consistency are important.
- If the issue involves complicated processes, break them down into the most relevant parts. Use tables, charts and pictures where possible to convey detailed and complicated information.
- Proof, proof, proof – It is embarrassing if there are typos, wrong information, incomplete sentences or bad grammar in your BN. These may need to be pointed out and explained by the presenter at a meeting, taking the presentation off track and raising questions in members minds (in the case of wrong information). More importantly, this document could end up in court or in the media someday.

Briefing Note Templates are available on the following webpages: Board of Governors: <https://www.ucalgary.ca/secretariat/board-governors/briefing-note-templates> and General Faculties Council <https://www.ucalgary.ca/secretariat/general-faculties-council/proposal-briefing-note-templates>