Advice on Giving a Policy Brief Presentation (for undergraduate economists)

Kyle Coombs[1]

Vassar College

December 2, 2025

Purpose of a Policy Brief Presentation

A policy brief presentation is not a seminar.

Your goal is simple:

Convey a compelling policy problem, show why it matters, explain what the best available evidence says, and conclude with a grounded recommendation.

Keys:

- ▶ Distill complexity
- ▶ Foreground intuition over technical detail
- ▶ Be honest about uncertainty
- ▶ Guide the audience: "Why does this matter?"

General Principles

Clarity > Completeness

- ▶ Define the problem in one clean sentence.
- ▶ State the stakes early.
- ▶ Minimum technical detail for credibility.

A policy brief is judged by understanding, not exhaustiveness.

Guide Your Audience

- ▶ Start with a roadmap.
- ▶ Transition clearly between sections.
- ▶ Recap before recommendations.

Prioritize Intuition

- ▶ Explain mechanisms intuitively.
- ▶ State magnitudes meaningfully.
- ▶ Avoid notation unless necessary.

Structure of an Effective Policy Brief Presentation

1. State the Problem & Why It Matters
2. Provide Essential Context
3. Summarize the Evidence
4. Discuss Limitations Honestly
5. Present Policy Alternatives & Recommendation
6. End with Takeaways

1. State the Problem and Why It Matters

Start with:

What is the problem? Why should the audience care right now?

Effective openings:

- ▶ Specific policy puzzle or failure
- ▶ Short, vivid fact or statistic
- ▶ Consequences if ignored

Avoid long historical digressions; foreground the stakes.

2. Provide Essential Context

- ▶ Current policy landscape
- ▶ Relevant institutions
- ▶ Scope and magnitude of the problem

Carefully chosen statistics anchor understanding.
One or two excellent facts $>$ many loosely connected ones.

3. Summarize the Evidence

▶ Group findings into 2–4 key lessons

▶ Show convergence/divergence across methods

▶ Explain credibility in plain language

Technique

State the lesson first, then briefly justify it with evidence.

If a study is central: give intuition, not technical detail.

4. Discuss Limitations Honestly

Acknowledge uncertainty:

- ▶ External validity
- ▶ Identification weaknesses
- ▶ Insufficient data
- ▶ Open research questions

Credibility > Unwarranted certainty

5. Present Policy Alternatives & Recommendation

Structure:

1. Plausible policy options
2. Evidence for each option
3. Tradeoffs
4. Recommendation

A good recommendation:

▶ Flows from evidence

▶ Acknowledges uncertainty

▶ Identifies who benefits or loses

▶ Clearly states implementation considerations

6. End with Takeaways

▶ Restate problem & your answer

▶ Emphasize most important empirical insight

▶ Identify key unknown for future research

Your Final Slide Should Answer:
What should policymakers remember 24 hours from now?

Style, Delivery, and Slides

Slide design:

- ▶ Minimal text (no full sentences unless necessary)
- ▶ Use graphs, not tables
- ▶ Label axes; annotate important regions
- ▶ One idea per slide

Delivery:

- ▶ Speak slowly; pause after key points
- ▶ Signpost transitions
- ▶ Explain visuals before interpreting
- ▶ Rehearse until nothing feels improvised

Common Mistakes to Avoid

▶ Starting with too much background
▶ Diving into empirical design before stating the question
▶ Listing studies instead of synthesizing lessons
▶ Overstating what the evidence can support
▶ Recommendation not clearly tied to evidence
▶ Ending with new results instead of takeaways

Final Thoughts

Giving a strong policy brief presentation is a core skill for economists.

It requires all the discipline of an applied micro seminar talk, but with a different objective:

Translate rigorous evidence into actionable, comprehensible policy guidance. **Clarity, structure, intuition, and credibility** matter more than technical detail.

Keep it simple, guide the audience, and make choices that reflect your judgment as an economist.