Tips for Writing a University Policy
Office of University Compliance and Integrity

Responsible Offices should follow these writing tips as they draft new or revised university policies.

General guidance

- Keep it simple. Policies are not law and should be written in plain language – not legalese. It should be easily understood by the entire university community.
- Keep it general. Policies cannot anticipate all possible situations. Because of this, they should be relatively general and clear enough to apply to varied unforeseen circumstances. More detailed guidance can be laid out in accompanying resources, such as FAQs and guidelines or standards.
- Make it helpful. The policy should tell the reader why it exists, who it affects, its major conditions and restrictions, when and under what circumstances it applies, and how it is to be carried out. Define “terms of art” for the reader.
- Be prepared to enforce whatever you write. If you write something without intending to enforce it, you are better off not writing it.
- Check for consistency. Ensure the draft policy is consistent with university bylaws, rules, regulations; industry requirements; and current state and federal laws/regulations.
- Check for conflicts. Check related policies to ensure your policy is not in conflict with, or if it interacts, with any other university policies. Connect with the appropriate Responsible Office to resolve any issues.

Format Requirements

Use the University Policy Template, available on the policies website, when drafting your policy. Following the template (including its embedded Word styles) is important for consistency and accessibility. The policy template was designed to be accessible for those with disabilities.

Be Mindful of the Audience

Because the audience for a policy is generally the entire university community, the language used must be understandable to all, not just technical experts.

- Writers may assume that readers have basic knowledge of the campus and university community, but no knowledge of specific policies or procedures.
- Use clear and precise words, short sentences, and common terminology. If industry terminology or words with specialized meaning must be used, define them in the definitions table within the policy. Be consistent when using technical terms. When multiple words have the same meaning, select one and use it throughout.
- The policy should be written on a seventh-grade reading level when possible.
- Use “must” instead of “shall.” Be intentional when using “should” – it means that something is not required but merely a suggestion. Keep in mind that university policies generally set forth requirements, not permissive guidelines or statements of best practices.
**Use Plain Language**
Plain language makes documents more clear, concise, and user-friendly.

- Use active rather than passive voice (e.g., write “the unit head must…” instead of “it is the ultimate responsibility of the unit head to…”); write “notify candidates who are barred from employment…” instead of “candidates who are barred from employment should be notified…”).
  
  Active voice clearly specifies who performs the actions.

- Language must be simple and direct, using strong sentence structure. Avoid jargon and qualifiers (e.g., totally, completely, definitely, etc.).

- Use short words (one or two syllables, e.g., “use” not “utilize”) when possible and write in short sentences. Avoid sentences with multiple clauses.

- Use proper punctuation to help your reader’s understanding of the policy.

- Omit unnecessary words (e.g., write “Faculty and staff must…” instead of “All faculty and staff must…”). Refer to the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excess Words</th>
<th>Plain Alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accordingly</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the present time</td>
<td>now, currently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constitutes</td>
<td>forms, makes up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the purpose of</td>
<td>to, for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in accordance with</td>
<td>under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order to</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the event that</td>
<td>if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pertaining to</td>
<td>of, about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>related to</td>
<td>of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with regard to</td>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Use Gender Inclusive Language**
Policies must be written using gender-neutral and gender-sensitive language.

- Do not use masculine or feminine pronouns as the default; use “they” or “the individual” instead.

- Avoid using gendered-nouns such as chairman, man, mankind, man-made, etc. Instead use gender-neutral nouns such as chair, coordinator, humanity, individual, machine-made, person, synthetic, etc.

- Accurately express sex versus gender distinctions.

- Advice can be found at The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill website, [writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-inclusive-language/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-inclusive-language/)
Style
It is important to follow the university’s Editorial Style Guide located at osu.edu/brand/editorial.html. Some key style guidelines include:

- Use the same word to refer to the same concept throughout all documents. In other words, use consistent terminology throughout (e.g., do not use “institution” and “university” interchangeably).
- Do not capitalize “university” when it is used alone in reference to Ohio State.
- Be consistent in naming the university – normally “The Ohio State University” the first time and simply “the university” thereafter. Do not use “OSU”.
- Do not capitalize job titles (president, provost, etc.), except when used with the person’s name, e.g., President Drake, Provost McPheron.
- Department names are capitalized, e.g., College of Optometry.
- Spell out an acronym the first time followed by the acronym in parentheses, e.g., The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO). Thereafter, use just the acronym.
- Website is one word and http:// is deleted from web addresses except when needed for a direct link.

Grammar
- Use simple rather than compound sentences when possible.
- Use the Oxford comma. Place a comma after the second-to-last item before the conjunction (and, or, or nor) and use a semicolon to separate items in a series when any of the items itself uses a comma. For example, “Units must apply, authorize, and report.” “The process consists of benchmarking; testing, remedying, and monitoring; and reporting findings.”
- Use parallel construction. Start sentences or sentence fragments using words in similar format. For example, instead of “built a team, raises money” say “builds a team, raises money.” Instead of “running, swimming, and exercised” say “running, swimming, and exercising” or “ran, swam, and exercised.”

Visual Aids, Graphics, Tables
Tables and other graphics can make complex information easier to understand, but they can pose accessibility difficulties for people with disabilities. As such, they are not to be the primary means to relay significant information or policy requirements. Complex tables are strongly discouraged. If they are required for understandability, they must be made accessible to the extent possible. If an inaccessible complex table is deemed necessary, the Responsible Office must provide a hyperlink to an accessible version of the information within the body of the policy.

Accompanying Resources
University policies often include a Resources section that lists various resources that help readers more fully understand specific issues that may be included in the policy. Such resources can include references to other university policies or bylaws, rules, regulations, standards/requirements, guidelines, and unit governing documents. Internal administrative procedures of units that own or have responsibilities defined by the policy should generally not be part of the policy document. Consider pulling out very specific and detailed procedures and placing them in separate documents (such as job aids) that can be linked to the policy.

Responsible Offices should also consider developing additional tools to facilitate the understanding of university policies. For example, FAQs list common questions and answers, and do not merely restate policy. They are designed to provide a better understanding of university policy or unit operating procedure connected to policy implementation.