THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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

General guidance

- Keep it simple. Policies are not law and should be written in plain language, without 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 standards.
- Make it helpful. The policy should tell the reader why it exists, who it affects, its major requirements 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 and rules; accreditation and industry requirements; and current local, state, and federal laws/regulations.
- Check for policy conflicts. Check related university policies to ensure your policy is not in conflict. Connect with the appropriate Responsible Office to resolve any issues.

Format Requirements

Use the University Policy Template, available on the University Policies website, when drafting your policy. Following the template (including its built-in Word styles) is important for consistency and accessibility. The policy template is designed to be digitally accessible.

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 subject matter 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.
- 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. Active voice clearly specifies who performs the actions (e.g., write "The president will communicate the results each year" instead of "The results will be communicated each year").
- 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…").
- Language must be simple and direct, using strong sentence structure. Avoid jargon and qualifiers (e.g., totally, completely, definitely, etc.) and eliminate unnecessary extra words (e.g., write "The provost must…" instead of "It is the responsibility of the provost to…"). Refer to the table below.

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

Use Gender Inclusive Language

Policies must be written using gender-neutral and gender-sensitive language.

- Do not use masculine or feminine pronouns ("he or she") 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.

Style

It is important to follow [Ohio State's editorial style guide](). 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, dean, etc.), except when used with the person's name, e.g., President Carter.
- College/department/unit names are capitalized, e.g., College of Optometry, Office of Administration and Planning.
- Spell out an acronym the first time followed by the acronym in parentheses, e.g., Office of Technology and Digital Innovation (OTDI). Thereafter, use just the acronym.
- Website is one word and http:// is deleted from website addresses listed in the Resources and Contacts sections of the policy.

Grammar

- **Use the Oxford comma.** Place a comma after the second-to-last item in a list before the conjunction (*and*, *or*, or *nor*). For example, "Units must review, approve, and report." Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when any of the items itself uses a comma. For example, "The process consists of benchmarking; testing, remedying, and monitoring; and reporting findings."
- Use simple rather than compound sentences when possible.
- Use parallel construction. Start sentences or sentence fragments using words in the same pattern or parts of speech. 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."

Tables

Tables should be rarely used in university policies. If a table is necessary, it must be simple and accessible.

Accompanying Resources

University policies often include a Resources section that lists various resources that help readers more fully understand specific issues covered in the policy. Such resources can include references to other university policies, university bylaws or rules, standards/requirements, guidelines, unit governing documents, and laws/regulations. Consider pulling out very specific and detailed procedures from the policy and placing them in separate documents that can be hyperlinked in 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 procedures connected to policy implementation. FAQs would be listed in the Resources section of the policy.