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University Policy Writing Guide

This guide provides best practices for drafting policies, emphasizing plain and inclusive language, organized structure, and other key elements to ensure that policies are accessible, understandable, and actionable.

Principles of Plain Language

Using plain language can help the reader find what they need, understand what they find, and use the information accordingly.

Write for the Audience:

Consider how to guide the reader from their current knowledge to what they need to know. When writing policies, procedures, or other standards, keep in mind that you are an expert in the subject, but that the reader is often not. Readers may be new to their current role or to the University, or they may be patients, parents, visitors, vendors, and so on. This means you must keep the content simple. To do this, consider the following:

a. What is the policy meant to accomplish?

b. What does my audience **already know** about the subject?

c. What needs to be stated to the reader to achieve the intended outcome?

d. What does my audience **need to know and understand**? Focus on:

  i. rights, responsibilities, obligations = policy

  ii. processes and implementation = procedure

e. What questions will the reader have and to whom should questions be directed?

f. What other resources are available? Remember that you can provide supplemental information related to the policy to keep the policy concise (e.g., reference a department website or resource, create appendices).

Be Clear and Concise:

a. Use a layered approach to presenting policy content. Present the most important information first.

b. Use simple, straightforward language. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and technical terms without definitions or explanations.

c. Use words that are familiar to the reader and omit unnecessary words.

Table 1: Simplified Language

Instead of	***Use***
be responsible for	must
utilize	use
on a monthly basis	monthly

perform an evaluation	evaluate
in the event that	if
provide education	educate
procure	get
in order to	to

d. Shorten sentences into smaller, easier-to-process components, especially when relaying complex information. Sentences should generally be 20 words or fewer.

e. Clearly outline specific requirements by role.

f. Use positive language that focuses on what needs to be done instead of what should be avoided. This helps the reader understand the correct course of action.

Table 2: Enhancing Clarity

Wordy / Vague	***Brief / Specific***
Do not fail to submit your reports on time.	Employees must submit reports to the CEO quarterly.
A reasonable effort must be made to complete the submission of timesheets on a regular basis. This should be done in a manner that is consistent with company procedures, ensuring that all hours worked, including overtime, are properly recorded. The timesheets should be submitted for approval in a timely manner to avoid any potential issues with processing. If timesheets are not submitted as expected, it may lead to delays or inaccuracies in the distribution of paychecks or other consequences.	All employees must accurately complete and submit their timesheets to their immediate supervisor in the Timekeeper software by 5:00 p.m. each Friday. Failure to do so may result in delays or errors in processing. Employees seeking an accommodation may contact the Accommodations Office for more information.
All faculty members will prepare detailed lesson plans for each class session well in advance. This is important to ensure that each class is delivered in a way that aligns with the overall course objectives and learning outcomes. Additionally, these materials should be made available to students in a timely manner before the class takes place. This practice is intended to help students better prepare for each session and contribute to a more effective learning environment. Faculty members are also reminded that these preparations should take into account any specific needs or accommodations for students with disabilities, as required by university policy and relevant laws.	Faculty must prepare and upload lesson plans to the University's online Learning Platform at least 48 hours before each class. Materials in the lesson plan must: • align with course objectives; • clearly outline learning outcomes; and • accommodate students with disabilities.
It is expected that research protocols will be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are compliant with all relevant	Principal Investigators must review and update research protocols every six months to ensure compliance with institutional and

regulations and standards. Failure to do so could potentially result in issues or complications during audits or reviews.	regulatory standards. Updated protocols must be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) by the 15th of the month following the review.

Use an Active Voice and Be Specific:

Perhaps more than any other writing technique, using the active voice to **specify who is performing, or expected to perform, an action** is essential to effective policy writing. In an active-voice sentence, the person or department/unit taking the action is the subject of the sentence. Passive-voice sentences often do not identify who is performing the action.

Table 3: Passive vs. Active Voice

Passive Voice	***Active Voice***
The following information must be included in the document in order for it to be considered complete.	Principal Investigators must include the following information in the grant application.
Copies of receipts must be provided.	Employees must provide copies of receipts for purchases exceeding $100 to their Reimbursement Officer within 30 days of the purchase.
Feedback will be collected on a monthly basis.	Supervisors will collect feedback from team members during monthly one-on-one meetings.
Safety inspections will be conducted.	The Safety Officer must: • conduct weekly inspections of the facility; • document inspections in the Inspection Report template; and • report any potential hazards to the Chief Safety Officer within 24 hours

Design for Readability:

a. Write short sections and use informative headings to break up material and provide the reader a document roadmap. Long, dense sections give the impression the policy or procedure is difficult to understand.
    i. Paragraphs should be 3-5 sentences
    ii. One topic per paragraph
b. Use **visual weight** and lists to highlight a series of requirements or other essential information.
    i. Visual weight refers to how much attention different parts of a page draw based on their appearance. **The more noticeable something is, the more visual weight it has**. Big weighs more than small. Dark weighs more than light. Adding visual weight to headings and text adds immediate cues to hierarchy and importance.

c. Create supporting documentation as needed to provide examples and visuals to help clarify complex information and make abstract concepts more concrete.

Accessibility & Inclusivity

Equity Lens

An equity lens is a framework used to assess policies, decisions, and processes to identify and address potential disparate impacts. The goal of using an equity lens is to promote fairness, reduce inequalities, and ensure that everyone can participate fully and benefit equitably. An example of this concept is the shift over time from "maternal leave" policies to "parental leave" policies.

When writing policy:

a. Consider whether individuals or groups will be disproportionately and negatively affected by the policy. Look at both direct and indirect impacts.

b. Engage a diverse range of stakeholders from different demographics, disciplines, and roles.

c. Consider whether the policy includes exceptions or accommodations that are fair and reasonable, ensuring that all groups can meet policy requirements.

Gender-neutral Language

There are several ways to replace gendered pronouns. Be mindful of other gendered language as well.

a. Use plural pronouns: they/them instead of s/he or her/him.
b. Use the relative pronoun "who."
c. Use titles or nouns.

Use Person-first Language

Person-first language emphasizes the person before any condition or disability.

Table 4: Inclusive Language Alternatives

Instead of	***Use***
If a complainant is not satisfied with the board's decision, **s/he** can request a rehearing	A complainant **who** is not satisfied with the board's decision can request a rehearing.
S/he must notify **his/her** supervisor in advance of the leave.	**Employees** must notify **their** supervisor 60 days in advance of the leave.
chairman	chairperson
policeman	officer
maternal leave	parental leave
diabetic patient	patient with diabetes

homeless person	person experiencing homelessness

Accessible Content

Accessible content allows the widest range of users possible to engage with information. Providing accessible content is everyone's responsibility and is upheld by University policies and by state and federal laws.

a. Use the **Check Accessibility Tool** in Microsoft Office and Office 365 to help determine accessibility issues with your document and follow the prompts to fix it. The Tool will not report all inaccessible content so writers should manually check the content as well.
    i. The Tool is located under File > Info > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility.
b. Provide headers and alternate text for all tables and images.
c. Provide scenarios and contextual examples or additional education in supplemental documents
d. Use sans serif font like Calibri or Arial when drafting accompanying resources. Font with serifs, like Times New Roman, can be difficult for people with low vision or learning disabilities.
e. Color accessibility: Use high contrast color combinations in images. For example, avoid yellow or light blue and white.

Policy Review

Ensure the following during review:

- ✓ The policy is necessary and relevant. Duplicate or conflicting policy does not exist.
- ✓ Content is in the approved **template** and formatted correctly. Consult the template guide(s) for additional information.
- ✓ The **title** identifies the key purpose of the policy in as few words as possible.
- ✓ **Contact information** is updated. Individuals' titles are provided rather than names. E.g., Program Manager *instead of* Jane Smith.
- ✓ The **Scope and Applicability** are clearly defined. Readers can quickly and easily identify if the policy applies to them.
- ✓ The **Purpose** tells the reader the reason for the policy, what it aims to achieve, and why it is necessary.
- ✓ **Defined terms** are clear and specific. They are capitalized throughout the document. E.g., Workforce Member
- ✓ Terminology is consistent.
- ✓ The **Policy Statement** articulates the core principles and directives of the policy. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Be direct, use an active voice and plain language to help ensure clarity.
- ✓ Content related to process implementation is contained in **Procedures**, not the Policy Statement.

- ✓ Procedures outline clear step-by-step instructions. Each step is easy to follow and logically connected to the next. They define who does what, when, and how, and include any resources or tools needed. Test procedures for clarity.
- ✓ **Nouns** such as “State” and “University” are capitalized when referring to a specific institution or entity. E.g., capitalize “University” when referring to the University of Connecticut or its resources to distinguish it from any university in general.
- ✓ No reference to “guidelines” or other document classifications appear in the content of the policy except for a Procedures section, where appropriate. ***Only*** **policies contain Policy Statements**. Protocols, Guidelines, and other standards documents do not.
- ✓ **Spelling and grammar** are checked using the Review tool in Word or another similar program.
- ✓ **Hyperlinks** are provided, current, and functional.
- ✓ The document is accessible and inclusive. Use the **Accessibility Checker** in Microsoft.
- ✓ The **Enforcement Statement** is present and references only the appropriate governing documents. For example, if students are not within the scope of the policy, then the University Student Code is removed from the Enforcement Statement.

References

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