

Policy Writing Guide

Central Ohio Technical College (COTC) approves, issues, and maintains all college-wide policies using a consistent process and format. This process provides continuity, ease of access and understanding, input and feedback as policies are formulated, and transparent guidance to the college community.

This guide contains information about the college's policy process and procedures for writing and revising institutional policies. It, along with the policy template, provides a standardized format and writing style for college policies, which will make policies more consistent from one to the next, make policies easier for members of the college community to read and understand, make the process of writing and revising policies easier for those involved, and produce better quality policies for the college. Other resources for policy developers, including the policy template, instructions for completing the policy template, and policy approval cover sheet are available on the college's web site at <http://www.cotc.edu/Discover/Pages/Policy-Resources.aspx>.

The college's policy process is co-managed by the Office of the President and the Office of the Vice President for Institutional Planning & Human Resources. Assistance and guidance with all stages of policy development are available from college policy process (CPP) coordinator, Jan Tomlinson, executive assistant to the president, at 740.364-9510 or jtomlins@cotc.edu or the policy process sponsor, Jackie Parrill, Ed.D., Vice President for Institutional Planning and Human Resources, at 740.366.9407 or Parrill.9@osu.edu.

Preparation and Research

Before you start writing any policy, it is important to gather the information you need to develop an accurate document. To focus your preparation effectively, be sure you are clear on the point of the policy you are about to develop. Is the policy being developed in response to a problem encountered on campus, in response to a new system-wide policy issued by ODHE or state or federal regulation, or for some other reason? You need to determine what you are trying to accomplish, and make sure the point of the policy will be clear to the college community.

When you are developing a new policy document, check to be sure you are not duplicating existing information. There may be a policy that could be expanded to include the information you are developing, or there may be related policy documents that will help inform the policy you are developing. By gathering this information in advance, you will know where you can cross-reference rather than repeat information, and you can be sure the policy document you develop corresponds with existing policies and procedures.

It may also be helpful to look at any policy document issued at other colleges and universities regarding the topic you plan to address. Other institutions may have found new or creative ways of addressing issues with which your area has been struggling. Because we often deal with similar issues, reviewing other colleges and universities policies can sometimes help focus your policy development and give you a good starting point for your policy.

Policy writers and owners should ask for and use input and feedback from stakeholders relevant to the policy. It is important to consult with primary stakeholders in the policy to determine existing processes and problem areas, and to ensure that the policy document you develop will not impede the ability of other units to conduct business. You should consult with those units and individuals who play a role in the policy you are developing and those whose regular business may be dramatically affected by the developing policy.

The list below, although not all inclusive, is intended to provide examples of constituent groups that might be appropriate to consult during the policy development process:

- Individual college offices
- Faculty council
- Faculty union leadership

- Staff Forum
- Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council
- Enrollment Issues Group
- Academic Leadership
- Individual position/subject matter experts (i.e. ADA coordinator, building coordinators, deans, compliance officer, etc.)

Finally, consult with the college policy process coordinator and the policy process sponsor regularly during policy development. They can provide guidance and oversight for college policy development and should be included early in all policy development activity.

Tips for Policy Writing

The institutional policies are intended to be practical, administrative guides, with both style and content determined by user needs. The only way this can be the case is if each and every policy and procedure document is developed, written, and updated with the user in mind. When writing your policy, keep in mind that you are an expert in the area on which you are writing, but that the users of your section will not be. Many people referring to your policy may be new to their current position, or new to the college altogether. This means you need to keep your procedures as simple and straightforward as possible.

Provide enough information for users to understand the policy, but not so much that they become confused. Keep your language straightforward, and write with attention to what the general college population needs to know, not what a specialist in your own area needs to know. Remember that you can always provide supplemental information on your own web site, and provide a cross-reference in the policy for those users who may need more assistance with the procedure.

Do not confuse "policy" with "procedures" or "guidelines." The term "policy" refers to a very specific aspect of the policy template. That part should include only the governing principles that explain the reason why the remainder of the template sections exists. It explains why we have certain procedures or guidelines, but not how to accomplish tasks. Procedures and guidelines are similar, but procedures are the required steps a user must take to be in compliance with policy, while guidelines are recommended best practices for departments to accomplish tasks but are not required to be in compliance.

Procedures should be presented in a step-by-step manner and should include locations of electronic systems or forms that are part of the procedure, and links to that information. Word choice in this section can also make a big difference in how easily your procedures can be used. For example, using the word "must" indicates that something is required, while the term "should" implies that there might be other options, or that a department could bypass the task associated with that step.

Avoid including the type of information that is likely to change frequently. Instead of using an individual's name, use the position title. Instead of including a building name, refer just to the department name. By carefully considering the type of information you include in the document, you can help ensure better accuracy for a longer period of time.

Remember that policy documents are not marketing documents or creative writing pieces. The goal of a well-written policy is to explain clearly how to accomplish a specific process at the college with minimal problem, aggravation or risk of non-compliance.

Finally, remember that when it comes to writing policy, less is more. Don't use ten words to say what could be said in four. Keep your statements clear and to the point. If you are able to develop a user-friendly policy, you increase the likelihood that users will refer to the policy rather than call you, will work to stay in compliance, and will contribute to increasing efficiency across the college.

Policy Writing Standards		
Remember the difference between policies and procedure	<p><i>Policies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe the rules that establish what will or will not be done. ▪ Can range from broad philosophies to specific rules. ▪ Are usually expressed in standard sentence and paragraph format. ▪ Include WHAT the rule is, WHEN it applies and WHO it covers. 	<p><i>Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe the critical steps undertaken to achieve policy intent. ▪ Are succinct, factual and to the point. ▪ Are usually expressed using lists. ▪ Include HOW to achieve the necessary results.
Be mindful of the audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Because the audience for a policy is generally the entire college community, the language used must be accessible and understandable to all, not just technical experts. ▪ Writers may assume that readers have basic knowledge of the campus and college community and 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 policy definitions section. Be consistent when using technical terms. When multiple words have the same meaning, select one and use it throughout the document. ▪ The policy should be written on a seventh-grade reading level. ▪ 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 most college policies are requirements and not simply statements of best practices. ▪ 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. ▪ 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 specifically how it is to be carried out. 	
Use everyday language that readers will easily and immediately understand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keep it simple. Policies are not law and should be written in plain language – not legalese. It should be easily understood by the entire college community. ▪ Use short words (one or two syllable). ▪ Keep language simple and direct and use strong sentence structure. ▪ Avoid the use of jargon, unnecessary technical expressions and fancy vocabulary. ▪ Use common words (e.g. "use" instead of "utilize"). ▪ Use active rather than passive voice (e.g., instead of “it is the ultimate responsibility of the department manager to...,” use “the department manager must...” or instead of “candidates who are barred from employment should be notified...” use “notify candidates who are barred from employment...”). Active voice clearly specifies who performs the actions. ▪ Omit unnecessary words (e.g., say “Faculty and staff must...” instead of “All faculty and staff must...”). ▪ Use proper grammar and punctuation. ▪ Use pronouns to help the reader relate to the document (e.g., instead of “Receipts must be provided...” say “You must provide receipts...”). This is also an example of switching from passive to active voice. ▪ Use the same word to refer to the same concept throughout all documents. ▪ Use standard outline format (i.e., I. A. 1. a. i.). Do not use bullets or unnumbered paragraphs. ▪ Do not capitalize “college” except as in “Central Ohio Technical College.” ▪ Do not capitalize job titles (e.g., library director, the president was quoted as saying), except when used with the person’s name, e.g. President Coe. ▪ Spell out initials and acronyms the first time, following with the initials or acronym in parentheses and subsequently follow with the initials or acronym. ▪ Be consistent in naming the college – “COTC,” “the college,” or “Central Ohio Technical College” ▪ Do not use “institution” and “college” interchangeably; use one term consistently. ▪ Additional advice can be found at Center for Plain Language website at centerforplainlanguage.org/about-plain-language/checklist/. 	
Keep the structure simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use gender-neutral/sensitive language – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Do not use masculine pronouns as the default; use “they” as a plural pronoun and “the individual,” “she/he,” or “she or he” as the singular pronoun. ➢ 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, people, person, synthetic, etc. ➢ Accurately express sex versus gender distinctions. 	

	<p>➤ Advice can be found at The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill website at http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/gender.html."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use short sentences (maximum of 15 words). ▪ Use short paragraphs (maximum of 100 words for policies; maximum 40 words for procedures). ▪ Use lists - it makes it easier to read, and encourages short sentences. ▪ Use numbering to facilitate easy referencing. ▪ Be consistent - repetition of familiar words increases comprehension. ▪ Remove words that don't add meaning. Tips to help achieve this include: write as you would normally do so, then edit to create short sentences to remove unnecessary words and information that does not add value to the policy or procedure. For example use "often" instead of "in most cases", "before" instead of "prior to", "because" instead of "due to the fact that". ▪ Use the approved policy and procedure template - documents written and presented in a consistent manner aids readability ▪ Use the Oxford comma. Place a comma after the second-to-last item before the conjunction (<i>and</i>, <i>or</i>, or <i>nor</i>) and use a semicolon to separate items in a series when any of the items itself uses a comma. For example, "Departments 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."
Be specific - mean what you say and say what you mean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rather than "submit the appropriate form" say "Submit the Withdrawal from Program form". ▪ If action is <i>mandatory</i> "must" or "will" is used. ▪ If the action is <i>recommended</i> or valid reasons to deviate from the requirement may exist in particular circumstances, then 'should' is used. ▪ If the action is <i>permissive</i> "may" is used. ▪ The word "shall" must be avoided unless there is a legislative requirement that prescribes its use. This word causes confusion between whether an action is mandatory or recommended.
Avoid the use of information that is quickly outdated and that therefore requires regular amendment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use department names, rather than position titles (if possible). ▪ Avoid using specific names or contact details. ▪ Provide links to generic web pages rather than specific web pages (if possible). For example, refer to "Student Administration Forms" rather than the specific URL for the form.