Policy Writing Guide

About this Guide

This guide contains information about writing and revising Central Ohio Technical College institutional policies. It, along with the policy template, provides a standardized format and writing style for institutional 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.

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Questions

For question not addressed in this guide, contact the 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, Vice President for Institutional Planning and Human Resource Management, at 740.366.9407 or Parrill.9@osu.edu.
Responsibilities of Policy Owners

The primary responsibility of policy owners/developers is to ensure the continued accuracy of the policies they have been assigned by their units/departments. Users across the college rely on the policies to provide accurate guidance, and regularly make important business decisions based on the information contained within the policies. Whenever the source document or related information for the policy is updated, the policy owner is responsible for reviewing the institutional policy for compliance.

All policies must be reviewed and updated at least every 4 years. The vast majority of policies do require some type of update, even if only a minor update, within this time span. If, after reviewing the policy, the policy owner determines that it remains accurate exactly as published, the policy owner must contact the CPP Coordinator to request that the policy be reissued. The policy will not go through a formal review process, but the "reviewed" date will be added, verifying its continued accuracy. By regularly reviewing, updating, and reissuing policies as needed, policy owners send a clear message to college users that they can rely on the accuracy of the policy owned by their respective areas.

Another important responsibility of policy owners is to monitor ease of use and compliance. When there is a high level of non-compliance across the college or when there is a large number of questions regarding a process, the policy owner should review the policy to identify problem areas that may be introducing confusion. It is important to recognize that systems, processes, and the college culture are constantly changing and evolving, and the policies must keep pace with those changes. A policy that was adequate for college needs 10 years ago may not be today. Policy owners need to recognize when it is time to reorganize or restructure the information in an existing policy, in an effort to keep the policies the practical guides they were meant to be.

Characteristics of a Good Policy Document

Issues that rise to a level needing to be addressed through the college policy process share a number of characteristics, that include and are not limited to:

- Endure across time and administrations; change infrequently and set the course for the foreseeable future.
- Manifest and operationalize the college’s mission, vision, values, and goals.
- Apply broadly across the institution.
- Ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations.
- Promote operational efficiency and reduce bureaucracy.
- Reduce institutional risk

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. Good policy and procedure documents:
• Are reviewed regularly and updated as needed to provide appropriate direction to the campus.
• Are written using simple, clear, concise language.
• Avoid jargon and overly technical descriptions.
• Are written assuming basic knowledge of the campus, but novice knowledge of the specific policy and procedure being described.
• Clearly differentiate between "policy," "procedure," and other appropriate headings within the policy.
• Consider why the user will need the information and what the user will likely be doing when looking for information.
• Provide accurate contact information for users who have questions or situations that fall outside of the normal situation.

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

**Preparation and Research**

Before you start writing any policy, it is important to gather the information you need to develop an accurate document. To effectively focus your preparation, 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 OBR 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. Since 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 and Inclusion Advisory Council
- Academic Leadership
- Individual positions/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.
The Policy Template

A standard template has been developed for use for policies in all areas of the College. The template is available on the Web site at http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx. The template uses standard styles that allow for clean transition from the Word document to the Web. It is important to use the templates and the styles properly to help streamline the review and approval process. When the templates are not utilized properly, the document will be returned to the policy owner for corrections, thus slowing the process.

Structure of the Document

The policy template sections are structured using standard outline format. This format helps you keep the policy organized and is easy for the reader to find the needed information. The template document is divided into the following 3 major parts:

Header

The header for each policy includes the policy name, policy number, responsible office name, and the “applies to” section.

Policy Name (required) The policy title is the primary means of identifying, locating, and referring to a policy. Do not include “Policy” or “Policy on” in the title of the policy listed in “Policy Name”.

Questions to consider when writing a policy title:
- Is the title descriptive enough to accurately reflect the main contents of the policy?
- Is the title easily understood by people not familiar with the policy?
- Does it contain words that will be identified in keyword searches?

When naming a policy:
- Avoid using generic first words such as "University", "Policy" or "Procedure".
- Ensure the title accurately reflects the policy or procedure content.
- Ensure the title does not start with words such as "the", "that" or "a".
- Ensure the title is succinct.
- Ensure that related policies have similar titles.

Policy Number Will be entered by the CCP Coordinator. Policy number follow a prescribed format: X.X.XX. The first section of the number indicates the topic area and is assigned as follows:

- General Governance (1.X.XX)
- Human Resources (2.X.XX)
- Business & Finance (3.X.XX)
- Academic Affairs (4.X.XX)
- Gateway/Enrollment (5.X.XX)
- Student Life (6.X.XX)
The second section of the policy number indicates subsections within the topic area. For example, in HR:

- 2.1.XX – General Policies
- 2.2.XX – Student Employment

For those topic areas under which subsections are limited or unnecessary, only one subsection may be used.

The final section of the policy number is used to indicate the number of policies within each subsection and should be sequential.

**Responsible Office Name** Enter the name of the responsible office or department. Official department/office names must be used. Please refer to the Organizational Guide available at [http://www.cotc.edu/faculty-and-staff/hr/Documents/OrgGuide-COTC.pdf](http://www.cotc.edu/faculty-and-staff/hr/Documents/OrgGuide-COTC.pdf)

**Applies to:** Indicate whomever is appropriate (any combination): Faculty, Staff, Students, Student Employees, Administrative Staff, Support Staff, Volunteers, Visitors, Vendors, Guests. When feasible “applies to” should indicate more specific applications such as “anyone operating college owned or operated vehicles”.

**POLICY (required)** This section contains the statement of policy. The policy statement is the governing principle, plan, or understanding that guides the action and provides the business reason driving the need for policy; reason for being. It states what we do, but not how. The policy statement(s) should be brief (2-6 sentences), and is supplemented by the information within the rest of the policy. The policy statement guides and determines present and future decisions and direction, and reflects and defines institutional values.

Questions to consider when writing the policy statement section:

- Does it accomplish the purpose of the policy?
- Does it clearly articulate what the policy is and what it is to accomplish?
- What is the scope of the policy?
- Does this section contain only policy (not procedures)?
- Is the policy statement consistent with the applicable laws, regulations, and policies?

**Table of Contents (optional; suggested for documents 6-10 pages or longer)** States the requirement or provision that is placed on or extended to the college community.

**Definitions (optional)** Defines terms that have specialized meanings in the policy. When the subject matter requires a precise understanding of terms, include them here. This allows a reader to approach the content in a more knowledgeable manner, and to easily refer back to the definition as needed when the term is used frequently throughout the policy section. When a term has more limited use, it can be defined in the body of the policy and Definitions may be omitted.
Questions to consider when writing the definitions section:

- Does it define new, uncommon, and/or specialized terms?
- Does it define terms that can have different meanings in different contexts?
- Does it list terms in alphabetical order?
- Are terms italicized, followed by a colon, and defined with a complete sentence? (e.g., Term: The definition of the term goes here.)

**Policy Details (optional)** Information that elucidates the policy at a higher level than procedures.

**PROCEDURES (required)** Procedures describe how the policy is implemented at the college. The action steps included here should clearly and accurately describe the process and responsibilities for accomplishing tasks governed by the policy. Procedures are the required process for the specific situation.

The procedures should be organized for ease of use. Some policies may require multiple procedure headings for the different tasks addressed. While procedures are organized as a chronological series of steps required to accomplish a task, responsibilities are organized as lists of tasks that must be completed by an individual or department.

This section prescribes the means of implementing and complying with the policy. Procedures articulate how the policy will be implemented. Questions to consider when writing the procedure section:

- Is it consistent with the policy statement section?
- Does it contain the specific actions or steps needed to comply with the policy?
- Does it contain implementation plans and dates for policies that require a phased implementation?
- Are procedural requirements reasonable?
- Does this section contain only procedures (not policy)?
- Is the procedure section consistent with the applicable laws, regulations, and policies?

**Responsibilities (required)** Summarizes the responsibilities of college offices, positions, or individuals named in the policy. Similar to the Procedures section; presents responsibilities according to job function/office, while Procedures presents the responsibilities according to tasks.

**Resources (required for anything referred to in the policy)**

- Links to forms, tools, and processes used to implement or required for compliance with the policy
- Links to federal state or local laws or relations
- Provides background material that is helpful and not directly related to policy implementation

It is important to remember that resources are meant as supplemental information, and they should not be relied upon to convey significant policy information.
**Contacts (required)** Lists topics and the corresponding contact information: office name (not an individual’s name), telephone (including area code), e-mail, and URL.

**History (required)**
List each issue, revision, edit, or review date.

**Issued**: First release date of the policy.

**Revised**: Date of substantive content changes approved by the College Policy Process.

**Edited**: Date of style, format or grammar changes and/or correction of error. No approval is needed through the formal review and approval process.

**Reviewed**: Last date that the policy content was reviewed and found to be current, e.g. no changes were made. No approval is needed through the College policy process.

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**Formatting Policy Documents**

All policy drafts are to be written in Microsoft Word and formatted to the specifications outlined below.

**REVISION MARKS**

For revisions to current policies, use strikethrough for deletions and underline for additions. In cases of extensive revisions where strikethrough and underline would be overly cumbersome, two separate documents are required. One document will be the proposed policy without revision marks. The other document will be the current policy with strikethrough throughout the entire document.

Do not use colored text or highlighting to indicate additions or deletions to the text of a proposed policy.

Do not use Microsoft Word “Track Changes” to indicate additions or deletions to the text of a proposed policy.

**FONTS, MARGINS, SPACING, ETC.**

Use Times New Roman, 12 pt font, bold for headings. Use Times New Roman, 12 pt font for text.

Use 1” margins on all sides.

Do not use the tab key or spacebar to align paragraphs or individual lines.

Set default tab stops to .25”.

Use a single space after punctuation.
Paragraphs are to be left justified (i.e., left aligned with a ragged right edge). Use single spacing for paragraphs. Make sure to leave one blank line above and below every paragraph.

Use position titles (e.g., Vice President for Academic Affairs) rather than names.

Acronyms should be used only after the full compound term has been written out.

OUTLINE FORMAT

Use the following outline standards as appropriate for each policy. The section titles of the template are already in the gray horizontal bars.

III. Policy

A. Text (flush left)

1. Text (indented .25" from left)

   a. Text (indented .5" from left)

      (1) Text (indented .75" from left)

      (a) Text (indented 1" from left)

      (i) Text (indented 1.25" from left)

Each paragraph in the document must begin with the appropriate outline level identifier.

MODIFYING THE STANDARD TEMPLATE

In general, it is best to stay as close to the standard template as possible. The closer you are to the standard, the easier it will be for users to find the information they need in your policy. However, there are occasions where you may need to add different parts/headings to the policy to increase ease of use.

Whenever you add a part/heading to the policy, it should be something that identifies a significant aspect of the policy. Any headings should be descriptive of the information to follow. All of the part headings should be of equal importance within the policy as a whole.

No matter how many headings you determine you need to clearly communicate your policy, you should retain the outline structure for all documents developed for the policy. Documents that are submitted in narrative structure may need to be rewritten and re-reviewed before starting the formal review process.
Contact the College Policy Process (CPP) Coordinator for assistance with the structure of your policy.
Additional Tips for Policy Writing

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 "shall" or "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.

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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Writing Standards</th>
<th>Policies</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Remember the difference between policies and procedure</strong></td>
<td>Describe the rules that establish what will or will not be done.</td>
<td>Describe the critical steps undertaken to achieve policy intent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can range from broad philosophies to specific rules.</td>
<td>Are succinct, factual and to the point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are usually expressed in standard sentence and paragraph format.</td>
<td>Are usually expressed using lists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include WHAT the rule is, WHEN it applies and WHO it covers.</td>
<td>Include HOW to achieve the necessary results.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Use everyday language that readers will easily and immediately understand** | For clarity, policies should, in general, be written in the third person. | Use everyday language that readers will easily and immediately understand |
| | Use short words (one or two syllable). | For clarity, policies should, in general, be written in the third person. |
| | Avoid the use of jargon, unnecessary technical expressions and fancy vocabulary. | Use short words (one or two syllable). |
| | Use common words (e.g., “use” instead of “utilize”). | Avoid the use of jargon, unnecessary technical expressions and fancy vocabulary. |
| | Use active, rather than passive language. | Use common words (e.g., “use” instead of “utilize”). |
| | Write as you would speak, editing out informal words or phrases. | Use active, rather than passive language. |
| | Avoid the use of acronyms. If acronyms are necessary, use the full title/term first before using the acronym. | Write as you would speak, editing out informal words or phrases. |

| **Keep the structure simple** | Use gender-neutral/sensitive language - Advice can be found at The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill website at [http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-sensitive-language/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-sensitive-language/) | Use gender-neutral/sensitive language - Advice can be found at The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill website at [http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-sensitive-language/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/gender-sensitive-language/) |
| | Use short sentences (maximum of 15 words). | Use short sentences (maximum of 15 words). |
| | Use short paragraphs (maximum of 100 words for policies; maximum 40 words for procedures). | 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 lists - it makes it easier to read, and encourages short sentences. |
| | Use numbering to facilitate easy referencing. | Use numbering to facilitate easy referencing. |
| | Be consistent - repetition of familiar words increases comprehension. | 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”. | 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 approved policy and procedure template - documents written and presented in a consistent manner aids readability |

| **Be specific - mean what you say and say what you mean** | Rather than “submit the appropriate form” say “Submit the Withdrawal from Program form” | Rather than “submit the appropriate form” say “Submit the Withdrawal from Program form” |
- If action is mandatory “must” or “will” is used.
- If the action is recommended or valid reasons to deviate from the requirement may exist in particular circumstances, then ‘should’ is used.
- If the action is permissive “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.

- Use department names, rather than position titles (if possible).
- Avoid using specific names or contact details.
- Provide links 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.
When you have completed a draft of the policy, checked all of your facts, and consulted with the appropriate individuals, follow the steps as outlined in the Policy Approval Process policy available on the President’s Office website [http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx).

Generally, you will submit your final draft to the College Policy Process Coordinator for consideration at an upcoming Executive Leadership Team meeting. With your draft, you also need to submit the Policy Approval Cover Sheet (available on the President’s Office website at [http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx)).

The CPP Coordinator will review the draft for structure, style, and usability; and will make any necessary editorial or structural changes to bring the draft in line with the template and formatting standards. If the draft requires significant changes, the CPP Coordinator will contact you to request or discuss the changes, or to review a revised draft. If you have followed the guidelines regarding structure and style provided in this document and have regularly consulted with the CPP Coordinator during development, this review will likely be very quick.

Once the final preparations of the draft have taken place, the CPP Coordinator will schedule the draft policy on the Executive Leadership Team agenda for review and comments. The policy owner is responsible for distributing the draft policy to the Executive Leadership Team members at least two weeks prior to the policy appearing on the Executive Leadership agenda.

Many policies can move to final approval relatively quickly following the Executive Leadership Team review, but others may require more work. The policy owner is responsible for incorporating feedback from the members of Executive Leadership, as appropriate. If substantial changes are necessary, the policy owner may resubmit the draft policy to the Executive Leadership Team before moving to final approval by the President.

Once the final draft is developed, the policy owner must update the Cover Sheet and submit the policy for approval by the President.

The policy owner is responsible for communicating the new policy, posting it to the appropriate website, and for any additional training necessary to achieve ongoing compliance.

**Technical Updates**

Technical updates are updates that occur between review cycles to provide clarification or minor procedural changes (e.g., changing a department name in procedures to reflect an organizational change). Technical changes can be requested and made without going through the formal review and approval process.

Technical updates cannot be used to make significant changes to policy.
The number of technical updates to a single policy document must be minimal. When a policy requires multiple technical updates, it indicates that the policy needs a more thorough review and it should be fully updated.

Technical updates will not be made to policies that are due for update and already require a full review, but can be made on policies that would otherwise be reissued.

When a technical update is made to a policy document, an edited date is appended to the approval date. The edited date does not modify the normal review cycle for the policy. The policy will still require a full review and update four years following the approval date.

**Policy Approval Cover Sheet**

This section of the guide provides direction on how to fill out the Policy Approval Cover Sheet, which can be found on the Policy page of the Office of the President’s web site under “Policy Resources.”

**POLICY TITLE**

Indicate the name of the policy.

**POLICY OWNER**

Fill in the name of the policy Owner.

**ACTION REQUESTED (STANDARD POLICY APPROVAL PROCESS)**

If the proposed policy is to go through the standard policy approval process, check the appropriate box for a new policy, revision of existing policy, or deletion of existing policy.

**TEMPORARY EMERGENCY POLICY APPROVAL PROCESS** - In preparing a policy for a temporary emergency approval process, follow the same standards as detailed above. Approval for a temporary emergency approval process must be granted by Executive Leadership Team. If the Executive Leadership determines the need for urgent action, it may approve policy and procedural changes for immediate implementation and recommend polices to the President for approval and then appoint a policy owner to take the policy or procedure through the steps of the policy and procedure approval process.
POLICY APPROVAL PROCESS DATES:

POLICY OWNER

The Policy Owner must sign and date the Policy Approval Cover Sheet, certifying that the policy has been drafted and vetted within the appropriate unit and with other interested constituent groups. Note: only certain senior administrative officers may sponsor a policy in the approval process.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP APPROVAL

Upon the review and approval of the policy by the entire Executive Leadership Team, each member must sign his/her approval on the Cover Sheet.

PRESIDENT’S REVIEW & APPROVAL

Subsequent to the Executive Leadership review and approval of the policy, the policy owner forwards the Cover Sheet and the final draft of the proposed policy to the President’s office for Presidential review and approval. Once approved the President signs and dates the Cover Sheet. The Executive Assistant to the President will notify the Policy Owner of the policy approval.

Other Resources

Assistance and guidance with all stages of policy development is 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, Vice President for Institutional Planning and Human Resource Management, at 740.366.9407 or Parrill.9@osu.edu.

Other resources for policy developers, including the Policy Template, Policy Approval Process Flowchart, and other resources are available on the college Web site at http://www.cotc.edu/AboutCOTC/collegepolicies/Pages/index.aspx