

University of Newcastle

Policy Style Guide

This Policy style guide has been developed to assist authors with drafting policy documents. This document is a companion document to the Policy Framework.

Choose the Right Document Type

- 1) Before you start drafting, consider the existing or potential document hierarchy that addresses the subject you are dealing with. This will assist in determining the type of policy document(s) you need to draft.
- 2) Use the following information as a general guide:
 - a) If you want to establish “intent” or “principles” that can be used to make future decisions across the University, then consider a Policy.
 - b) If you want to set out the steps required to start and finish a process, then this should be a Procedure.
 - c) If you want to help readers navigate complex information or understand best practice, then consider a Guideline.
 - d) A policy can have many supporting procedures and guidelines if necessary.
 - e) Not all procedures and guidelines need an overarching policy.

Policies tell people WHAT - What are our principles, requirements or our intent?

Procedures tell people HOW – How do I do this thing?

Guidelines explain GOOD PRACTICE – What information is useful to me? What is best practice?

- 3) Where several policy documents deal with the one subject (i.e. a policy, procedures and guidelines), then they should:
 - a) each identify the hierarchy in which they exist;
 - b) be consistent with each other; and
 - c) identify the higher-level document as having authority in the event of any conflict.

Design the Document

Content

- 4) Policy documents provide assurance that the University is meeting its obligations – whether these be regulatory, accreditation, or community expectations. Therefore, the content of a policy document should give a level of assurance to its audience. Remembering, the audience may extend to parties both within and outside the University.
- 5) Whilst not an exhaustive list, policy documents should consider the governance, risk management, compliance and assurance arrangements appropriate to the subject matter. These may include:
 - a) clearly defined accountability and responsibilities;
 - b) risk identification, assessment, treatment and review;
 - c) monitoring, evaluating and improving performance;
 - d) segregation of decision making;
 - e) provisions for managing non-compliance;
 - f) seeking and using feedback;

- g) management of complaints, disputes and concerns;
- h) management of conflicts of interest;
- i) reporting and escalation mechanisms.

Consider the Reader

- 5) When drafting, consider the audience that the content is directed towards:
 - a) What do they need to know? – keep it.
 - b) What is irrelevant to them? – discard it.

Format

- 6) The format of a policy document is pre-defined by the software that houses the University Policy Library. This formatting provides limited flexibility and cannot be changed.
- 7) The pre-configured format of policy documents allows for the following structure:

SECTION (numbered) (e.g. Section 1 -)

PART (letter) (e.g. Part A -)

Major Heading

Minor Heading

1. Clause

a. Sub Clause

i. sub-sub clause

• Bullet point

- 8) It is advisable to always use section headings.
- 9) It is not essential to use part headings.
- 10) It is not advisable to use bullet points, as this does not provide for referencing by readers, reviewers, approvers or authors. If the author is led to the use of bullet points when drafting, the structure of the clause should be reviewed to ensure that bullet points are absolutely necessary.
- 11) Major and minor headings can be used to improve ease of reading and will create a navigation pane in the Policy Library when readers view the document on-line.

Draft the Document

Longevity

- 12) Consider the duration of the document – temporary arrangements or project specific information should not be drafted into policy documents.

Language

Use Plain English

- 13) Always use Plain English to ensure that any reader can understand and comply with the content, regardless of their level of knowledge of the subject or the University.
- 14) Avoid jargon and use “every day” familiar words.
- 15) Avoid marketing terms, aspirational statements, trendy words, colloquialisms, euphemisms and slang. Avoid legal terms and legalese such as abovementioned, aforementioned, foregoing, henceforth, hereafter, hereby, thereafter, thereof, therewith, whatsoever, wherein, whereof, etc.
- 16) Where specific content is critical to mitigate a risk or ensure compliance, be explicit about what is required to comply.
- 17) If a specific term must be used and the definition or context of the term may not be equally understood by all readers, discuss the definition with the Policy & Delegations Officer to determine if the definition should be added to the Policy Library glossary, or included in the document draft within a definitions section.

Use an Active Voice

- 18) Active voice describes how an action is to be performed, and by whom. It eliminates any ambiguity regarding responsibility.
- 19) Passive voice only describes the action.
- 20) For example:
 - a) “The Vice-Chancellor may approve an exception to this requirement” (Active, preferred);
 - b) “Exceptions to this requirement may be considered” (Passive, not preferred);
 - c) “The following supporting information must be provided with the letter of appeal:” (listed) (Active, preferred).
 - d) “Supporting information should be attached” (Passive, not preferred);
 - e) The assigned Project Manager must develop a project plan and seek approval from their line Manager.” (Active, preferred);
 - f) “The project should be well planned” (Passive, not preferred).

Gender Neutral Language

- 21) Using gender neutral language or gender inclusive language is inclusive and equitable.
- 22) Examples:
 - a) “The Committee Chairperson is responsible for scheduling each meeting” (Gender Neutral, preferred);
 - b) “The Chairman is responsible for scheduling each meeting” (Not gender neutral, not preferred);
 - c) “The employee should submit the form to seek approval of their application” (Gender Neutral, preferred).
 - d) “The employee should submit the form to seek approval of his/her application” (Not gender neutral, not preferred).

Developing Policy Principles

- 23) Policy principles establish the University’s position on a matter, and provide information to inform decision-making. Principles should be enduring, broadly applicable (high-level) and aligned with the purpose of the document.
- 24) Policy principles should:
 - a) be relevant to the policy subject-matter;

- b) be concise and easy to understand;
- c) be written in a way that informs decision-making;
- d) where appropriate, support the University's values and desired culture;
- e) remain valid over time;
- f) avoid operational detail; and
- g) support any requirements detailed.

Sentences and Clauses

Logical Order

- 25) The structure of the document, the sequence and order of clauses will determine readability of the document.
- 26) For policies, a logical order is to begin with wide reaching statements (introduction, audience, principles) and then to specific clauses (details, requirements).
- 27) For procedures, a logical order is beginning with the actions that should occur first, and ending with the actions that should occur last. Flow charting the process can assist with perfecting your clause order.

Clarity and Conciseness

- 28) Short and simple sentences make it easy for the reader to understand what is required of them.
- 29) Avoid additional words that do not add value to the sentence.
- 30) Avoid unnecessary information (such as background information) or redundant information. Wordy, dense documents become confusing and do not attract readers.
- 31) Simple versus complex sentence examples:
 - a. "The staff member must obtain at least one written quotation before purchasing goods valued between \$5,000 and \$20,000 (simple sentence, preferred).
 - b. "Prior to the procurement of goods with an estimated value between \$5,000 and \$20,000, consideration should be given by the relevant staff member to obtaining an appropriate written quotation from a supplier, in accordance with the University's procurement requirements and any associated procedures that may apply" (complex sentence, not preferred).
- 32) Each clause should convey a specific message. Keep sentences within clauses to a minimum. Opt for sub-clauses, lists or tables when the key message cannot be conveyed in a short form.
- 33) Avoid, where possible, jumping from one clause to the next for content about the same message. Readers do not often read the full document and may only read one clause to address any specific question or concern.
- 34) Use sub-clauses to split a key message into digestible parts.

Capitalisation

- 35) Avoid unnecessary capitalisation.
- 36) There is no requirement to capitalise defined terms.
- 37) Capitalise titles, such as Vice-Chancellor, University of Newcastle, Application for Higher Duties Form.
- 38) Capitalise days, months and holidays. (E.g. Monday, June, Christmas Day).
- 39) Do not capitalise after a semi colon or colon unless the first word is a title or name.

Setting Requirements and Actions

- 40) Policy documents drive action and should be written in a manner that drives the desired behaviour, rather than the undesired behaviour.
- 41) Requirements to be carried out should be clear, specific, action-oriented, capable of compliance, and capable of being monitored. Every mandatory requirement should identify WHO is responsible, WHAT action is required, and WHEN the action must occur (where relevant).
- 42) As a general rule:
 - a. Must = mandatory requirement;
 - b. Must not = prohibited;
 - c. Should = recommended;
 - d. May = discretion;
 - e. Will = organisational commitment.
- 43) When determining if a requirement is mandatory, discretionary or recommended, consider the following:
 - a) its relationship to any identified risk, and status as a risk control;
 - b) any legislative or rule requirement that may pre-determine if the action is mandatory;
 - c) the ability to always comply with a mandatory requirement;
 - d) the consequence of always having to comply with a mandatory action – it may be inappropriate for a universal rule to be applied where individual circumstances may vary;
 - e) the consequence of not complying with an optional action.
- 44) If an action is mandatory, consider applying a timeframe for the action. E.g. The student must submit their Acceptance Form to the Scholarships Office within 21 working days of being notified of the scholarship offer.
- 45) If relevant, be explicit about the consequence of not complying with a mandatory action. If there is a consequence and it is not explicitly stated, any decision to apply the consequence may be more easily appealed.

Terminology

- 46) Consistency is the key.
- 47) Agree on terminology as part of your planning – remove any other “like” names for terms used to achieve consistency.
- 48) When using a title, regardless of what the title is, ensure that it is referred to in the same way throughout the document, unless the title is reduced in the first instance.
- 49) Avoid using personal names and contact details to ensure longevity of content.

Repetition / Duplication

- 50) Avoid repeating content that has already been stated previously in the document. Use references to clauses where necessary, noting that these may change as you draft the document.
- 51) Avoid duplicating content from other documents, including legislation. Link to other documents where necessary.

Placeholders vs Hyperlinks

- 52) The software that houses the University Policy Library maintains a database of all information referenced within policy documents, including:
 - a) legislation, including codes and standards;
 - b) websites;
 - c) other policy documents;

- d) forms and templates; and
 - e) digital assets.
- 53) This information is referred to as “Associated Information”.
 - 54) When drafting or revising any policy document, the list of available Associated Information should be used. If a link to any associated information is required, but it cannot be found in the available lists of information, the Policy & Delegations Officer should be contacted, who will add the information to the database.
 - 55) Amendments to existing information, such as version changes, should also be notified to the Policy & Delegations Officer so that the database can be updated.
 - 56) Hyperlinks should not be used in the Policy Library workspace and may create unintended content when viewing the document. Hyperlinks are not subject to the daily URL validation process that operates within the Policy Library and if they fail, there is no notification of this provided.

Tables and Images

- 57) Simple tables can be included may make complex information easier to understand.
- 58) Tables should always have a Heading and title (e.g. Table 4 – List of Approved forms).
- 59) Images cannot be inserted into draft documents in the Policy Library workspace. If an image is essential to a policy document, it is recommended it be linked as a piece of Associated Information (see placeholders versus hyperlinks above).

Check the Document

Elements of a Good Policy Document

Element	Detail
Purposeful.	The purpose is clear and concise and demonstrates the necessity of the document to the audience by expressing the outcomes expected to be achieved within the scope of the document.
Well structured.	Information is clear, relevant and proportionate. Content is consistent throughout. The information is designed to drive the right action (see Behavioural Design Principles for Policy Authors).
Directed at an audience.	The audience can understand the content and know what is expected of them.
Clear and concise.	Required actions are assigned to roles, enforceable and measurable. Mandatory and discretionary obligations are clear and concise. Responsibility and accountability is established.
Risk-based thinking.	Risk-based thinking is used to establish the content. What could go wrong is considered in terms of the subject and the document content.

Consistent in terms of governance.	The document will operate in a manner that is consistent with the University's governance arrangements.
Exceptions and exemptions are identified.	Circumstances which may require exceptions or exemptions are identified, and the content clearly establishes concise expectations in this regard.
Related information is accurately cross-referenced.	The reader can easily access related information. The document does not duplicate information referenced elsewhere.
Assurance, governance and compliance is well considered.	The content establishes how compliance can be monitored and assured. Non-compliance mechanisms are explained. Reporting up and reporting down, in the management hierarchy, is considered.
Sustainability.	The document will hold well if there are organisational, personnel or system changes.
Measurable.	Effectiveness can be objectively assessed.
Behaviourally informed.	Effective design principles are applied to encourage and support the desired behaviour.

Behavioural Design Principles for Policy Authors

- 60) Policy documents should be designed not only to communicate requirements, but also to support and encourage compliance. Authors should consider the EAST principles (easy, attractive, social and timely) when drafting policy documents:

EAST Principle	What it means	Application in Policy Documents
Easy	Reduce the reader's effort required to understand the document. Make compliance easy.	Use plain English. Avoid too much information and unnecessary complexity. Clearly identify responsibilities and required actions. Align requirements with existing workflows wherever possible and appropriate. Reduce unnecessary approvals, complexity and administrative burden.
Attractive	Draw attention to important information. Make compliance meaningful.	Clearly communicate the purpose and benefits of compliance. Make key actions, mandatory requirements and decision-points easy to identify. Highlight information that is critical for achieving outcomes or managing risk. Ensure the process is effective with minimal barriers.
Social	Recognise that behaviour is influenced by others,	Establish clear accountability and leadership responsibilities.

	including leaders, peers and organisational culture.	Reinforce expected behaviours as standard University practice. Encourage consultation, collaboration, feedback and shared responsibility where appropriate.
Timely	Provide information and prompts when they are most likely to influence behaviour.	Include clear timeframes, review points, reporting requirements, reminders and triggers for action. Ensure requirements occur at the point decisions are made or risks arise. Supplement the document with decision-making aids, where relevant.