Guide to Writing Policies

Administrative policies align operations, set behavior expectations across the University system and communicate policy roles and responsibilities.

You, as the policy owner or writer, have the important task of reaching your intended audience with policies that are clear, easily read, and provide the right level of information to the individuals specifically affected by the content. If users understand a policy, they are more likely to follow it and incorporate it into their daily work.

There is a standard policy template that organizes the information in such a way that is consistent across all administrative policies. This guide provides explanations and guidelines for each of the policy sections to make it easy to begin drafting your policy and procedures.

The University Policy Office staff are here to support you in your effort, whether to provide writing assistance, review drafts, or guide you through the full policy development, review, and maintenance process. The policy journey begins with a call to the Director of Policy at 612-624-8081.

Getting Started

Overall guidelines for writing an administrative policy

- **Review** the administrative policy: Establishing Administrative Policy and procedures. It can be found at the Policy Library (www.policy.umn.edu).

- **Contact** the Director of the University Policy Office at 612-624-8081.

**Use language that reflects the policy’s intent.**

Select the words carefully. Words like “should” and “may” imply a choice. For example,

"Faculty and staff should not smoke in class".

This means they shouldn’t smoke but will be allowed if they do. The statement also does not address restrictions applicable to students.

Examples of alternative phrasing would be:

"Faculty, staff and students are prohibited from smoking in class." (better, but only addresses a class setting)

"Smoking is not allowed inside University buildings." (best)

- **Use as few words as possible to state a case.**

For example, the following statement is quoted from a prior University policy:

"All University faculty and staff, under the leadership of its officers, are obligated to ensure that University funds are used only for mission-related purposes"

This statement implies that only those "under the leadership" are required to follow the policy. An alternative to the above statement is:

"Employees must ensure that University funds are used only for mission-related purposes."

- **Ensure that clarifying a statement did not alter its meaning.**

For example,

"All faculty and staff must ............."

The word “all” is redundant. Simply stating "Faculty and staff" implies all unless an exception is also written.
POLICY SECTIONS

The standard University Policy Template contains a variety of sections that need to be completed when writing a policy. Below are descriptions of each section as well as tips, samples and more.

Policy Title

Key points to follow when determining the title of an administrative or academic policy:

- The title must identify the key purpose of the policy, in as few words as possible.
- If the policy does not pertain to the whole University, this must be reflected in the policy title. Examples: Emergency Closing: Twin Cities; Grading and Transcripts: Twin Cities, Morris, Rochester.
- The title may include verbs to either show separation from another closely titled policy, or to indicate which portion of the topic will be covered by the policy and procedures. Example: Gifts vs. Accepting and Managing Gifts.

Policy Statement

What to Include

This is the most important section of the administrative policy. It will provide direction for the intended audience. Questions that are typically answered through the policy statement:

- Who is the primary audience? (Who needs to follow the policy?)
- In what situation(s) does this policy apply?
- What are the major conditions or restrictions? (What is expected of the employee or student?)
- Are there exclusions or special situations?

Here are rules for the policy owner/writer to follow when drafting the policy statement:

- Sentences and paragraphs must be clear and understandable for the given audience.
- Acronyms may be used if spelled out completely the first time the phrase is used (e.g. principal investigator (PI) or National Incident Management System (NIMS)).
- Use strong action words (will, must, are responsible for, etc.). Do not use “shall” in the policy statement.
- Use the Special Situation subheading when there are important circumstances that affect ONLY a few people or circumstances that occur infrequently.

What Not to Include

The policy statement should not include background details on the policy nor should it contain procedural steps.

Avoid using a specific label, such the name of a software product. Generic terms are more sustaining and require less maintenance. Example: use ‘enterprise financial system’ vs. PeopleSoft Financials.

Sample policy statement

Departments must receive approval from the Non-Sponsored Accounts Receivable department before using their departmental systems. Departments are also responsible for ensuring appropriate internal controls and data integrity over their systems.

Departments are responsible for generating accurate, timely billings to non-University customers. These billings must be recorded in the approved departmental system. The standard payment term to be applied to these external billings is Net 30.

Departments will track all invoices sent and follow a regular collection schedule with appropriate escalation actions for those not paid in full within the 30 days. Ensure that personal relationships within the community do not result in conflicts of interest and situations that might impair objective judgment or create a hostile work environment.
POLICY SECTIONS

Reason for Policy

What to include
The information in this section answers the question as to why the policy exists. Key areas that may be addressed include:

- legal or regulatory reasons
- description of conflict or problem the policy will resolve recognizes the legitimate interests of all parties
- overall benefits

If implementing a Board of Regents policy, this must be the first sentence, phrased as shown below.

“To implement Board of Regents policy: use italics here for the official policy title.”

If there is a state or federal law with which this policy is aligned, it may also be specifically referenced in Reason. If several laws are touched by topics contained within the policy, this list of references is better moved to the Related Information section.

What not to include
Reason should not include the history as to how the policy was developed nor should it contain any procedural steps.

Sample policy reason
To implement Board of Regents Policy: Nepotism and Personal Relationships. The University of Minnesota is committed to the highest standard of professional conduct and integrity and expects all members of the University community to adhere to them. Members of the University community must take care to ensure that personal relationships within the community do not result in conflicts of interest and situations that might impair objective judgment or create a hostile work environment.

Procedures

The specific procedure titles should be listed here. The Policy Office will ensure that the links work for the end user. See separate instructions for developing administrative procedures.

Procedures should be listed in the order in which they are carried out. If there is no particular order, procedures will be listed alphabetically.

Forms/Instructions

Links to University-wide forms used in following this policy and procedure(s) will be displayed here. Necessary forms that are hosted on another site, such as a federal or state website, may also be listed.

Forms will be listed with the form number first, then the form title.
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Additional Contacts

Each policy should have a minimum of one contact listed. This person is the subject matter expert who could answer most of the questions and direct them to additional resources as needed.

If there are separate contact lists by coordinate campus, enter a line to reference the particular campus.

If the first point of contact is a position within the unit (e.g., human resource representative), the listing could specify that distinction in the Contact column. Phone and fax numbers would be left blank.

Contacts may be listed in the order of most important or most frequent, rather than an alphabetical listing.

Definitions

List unique terms that, by being defined, would add to the reader’s understanding of the basic policy or procedures. Subject matter terms, if lengthy, should be included in a glossary in the Appendices.

- Define unfamiliar or technical terms
- Define terms with special meanings

The list of definitions will be posted in alphabetical order.

Responsibilities

List the individual roles or units who are responsible for some portion of the policy and process. This may include the intended audience (e.g., faculty, student), operating units, departments, and even organizations outside of the University.

Summarize the major responsibilities, describing the “what” but not the “how” of the responsibility. More details can be provided, if needed, in any associated procedures linked to the policy.

The list of responsibilities will be posted in an order defined by the policy owner, typically in order by importance or level of involvement in the policy.

Sample policy definition

Procurement Card (formerly Purchasing Card)

A University approved charge card used by employees to pay for certain authorized purchases up to $999 on Sponsored Funds and up to $2000 on Non-Sponsored Funds.

Sample policy responsibility

Disbursement Services


Sample policy contacts

additional contacts

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<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Fax/Email</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Contact</td>
<td>Michele Gross</td>
<td>612-625-0331</td>
<td><a href="mailto:m-gross@umn.edu">m-gross@umn.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President's Office</td>
<td>Kate Stucki</td>
<td>612-625-8944</td>
<td><a href="mailto:stucki000@umn.edu">stucki000@umn.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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POLICY SECTIONS

Appendices

Provide one or more documents that supplement the information provided in the policy and procedures. Common examples are:

- Examples or matrices related to the topic (e.g., for the Hospitality policy, it’s type of expense, allowability, and type of funds to use)
- Job aids
- Rate list

Appendices will be listed in alphabetical order.

Related Information

List information that supports the specific policy. These documents may be internal or external to the University, such as references to state or federal laws. Common examples are:

- Associated Board of Regents policies, using this style: Board of Regents policy: list specific policy title in italics.
- Other administrative/academic policies that relate to this specific policy.
- Final reports or other key background documents.

The list of related information will be displayed in an order defined by the policy owner, typically in order by importance or level of involvement in the policy.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

No matter how well some policies are written, there will always be some questions based on individual interpretation. This section provides for the most common questions and their respective answers.

If there are three or fewer questions/answers, the full text may be listed in the policy itself. If more than three questions/answers, a separate FAQ document will be linked to the policy.

History

This is a record of significant changes by date, for the specified policy. The Policy Librarian in the University Policy Office will draft the summary of changes and update the content management system, after consulting with the policy owner or subject matter expert (as needed).