UNC | INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Ethics & Policy Style Guidebook

A GUIDEBOOK FOR WRITING UNIVERSITY POLICY

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Introduction

The Office of Ethics and Policy forms one subdivision within the division for Institutional Integrity and Risk Management at UNC-Chapel Hill. We support different administrative and academic units in incorporating equity and integrity into the policy revision process and maintaining the Policy Knowledge Base.

We also provide a template to assist with standardizing information on the Ethics and Policy website.

This document serves as a style guide to document policy best-practice. Policy exists to establish community norms and processes, so well-written policy is written in plain, clear language. This facilitates UNC-Chapel Hill community access to policy information. To this end, this guide will:

- Explain different policy documents
- Define policy key terms
- Share links to further video trainings
- Overview best practice for policy writing

Policy Document Overview

Policies, Standards, and Procedures

The Policy Knowledge Database stores three types of documents: policies, standards, and procedures. Each type serves a different purpose.

Definition	Example
Policy Policies are panoramic, high-level strategic documents. They set aspirational goals, align with the University's mission and values, and ensure legal compliance.	The Data Network Policy entrusts ITS with maintaining the campus network, in accord with the University mission and legal regulations. The policy also establishes departmental liaisons and charges ITS as responsible for maintaining University domain names, IP addresses, and campus devices.

Standard Standards serve a middle-role between high-level policy and detail-oriented procedure. They explain the minimum acceptable limits or rules that may be used to execute a policy.	The Data Network Standard establishes the certain minimum physical, network, Internet-connectivity, and personnel requirements necessary to comply with the Data Network Policy and other relevant policies.
Procedure Procedures are tactical, applied documents that detail actionable steps needed to fulfil a standard or policy.	The Incident Management Procedure lists the steps for who to contact, and how if sensitive data or university equipment is compromised. Departments also may provide help guides.

In short, policy sets institutional purpose and functions, standard sets the necessary minimum requirements to accomplish a policy, and procedure outlines the steps to reach a standard. Standards and procedures do not need to pass through the same review process as policy but still need to be thoroughly vetted.

University and Unit Policy

We classify these documents based on whether they apply to one Unit or across the University. A Unit is a division of the University that reports directly to the provost (i.e., the Adams School of Dentistry, Carolina Performing Arts, or Student Affairs). A Unit Policy, Standard, or Procedure applies only within one Unit, whereas University Policies, Standards, or Procedures applies across multiple Units.

All University Policies, Standards, and Procedures are stored in the Policy Knowledge Base. We recommend that Units store their policies, standards, and procedures in the Policy Knowledge Base as well, so that all can access these from a central location.

Policy Creation and Maintenance at a Glance

A general overview of the policy creation and maintenance is here, but please consult the complete guidelines. Units are responsible for writing and maintaining policy that they create.

1. **Policy Development**

   The Issuing Unit determines that they need to write or revise a policy. Their Policy Liaison coordinates with the Policy Office (Office of Ethics and Policy).

2. **Policy Review**

   The Policy Office and Issuing Unit determine the relevant stakeholders and the Issuing Unit may open a feedback period for interested parties.

   The Policy Office submits the draft to the Policy Review Committee (PRC), which meets monthly.

   Tip: Always screen policy with non-field experts.

3. **Policy Approval**

   The Issuing Officer of the Issuing Unit grants final approval to low-risk policies (over 90% of policies).

4. **Policy Communication:**

   The Policy Office publishes approved policy in the Electronic Policy Repository and assists in communications.

   Issuing Units and Policy Units communicate changes to all stakeholders and their units.

   Tip: Design for Digital Accessibility in document preparation.

5. **Policy Maintenance**

   The Issuing Unit initiates scheduled policy reviews.

   The Policy Office provides support to the Issuing Unit in initiating a policy maintenance schedule.

   Tip: Policy should be reviewed at least once every three years.

Policy-Writing Best Practice

Well-written policy is accessible to as many readers as possible, while retaining a clear meaning. With this in mind, these best practices will help to facilitate clear, accessible, and inclusive policy-writing.

Stylistic Notes

- ✓ **Write policy as plainly and clearly as possible for your target audience.**
- ✓ **Policy should be written in the third person.**

- ✓ **Always write policy in the active voice and in simple tenses.**
- ✓ **Avoid negative statements.**
  - Negative statements ("don't do X") instruct someone what not to do. Research finds that readers understand positive statements ("do X") better than negative statements.
  - Sometimes, a negative statement is the clearest way to express a policy.
- ✓ **At its first appearance, refer to the University as the "University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill." Afterwards "the University", "UNC-CH", or "UNC-Chapel Hill" are appropriate, as long as the document is internally consistent.**
  - Only capitalize "University" when it refers to UNC-Chapel Hill.
  - Never refer to UNC-Chapel Hill as simply "UNC".
- ✓ **Capitalize all terms defined in the policy and titles that refer to a specific person.**
  - Do not capitalize plural titles. i.e., Do capitalize "Dean of Students," but do not capitalize "vice provosts."

Plain Language

UNC-Chapel Hill has a large, international reach with over 30,000 students and 15,000 employees. Students and employees have different fields of expertise, speak different languages, and have different educational backgrounds. Clarity is access.

- ✓ **Avoid legalese and make obligation clear.**
  - "Must" can be used in place of "shall" or "will".
- ✓ **Use modern terminology instead of archaic language.**
  - Language such as "thou/thee" or "as aforementioned" is inappropriate for policy.
- ✓ **Consider verifying the reading level of your policy by using Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test.**
  - Notably, the average adult reads at an eighth-grade level (Marchand, 2017). If a policy must be written at above a tenth-grade reading level, consider offering a supplemental text.

- ✓ **Use bullet or numbered lists, when logical.**
- ✓ **Use the one word or phrase to refer to the same concept throughout all documents.**
- ✓ **Write from the perspective of “Global English” when possible.**
    - Global English is manner of written English that considers what is clearest to adults who have learned English as a second language, while still reading naturally to native speakers.
    - Idioms and figurative speech are not always transparent to adults who learned English as a second language. Use literal language in policy for clarity. (i.e., “Reduce costs” is less idiomatic than “cut down on costs.”)
    - Consider consulting materials on Global English and on Plain Language.

Examples:

Avoid these formulations	Preferred formulations
“For consideration, the candidate shall submit an application to…”	*“For consideration, the candidate **must** submit an application to…”*
Note: Must express the mandatory nature of this policy more clearly than shall.	
“To begin the extended leave progress, employees must submit the Leave Request Form to their direct supervisor, *…,* *and file this document with Human Resources.”*	*“To begin the extended leave process, employees must:* *1. Submit the Leave Request Form to their direct supervisor…* *2. File the Leave Request Form with Human Resources.”*
Note: When it aids readability, use numbered listed for sequential tasks, and bulleted lists otherwise.	

"The University establishes an Emergency Loan Program in set situations. The Institution… Emergency Assistance Program."	*"The **University** establishes an **Emergency Loan Program** in set situations. The **University**… this **Emergency Loan Program."***

Note: Use consistent terminology whenever possible. This is especially important when referring to UNC-CH (excepting the first reference), specific forms, and actions. Use either University or Institution consistently.

"The Department will *go over* anonymized results from the teaching evaluations."	"The Department will ***review*** anonymized results from the teaching evaluations."

Note: Consider Global English norms in policy writing. Phrasal verbs, such as go over, set off, or break down often present idiomatic or opaque meanings to speakers of English as a second language.

Avoid Unnecessary Jargon

Unnecessary jargon and technical language can serve as a barrier to comprehension. While some technical terminology is necessary, it is important to screen policy for unnecessarily technical language. When deciding whether to incorporate field-specific jargon into a policy, the key question should be: "Does this term clarify the purpose of the policy?"

✓ **Remove all non-essential jargon.**

- Use field-neutral terminology when it is feasible.
- Only use field-specific language when it increases the clarity of the purpose of a policy.
- Consider the policy's audience and screen subject-specific policy with non-experts.

Examples:

Avoid these formulations	Preferred formulations
1. *"When conducting a palatogram or a related procedure, technicians must not block the ingress and egress of patients and medical personnel."*	1. *"Do not block the **doorway** of the Ear, Nose, and Throat lab."*
Compare jargon usage with: 2. *"Prior to conducting a palatogram, technicians must ask and report a patient's allergy history on the Patient Information Form."*	
Note: Policy should use the simplest language possible while preserving clarity of communication. The difference between the first and second rows illustrates proper and improper use of jargon. • The first policy orders technicians not to block the entryway to the medical facility. The procedure they are conducting is irrelevant to the policy's intention and specifying that they are conducting palatograms does not enhance the policy's clarity, so it should be removed. • In the second policy, the policy authors are correct to refer to the palatogram procedure with proper, technical language, because checking for a patient's allergy history directly pertains to the process of executing the procedure.	

Inclusion

By providing one centralized location for policy, the Policy Knowledge Base is well-positioned to incorporate accessible, universal design into the policy documentation process. This increases policy access for individuals using adaptive technology while also making policy more readable for the entire University.

Furthermore, policy language must respect the entire University community. Inclusive language is clear writing. With this in mind, consider these tips in your policy writing:

✓ **Consult the Office of Digital Accessibility's top recommendations.**

✓ **Design for digital accessibility**

- Add alternative, curse-over text to images.
- Avoid run on sentences and insert line breaks.
- Avoid inserting vertical lines that may interfere with screen readers.

- Insert hyperlinks to referenced texts, including other Policies, Standards, and Procedures, the first time they appear.

✓ **Design for longevity.**

- When possible, provide office email and phone contacts rather than individuals' contacts. This keeps policy current, despite personnel changes.
- Consider referring to positions by title rather than individuals by name.
- If information relevant to a Policy, Standard, or Procedure updates on a regular, fixed basis (i.e. yearly salary-schedules or tuition rates), cite where current information can be found in the policy and provide a link to the information.

✓ **Use gender-neutral language.**

- The Gender-Inclusive Language Policy directs the University to use gender-inclusive language in University materials. The writing center has a guide that may be of assistance.
- Consider referring to individuals by their role rather than a pronoun or a name. This also increases policy longevity.
- When using a pronoun, use they/them.
- Use "Ms." rather than "Mrs." to refer to women without their doctorate.

✓ **Screen writing for appropriate language regarding gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, veteran status, disability, and employee status.**

- Consider consulting the APA's guide on bias-free language.
- Refer to foreign nationals should be referred to as "noncitizen" or "undocumented noncitizen" rather than by "alien" or "illegal alien."

Examples:

Avoid these formulations	Preferred formulations
"The Writing Center maintains a web resource on Gender Inclusive Language. … (Read more.)"	"The Writing Center maintains a web resource on Gender Inclusive Language."
Note: It is advised to link resources the first time they are mentioned.	
"Pay is determined according to the North Carolina Salary Schedule. *The 2021 Salary Schedule is as follows:* … For further questions, contact Ms. Samantha Gain at …."	"Pay is determined according to the North Carolina Salary Schedule. … For further questions, contact the office of Human Resources at …."
Note: By linking to the yearly schedule, the policy remains current each year. Similarly, when appropriate, listing a contact office rather than an individual helps policies remain up to date despite of personnel changes.	
"The student must contact *his* advisor to request a major change meeting. … The advisor will contact *him* afterwards with his results."	Students must contact ***their*** advisor to request a major change meeting. … The advisor will contact ***the student*** afterwards with results.
Note: Use gender-neutral language for individuals. Policy may use the singular or plural "they" to achieve this purpose.	

Summary

For further resources, please visit the Ethics and Policy website. The Ethics and Policy website contains Policy templates, training videos, and other policy resources.