

Intelligence

How to Write Policies That Work

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Plan and write the right policies for your association using these checklists.

Policies are written to guide behavior. But, although they are powerful tools, policies are most effective when used in the right way and for the right reasons. We often write policies due to the actions of a few individuals, when the situation could be addressed directly with the offenders instead. Conversely, we often don't develop policies where guidance is truly needed.

Borrowing from Wikipedia, "A policy is typically described as a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). ... Where a policy will contain the 'what' and the 'why,' procedures or protocols contain the 'what,' the 'how,' the 'where,' and the 'when.'"

To help you identify when and how you should write a policy, I offer you the following checklists.

Incentive/trigger. The passage of legislation or new regulations, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act or the revised IRS Form 990, may mandate the need for new policies. Social and business trends have also led many associations to develop policies in areas such as social media, crisis communication, or flexible work schedules.

Once you have identified an issue that needs to be addressed, the next step is to determine if a new policy is truly needed. Ask yourself:

- Do people need guidance on how to behave? Who needs this guidance (employees, board, volunteers, members, chapters, components, others)?
- Is this a compliance issue (legal, regulatory, certification or accreditation requirement, standard, and so on)?
- Do we need to establish consistency and fair treatment across the organization?
- If we do not need a policy, what other action should we take, such as education or training for staff, board, or key volunteers; modification of existing procedures; or monitoring of the situation to determine if we need a policy later?

Preparation. Before you start writing, ask yourself:

- What is the purpose or goal of this policy? Be as specific as possible.
- Why do we want people to behave in this manner? What behavior do we want to achieve?
- What is the context (organizational vision, mission, goals, purpose, and culture)?
- What outcomes do we want? Focus on the positive instead of the negative.

- How will we monitor compliance?
- Whose input is needed (frontline workers, chapter leaders, others)?
- Who needs to review and approve the new policy (senior management, board, legal, finance, human resources, others)?

Writing the policy. As you write, consider the following:

- Is there a designated format for policies within our organization? If not, should one be developed?
- Is the policy practical?
- Is the policy intuitive, based on people's understanding and acceptance of our culture and values?
- Is the policy user friendly? Does it encourage people to behave appropriately?
- Will people know what to do without having to continually refer back to the policy?
- Is the policy flexible, and does it grant our organization discretion in interpreting the policy and the appropriate discipline?
- What are our options for addressing transgressions or policy violations?
- Do we provide due process for alleged or actual violations? Is the process manageable, timely, and fair?
- Is the policy consistent throughout the organization? Are the privileges, expectations, and methods of enforcement the same throughout the appropriate organizational levels? Are we avoiding any potential claims of favoritism or even discrimination?
- Do stakeholders need education and training on the purpose and goal of the policy or on how we want them to behave? If so, what training is needed, and when and how will it be undertaken?

After writing the policy, ask several people to read it to ensure its clarity and purpose, and make sure your monitoring process is in place and workable. Once the policy is ready, plan and activate your implementation process. Good luck!

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Want to dig deeper into policy writing? Leslie White of Croydon Consulting, LLC, recommends the following resources for readers interested in improving their policy-writing skills:

- [Definition of Policy on the Web](#)
- [Guide to Writing Policies and Procedures](#) (PDF), University of California-Santa Cruz
- [Writing Guide](#), University of Idaho
- [Workbook for Selection Policy Writing](#), American Library Association (a sample of a specific policy that provides useful information)

- [Writing Policies, Rules, and Guidelines](#), Information Services & Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- [Tips for Writing Policy](#), Queensland University of Technology, Australia
- [Tips on Writing a Policy Memo](#), Peter J. Wilcoxon, Associate Professor of Economics and Public Administration and Director, Center for Environmental Policy and Administration, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University
- [Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Policy Manual](#) (good example of policy-manual formatting)