

Policy writing guidance

1. Overview

Policies should always be clear and simple.

Their purpose is to set out how we, as an organisation, conduct ourselves in different scenarios and with different activities. They provide key principles, requirements and parameters rather than detailed instructions. The longer your policy, the less likely your audience is to read it with the required thoroughness and care and the harder it becomes for your audience to find relevant information.

You might consider developing an associated procedures document or guidance note to accompany your policy which provides more detailed information.

Before you go through our checklist, consider who your audience is. Is it for an internal or external audience? Students or academics? How might you tailor the tone, and the guidance below? The intended audience ought to influence how you write your policy, and how you present it.

We understand some policies are more complex than others, and there is no “one size fits all”. This resource is designed to simplify both the policy writing process, and the policies themselves so they are as clear and succinct as possible.

2. Checklist

Before you start setting out your policy, refer to this checklist.

- **Short contextual statement**

This is where you outline the nature of the organisation, and our strategic direction if applicable to the policy. Otherwise, a short organisational description is enough. Please have a look at both [Our Brand](#) and [Strategy 2030](#) for inspiration.

- **Policy purpose**

Set out the objectives for writing and upholding the policy.

- **List of definitions**

All good policies include definitions of key terms that readers may not at first understand. This list helps readers navigate the document and means that as an organisation, we are being completely transparent.

- **Topics (the main body of the policy)**

Structure and sign-post this as clearly as possible to aid navigation. Long blocks of text are hard to read and could confuse your audience.

- **FAQs**

The topics section must be as exhaustive as possible and should pre-empt any questions that might arise by delivering all relevant information.

If there is anything you've not covered, or if you can think of follow-up questions which don't fit into the body of the policy, then you may add associated guidance under the resources and related links section.

- **Resources and related links**

List and link to any material relevant to your policy which might provide further context and improve understanding.

3. Accessibility

All policy documents should be checked to see if they meet accessibility standards. Please [refer to our guidance on creating accessible PDFs](#) for further support with this.

4. Acronyms

At first use, spell out a name in full, with the acronym in brackets after it. Then use the acronym thereafter, eg 'The Department for Education (DfE) provided funding to the five institutions. DfE is a central government department.'

5. Active voice

Our goal with policies is to be succinct, which means getting to the point. One sure-fire way to do this is through using the active voice, rather than the passive.

The active voice clearly conveys the subject of the sentence performing the action. It's easy for us to see who is doing what, or what needs to be done.

With the passive voice, the subject receives the action. This can a) make things confusing and b) dilutes the message of the sentence.

Examples:

Active voice: The tenant will pay the landlord monthly.

Passive voice: The landlord will be paid by the tenant monthly

6. Clichés, idioms and jargon

- Idioms - we have a large international audience. Our community itself is made up of over 170 nationalities.
- We should strive to be as direct as is appropriate for the audience and platform, so avoid clichés, repetitions and redundant phrasing. We focus on legalese further down this guidance.
- If you're not sure about a phrase's usefulness, ask a colleague.
- Be aware of the sort of phrases that get used a lot in copy. We cover all the above in more detail in our [style guide](#).

7. Font and format

All policy should be written in Source Sans Pro font in a size no smaller than 12. Please [refer to our guidance](#) for more information. Line spacing should be 1.5 and text should always be aligned to the left.

Start a new paragraph wherever possible. Keep sentence length to a minimum.

With headings, use sentence case instead of title case. Title case may be used for specific legal terms, the name of the policy itself, proper nouns and titles, but should otherwise be avoided.

If you wish to emphasise something, use bold font. Do not italicize or use caps.

8. Further reading

Is there supporting information that aids your audience's understanding and engagement of the policy? If so, add this in.

9. How we talk about Queen Mary

- When you first mention Queen Mary in external-facing communications, use the full title: Queen Mary University of London.

- For following mentions, use Queen Mary, the University, us, we, our, etc. Do not use QM or QMU. Only use QMUL as a hashtag on social media such as YouTube, Twitter or Instagram.
- For internal communications, it is fine to use Queen Mary from the first mention.
- When referring specifically to our University, we use an upper-case 'U' eg 'We are the only University in central London with a residential campus.'
- When we talk about universities in general we use a lower case 'u' eg 'our alumni have gone on to study at other Russell Group universities.'

10. Legalese

Make your point without using legal terminology. This might not always be possible with nuanced legislative matters but get into the habit of asking yourself if legalese is necessary.

Legalese often includes redundant synonyms which can be simplified. 'Null and void' is a popular example. It's also best to avoid using Latin words or phrases, unless commonly used.

11. Must, shall, should and will.

Policies must reflect UK legislation guidance. English legislation avoids the use of 'will' or 'shall' in favour of 'must'.

'Will' when used in the first person, conveys an obligation, whereas 'shall' merely a future intention. Instead of 'shall', use 'must' to specify requirements and obligations.

So: 'Must' is for obligations; 'must not' for prohibitions; 'may' for discretionary actions; and 'should' for recommendations.

12. Removing redundant words

There are a few rules for removing redundant words and making copy more concise.

Take out more than you add

Watch out for the following in your writing:

- Repetition of something that's already been said.
- Words that don't actually add anything. Adverbs are a good starting point!

- Long sentences that could have the same impact/relay the same point in fewer words.
- Redundancy: “~~In accordance with our strategic aims and as laid out in Strategy 2030,~~ we aim to be the most inclusive University of its kind...”

Two words to delete for concise copy

‘That are’

“There are a number of rules that are useful for writing clean copy.”

“There are a number of useful rules for writing clean copy.”

“The skills that are needed to craft a compelling application are...”

“The skills necessary for a compelling application are...”

Tip: Simply take out ‘that are’ and use the adjective earlier on

13. Run-on sentences

Avoid run-on sentences. Sentences can often be broken up into smaller sentences without any meaning being lost. In fact, breaking up run-on sentences can heighten the text’s impact (and therefore holds the readers’ attention). Keep sentences to 40 words max where possible.

Take this sentence for example, which is very long:

“The University reserves the right to impose such conditions upon the use of its facilities as are reasonably necessary for the discharge of its obligations relating to the health and safety of its registered students, staff and other persons lawfully upon its premises or for the efficient conduct and administration of its functions.”

It can be split in two sentences to prevent attention from wandering. Eg:

“The University reserves the right to impose such conditions upon the use of its facilities as are reasonably necessary. This is for the discharge of its obligations relating to the health and safety of its registered students, staff and other persons lawfully upon its premises or for the efficient conduct and administration of its functions.”

14. Time-sensitive information

When putting together the policy details ask yourself the following:

Does any of this look dated/will it date (eg with names, phone numbers)?

Will this document only need updating when our organisational structure, goals or objectives change?

Consider how frequently you will need to update your policy, and how you can make it as 'evergreen' as is appropriate.

15. Subordinate clauses

Don't front-load a sentence with a subordinate clause. Eg:

"Except where expressly agreed by the Council in line with advancing the University's charitable objects (as defined in the University Charter), the University does not take an institutional position on political, cultural and religious debates to ensure that individuals are not discouraged from expressing themselves freely within the law."

The sole aim of the policy is to inform, so getting straight to the point is fine (preferable, even). To achieve this, you can simply switch the order of the clauses to get to the point faster.

Additional resources for you

- Please refer to our [style guide](#) for further support with clear, on-brand writing.
- As well as this, we provide wider [copywriting](#) and [brand](#) support too.
- For a truly no-nonsense approach to formal writing, we recommend the [Plain English Campaign](#).