

Appendix A - Language & Writing Guidelines for Policy Development and Review¹

Recognize your audience:

- Identify who your audience is.
- Write for your audience: what does your audience need to know.
- If you have different audiences, address them separately in the same document.
- When addressing your audience, use the singular tense rather than plural (for example, *“you must apply”* vs. *“individuals must apply”*).

Organize your policy using the policy template:

- Start by stating the purpose and the relevant information in the beginning sections of the template.
- For complex policies, create a table of contents in the beginning.
- Start by putting the general information first, conditions, exceptions and specialized information later.
- If your policy is longer than one or two pages, use headings such as:
 - Question heading: *“Who must apply?”*
 - Statement heading: *“Guidelines to apply for loans.”*
 - Topic heading: *“Loans Applications.”*

Write your policy:

- Write short sections and be precise and concise. Write to communicate, not to impress.
- When using verbs, use the active voice to eliminate ambiguity in determining the subject.
 - For example, *“regulations were proposed”* vs. *“legislators proposed regulations.”*
- Preferably, write using simple verbs in the present tense.
- Avoid hidden verbs (for example, *“make a call”* vs. *“call;”* *“make an application”* vs. *“apply”*).

¹ These guidelines have been entirely prepared based on the “Federal Plain Language Guidelines: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public” (2011): <https://www.plainlanguage.gov>

- Use “must” to refer to an obligation, “must not” for a prohibition, “may” to refer to a discretionary action, and “should” for recommendations.
- Avoid turning verbs into nouns and, if using them, use a maximum of three.
 - For example, *“graduate law student ceremony convocation procedure”* vs. *“convocation procedure for the ceremony of graduate law students.”*
- Speak directly to your readers using the pronoun “you.” Be sure to define who is “you.”
 - For example, *“files must be submitted”* vs. *“you must submit your files.”*
 - For example, *“these guidelines tell you the tenant (...).”*
 - For example, *“facilities at Queen’s Univ. are available from (...)”* vs. *“If you are a student, facilities at Queen’s Univ. are available (...)”*
- In the case of abbreviations, use a simplified name, so your reader does not have to search for the acronym’s meaning. If the abbreviation is evident to the reader, do not define it (for example, IBM, Ph.D., etc.).
 - For example, for *“Workplace Safety Advisory Committee,”* instead of WSAC, use *“the Committee.”*
- If you need to use the abbreviation (WSAC from the previous example), define it the first time you use it and if you use it more than once.
- Omit unnecessary words.
 - For example, *“on a weekly basis”* vs. *“weekly,”* *“a number of”* vs. *“several,”* *“able to”* vs. *“can,”* etc.
- Avoid excess modifiers.
 - For example, *“absolutely,”* *“totally,”* *“completely,”* etc.
 - *“The claim was totally unrealistic”* vs. *“the claim was absurd.”*
- Definitions:
 - Ensure the definition you use is consistent with the ones set out in associated policies.
 - Avoid defining words with a commonly accepted meaning or customary usage (for example, website).
 - Do not define words you will not use.
 - If you need to use definitions, define them next to the word or at the beginning of the text alphabetically.
- Use the same term consistently in all your policy.
 - For example, if you use *“international students,”* do not switch to *“foreign students”* or *“abroad students.”*

- Do not use jargon or technical words unless strictly necessary.
 - For example, *“involuntarily undomiciled”* vs. *“homeless.”*
- Avoid legal language.
 - For example, *“thereafter,” “foregoing,” “henceforth,” “hereby,”* etc.
- Use positive words instead of negative ones.
 - For example, *“no less than”* vs. *“at least.”*
- Start your sentences with the general idea. Then, if any exceptions apply, mention them after the general rule has been stated.
 - For example, *“except as described in section 1, the audit department will not begin the revision process until after a preliminary assessment is done”* vs. *“the audit department will begin the revision process after a preliminary assessment is done. However, see section 1 for exceptions.”*
- Write in the natural word order (subject, verb, and object). When you use modifiers or clauses, it is harder to understand.
- Exceptions:
 - Exceptions (from general rules) should be placed where it is easier for readers to understand the policy.
 - If an exception (or condition) is just short, place it in the beginning.
For example, *“for your admission, you must submit a resume, a cover letter, a detail of your work experience, reference letters and contact information, unless you have already applied within a year”* vs. *“unless you have already applied within a year, you must submit (...).”*
 - If an exception or condition is long (and the main clause is short), place it at the end.
For example, *“except when you submitted your application for a national bursary within a year and received a partial acceptance, we will consider your application”* vs. *“we will consider your application except when you submitted (...).”*
 - When describing a category, avoid using exceptions.
For example, *“all persons except those older than 18 years old must (...).”* vs. *“each person under 18 years old must (...).”*
 - Use exceptions to avoid a long description.
For example, *“Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba (list all provinces) must (...).”* vs. *“all provinces (instead of detailing each one) except territories must (...).”*
- Instead of writing all steps in a paragraph, use lists to help identify the steps in the process and in chronological order.