



Guidelines for writing good Policies

Contents

1. Introduction: The difference between Policy and Procedures
2. Content
3. Writing Style
4. Common Terms
5. Currency and Version Control
6. Visual Formatting Guidelines
7. Partners
8. Additional Resources

1. Introduction: The difference between Policy and Procedures

Policy and procedure documents are often mixed up or merged in practise, so it's not surprising that there is often confusion about how to create good policy documents. However, policies are actually very different to procedures, with different purposes, and this should be reflected in the new documents coming out of Trinity Teaching & Learning.

So what's the difference?

Policies are clear, simple statements of how an organisation intends to conduct its activities.

Policies represent guiding principles, rather than detailed instructions. A couple of sentences may be enough for some policy areas. For example, this might appear as a sub-topic in a Quality Assurance policy:

Good research practise is instilled into the ethos of the university community. We will inform all staff, students and visitors of our guidelines on research ethics and best practise.

Note that details are not given on *how* this information will be disseminated. The *how* will be detailed in a procedure document, whilst the guiding principles of good practise research may appear in a separate policy document.

Procedures describe how policies will be put into action.

A procedure specifies what should be done, when, by whom, and what records must be kept (if relevant). Procedures should outline:

- Who will do what
- What steps they must take
- Which forms or documents to use

2. Content

Policies have a lot in common with strategy documents, in that they both outline the desired state of the organisation. However, a strategy document may recognise that the desired state differs from the current state. A policy document expresses the desired state in terms of the current status quo. In other words: **it is assumed that the policy can be executed by the organisation in its current form.**

The key test of policies vs. procedures is: "Will this document only need updating when our organisational structure, goals or objectives change?" If the answer is yes, you have successfully written a policy.

A policy document will typically consist of the following:

- Context (the nature of the organisation and its overall strategic direction)
- Purpose (the objectives of writing and enforcing the policy)
- Benefits (the benefits of realising the policy)
- Scope (to whom/what does the policy apply)
- Principles (the ethos behind the policy)
- Policy (the main body of the policy)
- Responsibility (who is responsible for the implementation and oversight of this policy)
- Related Documents (e.g. related policies, procedures)
- Document Control (who is responsible for reviewing this policy)

There should also be information in the header and footer:

- Header: policy number, revision, date of Issue
- Footer: page number

3. Writing Style

Policy documents should be clear and understandable to a general audience. These documents will be available on the Trinity website, for anyone curious to know about our principles. Think in terms of writing for the web: short and sweet.

Write in the “active voice”.

The active voice makes statements clearer and more powerful. When we write in the active voice, the person/department taking action is the subject of the sentence (e.g. “We seek advice...”). In the passive voice, the “who” is often not identified (e.g. Advice is sought...”).

Active Voice:	Passive Voice:
The company polluted the lake.	The lake was polluted by the company.
We proposed new regulations.	New regulations were proposed.
You must include the following information in your application.	The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.
The Department of Labour proposed new regulations.	Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Labour.

Omit unnecessary words, and use short words and sentences.

DO say:	DON'T say:
several, a few, many	a number of
enough	a sufficient number of
now	at this point in time
can	is able to can
monthly	on a monthly basis
because	on the grounds that
must	be responsible for
to	in order to

Avoid the word “shall”.

“We will” reads better than “we shall”. Legal writing experts also recommend avoiding the archaic and ambiguous “shall” in favour of another word, depending on the meaning:

- “must” for obligations
- “must not” for prohibitions
- “may” for discretionary actions
- “should” for recommendations

Be aware of the weight of each of these words as you are developing or revising policy.

Avoid jargon and acronyms.

If you really must use an acronym, e.g. QQI, then you must identify what it stands for the first time it appears, e.g. “All of our course content and certification is in line with QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland)”. However, bear in mind the following point, and try to keep your language as general as possible:

Avoid specifying information that may be subject to change, requiring the document to be updated.

Avoid information such as the following:

- Staff names
- Staff phone numbers

Instead, when identifying who is responsible etc. use:

- Job title
- Department

The policy title should capture the content of the policy.

Policy titles should be easy to search online and elsewhere. Do not use the word “policy” in the title, unless it comes at the end, so it is easy to find documents alphabetically.

GOOD	BAD
Quality Assurance Policy ✓	Policy for Quality Assurance
Research Ethics Policy ✓	Policy on Ethics in Research
Data Collection Policy ✓	The Collection of Data

4. Common Terms

To ensure consistency across documents, the same terms should be agreed upon and used:

Trinity

- The full name “Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin” should be used in the first instance.
- “Trinity” (not TCD) should be used as the short-hand version every time there after.
- Use “the University” not “the College” in external communications.

Programmes

- Use the term “programme” (*not course*) to describe a study.

University Council

- In the first instance, write “University Council, Trinity’s highest academic committee”.
- Thereafter, it may be described as “University Council” or “Council”.

Capital Letters

Do not capitalise general terms such as “external examiners”, or “examining system” etc., unless they are active, named systems/services/posts within Trinity, e.g. Provost, Academic Secretary, Disability Service, Trinity Access Programme or Quality Office, etc.

5. Currency and Version Control

Some simple strategies can ensure that everyone understands the level of currency.

Although a number of people will contribute to the development of policies, all issuing and re-issuing should be done through one designated position. In this way, amendment records can be appropriately maintained and issuing controlled. In TTL, this should be done by the Academic Secretary.

The standard format of policies and procedures includes an issue date and number. The first time a policy or procedure is issued it should be numbered ‘1’, with subsequent amendments numbered ‘2’, ‘3’, ‘4’ etc. Until the policy is issued, mark it as a draft document.

6. Visual Formatting Guidelines

Logo

The Communications office advise that the following version of the TCD logo (common use) is to be used on policy and procedure documents:



A policy template is available into which policy text can be pasted. This template will feature the logo correctly placed, along with where to put the policy number, issuing office etc.

Font

Source Sans Pro is preferred, but Calibri is also acceptable. Line spacing should be 1.5. Font should not be smaller than 12. Avoid underlining or italicising text (make bold instead). Left align text (do not justify it as it can cause readers to focus on the rivers of white space, rather than the words).

Accessibility

Finished documents should be published online in PDF form. Prior to publication, all documents should be proofed to make sure they meet the accessibility guidelines outlined by CAPSL: <http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/accessible-info/>. Trinity's policy on Accessible Information advises that policy documents in other accessible formats may be made available *upon request*.

If a request is made for another accessible format, this should be forwarded to the Disability Service. To enable conversion, all documents should be stored by the responsible department/office in both PDF and Word format.

7. Partners

Consider partners and collaborators:

- Who are our partners/collaborators in developing these policies and procedures?
- What do we need from them?
- At what stage will we work with them?

8. Additional Resources

Useful Websites:

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland: www.qqi.ie
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK): www.qaa.ac.uk

Other Educational Institutions

The following may provide good practise reference points and samples of documents that we have not yet developed in Trinity. Would elements of their policy models work within Trinity?

Our comparator group of universities:

- University of St. Andrews
- University College of London
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Warwick

The other Irish universities:

- UCD
- NUI Galway
- University of Maynooth
- University of Limerick
- Dublin City University
- University College Cork

Other Irish colleges:

- DIT
- Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

The Russell Group of universities:

- University of Birmingham
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- Cardiff University
- Durham University
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Exeter
- University of Glasgow
- Imperial College London
- King's College London
- University of Leeds
- University of Liverpool
- London School of Economics & Political Science
- University of Manchester
- Newcastle University
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- Queen Mary University of London
- Queen's University Belfast
- University of Sheffield
- University of Southampton
- University College London
- University of Warwick
- University of York