



University of California Policy Process

Policy Stylebook

Good policies are easy to read. “Plain language” is a writing style that helps readers:

- find what they need,
- understand what they find; and
- use what they find to meet their needs.

Guidelines for plain language writing are available online (see references below). In general, follow these principles:

- Write in the “active voice”. In an active-voice sentence, the person or department/unit taking the action is the subject of the sentence. Passive-voice sentences often do not identify who is performing the action:

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

More than any other writing technique, using the active voice and specifying who is performing an action will change the character of your writing.

- Avoid the word “shall”
Use “must” for an obligation, “must not” for a prohibition, “may” for a discretionary action, and “should” for a recommendation.

Be aware of the “weight” of each of these words as you are developing or revising policy. Legal writing experts now recommend avoiding the archaic and ambiguous “shall” in favor of another word, depending on your meaning.

- Use pronouns. Pronouns help readers relate better to your documents. They are more likely to understand what their responsibility is. Using pronouns also makes sentences shorter and your document easier to read.

<i>Don’t say</i>	<i>Say</i>
Copies of receipts must be provided.	You must provide copies of your receipts.

- Omit unnecessary words

Wordy, dense documents are confusing to the reader. Edit your policy to reduce unnecessary or redundant information. This task can be difficult for the writer him/herself or for a subject matter expert, so have a friend or colleagues read your document and provide feedback.

Watch out for *of*, *to*, *on*, and other *prepositions*. They often mark phrases you can reduce to one or two words.

<i>Don't say</i>	<i>Say</i>
a number of	several, a few, many
a sufficient number of	enough
At this point in time	now
Is able to	can
On a monthly basis	Monthly
On the grounds that	because
Be responsible for	must
In order to	to

- Use short words (one or two syllables).
- Avoid the use of jargon, unnecessary technical expressions and fancy vocabulary.
- Use common words (e.g., 'use' instead of 'utilize').

- Avoid "legalese" --These words make documents "stuffy".

Above-mentioned	hereafter	therewith
aforementioned	hereby	whatsoever
foregoing	thereafter	wherein
henceforth	thereof	whereof

- Write short sentences

Long, complicated sentences often mean that you are not sure about what you want to say. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units.

Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence. Break up your idea into its parts and make each one the subject of its own sentence.



- Use lists

Vertical lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your user focus on important material.

- Use tables to make complex material easier to understand

Tables help your audience see relationships that are often times hidden in dense text. Moreover, for most readers, it is not necessary to understand all possibilities and conditions, only those that apply to the reader's situation.

- Write for the web

People who are looking for University policy on the web usually have a specific question or need in mind. If the policy or procedure does not answer that question, or if it is too time-consuming to find it, they will leave disappointed. So when you are writing a policy, try to use:

Logical organization	Pronouns
Informative headings	Common words
Active voice	Lists and tables

and to avoid:

Jargon & legalese	Long sentences or paragraphs
Hidden verbs	Abbreviations
Passive voice	Unnecessary words

Online References for Policy Writers

Plain Language.gov, Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public, <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/> (2011).

[The Elements of Plain Language](#), J. Kimble

[University of Wisconsin – Madison Writer's Handbook](#)

[Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

[Writing Revisable Manuals](#), A Guidebook for Business and Government