Griffith University Policy Style Guide

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Introduction

All governance documents at the University, including policies, must be clear, concise, and consistent. Documents should be able to be easily understood by their intended audience. They should also be transparent about the actions, behaviours and responsibilities they require.

Policies, procedures and related material are most effective, most useful and most likely to aid with meeting the University's compliance obligations when they:

a) look and feel like they are part of the same "family" of documents to readers (ie are easy to identify as policies, and easy to tell what expectations they contain)

b) are integrated and harmonised with other related policies, so all documents act to reinforce each other

c) use a consistent voice, tone and style

d) assume good faith on behalf of the reader

e) are very clear in stating any compliance requirements created by the policy

f) prioritise helping the reader to understand their obligations and any restrictions on their actions.

When preparing any policy or related document, drafters need to use the rules set out in the Griffith Writing and Editing Guide for all grammatical matters. This includes spelling, shortened forms, capitals, hyphens, punctuation, en rules, bullets, quotations, and italics. These rules apply whether the audience is internal or external.

Understanding the function of different document types

The Policy Governance Policy and its associated Procedure defines the types of documents in the University's policy suite and the kind of material they should contain. Policy developers must take care to place content at the right level, and understand the distinction between governance (policy), management (procedure) and guidance (guidelines).

Within the documentation hierarchy:

- Policies are mandatory for all members of the University community
- Procedures are mandatory for all people and activities captured within the scope of the Procedure
- Guidelines are advisory and explanatory, and do not contain mandated actions.

Essentially, the rule is:

- Policy contains the "why" and the high level of "what".
- Procedure contains the detailed "what" and the process-level "how".
- Guidelines contain the conversational and assistance-focused "how".

- **Policies** contain:
    - high-level principles and rules that apply to a particular activity or theme

- roles, responsibilities
- must clearly state their scope, including any exclusions to coverage, their source of authority and their review cycle
- a link to the Delegations Register for relevant delegations and instruction on what section of the Register the delegations can be found, for example, 'Delegations relevant to this Policy are listed in the Delegations Register under delegations Type 'Staff' and Function 'Recruitment'
- where relevant, rules for appeal and review processes.

- **Procedures** capture management process rules, and other provisions that a governance body cannot add much value to, along with relevant minor points of information and guidance. Procedures should be written so that what needs to be done can be easily followed by all users.
- **Guidelines** provide substantial guidance on factors to consider in making decisions, or how to go about an activity to achieve good practice. Guidelines are often conversational in tone.
- **Frameworks** are a structure for management and operational activities that brings together policy documents.
- **Plans** are document that states the University's strategic directions across its core activities. They may also give effect to legislation or other regulatory requirements.
- **Local protocols** are means operational-level procedures or practices that apply within a particular Academic Group or Division and that must be consistent with all policy documents above them in the policy document hierarchy.

Structure and Methodology

Policies and procedures must be developed, reviewed and maintained following the Policy Governance Policy and Procedure. They must be created within the prescribed templates and must use template-defined fonts, numbering conventions, styles, and section headings.

A policy or procedure about a specific activity should follow the 'life cycle' order of the activity, with sections for each stage of the activity. Typical life cycle stages are:

a. defining the need and the principles to be applied
b. roles and responsibilities
c. set-up/configuration
d. doing the thing
e. assessment
f. record-keeping
g. complaints/appeals
h. reporting and continuous improvement.

Procedures must be tied to one or more policies, and this relationship must be made explicit. When feasible, procedures should offer the user options.

Where the policy or procedure contains assertions of fact or law, careful accuracy checks must be performed. As a general rule, policies should avoid quoting legislation verbatim, but where necessary, should reference particular sections of Acts of Regulations as the authority.

Policies should avoid, where possible, naming specific individuals, positions, or business units (except within the Roles and Responsibilities table), to reduce the chance of quickly falling out of date with staff movements and organisational change.

Definitions

Terms used in policies and procedures need to be used consistently across the organisation with a common understanding of what they mean in every instance.

Policy environments with multiple definitions for a single term, obscure acronyms or technical/professional jargon cause a great deal of confusion to users, who may inadvertently breach a policy through a lack of understanding about what was meant. It is also a major reason so many employees find it difficult or frustrating to read policy and procedures.

The lack of a shared common understanding of key terms (such as "student" for example) can lead to real consequences for the application and reach of a policy. If "student" is undefined, one reader may interpret it as "persons who have been admitted to the University" while another may consider it to only apply to people who are actually enrolled. This can lead to both compliance and clarity issues.

When a word or phrase is either:

- **not** a commonly used English expression with a clear common understanding of its meaning; or
- is being used by the University in a specific or different way to its common meaning,

a definition must be provided, stating the way the organisation wants it interpreted so there can be no misunderstanding on the part of those looking for guidance in the document.

If the definition does not currently appear in the Policy Glossary, it will be added as part of the policy review process. If there is an existing Glossary definition, it must be used unless a strong case for change or exception is made.

Writing Good Policy, Procedure and Guideline documents

Writing good policy, procedure and guideline documents is a skill that takes time to develop. However, there are five key pillars that can assist you to develop strong, useful documents:

1. use plain English
2. use a consistent and appropriate style and tone;
3. use inclusive language
4. use intuitive and succinct sentences
5. edit your work.

1. Use plain English

Griffith University policies, and related documents must be written in plain English. Texts should be succinct, clear, and easy to read. The Griffith Writing and Editing Guide provides excellent direction on written style and language.

In a policy context in particular, the following principles apply:

- use short, common, informal words
- use precise words that will convey the meaning clearly
- avoid (or where you cannot avoid, explain) jargon, initialisms, and acronyms
- use verbs instead of verbal nouns (e.g. 'apply', not 'submit an application')
- remove redundant words that don't contribute to the meaning
- select a succinct title that is easily understood by most potential users
- use definitions and terminology consistently with the way the terms are used in the Policy Library Glossary, where relevant and possible.

Polices should be written in:

- third person ("it", "they", "the organisation", "staff", "members", "volunteers" rather than "you / your" or "I / we")
- active voice ("They will help you") rather than passive voice ("You will be helped by them").

Procedures and Guidelines may be written in the second person where that helps to convey a more directive and/or helpful tone (i.e. "You must do X" or "We provide resources to assist with Y").

2. Use a consistent and appropriate style and tone

It is important that policies adopt a consistent voice and tone. Not all policies will have the same tone requirements, but within each document, tone should be consistent. While policies should not be stiffly formal and legalistic (they should never read like legislation!), policies that embed legal compliance obligations may need to use a firm directive tone, which reinforces the need to comply in full. Such policies will typically use directive language ("must" or "will" instead of "should" or "may").

Policies that are intended to be more aspirational or principles-based with a less defined compliance element should also prioritise a clear, professional tone, but may be less directive in their language ("should" or "may" are appropriate for some such policies).

3. Use inclusive language

Policies and other governance documents should be drafted with a human-centred approach. Language choices, content, style, and presentation should work together to deliver clear, reasonable, and equitable directions. Utilising Griffith's Quick Guide to Inclusive Language and Accessible Content direction and assistance with this goal.

All policies must use language that demonstrates respect for, and includes, all people. This includes much more than pronoun selection. It also includes the choice of examples, the phrasing of general statements, and the assumptions that underlie the principles. Generally, statements that "all people" or "all staff" have a particular characteristic or experience should be avoided, as they are not inclusive of diverse groups of people.

Gender, gender identity and sexuality

- Gendered language should be avoided (use "they/them" rather than "he/she", or a collective term for the group of people discussed e.g. "staff members working at the College of "X" or "students with children").
- Avoid using unnecessary gender references, e.g. the male nurse or the woman physicist.
- Use gender-neutral position titles e.g. the Chair rather than Chairman.
- Don't use language that makes assumptions about a person's sexuality or relationship status. Use "partner" rather than "spouse", or if there is a need to differentiate between the married and non-married partners, "spouse" rather than "husband/wife".
- The acronym LGBTIQ may be used, but it is preferred to refer to "'sexuality, sex and gender diversity" to be more inclusive where possible.
- Don't use language or examples that exclude the experience and legitimacy of transgender and gender diverse people (e.g. "pregnant staff members may access sick leave to attend scheduled appointments" rather than "women are entitled to sick leave to attend scheduled pregnancy appointments").

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- Refer to Griffith's Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology to make sure you are selecting the most appropriate language.
- Always use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in full and don't abbreviate to 'ATSI'.
- Don't isolate or exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, stating that 'all Australians have access to quality medical care' excludes the lived experience of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Disability and age

- Use people-centric language: the disability doesn't define the person, i.e., person with disability or people with disability. (Note: This is not universally agreed within the community of people with disabilities; sensitivity should be displayed if staff or students prefer "disabled person", "an asthmatic" etc.)

- Policy should never use pejorative or inappropriate language for people with disabilities.
- Where disability needs to be referenced, policy and procedure should use a strength-based approach, such as 'person experiencing mental health challenges', rather than 'they are schizophrenic'.
- Policy and procedure should never make assumptions about the nature or legitimacy of disability.
- Only refer to age when relevant to the context, and when it is necessary, use people-centric language e.g. older adults, younger people, children under 15.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

- Only reference someone's cultural background when it is appropriate for the context. Generally, in policy and procedure it is unnecessary to refer to people's cultural backgrounds, but if it is required, use people-centric language e.g. people of Vietnamese descent, international students from Eastern European countries.
- Where the policy or procedure will be relied upon by people whose first language may not be English, try to make language choices that can be readily understood by a person with IELTS 5 level English proficiency.

4. Use intuitive and succinct sentences

Policy can be difficult to read and understand. Sometimes this is because the subject matter is complex, but a frequent problem is the use of long, rambling sentences.

A good writing rule is that sentences should average 22 words. They can be longer than 22 words, but not often, and when they are, they should follow other plain English rules. Where long sentences contain a list of points, breaking them into subclauses usually makes them more readable.

Sentences should present information to the reader in the order that makes it easiest to understand. This will often be a chronological narrative: 'first this happens, then that happens' or 'if this happens, then that happens'.

Wherever you can, avoid using any sentence structure that divides the meaning of the sentence. This includes over-using parentheses to insert extra information, as well as using split infinitives. A split infinitive happens when you put an adverb between *to* and a verb – such as, "To boldly go where no man has gone before". While these sentence constructions can add flair and artistry to creative writing, clarity is the key goal in developing policy.

5. Edit your work

During and after drafting, rigorous self-editing is essential. In particular, look for places where the text breaches the plain English principles above, and correct this. But also consider the order of information in sections of the text – the reader's experience of moving through the text.

- Is it a smooth, intuitive journey?
- Are the various sections consistent with one another – for example, in the terms they use for the same things?
- Does the document use a consistent voice and tone?

- Are all the clauses needed? (Shorter is almost always better.)
- Correct and consistent use of tense – past, present and future

Sometimes a fresh set of eyes is very helpful in identifying ways to improve a policy document. The Policy team can assist with reviewing and editing your work as you undertake development.