

Developing and Writing Library Policies and Procedures

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Policies and procedures are the working documents of any organization, whether an electrical utility or a library. Establishing a program of written policies and procedures is a challenge, requiring time and effort on the part of managers and staff alike. But in the end, it is the mark of a good organization.

Policy or Procedure?

Some people slam the phrase “policies and procedures” together so that it sounds like one word. Indeed some people seem to think that policies and procedures are one and the same. However, there are important differences between these kinds of documents. Policy comes first; procedure follows. Policy deals with the “what” of an organization’s work; procedure with the “how.” Policy creates the rules; procedure tells how the organization will implement the rules. Policies should be stable and relatively long-term; procedures may change quickly to reflect a changing work environment. Policies represent a consistent, logical framework for action; procedures evolve to reflect changes in managerial philosophy, personnel, equipment, or technology.

A program of written policies and procedures offers benefits to a library or department. Written policies and procedures:

- Improve the quality of work by reducing errors. How many times have we said or heard an assistant say, “I didn’t know. Nobody told me.” Librarians spend time and money straightening out the errors that occur.
- Increase productivity by standardizing processes, creating a consistent way of doing things in the library.
- Serve as training aides for both new employees and experienced employees who are cross-training. Written policies and procedures are far superior to oral tradition.
- Serve as a checklist for complicated or little-used processes. It takes time to go back and determine how you did something the last time the issue came up. A written policy or procedure will help the organization be consistent over time.
- Provide a basis for improvement. When an organization wants to improve its processes, written policies and procedures offer a starting point.

Polices

A policy establishes the framework for what will or will not be done in an organization. A policy is a philosophy, standard, or criterion that helps employees exercise good judgment and discretion in the management of the organization's daily affairs. Policies range from broad philosophies to specific rules. Sometime policies are vague and imprecise.

To develop a policy, there are several basic steps for the library to take:

1. Assess the need for a new policy. Does the library have a policy in place that covers the situation? Does the library need a policy on this matter? Is anyone in the library developing a policy on this topic?
2. Research best practices. Check the FDPL *Instructions to Depository Libraries* and *Federal Depository Manual*. Do a literature search. Before posting a query, check the GOVDOC-L archives. Check with your regional depository library. Network locally to learn how other libraries handle the matter.
3. Draft the policy.
4. Review the draft with stakeholders. Get input from affected offices, library board, library users, and other groups.
5. If needed, get approval from appropriate management.
6. Issue the policy by distributing copies to appropriate offices.
7. Train affected staff.
8. Develop procedures as quickly as possible.

Format of a Policy

When issuing a policy, you should follow a consistent format that includes the following features:

- Responsible office. The name of the office (the library or a specific library department) that is responsible for the issuing the policy.
- Title. Select a title carefully so that it is simple but clearly reflects the policy's content.
- Date. The date the policy will go into effect. It may be the same as the date the policy is issued.
- Version number. Start with version 1 and increase the version number every time you revise the policy.
- Purpose statement. Write a concise statement conveying the purpose of the policy.
- Detailed policy statement. The complete, yet concise, text of the policy.
- Applicability. A statement of exactly who or what the policy applies to and the consequences of noncompliance, if applicable.
- Definitions. If the policy uses an unusual or specialized language, jargon, or unique applications of words, include a list of definitions.
- Sources of help. Provide the name of the office and specific position title (not an individual's name) that can give interpretations, resolution of problems, or permission in special situations.

- Policy authority. If the policy has been issued on the basis of an outside authority, cite the authority.
- Related forms, policies, and references. Include a list of forms, other policies, or references related to the policy.
- List of related procedures. Cite the procedures that carry out the intent of the policy.

Text of a Policy

The text of the detailed policy statement should be as concise as possible. In addition, it should be:

- Simple.
- Straightforward.
- Easy to understand.

To understand the policy, you should not need to diagram the policy statement nor should you need a law or management dictionary.

Procedures

Procedures are instructions that must be followed to achieve the desired results. A procedure presents the steps that one takes to accomplish a task. Procedures are tangible, precise, exact, specific, and factual. Procedures are succinct and to the point.

There are several steps to developing a library procedure.

1. Assess the need for a procedure. Does the library have a procedure in place that covers the situation? Does the library need a procedure on this matter? Is anyone in the library developing a procedure on this topic?
2. Research best practices. Check the FDPL *Instructions to Depository Libraries* and *Federal Depository Manual*. Do a literature search. Before posting a query, check the GOVDOC-L archives. Check with your regional depository library. Network locally to learn how other libraries handle the matter.
3. Become thoroughly familiar with the process that you will document in the procedure. Here the buddy system works well. Have two people work together, one does the action to be documented in the procedure, the other takes notes. The former orally describes the process, the latter records, being careful to note exceptions, problems, or glitches.
4. List the tools, both real and virtual, needed to do the process. This list should include the tools, equipment, and materials as well as system permissions needed.
5. Draft the procedure.
6. Add graphics to the procedure. Drawings, illustrations, flowcharts, tables, and screen prints are useful. However, the graphics themselves are not a substitute for the written text. The well written procedure will explain the process in the text and use the graphics as supporting material.

7. Test and evaluate the draft. Ask someone to follow the process while you shadow his or her action. Ask the tester to read the procedure and explain the action that he or she is being instructed to take. If the tester gets stuck and cannot proceed, he or she can ask questions and explain the problem. But the writer of the procedure should not offer help. The point here is for the writer to learn the tester's thought processes and misinterpretations.
8. Revise the procedure by using the information gained in step 7 (the test-and-evaluate step).
9. If needed, get approvals from management.
10. Distribute copies of the procedure to all concerned staff and offices. Include the date that the procedure is issued or becomes effective.
11. Train staff by scheduling training session for all concerned parties.

People who are new to procedure writing often puzzle about the appropriate length of a procedure. Like most written pieces, a procedure has no set length. It should be as long as it needs to be to accomplish its goal. However, shorter procedures are usually better than longer ones. For the writer, a shorter procedure is easier to develop, write, and maintain. For the reader, several 2- to 4-page procedures are less intimidating and easier to use than one 15-page one.

Format of a Procedure

When issuing a procedure, you should follow a consistent format which includes the following features:

- Procedure title. Select the title carefully so that it is simple but at the same time accurately conveys the procedure's content.
- Date. The date the procedure will go into effect. It may be the same as the date the procedure is issued.
- Version number. Start with version 1, and increase the version number every time you revise the procedure.
- Purpose statement. Write a concise statement conveying the purpose of the procedure.
- Text of the procedure.
- Applicability. Describe exactly who or what the procedure applies to.
- Definitions. If the procedure uses an unusual or specialized language, jargon, or unique applications of words, include a list of definitions.
- Sources of help. Provide the name of the office and specific position title (not an individual's name) that can give interpretations, resolution of problems, or permission in special situations.
- Procedure authority. If the procedure has been issued on the basis of an outside authority (such as *Instructions to Depository Libraries*), cite the authority.
- Related forms, policies, and references. Include a list of forms, other policies, or references related to the procedure.

Text of a Procedure

- Write the procedure as a numbered list.
- Include subroutines. Identify the primary routine and subordinate other actions.
- Limit each step to one task.
- Write each step of a procedure as a positive command (the imperative mood). Readers understand positive commands more easily and quickly than indirect statements.
- Present the condition, if any, at the beginning of the step. Readers tend to stop reading when they reach the verb (the action they are being instructed to take). If the condition is at the end of the step, they sometimes take action unnecessarily.
- Tell readers when they have completed the procedure.
- Anticipate typical problems and address them in the procedure. Obviously you cannot anticipate every problem, but you probably will have a good idea of what can go wrong.

Writing Style for Policies and Procedures

When writing a policy or procedure, keep three questions in mind:

- What is the purpose of this policy or procedure? Clearly defining the purpose will help focus the writing process.
- Who is the audience for this policy or procedure? Is the audience the library staff, the general public, or some combination? Clearly defining the audience will further focus the writing process.
- How will the audience use the policy or procedure? Will it be at the busy circulation or reference desk with distractions and interruptions, or will the person using the policy or procedure be sitting in a quiet office?

The writing style should be

- **Clear.** Your objective is to make the content of the policy or procedure immediately understandable and usable.
- **Concise.** Avoid wordiness. Keep the language precise.
- **Consistent.** Refer to a part, process, fact, procedure, idea, thing, service, organization, or operation in the same way every time you write about it. Do not vary the reference by using synonyms. By varying the terms and references, you can confuse the reader who may assume that you are referring to two different things. Confusion takes time to resolve and may result in errors and inefficiency.
- **Complete.** In a policy, check to be sure you have covered all the issues. In a procedure, be sure you have included all the steps in the process.
- **Coherent.** Be sure that the policy or procedure shows a logical thought process and that the text makes sense.

Here are some general observations on the writing style for policies and procedures:

- Keep it simple. Most people learn best when information is presented in “chunks” each with a clearly defined subject. Limit paragraphs to one topic and write sentences of 25 words or less. Keep it simple. Simple is good.
- Write the policy or procedure in the active voice. Active voice shows who is responsible for the action. It adds conviction and liveliness to the writing and is more concise than the passive. Readers find action verbs appealing because such verbs are direct and show motion.
- If you use an acronym, spell out the words with the first use, then use the acronym for subsequent uses. Don’t assume the reader will understand.
- If the library’s online catalog has a unique name, identify it with the first use (“WIZARD, XYZ Library’s online catalog”).
- Write the policy or procedure so that the informed amateur can follow it. Don’t insult the reader’s intelligence, but at the same time, don’t go way over the reader’s head.
- Use Arabic numbers. Roman numerals are too confusing.
- Avoid “please.” A policy presents a position and does not ask for action, so there is no need to use please. A procedure gives instructions that must be followed, so please is not needed.
- Use “utilize” correctly. In many instances, the use of utilize is pompous. Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* say to avoid the use of utilize. They prefer “use.” On the other hand, utilize can mean “to find a profitable and practical use for something.” The sentence “The librarians were unable to use the new computers” might mean only that the librarians were unable to operate the computers, whereas “The librarians were unable to utilize the new computers” suggests that the librarians could not find ways to apply the computers in their work.
- Avoid “etc.” The abbreviation is overused and almost meaningless. It is probably better to introduce a list of examples with the phrases “for example” or “such as.”
- Avoid “i.e.” and “e.g.” Both writers and readers often confuse the meaning of these abbreviations. Generally they are pompous. Instead use “that is” and “for example” respectively.
- Avoid long noun-adjective strings like “online catalog user training enhancement grant.” Such strings can confuse the reader. What’s modifying what? Breakup the string to clarify the meaning.
- Avoid right-handed bias. Left-handed people make up an estimated 13 percent of the world’s population. Test procedures to be certain that there is no handed bias.
- Use gender-neutral or gender-fair language. There are several ways to accomplish gender-neutral language:
 1. Use the phrase “he or she” or “his or her.”
 2. Rewrite the sentence to avoid the need for any pronoun. Often you can substitute “the” or “a” for the pronoun.
 3. Substitute “one” for the phrase “he or she.”
 4. Change the subject for singular to plural. When you are referring to a type of individuals (“library users”) rather than a single individual (“library user”), you can avoid gender-specific pronouns and the incorrect use of the third person “their.”

Format for Policies and Procedures

There are several factors to keep in mind when formatting policies and procedures.

- Use white space generously. White space is the blank space in the margins, the indentions, and between lines of text. A common error in page layout is inadequate white space. Use white space to frame the text, to separate ideas, to define sections, to give visual relief from blocks of text, and to work with other visual markers (headings, bold text, and boxes) to highlight information. White space is simple to use, it doesn't cost anything, and it is highly effective.
- Structure the presentation so the reader can focus on relevant information by using visual clues such as white space and headings.
- When numbering the pages, include the total number of pages ("3 of 6"). Readers can then be confident that they received the entire document.
- Use lots of lists.
 - Use numbered lists for steps in a sequence or to designate priorities.
 - Use bulleted lists when you do not to suggest a sequence or priorities.
 - For sublists, use hyphens. Do not go below this level. If you need a next level, rewrite the list.
 - Use short lists by breaking up long lists. Limit a list to five to nine items.
 - Use a parallel structure for the items in a list.
- Use "note," "caution," and "warning" in a consistent manner.
 - A note is a suggestion for how to carry out a task. A note does not include any steps nor does it include safety information.
 - A caution indicates potential for damage to equipment.
 - A warning indicates the potential for serious injury or possibly death to persons.

Putting Policies and Procedures on a Web Site

Putting library policies and procedures online is another way to communicate with library users and staff. There are advantages:

- Web-based policies and procedures have lower maintenance costs than do paper manuals. Small corrections to policies and procedures can be made immediately on the Web.
- Web-based policies and procedures can be linked to related policies, procedures, and forms.

At the same time, there are disadvantages:

- Library staff may need training before they put policies and procedures on the Web.
- Because of the variety of Web browsers, the format of policies and procedures may be limited.
- A system crash or major power outage may limit access by both the public and library staff.
- Some individuals prefer a paper copy and will print the policy or procedure for their files.

Selected Resources

Books

Campbell, Nancy J. *Writing Effective Policies and Procedures: A Step-by-Step Resource for Clear Communication*. New York: American Management Association, 1998.

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Goldfarb, Stephen M. "Writing Policies and Procedures Manuals." *Journal of Systems Management* 32 (April 1981): 10-11.

Kliem, Ralph L. "Writing Technical Procedures." *Journal of Systems Management* 35 (October 1984): 30-2.

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Librarians' Index to the Internet. *USA Patriot Act Resources*. Online. Available: lii.org/search/patriotact [September 21, 2003].

Librarylaw.com. Online. Available: LibraryLaw.com [September 21, 2003].

Redfern, Jenny R. *Gender Fair Language*. Online. Available: www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/genderfair.html [September 17, 2003].

U.S. Plain Language Action and Information Network. *Writing User-Friendly Documents*. Online. Available: www.plainlanguage.gov [September 15, 2003].