A Guide

How to Write Effective Policies

in 3 Phases

PowerDMS®

Introduction

Policy Writing in 3 Phases

Are your policies out of date? Has your staff adopted their own way of doing things? Are you drowning in a flood of disorganized policies? Are vital procedures slipping through the cracks?

It can be challenging keeping policies updated with the latest best practices, accreditation standards, and ever-changing local, state, and federal regulations. If you're the compliance champion at your organization and need help developing policies, this guide was designed for you.

We have developed three phases for effective policy writing. Over the next several pages, you will be equipped with the know-how, tools, and templates you need to write effective policies.

- **Phase 1:** Preparation
- **Phase 2:** Development
- **Phase 3:** Implementation

Your Job Really Matters

Let's start by saying something you may not hear enough. **Thank you for making a difference**. Your day-to-day work is vitally important to your organization's success.

By keeping policies updated and staff trained, you are serving your community. You are protecting your employees and organization as a whole. As public image becomes more important and society more litigious, policy management and adherence matters like never before.

We believe that compliance managers, or those with similar titles and responsibilities, are the unsung heroes of their organization.

Policies vs. Procedures

Together, policies and procedures provide a roadmap for day-to-day operations. Wondering what the difference is?

Policies are a set of general guidelines. They outline your organization's plan for tackling certain issues. Maybe you've seen firsthand how policies influence culture, communicate expectations to employees, and guide day-to-day operations. And maybe you've seen the adverse effect of neglected policies.

What makes a good policy?
- Clear, concise, and simple language
- Explains the rule, not how to implement the rule

- Easily accessible by staff at all times
- Represents a consistent, logical framework

On the other hand, **procedures** explain a specific plan of action for carrying out a policy. They tell employees how to deal with certain situations.

What makes a good procedure?

- Clear, concise, and simple language
- Addresses how to implement policies
- Takes user insight into account
- A sense of ownership by users
- Provides options when feasible, not unnecessarily restrictive

Considering these differences will help you understand the purpose of your policy and procedure manuals, as well as how to structure them. While this guide focuses on policy development, much of what we cover will apply to procedures as well.

Phase 1: Preparation
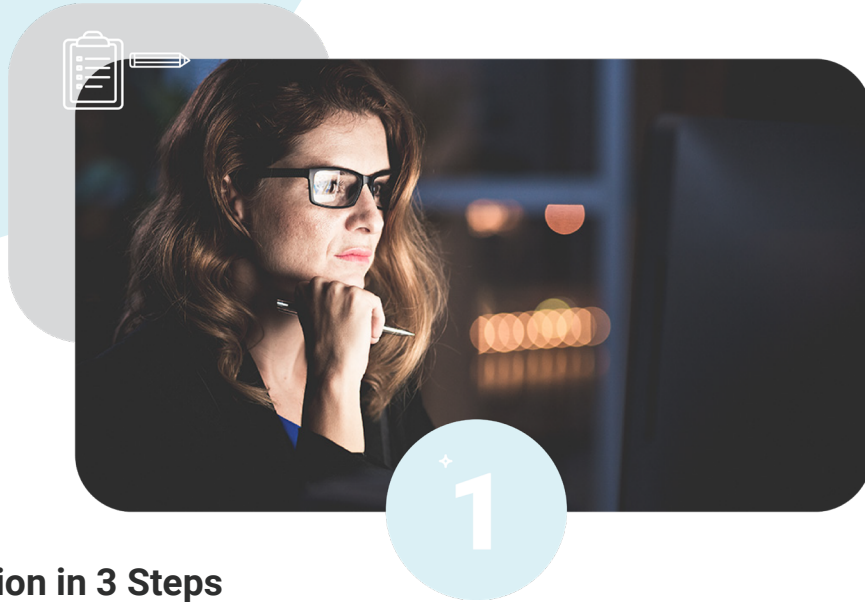
Preparation in 3 Steps

The most successful projects begin with preparation. And when it comes to policy writing, the prep work can take some time.

It's time well spent, of course. These documents will impact your entire organization. Every day. Not only that, they will influence culture and mitigate risk. **With that in mind, let's start prepping.**

Step 1: Get Approval

Preparation starts by getting approval. New policies come with cultural and legal implications, so getting sign-off from upper management is necessary. Who needs to approve your policy project?

The benefits of creating, compiling, and organizing policies may seem obvious to you. But it's always safe to create a compelling pitch when presenting your idea to leadership. Not only does it ensure sign-off, it gets the decision makers on the same page as you.

When it comes to policies and procedures, It's natural to focus on the "how." That's what matters right? How to get it done. While this is true, the "why" matters as well.

Consider these questions before speaking with upper management:

- What are your organization's goals?
- How would new policies help reach these goals?
- What problems will this project solve?
- What's your plan?

Step 2: Form a Team

Now it's time to form your project team. Keep in mind, the "right people" are not necessarily those who are easiest to work with or most excited to participate. They are the ones who need to be involved to make your project successful.

When building your team, consider the following stakeholders:
- Subject-matter experts in or outside your organization
- Supervisors familiar with current protocol
- Employees who will use the policies and procedures
- Colleagues across departments (i.e. Legal, HR)

Your teammates will have different roles and levels of involvement. Some will be high touch—they'll want a say in every step of the process. Others may only want to be involved in the areas relevant to them and their expertise.

Either is fine. **The key is to know who you're dealing with before enlisting their help.**

Team efforts are most successful when there's a clearly defined leader. Since you signed up for this course, you will likely take the lead. But the leader doesn't have to be the person writing all the policies. It could be the person most skilled at managing people and projects.

Step 3: Use a Standard Format

Consistent formatting keeps your policies organized and easy to understand. Familiarity with the standard format helps employees when they need to quickly reference a policy or procedure. It also saves you time and effort during the writing process.

To get started, think about the sections and information that should be covered in each policy.

Here are some examples:

- Document Header: information about the policy like title, effective/revision dates, approver signature, and department
- Purpose Statement: what is the policy about and what's the reason for having it?
- Policy Statement: what is your organization's policy on this topic?
- Definitions: define terms as you go to keep policies clear and to protect your organization from potential litigation
- Procedures: step-by-step instructions for routine tasks and operations
- Conduct: guidelines for proper behavior and restrictions on employee behavior
- Reporting Requirements: what employees need to report after an incident

If you'd like an example, download our helpful **Policy Template.** It's a good starting point as you walk through this step.

Phase 2: Development
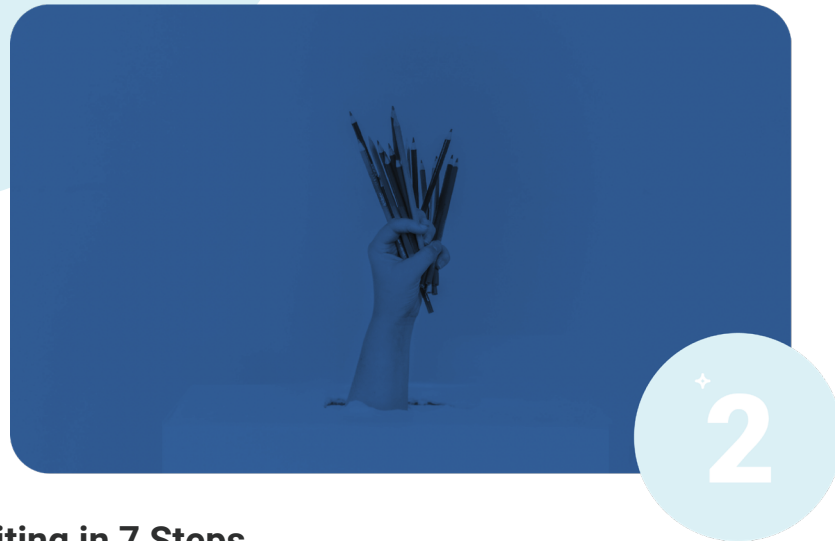
Policy Writing in 7 Steps

Let's put pen to paper and discuss how to write your policies. We've shared some sample policies as well, which will help you get started on the right foot.

Step 1: Map Existing Processes

Instead of starting from scratch, build on your current policies and procedures. **Leverage your team to create a prioritized list of policies:**

1. New policies that need to be written
2. Existing policies that need revisions

For new policies, interview employees and supervisors about the processes they follow. How are things done currently? What compliance issues, if any, prompted this policy? In the absence of policy, employees can come up with their own way of performing tasks. If this has happened, you'll need to resolve those discrepancies and create one formal process.

You can use this helpful checklist to map out your policies:

- Interview those involved in day-to-day tasks
- Shadow employees to see current procedures in action
- Discuss with internal and external subject-matter experts
- Find the latest laws, regulations, and accreditation standards
- Identify overlapping policies to ensure consistent language and requirements

In addition, here are several policies every organization should have. Feel free to reference and use these sample policies:

- Anti-Harassment/Discrimination
- Leave and Time-Off Benefits
- Workplace Health & Safety
- Use of Technology
- Equal Opportunity

Step 2: Write the First Draft

After mapping current processes and prioritizing a list of new policies, you can start writing.

Once again your team comes into play. Leverage their expertise, as well as the experiences of employees and supervisors who will interact with the policy every day. Consider asking one of these people to write the first draft. It can be a rough draft. The important thing is getting an SME's (Subject Matter Expert) valuable perspective down on paper.

When they're done, fill in the gaps. Add as much detail as possible into the first draft. It's better to have too much than too little at this stage.

Step 3: Include Visual Aids

It's helpful to add visual aids to complex policies and procedures.

For example, rules on operating technology and equipment can include pictures, screenshots, or videos. A procedure with many steps and supervisor sign-offs can include a diagram or flowchart. This is particularly useful for new employees.

Step 4: Get Review & Approval

By now you should have a completed first draft, bursting at the seams with pertinent information and visual aids. As you start revising a second draft, ask others to help you review the document.

The Outsider's Perspective
Who's an outsider? It could be someone from a different department, who the policy doesn't apply to. It could be someone not involved with the process. It could even be a new hire, who doesn't already know the ropes.

The goal is to make sure your policies are clear and easy to understand, especially for new hires. If it takes an experienced employee to understand the policy, it's too complicated. So remember to simplify the language and remove technical jargon.

The Insider's Perspective

Ask someone involved in the process (who understands what you're trying to accomplish) to review the document as well.

By the time you get feedback from an **"outsider"** and **"insider,"** you should have a strong second or third draft.

Step 5: Validate Your Work

To confirm your policies make sense, you need to see them in action.

Go back to the employees who will use the policy every day. Ask them to perform the policy or procedure as written in your document. Observe them carefully and note any discrepancies in their work or variances from the policy. The goal is to find holes or unclear verbiage in your policy, not to critique their performance.

Step 6: Get Final Approval

This is the moment you've been waiting for, to submit your policies for final approval. Try to receive approval from the highest level of leadership that makes sense for each policy. For example, an IT manager shouldn't be signing off on an Acceptable Use Policy. It should be the CTO or CIO who is ultimately responsible.
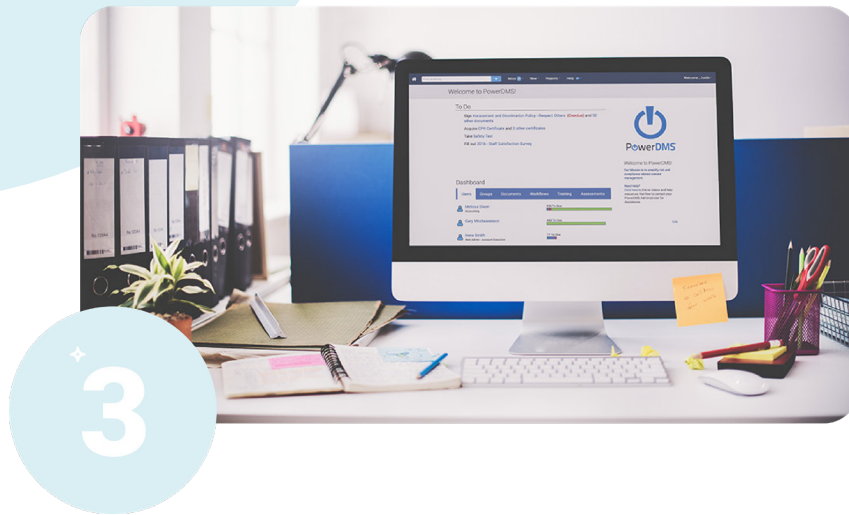
Step 7: Celebrate

At this point, you should let yourself celebrate. The work isn't over, but you've accomplished a lot. So pat yourself on the back.

The next step is implementation. Once these policies are created, how do you keep them updated? **How do you keep employees accountable to them?**

Phase 3: Implementation

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Implement Your Policies in 3 Steps

It's easy to focus on the writing phase of the policy process. After all, that phase has the most tangible deliverable. But each phase is equally important. Without preparation, your policies wouldn't be as comprehensive or effective. Without implementation, all your hard work will have been done in vain.

So just as the most successful projects begin with preparation, they end with implementation. Here are three steps to successfully implement your policies:

Step 1: Distribute Your Policies

The first step to implementation is distribution. All employees should have a copy of your policies or know where to access them.

How do you disseminate policies? We recommend managing and distributing your policies with online software. Without quality software, it's easy to rely on paper-based systems or limited solutions like email, Sharepoint, etc. that are less efficient and less organized.

The right software will act as a central repository, or single source of truth, making it easy for employees to access and search for policies anytime, anywhere. Some software lets you set up automated alerts for employees about coming audits, annual reviews, policy updates, and more. You can even require E-signatures to verify your staff has acknowledged policies.

Step 2: Create a Training Plan

Unfortunately, dissemination doesn't equal compliance. At the very least, you need to establish a sign-off process where staff acknowledges receipt and understanding of the policy. Ideally, if budget allows it, you would implement a training program to test and certify understanding. Online training management tools can make this a lot easier.

With online training, you can save valuable hours and dollars while helping your employees quickly understand your policies. You can also create custom tests to make sure they retained the information.

Step 3: Establish a Review Cycle

You've seen it firsthand. Laws and best practices are always evolving, which means your policies need to as well.

When creating your management process, establish review timelines for each policy. Considering the rate that technology is advancing, certain policies like Social Media or BYOD may need more frequent review. Some policies may only need to be revised annually or every few years.

It's important to understand the lifecycle of your policies. Planning updates ahead of time keeps you on schedule, your policies up-to-date, and your organization compliant.

Helpful Tools

7 Tools for the Policy Writing Process

We've covered a lot of material. Maybe it feels overwhelming. Maybe you can't wait to get started. Wherever you land on the spectrum, we are here for you. With insights. With industry-leading customer service. With a list of seven tools to make your work less stressful and more organized.

Tools for planning and ideation

These tools are great for the preparation phase of your policy project, when it's critical to gather notes, resources, and ideas.

Coggle: A free mind-mapping tool that lets you plan, organize, and share any type of content. Jot down your ideas for a new policy. Create clutter-free notes and diagrams. Coggle lets multiple users collaborate, comment, and chat within a document. Collaborators can add text, links, images, and rearrange information using simple drag-and-drop tools.

Evernote: A sophisticated note taking app. Evernote lets you compile, organize, and share notes, pictures, screenshots, articles, and more across the web. More robust functionality comes with paid plans, but the free version can get you started. With the mobile app, you can access all your notes on the go.

Tools for writing policies

The best way to ensure employee compliance is by crafting policies that are simple, concise, and well-worded. The following tools can help:

Hemingway: A free content editor that highlights and corrects grammar, fluency, and sentence structure. This app will help you minimize adverbs, use the active voice, avoid run-ons, and simplify sentences.

Grammarly: A free online writing assistant. Add the Grammarly extension to your browser to create clear, error-free content anywhere you write online.

Tools for adding imagery

Visual aids can complement your training content. Pictures, videos, infographics, diagrams, and more can help your staff retain information.

Nimbus: A free screenshot tool. Nimbus lets you create screenshots, annotate screenshots, and record video from your computer screen. It can be used to create step-by-step explanations of complex procedures or to record webinars for your training program.

Google Sheets: A free tool similar to Excel for creating, editing, and collaborating on spreadsheets, charts, and graphs wherever you are. Though you're likely familiar with Google Sheets already, it remains a valuable tool for tracking and visualizing data.

Tools for policy management

The free tools listed above will complement and assist your policy project. But if you're looking for a tool to manage policies across their entire lifecycle, you'll need a more comprehensive, digital solution.

PowerDMS: a policy and training management software. PowerDMS is a single platform for all your policy needs: drafting, revising, distributing, tracking, and collaborating. With built-in features for accountability, automated workflows, version control, and more, you can manage compliance without the headache.

While there are other content management solutions like Dropbox or Sharepoint, none of them provide a living connection between your policies, training, and accreditation.

To learn how PowerDMS can transform the way you do compliance, sign up for a free and friendly demo today.

Click here to reserve your demo.

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