

## University of Southern California | Policy Writing Style Guide

---

### SECTION 1 – Purpose and USC Identity

#### Style Guide Purpose

This style guide is intended to support the University’s desire to build a common foundation to manage and govern university-wide policies that are consistent, and in an easily digestible structure for both faculty and staff.

#### Templates

##### *Policy Template*

All new or substantially revised university-wide policies must be written using the policy template below. Follow the instruction for each section as stated within the template. Policies owners and those developing university-wide policies should include and populate each heading as provided in the template. For those sections that are not required per the policy, rather than deleting the section, it should list “Not applicable.”

**The policy template and instructions can be accessed on the USC Policy Governance website.**

##### *Procedure Template*

Any procedure in support of a university-wide policy must be written using the procedure template below. Follow the instruction for each section as stated within the template.

The procedure template and instructions can be accessed on the USC Policy Governance website.

##### *Other Templates*

In addition to the policy and procedure templates, policy owners and those developing university-wide policies can utilize the templates below when developing FAQs, standards, and guidelines in support of a policy. There is no template for forms.

The FAQs, standards, and guidelines templates and instructions can be accessed on the USC Policy Governance website.

#### Policy Titles

For any new policies, the policy title should be clear, concise and accurately reflect its content. Use a title that is distinct from already established policies.

## USC Identity

The policy templates were developed in accordance with [USC's Identity Guidelines](#). For any additional USC identity-related question, please contact the Human Resources/Administrative Operations Brand Ambassador, Candance Stalder ([cstalder@hr.usc.edu](mailto:cstalder@hr.usc.edu)). USC brand ambassadors are the point person for all identity questions related to the academic or administrative unit a department falls under.

## SECTION 2 – Accessibility and Language Guidelines

### Accessibility Guidelines

- Do not use ableist or gendered language. Avoid bias and harm when discussing disability and accessibility.
- Ensure that readers can reach all parts of the policy or policy-type document using only a keyboard, without a mouse or trackpad.
- Use a screen reader to test your document's accessibility.
- Use sentence case and avoid camel case and all caps when possible as some screen readers read capitalized letters individually.
- Make sure the same meaning is conveyed to the reader without punctuation marks. For that reason, avoid when possible the use of exclamation marks, question marks, and semicolons. Depending on the screen reader (or personal settings), not all punctuation marks are read.
- Use both upper- and lower-case fonts in text; all caps make text harder to read.
- Do not use “&” instead of “and” in headings, text, or tables of contents.
- Document text size should be 12 point or larger whenever possible.
- When adding a link into a document, do not use “click here” or “read this document”. Users who use screen readers jump from link to link to scan a page and need to understand what a link contains.

### General Language Guidelines

- Write in simple, plain English using familiar, everyday words that readers will understand.
- Ensure policies are written in a way that they can stand alone and can be understood without training.
- Bullets should be used as necessary in lieu of extensive paragraphs.
- Write in the “active voice” with the person or department/unit taking the action as the subject of the sentence.
- When citing responsible stakeholders, use roles or titles rather than individual names.

- When using acronyms, ensure that the acronym is spelled out the first time it is used (e.g. University of Southern California (“USC”).
- Avoid the word “shall.” Use “must” for an obligation, “must not” for a prohibition, “may” for a discretionary action, and “should” for a recommendation.
- Avoid “he,” “she,” or “you. ” Use "they" or refer to the stakeholder group (e.g., students) for both singular and plural nouns.
- Avoid “legalese” (Ex: hereby, whatsoever, aforementioned, etc.).

### **Specific Language Guidelines**

For USC-specific language and guidelines, please refer to the [USC Style Guide](#) maintained by USC University Communications. This includes guidelines related to:

- Common grammar and spelling mistakes
- Proper use of abbreviations, numbers, capitalization, etc.
- Proper use of commas, hyphens, special characters, etc.
- How to reference Keck entities and USC schools and divisions
- Preferred terminology such as when referring to race and ethnicity, semesters, building names, etc.

For policy-specific language, please refer to the below:

- When referring to the policy itself, capitalize “Policy.”
- When referring to USC as the “University,” capitalize the first letter.
- Avoid “employee,” “faculty member,” or “staff member.” Use "Faculty" and “Staff.”
- When referring to managers in policies who will be receiving requests or approving items, use “Dean of Faculty, Department Chair, or Supervisor” in order to cover a broad range of USC employees.
- Terms defined in the Definitions section should be capitalized when used in the remainder of the policy document.

### **Additional References for Policy Owners and Drafters**

- 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
- [Writing inclusive documentation](#)