

NORTH CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Policy Style Guide

How North Central University writes,
structures, and maintains its policies.

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At a Glance

The ten rules every North Central University policy follows.

E-Prime

Never use a form of “to be.” Pick an action verb.

7th to 8th Grade

Short sentences, common words. Student-only policies may reach 8th to 10th.

Active Voice

Name who acts, then the action. “The Registrar reviews each request.”

Third Person

Use titles, never “you” or “we.”

Must • Must Not • May

Obligation, prohibition, discretion. “Should” only for recommendations.

No Self-Reference

No “this policy,” “as stated above,” or “established procedures.”

Banned Words

Shall, ensure, etc., appropriate, might, could, would.

No Em Dashes

Use a comma, colon, parentheses, or a new sentence.

Comprehensive Statements

Every requirement lives in the policy statement, usually 1+ pages.

Real NCU Offices

Name only offices and titles that exist at NCU today.

NEED HELP?

Contact the Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) at policy@northcentral.edu for help at any stage of drafting.

01 Style Guide Usage

Policy owners and authors must write policies that follow North Central University's policy framework principles:

- **Transparency:** The university policy process follows clear, reasonable, and easy-to-follow steps that anyone can understand.
- **Efficiency:** The policy development process sets and follows a timeline for each policy.
- **Inclusivity:** The university seeks stakeholder and community input broadly, values that input, and uses it fairly.
- **Accountability:** Policy owners work within the university policy framework to develop new policies and to review, update, and retire policies as needed, and at least every four years. Policy owners also develop and maintain the required FAQ section for each policy.
- **Compliance:** Stakeholders must understand, implement, and enforce university policies and governing documents.

The style guide gives policy writers authoritative direction so that every policy fits the university policy framework. The framework includes an official policy template, official definitions in the University Policy Glossary, and official processes for policy development, maintenance, and promulgation.

For more information or help with policy creation, contact the Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) at policy@northcentral.edu.

02 What Makes a University Policy

A university policy serves as an official directive that:

- Applies broadly across the university.
- Advances the university's mission, sets behavioral expectations, promotes ethical standards and integrity, improves how the university operates, or manages institutional risk.
- Helps the university comply with laws and regulations.
- Has passed review by the PAC and approval by the President's Cabinet. During development, the PAC consults stakeholders such as the Academic Leadership Team (ALT) and Human Resources when a policy needs their input. Academic policies fall outside the PAC's scope, and the ALT approves them.
- Includes an FAQ section and, when a formal process exists, procedures that support implementation and clarity.

03 General Policy Standards

General Policy Writing Requirements and Philosophy

The PAC and any informal authoring committee address many of these requirements during policy development. Policy authors should still keep each requirement in mind when they write new policies or change existing ones.

- **Reader-Centric:** Write every policy for the reader. Use words and examples that the people who must follow the policy will understand.
- **Active Voice:** Write in active voice. Name who acts, then state the action (e.g., “The Registrar reviews each request,” not “Each request gets reviewed”).
- **E-Prime:** Write without any form of the verb “to be” (is, are, was, were, be, being, been, am), including contractions such as “it’s” and “isn’t.” Replace these verbs with action verbs (e.g., “Employees must complete training” instead of a sentence built on “is required”).
- **Scannability:** Use lists instead of long narrative whenever possible. Place an introductory sentence or paragraph before each list.
- **Oxford Comma:** North Central University uses the Oxford comma.
- **ISO Dates:** Policies and policy-related documents use the ISO 8601 date format (YYYY-MM-DD). The History section and all date fields require this format.
- **Capitalization:** Write “university” in lowercase except in the full name North Central University. Capitalize official office and department names. Do not capitalize common words for emphasis.
- **Hyphens:** Use hyphens only when grammar requires them (e.g., university-wide).
- **Dashes:** Do not use em dashes. Use a comma, a colon, parentheses, or a new sentence instead.
- **Titles:** Capitalize job titles when they stand alone or appear in a directory listing, such as the header fields for Responsible Officer, Policy Owner, and Policy Contact. Otherwise, capitalize a job title only when it comes before a name.
- **Paragraph Spacing:** Do not add blank lines between paragraphs within a policy section. The template styles control spacing.

- **Web Addresses:** Remove “http://” and “https://” from web addresses unless the address needs them to work as a direct link.

Policy Language

Language matters. Policy language must stay definitive and direct.

- **Precision:** Use literal, exact language that leaves no room for misreading. Avoid vague qualifiers. Every word must support a specific, enforceable requirement.
- **Simplicity:** Use simple, specific, and precise words. Avoid industry, technical, legal, and departmental jargon. When a technical or legal term has no plain substitute, define it in the Definitions section.
- **Readability:** Write at a 7th to 8th grade reading level for policies that apply to employees or to the whole university. Policies written only for students may reach an 8th to 10th grade level. Use short sentences and common words, and avoid complex sentence structures.
- **Perspective:** Write all policy documents in the third person. Use specific titles instead of pronouns (e.g., “The Registrar works with the department head,” not “You work with your department”).
- **Non-Self-Referential:** Policy text must never refer to itself. Do not use phrases such as “this policy,” “under this policy,” “as stated above,” “in this document,” “this section,” “established procedures,” or “previously mentioned.” State each requirement as a direct fact.
- **The Shall Prohibition:** Do not use “shall” in any policy-related document. “Shall” works as an imprecise legalism.
- **Active Headings:** Use gerund headings to organize subsections within a policy statement and to name procedures (e.g., Accessing Education Records, Submitting a Request). Policy titles must not use gerunds. The Policy Title section gives more detail.
- **Generic Terms:** Avoid product and brand names whenever possible. Generic terms last longer and need less upkeep (e.g., use “enterprise financial system,” not “Colleague Finance”).
- **NCU Offices and Positions:** Use only offices, titles, and governing bodies that exist at NCU. Confirm current titles with the PAC before submitting a draft. Common points to get right:
 - University counsel serves as external counsel. NCU has no Office of General Counsel.
 - The Office of Student Development handles student matters. The Office of Human Resources handles employee matters.
 - Use “Campus Safety & Emergency Preparedness,” not “Public Safety.”
 - Use “President’s Cabinet,” not “President’s Council” or “Senior Leadership Team.”
 - Use “Board of Regents” for the governing board.
 - Do not refer to offices NCU lacks, such as a Technology Transfer Office, an Office of Sponsored Programs, or a separate housing or disability services office.

Standard Word Choices

Must

For an obligation.

Must not

For a prohibition.

May

For discretionary action.

Should

For a recommendation.
Use sparingly, and never
for a requirement.

Prohibited and Discouraged Words

× Shall

Prohibited. Use “must.”

× Forms of “to be”

Prohibited (is, are, was, were, be, being, been, am). Use action verbs.

× Might, Could, or Would

Speculative. Use “must” or “will” to show certainty.

× Ensure

Avoid. Name the specific required action instead.

× Etc.

Prohibited. Use “including, but not limited to,” followed by specific examples.

× Appropriate

Avoid this and other subjective adjectives. State the specific standard required.

More information: <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/write/legal-docs/clear-writing.html>

Using the University Policy Template

Policy authors must draft every policy in the official simplified university policy template. The PAC and PAC Chair manage editing and formatting and confirm that authors complete every required part of the template.

The PAC sometimes gives policy authors a Microsoft Word version of the template with tracked changes turned on. The PAC keeps the policy document intact and tracks every version of each draft. Authors must follow these rules when they use the template:

- Do not rename files that the PAC distributes.
- Focus on content, not formatting. The PAC shares the template in a protected format so that (1) authors can focus on content, (2) the PAC can see what changed and where, and (3) the template keeps its text styles and formatting.
- Do not change headings or section names, such as “Responsibilities” or “Procedures.”
- Do not rearrange any part of the policy document or template.
- Complete every required section. When a section marked “Required, as needed” does not apply, follow the template instruction for that section.

Examples of Policy Statement Language

General Language (Clarity)

AVOID

"Faculty and staff should not smoke in class."

The word "should" leaves room for anyone to smoke anyway. The statement also leaves out students.

USE INSTEAD

"North Central University prohibits smoking on university property."

Policy Brevity and Precision

AVOID

"All University faculty and staff, under the leadership of its officers, are obligated to ensure that University funds are used only for mission related purposes."

The phrase "under the leadership" suggests that only some employees must follow the rule. The word "ensure" promises an outcome the university cannot guarantee.

USE INSTEAD

"All employees must use university funds only for mission-related purposes."

E-Prime, Active Voice, and Self-Reference

AVOID

"Employees are required to complete training within 30 days."

Uses a "to be" verb and hides who sets the requirement.

USE INSTEAD

"Employees must complete training within 30 days of hire."

AVOID

"Requests will be reviewed by the department head."

Passive voice puts the actor at the end.

USE INSTEAD

"The department head reviews each request."

AVOID

"As stated in this policy, employees must report concerns."

Refers to itself and adds no meaning.

USE INSTEAD

"Employees must report concerns to the Office of Human Resources."

04 Sections of a University Policy

A university policy contains several sections. The template marks some sections “Required.” It marks others “Required, as needed,” which means the policy must include the section when the content or nature of the policy calls for it to support enforcement, clear communication, and completeness. Sections must appear in the order the template sets, with the FAQ placed immediately before Forms/Instructions.

Policy Title (Required)

The following standards govern all university policy titles and keep the policy library professional, searchable, and authoritative. All language within the title must stay literal and exact.

General Standards

- The policy title names the key purpose of the policy in as few words as possible.
- Titles do not include the word “policy.”
- Authors build all titles as **Subject-Focused Noun Phrases**.
- Titles focus on the subject (the “what”) rather than the action (the “how”) to present a governing directive rather than a procedural task.

The “Subject + Function” Formula

To keep an authoritative tone and follow noun-phrase standards, titles combine a **Primary Subject** with a **Functional Qualifier**. Gerunds (verbs ending in -ing) serve as the standard for subsection and procedure headings within a policy, but titles must not use them.

- **Primary Subject:** Names the core asset or topic (e.g., **Student Records, Information Security**).
- **Functional Qualifier:** A noun that names the institutional requirement, stance, or lifecycle stage (e.g., **Management, Governance, Privacy**).

Management of Overlapping Subject Areas

When multiple policies govern the same broad topic, they share a common **Anchor Noun**. The shared noun groups related policies together alphabetically in the university policy library, which makes them easier to find. The **Functional Qualifier** sets each title apart.

ORIGINAL TITLE (ACTION-BASED)	NEW TITLE (SUBJECT + FUNCTION)	INDEXING BENEFIT
Establishing University Policies	University Policy Management	Groups under U with all policy-related rules.
Managing Student Records	Student Records Management	Groups under S with all records-related rules.
Protecting Student Privacy	Student Records Privacy	Sits next to other student records documents.
Preventing Hazing	Hazing Prevention	Names the safety mandate as a subject.

Writing and Style Requirements

- **Primary Subject First:** The most important noun appears at the start of the phrase to support indexing and search.
- **Heading Distinction:** Gerunds appear in subsection headings within the policy statement and in procedure headings (e.g., *Accessing Education Records*, *Submitting a Request*). They do not appear in the policy title.
- **Prohibited Verbs:** Titles must not start with gerunds such as *Establishing*, *Managing*, *Using*, *Protecting*, *Securing*, or *Creating*.
- **Prohibited Words:** Titles and text must not use “ensure.” Describe the specific required action instead.
- **Perspective:** Write all text in the third person, using specific titles rather than pronouns.
- **Non-Self-Referential:** The title names the subject and does not refer to the document itself.

Standard Functional Nouns

To keep the university library consistent, the following nouns serve as qualifiers that describe institutional processes:

- **Administration:** The formal management, execution, and oversight of a system or program.
- **Disclosure:** The authorized release or transfer of information to internal or external parties.
- **Establishment:** The formal creation and approval of an institutional framework or standard.
- **Governance:** The high-level exercise of authority and control over a specific institutional area.
- **Management:** The day-to-day administration of a subject throughout its lifecycle.
- **Prevention:** The specific standards and measures that prohibit unauthorized or harmful activity.

- **Privacy:** The legal and ethical protections that govern access to and use of sensitive information.
- **Retention:** The required timeframes and standards for storing and destroying records.

Policy Statement (Required)

The Policy Statement states the university's position on the topic, who must follow the policy, when it applies, and every required action, prohibition, and constraint. It serves as the most important section of the policy and must cover every requirement, obligation, restriction, and scenario the policy addresses. Most policy statements run one page or longer, and some topics need longer and more detailed statements. The policy statement tells people what they must do. It does not describe the step-by-step procedures for doing it.

What to Include in a Policy Statement

The policy statement answers these questions:

- Who must follow the policy? Name every group the policy covers, such as faculty, staff, students, volunteers, and contractors, and state any requirements unique to each group.
- When and where does the policy apply?
- What must each group do, and what must each group avoid?
- What deadlines, timeframes, and limits apply? State them specifically (e.g., "within 24 hours," not "promptly").
- Who holds authority to act, approve, grant exceptions, or remove access?
- What exclusions or special situations apply?
- Do other parties hold separate duties? When they do (e.g., the university's legal duties and a vendor's contract duties), state that each duty runs independently and that meeting one does not satisfy the other.

Brief context may appear when it helps the reader understand a requirement. Tie the context directly to a specific requirement, not to a general philosophy.

Rules for Drafting Policy Statements

- Follow the policy language requirements in the General Policy Standards section.
- Write sentences and paragraphs that the intended audience can clearly understand.
- Spell out each acronym the first time it appears, followed by the acronym in parentheses (e.g., personally identifiable information (PII)).
- Use gerund headings within the policy statement to organize topics (e.g., Reporting Concerns, Protecting Confidential Data).
- Name risk directly. When a requirement exists because of legal exposure, such as FERPA obligations, breach notification, or liability, say so plainly.

What Not to Include in a Policy Statement

Policy statements must not contain lengthy background details or procedural steps. Leaving out procedural steps does not mean leaving out required actions. Every requirement or obligation belongs in the policy statement.

Do not use phrases such as “as outlined in this policy,” “must follow this policy,” or “as stated below.” Readers already know they must follow the entire policy, so these phrases add nothing.

Do not use the policy statement to define terms at length. Focus on requirements. The Definitions section carries the same binding authority as the policy statement.

Organizing the Policy Statement

For consistency, each policy statement follows a three-part progression. It moves from setting the boundaries of behavior, to protecting the reporting process, to the consequences of not complying.



1 The Standard (Requirements and Restrictions)

The Standard forms the core of the policy. It must cover both what people must do and what they must not do.

- **Affirmative Duties (The Dos):** Clear instructions on what each covered group must do to comply.
 - *Style Note:* Use “must,” “has a duty to,” or “holds responsibility for.”
- **Prohibited Conduct (The Don’ts):** Explicit statements of what the university forbids or what creates risk.
 - *Style Note:* Use “must not,” “prohibits,” or “does not permit.”
- **Goal:** A complete operating manual for the topic.

2 The Safety Net (Reporting and Protection)

The Safety Net connects the rules to what actually happens in day-to-day university life.

- **Reporting Channels:** Explicit directions on how and where to report a concern or a violation someone witnessed.
- **Non-Retaliation Pledge:** A firm commitment that the university protects anyone who reports in good faith.
- **Goal:** Bring the Don’ts from the Standard to light so the university can address them.

3 The Accountability (Violations and Sanctions)

The Accountability section gives the policy its legal and disciplinary weight.

- **The Consequence:** A clear statement that failing to meet the Standard, or interfering with the Safety Net, leads to disciplinary action.
- **The Scale:** A brief overview of possible outcomes for each covered group (e.g., up to and including termination for employees or dismissal for students).
- **Goal:** Serve as the final guardrail and the end of the policy statement.

Reason for Policy (Required)

The Reason for Policy, usually two to six sentences in paragraph form, explains why the policy exists. It states the policy's purpose, what drives the need for it, and what it must accomplish. It answers the question "Why does the university need these requirements?" Brief NCU mission context may appear when it helps explain the purpose.

What to Include

The Reason for Policy may address:

- Legal, regulatory, stewardship, or other requirements the policy meets.
- The conflict or problem the policy resolves, with recognition of the legitimate interests of all parties.
- Overall benefits.

When the policy touches several specific laws, list them in the Related Information section instead.

What Not to Include

- Statements of university policy.
- The history of how the policy developed.
- Procedural steps for compliance and implementation.
- Self-referential openings such as "The purpose of this policy."

Sample Reason for Policy Statements

SAMPLE 1

North Central University protects the well-being of its students and employees and complies with state and federal laws, including the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (section 485(f) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended), the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, the Campus SaVE Act, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. section 1681 et seq.

SAMPLE 2

North Central University holds valuable and sensitive information. Everyone who handles this information must comply with the laws, regulations, university policies, and procedures that protect it. Mishandling information or exposing confidential information to unauthorized people can cause serious harm to the university and can lead to fines or other local, state, and federal sanctions.

SAMPLE 3

North Central University sets standards for using its information technology resources to:

- Comply with legal and contractual requirements.
- Protect the university from harmful legal consequences.
- Safeguard university technology resources.

Policy Scope (Required)

Every university policy must include a scope. The scope identifies **who** the policy affects and **which actions** it covers. The scope may expressly exclude certain people, organizations, locations, or actions. A clear scope focuses the policy on the intended groups and helps avoid unintended consequences.

Most policies apply to all university employees. Narrow the scope only when a specific section or requirement targets a particular group.

Sample Scopes

SAMPLE SCOPE 1

All university departments, faculty, staff, and students must follow the requirements for developing, issuing, and maintaining North Central University policies.

SAMPLE SCOPE 2

Requirements apply to all employees, students, volunteers, employees of affiliated organizations paid through the university, agents, and contractors. Employees include all staff, administrators, and faculty, full-time or part-time, whom the university pays. Students include all persons admitted to the university who have not completed the program of study in which they enrolled. Student status continues whether or not university programs remain in session. Affiliated organizations include separate entities that exist for the benefit of the university through an operating agreement. Agents include persons authorized to represent, act on behalf of, or bind the university. Contractors include any persons who have entered a contractual relationship with the university.

Procedures (Required)

Every policy includes a Procedures section. Procedures document formal processes, such as a grievance process, a Title IX process, or a request and approval process. When a policy has no formal process, the Procedures section contains the template's standard statement: "There are no procedures associated with this policy."

Procedures carry the same authority as the policy statement. They do not offer best practices, guidance, or recommendations. People must follow them. Procedures must not add new policy requirements, because every requirement belongs in the policy statement.

Procedures:

- Lay out, step by step, the required processes for complying with the policy.
- Explain how to carry out each policy requirement clearly and without ambiguity.
- Leave out the behind-the-scenes protocols that a responsible office uses internally.
- Leave out task lists that only restate who holds authority to act. State that authority in the policy statement.

Procedures organize required actions by task. The Responsibilities section organizes the same actions by office or job function.

List procedures in the order people carry them out. When no clear order exists, list procedures alphabetically.

Procedure Writing

- Use gerund headings to name each procedure, because each procedure represents a task (e.g., Submitting a Request, Reviewing an Appeal).
- Open each procedure with a short narrative that explains its context, such as when the procedure applies and who starts it.
- Use bullet points for the actual steps.
- Name the party responsible for each step (e.g., the department head), not general terms such as “you” or “the unit.”
- Write clear, short steps. Streamline whenever possible, but give enough detail that readers can complete each task without guessing.

Frequently Asked Questions (Required)

Every policy must include an FAQ section, placed immediately before Forms/Instructions. Policy owners develop and maintain the FAQ to answer common stakeholder questions.

- **Perspective:** Write questions from the stakeholder’s point of view (e.g., How do I request a budget increase?). Questions may use “I.” Answers stay in the third person.
- **Format:** Label each question “Q:” and each answer “A:” with each on its own line.
- **Voice:** Write answers in active voice, following the same language rules as the rest of the policy.
- **Consistency:** Answers must match the policy statement. An FAQ answer must not add, change, or soften a requirement.

Forms/Instructions (Required, as needed)

List and link the university-wide forms people use to follow the policy and its procedures. Forms hosted on another site, such as a federal or state website, may also appear. Not every policy needs forms or instructions.

Appendices (Required, as needed)

Not every policy needs appendices. Appendices hold supplemental information for the policy and procedures. Common examples include:

- Examples or matrices related to the topic.
- Job aids.
- Flowcharts.
- Supporting images.
- Detailed processes related to the policy and procedures.

Binding Status: Appendices carry binding authority unless the appendix heading labels the appendix “Informational” or “Non-Binding Guide.” List appendices in alphabetical order (e.g., Appendix A, Appendix B).

Additional Contacts (Required)

Each policy must list at least one contact. The contact serves as the subject matter expert who can answer most questions and direct people to additional resources.

List contacts in order of importance or frequency of use, not alphabetically. Whenever possible, list an office or department with its main phone number and email instead of a named person, so the listing stays current when staff change.

Definitions (Required)

List terms that help readers understand the policy or procedures. Write complete, legally sound definitions, not brief summaries. When a policy uses many subject matter terms, place them in a glossary in the Appendices.

- Define unfamiliar or technical terms.
- Define terms with special meanings.

Definitions carry the same authority as the policy statement.

- **Order:** Arrange definitions alphabetically.
- **Glossary Check:** Before writing a new definition, check the University Policy Glossary. When the glossary already defines a term, use that definition so terms stay consistent across all university policies. The PAC adds new terms to the glossary after the policy reaches final form.
- **Precision:** Accuracy keeps terms consistent across the university policy library.
- **Function Over Form:** Define terms by what something does, not by its technical makeup. Functional definitions last longer and leave fewer loopholes (e.g., define a device by what it can record or transmit, not by its brand or connection type).
- **Over-defining:** When in doubt, provide a precise definition.
- **Cross-referencing:** When a term means the same thing as a defined term, write “Ref. [Primary Term]” instead of repeating the definition.

Responsibilities (Required)

The Responsibilities section summarizes the duties of each university office, position, role, or group that holds a part in the policy. Responsibilities describe the “what,” not the “how.” State each duty at a high level and leave step-by-step actions to the Procedures section.

Cover every stakeholder group the policy affects, such as faculty, staff, students, supervisors, and the offices that administer the policy. The policy owner sets the order of the list, usually by importance or level of involvement.

Related Information (Required, as needed)

List information that supports the policy. These items may come from inside or outside the university, such as state or federal laws. Common examples include:

- Associated Board of Regents policies.
- Other university policies that relate to the policy.
- Final reports or other key background documents.
- Federal, state, or local laws or regulations the policy relates to or references.
- Other university procedures or standards.

Format each entry as “Text - URL” (e.g., Acceptable Use of Information Technology - northcentral.edu/policy/it/). List internal documents without a public link by name only. The policy owner sets the order of the list, usually by importance or level of involvement.

History (Required)

Every policy includes a History section, but only the PAC completes or updates it. The History section lists every issue, revision, edit, and review date in chronological order, using the ISO 8601 format (YYYY-MM-DD). It differs from the Policy and Procedure sections, which show only the most recent issue, revision, edit, and review dates.

The PAC Chair drafts the summary of changes and updates the policy library after consulting with the policy owner or subject matter expert as needed.

05 Final Review Checklist

Before submitting a draft to the PAC, the policy author must confirm that the draft:

- ☐ Uses E-Prime throughout, with no forms of “to be.”
- ☐ Reads at the required grade level.
- ☐ Uses active voice and the third person.
- ☐ Contains no “shall,” “ensure,” “etc.,” em dashes, or self-referential phrases.
- ☐ Places every requirement in the policy statement and only implementation steps in the procedures.
- ☐ Names only offices and positions that exist at NCU.
- ☐ Covers every stakeholder group and scenario the policy addresses.
- ☐ Follows the template section order, with the FAQ placed immediately before Forms/Instructions.
- ☐ Uses definitions that match the University Policy Glossary.