The Plain-English Guide to Writing Workplace Policies and Procedures

How to write policies that protect your business, without the legal risk

Good policies protect your business. Poorly written ones can create the very risk they were meant to prevent. This guide sets out a simple, repeatable way to write workplace policies and procedures that are clear, lawful, followed, and current.

Work through it in order. It gives you a method, a structure, the traps to avoid, and a final check before you publish.

**This guide is general information, not legal or financial advice. Obligations vary by state, sector and situation.*

Step 1. Before You Write, Answer Three Questions

Every sound policy starts with three questions. Answer them before you draft a word.

1. **What does the law actually require?**
   Identify the awards, standards and legislation that apply to your business, sector and size.

2. **How do we really work?**
   Describe your actual process, then improve it. A policy must match reality.

3. **Who needs to follow this, and will they understand it?**
   Write for the people who must act on it, not for a lawyer or a shelf.

Step 2. The Anatomy Of A Sound Policy

A clear policy has a predictable shape. Include these parts, in this order.

1. **Purpose.** Why the policy exists, in a sentence or two.
2. **Scope.** Who and what it covers.
3. **Definitions.** Plain meanings for any terms that matter.
4. **Policy statement.** Your position and your rules.
5. **Procedure.** The steps, in order, with the responsible person named.
6. **Responsibilities.** Who owns, approves and follows the policy.
7. **Related documents.** Links to forms, records and related policies.
8. **Version and review.** A date, a version number, and the next review date.

Step 3. Write It In Plain English

How you write matters as much as what you include. Keep it readable.

- ✓ One idea per sentence. Aim for 15 to 20 words.
- ✓ Active voice. Name who does what.
- ✓ Everyday words. Explain any term you cannot avoid.
- ✓ Short paragraphs and clear headings, so people can scan.
- ✓ Say exactly what happens, and when. Vague policies cause disputes.

Step 4. Seven Legal-Risk Traps To Avoid

These are the mistakes that turn a policy into a liability.

1. **Letting policies become contract terms.** State that policies are lawful and reasonable directions, not part of the employment contract, unless you intend otherwise.
2. **Promising more than the law requires.** Aspirational wording can create obligations you never intended.
3. **Contradicting the law.** A policy cannot undercut an award, the National Employment Standards or legislation.
4. **Writing a process you do not follow.** If your policy sets steps, you must follow them. A policy ignored is used against you.
5. **Making it too long to read.** Regulators have warned against lengthy, complex policies. Clear beats comprehensive.
6. **Skipping consultation.** Safety and discrimination duties expect you to consult your team.
7. **Letting it go out of date.** Set a review date and keep to it. The law changes often.

Step 5. Language To Prefer, And To Avoid

Small wording choices carry legal weight.

- ✓ Prefer 'must' and 'will' for genuine rules. Avoid 'should' or 'may' when you mean an obligation.
- ✓ Prefer 'the business will follow this process'. Avoid open promises like 'we guarantee'.
- ✓ Prefer plain terms. Avoid legal jargon that no one on the floor understands.
- ✓ Prefer 'these procedures are directions'. Avoid wording that reads as a contractual entitlement.
- ✓ Prefer specific timeframes and named owners. Avoid 'as soon as possible' and someone will'.

Step 6. Before You Publish, Run A Final Pass

A quick final check prevents most problems. Confirm each of these.

- ✓ Approved by the right person and dated.
- ✓ Consistent with your other policies and your contracts.
- ✓ Communicated to the team, not just filed.
- ✓ Acknowledged, so you can show people received it.
- ✓ Stored where staff can find it, with a set review date.

Step 7. When To Get Legal Review

Draft in-house with confidence, but get a second set of eyes for:

- ✓ Termination, discipline and contract-related policies.
- ✓ Anything that could read as a promise, like redundancy or bonuses.
- ✓ Sector rules with audit consequences, such as NDIS or funding compliance.
- ✓ Discrimination, harassment and safety duties.

Want your policies done right?

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