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Policy and SOP Explained

A practical guide to choosing, writing and connecting the right documents

A policy sets the organisation's position, expectations and rules. A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) explains how to perform a specific task consistently. Both support accountability, but they serve different purposes.

Aspect	Policy	Standard Operating Procedure
Purpose	Sets direction, principles and decision rules.	Explains how a particular task is completed.
Main questions	What is required, why, and who is accountable?	Who does what, in which order, using which tools and records?
Content	Purpose, scope, principles, responsibilities, criteria and exceptions.	Steps, timeframes, handovers, forms, system instructions and escalation.
Level of detail	Enough direction to guide consistent decisions.	Enough operational detail to carry out the task.
Approval	The authority designated for that policy.	The authority designated by the organisation's procedure approval arrangements.
Review triggers	Changes to purpose, rules or applicable requirements.	Changes to workflow, systems, roles or operational requirements.

The distinction is about purpose, not document length. Policies may include some process detail, while SOPs may repeat essential rules. Keep the authoritative rule clear and avoid contradictions.

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One policy can support several SOPs

A Learning and Development Policy might establish the principles governing learning investment, access, approval and accountability. It can be supported by separate SOPs for training requests, bursary applications and recording completed learning.

What belongs in the policy

The policy explains the organisation's commitment and the conditions for decisions. For example: learning requests must support an identified development need, be assessed fairly, have budget approval and comply with delegated authority.

What belongs in an SOP

The training request SOP explains the submission channel, required information, assessment sequence, approval route, booking process and record location. A bursary SOP would describe a different process under the same policy.

Policy statement	Supporting SOP instruction
Learning must address an identified development need.	The employee completes the learning request form, describing the need, proposed course, dates and cost.
Approval must follow delegated authority and available budget.	The manager checks the request and refers expenditure outside their authority to the designated approver.
Decisions must be fair and recorded.	The responsible role records the decision, reasons and date in the agreed register and notifies the employee.
Learning participation and outcomes must be monitored.	The employee provides completion evidence and discusses practical application with their manager. The designated role updates the learning record.

Illustration only. These examples demonstrate document design. Each organisation must agree its own rules, roles and workflow and check relevant requirements before use.

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Worked example from rule to workflow

Example policy wording

The organisation supports learning that addresses identified development needs and organisational priorities. Requests are assessed against role relevance, available budget and operational cover. Approval must follow delegated authority. Decisions and exceptions must be recorded, and employees must be informed of the outcome.

Example SOP for a training request

No	Responsible role	Action and record
1	Employee	Complete the designated request form with the development need, provider, cost and dates. Submit it through the agreed channel.
2	Line manager	Check role relevance and operational cover. Ask for missing information and record the assessment.
3	Designated budget holder	Confirm budget availability and approval authority. Record the funding decision.
4	Authorised approver	Approve or decline with reasons, or refer the request where it exceeds delegated authority. Record any exception.
5	Designated coordinator	Notify the employee, retain the approval and arrange booking only after authorisation.
6	Employee and designated record owner	Retain completion evidence, update the learning record and arrange a discussion on applying the learning.

Before adopting this example

Define the actual form and channel, response deadlines, handovers, record location and access controls. Add routes for urgent requests, conflicts of interest, disputed decisions and unavailable approvers. Confirm any payment or procurement dependencies.

Test the workflow with an ordinary request and an exception. If a step cannot be completed using the stated roles, authority and resources, revise the process before publishing it.

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Do you need a policy or an SOP or both

Decision checklist

Ask yourself	Likely document need
Do we need to establish principles, expectations or decision rules?	Policy
Are the rules agreed, but people need a repeatable sequence of actions?	SOP
Do we need both organisational rules and a consistent operational process?	Policy and supporting SOP
Does an approved policy already cover the subject?	Check whether a new or revised SOP is sufficient. Review any policy gaps separately.
Is the problem mainly poor understanding or inconsistent implementation?	Consider communication, training, supervision or process improvement before adding another document.
Is this only a tool for collecting information or checking completion?	A form or checklist, linked to the relevant policy or SOP.

Keep the documents connected

Give each document a title, owner, reference, version, approval record, effective date and review date. The policy should list supporting SOPs; each SOP should identify its governing policy. Keep links current and archive superseded versions so staff can find the approved documents.

When an SOP changes, check that it still follows the policy. When a policy changes, check all supporting SOPs, forms and training materials. Operational detail may change more frequently, but review timing should reflect the organisation's risks and needs.

Should they be separate documents

Separate, linked documents are useful when one policy supports several processes or when operational steps change more often than policy rules. A short, simple process may sit in a combined document if the policy rules and procedural steps are clearly distinguished and controlled.

Support from Turnitup

We help organisations develop clear HR policies, practical SOPs and supporting implementation tools.

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