



Title:	A GUIDELINE TO WRITE AN IT POLICY OR GUIDANCE		
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KEYWORDS

Policy, guidance, process, procedure, standard operating procedure, SOP, template, standard

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This guideline describes how to write a standard policy or guidance about IT topics throughout NOAA. This guideline may be used by any organization.

Standards enable the IT community across NOAA to establish a common business model, and ensure quality of IT products and operations. If IT policy and guidance uses a common format and numbering system, it helps help serve these purposes:

- Ensures consistent quality and a common look-and-feel of NOAA OCIO standards.
- Enables the ability to organize these into standards library. Such a library will serve as an information resource and operations manual to the IT community, managers, and project managers.
- Establishes a means to promote best practices in NOAA.

Scope of this Standard: Guidance

Intended Use of this Standard: Procedure; and Template

AUTHORITY

This standard from the NOAA OCIO, Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis (PPA), is mandated by Department of Commerce OCIO IT Policy as essential to establishing program management for IT Governance.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

Any person writing a policy or guidance – a reusable document template, repeatable process, procedures or SOPs – should follow this guideline, and use the related, sample template.

**DESCRIPTION**

The NOAA OCIO needs to establish and distribute IT policy and guidance, in order to communicate responsibilities and NOAA-wide standard business practices. This guidance recommends a standard format that describes “how to do” recurring work, or work that might be performed by many and consolidated or shared across NOAA.

The NOAA OCIO welcomes Line Office (LO) collaboration, and encourages LOs to propose and share standards that might be helpful for the rest of NOAA. LOs can submit a standard to the NOAA OCIO for consideration NOAA-wide, or an LO can work with the NOAA OCIO PPA to develop new standards for policy and guidance.

Supporting documents:

- (1) Template filename: “NISN-1.001 Policy and Guidance TEMPLATE.doc”
- (2) Example: “NISN-3.006 OITP.doc”

This subject of policy or guidance falls into the category: Administrative and General.

DEFINITIONS

Guidance – A recommended action to perform a given work activity. This may comprise of: step-by-step instructions, Frequently Asked Questions, a repeatable process, a standard operating procedure (SOP), a template, and/or sample examples. Although “*guidance*” may imply non-mandatory or suggested approaches, it is expected that work products will voluntarily comply with the *guidance*, and use the *guidance* for review and quality criteria.

- See also *template*, when *guidance* recommends use of a *template* to aid in creating a document.

NOAA IT Standard Number (NISN) – A sequential ID number assigned to the policy or guidance.

Policy – A statement from the CIO describing mandatory responsibilities by programs and staff within organizations reporting to the CIO, generally mandated by legal statute. Note, only the CIO may issue *policy*.

Procedure – The detailed instructions and steps to complete a specific singular work task, often described sequentially and stating in detail for each step: who does what, and when. A procedure is usually more lower-level or granular than a process. See *SOP*.

Process – Similar to *procedure* but generally at a higher-, overview-level, a *process* is a series of steps that often involves coordinating product inputs and outputs, and interfaces people or roles across multiple work units, along each step from beginning to finish in the *process*.

Standard operating procedure (SOP) – An official common *procedure* for a given task. See *procedure*.

Template – A standard format for a document on a given topic. A template is an attachment to guidance. It is a business rule that a standard template must have guidance as a cover sheet.

- Note, when *guidance* recommends a common format for a document or data call, the NOAA standard is to include the complete set of *guidance*, *template*, and an example. That is, you should provide: (1) *guidance* that mandates and describes the document standard, (2) a *template* which a user can reuse to create a customized instance of that document, and (3) an example of that document already in use by a project or organization.
- For example, this document is a guidance document, the instructions to write a policy or guidance. In addition, a template is attached for you to use when writing an actual policy or guidance.



PROCEDURE

Follow these steps when writing a policy or guidance.

Step 1. Use the *policy/guidance template* –

- ✓ Use the NOAA standard template file, “NISN-1.001 Policy and Guidance TEMPLATE.doc”, supplied with this guideline to write your policy or guidance.
- ✓ Typically, when you write a *guidance*, which recommends using a standard *template* format for a document or data call, you only need refer to the *template* filename in this Section. Do not replicate the template’s format description in the *guidance*. However, since this is “a procedure to write a procedure”, some instructions are reiterated here.
- ✓ Using the template, “Save As...” a new filename. Enter the following information:

A. **The Title Table** – The title table is at the top of the document. It contains “meta-data”, or information to catalog the document.

1. *Title* – the policy or guidance name.
2. *NOAA IT Standard Number (NISN)* – The NISN is a “smart” decimal, sequential ID number. The leftmost number indicates what the subject matter is, and to the right of the decimal is the unique ID number. Using Table 1, NISN Numbering Table, assign the number of your document.
 - Does your Line Office want to create a standard that does not apply to the rest of NOAA? If yes, append “.” and the LO initials to the right of the NISN. For example, “NISN-2.001.NOS” is a NOS CIO Policy.

Table 1, NISN Numbering Table

The category is...	This number series contains files on policy and guidance:
Administrative and General	1.001 thru 1.999
Chief Information Officer (CIO)	2.001 thru 2.999
Capital Planning and Investment Control (CPIC), Program and Project Management (PM), and Systems Development Life Cycle (SDLC)	3.001 thru 3.999
Desktop Management, IT Infrastructure	4.001 thru 4.999
Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility	5.001 thru 5.999
Electronic Government	6.001 thru 6.999
Enterprise Architecture	7.001 thru 7.999
Information Quality	8.001 thru 8.999
Information Technology Security	9.001 thru 9.999
IT Privacy	10.001 thru 10.999
IT Workforce Management and Development	11.001 thru 11.999
Network, Telecommunications, Intranet, Internet	12.001 thru 12.999
- Reserved -	13.001 thru 13.999
Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution System (PPBES)	14.001 thru 14.999
Records Management	15.001 thru 15.999
Web sites, web servers, web pages, content	16.001 thru 16.999

3. *Effective Date* – the starting date the policy or guidance takes effect.
4. *Current Version Date* – the date of this version, the most recent revision.
5. *Expiration Date* – the date of the standard will expire.
6. *Originator Editor*– the name of person who created the original version.
7. *Current Editor*– the name of person who edited this current version.



B. **The Main Section** – This is the main body. These following sections contain the salient information about the policy/guidance:

1. **Keywords** – list the keywords that indicate the subject, as if you were to search on the keywords to find the document.
2. **Purpose and Scope** – describe the purpose, objectives, and the extent to which people and organizations are bound by the direction this policy or guidance provides. State here if the scope of this policy or guidance is NOAA-wide, or limited to another organization or Line Office.
3. **Intended Audience** – state who should read and apply a policy or guidance.
4. **Description** – briefly describe information about the background and context.
5. **Definitions** – clarify and provide definitions of the terms used in this document.
6. **Policy, Guidance, Process, SOP, Checklist, etc.** – This is the “heart” of the document. Here, use the formatting techniques that serves the needs best. Use numbered steps, bullets, a checklist, tables, etc.
 - Are you attaching a template and an actual example of one used in NOAA? If so, list the filenames here in this Section.
 - List the requirement(s). Outline the rules, steps, responsibilities, etc. needed to do this work. Include Who, What, When, Where, How, Why for each step, if applicable.
 - What is the expected result or product?
 - Who (a person’s name, role, or organization) is responsible to perform a given step?
 - How much time can we expect to need to complete the step?
 - How is the quality reviewed?
 - How is the product approved?
 - See below Tips; and see also the template file.

C. **Housekeeping** – More formatting instructions.

1. Write the *Title* in the document Header, beginning with the 2nd page
2. Write the filename and insert an automated page number in the Footer.
3. Save the policy or guidance using the file naming convention, **NISN-n.nnn Title Date.doc**, where:
 - a. “n.nnn” is the assigned *NISN*.
 - b. “Title” is the actual full *Title*; shortened if needed.
 - c. [OPTIONAL] “Date” is the date the file was baselined (modified or approved), in YYYYMMDD format.
 - d. For example, the 1st version of this document was called “NISN-1.001 Guideline for IT Policy and Guidance 2006Oct 31.doc”.

Step 2. If you have a template document, follow these instructions...

...Else skip this and go the next step. A template is a model of best practice. Its format is repeatedly reused to create documents of that same type of subject. You don’t need to reinvent the wheel in trying to create a good template. Find an existing example to reuse. Either find a good example from within NOAA, or look on internet for examples of best practice that can fit-in at NOAA. You might see several examples you like. Select one, or create a hybrid, that you want to reuse and make into a reusable template to support your NOAA guidance.

- ✓ Systematically remove the content from the document, while leaving the format and generic attributes. Replace the former content with generic instructions for entering new content. Provide template instructions and comments inside brackets, “[]”, as a way to cue the writer who is reusing the template what information they need to enter, versus what formatting should not be changed.
- ✓ Adopt the look and feel of other NOAA standards in your template.



- ✓ Look at and follow other template examples.
- ✓ State, in brackets somewhere at the top of the template, what is the template name or purpose.
- ✓ The template filename should follow a similar file naming convention as the guidance it supports. Save the template using the file naming convention: **NISN-n.nnnT Title.doc** [note, the word “Template” in the filename distinguishes it from the policy/guidance file; omit the date from the filename].

Step 3. Submit the policy or guidance for approval –

- A. Ask your peers and manager to review the document(s), including the template and example, if any.
- ✓ Ask other stakeholders, subject matter experts, or interested parties for their review.
 - ✓ If the scope is NOAA-wide, NOAA OCIO PPA is the approving authority. If the scope is internal to a Line Office or another organization, then the LO CIO delegate or IT Director signs off with their approval.
 - ✓ Policies are subject to CIO &/or CIO Council approval.
 - ✓ Expect to discuss any policy or guidance of significant impact with your CIO or the CIO Council.
- B. Submit the approved item(s) to the PPA staff, who will assist you to include it in the standards library.

Step 4. Tips to write the right content –

Here are tips to organize your policy or guidance, before you commit thoughts to paper.

- A. **Think and prepare**... in advance.
- ✓ Ask others’ their requirements.
 - ✓ Write for your audience, from the reader’s point of view. Some reader’s are learning this work for the 1st time. Or do you need to write for a NOAA-wide audience, and not just your office?
 - ✓ When you did this work, what did you do?
 - ✓ What are some frequently-asked-questions? Answer those questions.
 - ✓ Write down your ideas one-by-one on a “stickie”. Then rearrange the stickies into a logical order.
- B. **Write** ... using a writing style that best communicates the subject.
- ✓ Write using “Plain English” standards.
 - “Plain English” refers to a style of writing that is not complex and uses clear language.
 - For more info on “Plain English”, search the internet.
 - ✓ Write one step or instruction per line. Instructions are easier to understand when there is one per each line, than when reading multiple steps in a longer narrative paragraph. Use bullets or number each step.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

[Q: What’s new with guidance from PPA?](#)

[Q: How will I know what guidance PPA has available?](#)

[Q: Does PPA guidance apply to Line Offices and Staff Offices?](#)

[Q: Can Line Offices and Staff Offices promote their standards to be NOAA standards?](#)

[Q: Can a Line Offices or Staff Office create guidance and templates using the PPA approach \(i.e. numbering system, templates, etc.\) but limit the scope and authority to that LO/SO only?](#)

[Q: What is a guidance template?](#)

[Q: Aren’t guidance and template the same?](#)



[Q: Isn't the guidance look and feel too "technical"? Guidance, templates... It's too complicated. It takes too much time to do. I won't read it. It won't work in NOAA's culture.](#)

Q: What's new with guidance from PPA?

A: The NOAA OCIO is initiating writing its policy, guidance, and templates using a standard library numbering system and a common look and feel format. The benefits of doing this are many. This will enable reuse, version control, internet/intranet publishing, distribution to a wider audience, and helps to reduce data mining through old emails.

Q: How will I know what guidance PPA has available?

A: You will find out about guidance at the weekly OCIO Contact meetings and via email. PPA will still email guidance and templates as attachments to IT liaisons. Eventually PPA intends to post these files for access by NOAA employees and contractors on a NOAA intranet. To see the list of existing (or pending) policy or guidance, see the handout "NOAA OCIO IT Library" (NISN-Catalog).

Q: Does PPA guidance apply to Line Offices and Staff Offices?

A: Yes.

Q: Can Line Offices and Staff Offices promote their standards to be NOAA standards?

A: Yes. We welcome LOs to initiate new standards across NOAA.

Q: Can a Line Offices or Staff Office create guidance and templates using the PPA approach (i.e. numbering system, templates, etc.) but limit the scope and authority to that LO/SO only?

A: Yes. We encourage LOs to use a common approach even if the actual subject matter doesn't apply across NOAA. It may also be a way to pilot a new standard in one LO and test it before making it NOAA-wide.

Q: What is a guidance template?

A: You use the *guidance template* to write a policy or guidance. The objective is to use a common format for policies and guidance. One common format is adapted for rules, repeatable processes, SOPs, and technical directives, etc. The 1st part of the guidance format is a "header" – including information like title, version date, author, and ID number – that helps with cataloging and version control. The 2nd part of the guidance has attributes – such as purpose, authority description, etc. – that describe the guidance in detail. For *information about how to write* a policy or guidance, see the handout "Guidance to Write a Policy or Guidance" (NISN-1.001). If you want to *write an actual* policy or guidance, use the template "Template Policy or Guidance" (NISN-1.001T). Don't hesitate to ask PPA staff your questions or for more examples.

Q: Aren't guidance and template the same?

A: "Template" simply means a common format for a certain document type; "*guidance*" is instructions – who does it, when it is due, etc. Generally the template is like a blank form and you fill it in. You use a *guidance template* to write a policy or guidance. However, if you want to write either a status report or an Exhibit 300, you use the respective *template* to write it. For example, PPA will write Exhibit 300 guidance, which states the requirements and instructions for completing the Exhibit 300. That is different than a template, or blank Exhibit 300.

Q: Isn't the guidance look and feel too "technical"? Guidance, templates... It's too complicated. It takes too much time to do. I won't read it. It won't work in NOAA's culture.

A: We are trying something new, and if it doesn't work we can change again. NOAA needs some standards to keep up with industry best practices and expectations for IT governance. The approach taken so far has its roots in the old DOD-school, data item description or "DID" approach. This strategy gives



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us the ability to complete milestones now – to get started in FY2007 Q1 and not be paralyzed. These standards were circulated for comments. A first version is now baselined for a trial period. The best test will be for us to use it for a while. After a trial period, expect this to evolve more. Future options include trashing the “DID” format for a Q & A format, porting the format to XML or HTML, publishing on the internet, broadcasting with RSS feeds and podcasting, and group collaboration online.