Writing Better SOPs

What are SOPs?

SOPs are Standard Operating Procedures. They are written procedures for a specific activity, with detailed instructions. They use a standardised format and describe standard practices.

Why you should you write SOPs

- They increase efficiency, accuracy and safety
- They increase accountability if something goes wrong
- They can be used as a training aid
- They help identify weak areas and potential problems
- They are often required by donors, institutions, regulators and governments

Parts of a SOP

Although SOPs focus on the step-by-step procedure for an activity, there are also many other parts to include in the document. Requirements and format vary between institutions donors and other regulatory authorities, but the general features are:

Section	Details
Header	Include the organisation name, title of the SOP, version number, SOP reference number, and author.
Purpose	This usually refers to the process described. E.g. "This SOP explains the steps necessary for…"
Scope	Explains the limits of the use of the SOP. This might include defining what is *not* in the scope of the SOP.
Definitions	Includes definitions of specific terms, acronyms and abbreviations.
Responsible individuals	Use job titles not people's names. People change jobs!
List of equipment and supplies used	Refer to manufacturer names and model numbers where needed.
Procedure	Describe in the procedure in defined steps. Include everything that is done, from the very beginning of the process.
Contingencies	Describe what to do if, for some reason, parts of the procedure cannot be followed.
Corrective actions	Describe what to do if something goes wrong.
References and attachments	References include other SOPs, manuals and regulations that are relevant to the SOP. Attachments will include example documents and pictures or diagrams showing the procedure.
Signature space	Signatures are usually needed for reviews and authorisation. All signatures must be dated.
Page numbers	In the "page X of Y" format. This helps people know if they have a page missing.

The language of SOPs

- Write in the third person (don't use 'I')
- Avoid gendered pronouns. Use 'they' instead of 'he' or 'she'
- Write in clear, short sentences
- Write in the active voice and present tense
- Use accurate language. E.g. use 'after 4 minutes' instead of 'after a few minutes'
- Don't use modal verbs. E.g. use 'samples *are* stored' instead of 'samples *should be* stored'
- Use a language(s) clearly understood by the intended users. E.g. have local language and English versions

How to produce an SOP

	Stage	Details
1	Process mapping	° Make notes on what you already do ° Look at the relevant regulations and policies ° Look at SOPs from other departments or institutions
2	Writing content	° Use the information from the process mapping ° Best done by someone who knows the procedure well ° Can save time by using an already written example
3	Formatting	° Add headers, page numbers and signature boxes ° Use tables, bullet points and subheadings to make it easier to read and understand ° Make sure all SOPs from your organisation use the same format
4	Editing	° Ask your team to check the content is correct and understandable ° Ask an editor to check and improve language
5	Authorising	° The relevant people add a dated signature or e-signature to the document
6	Distribution	° Can be in soft or hard copy depending on how the people who need the SOP usually work ° If online (or by email) only share a PDF version (not an editable Word or Google Docs version)
7	Training	° Often done by the SOP author ° Can be small groups or one-to-one ° Must be practical and involved tasks and tests ° Keep records of all training
8	Revising and archiving	° Revise annually or whenever needed, e.g. for new equipment, before grant applications ° Distribute new version and remove old version ° Add old version to archive, do not delete completely

Templates and examples

Using an existing example or template will save you time. But be sure to modify the information to fit your exact procedure.

Below are few examples of what you can find with some searching. These are for medical research but you should be able to find similar examples in your field of work.

- SOP bundles for different areas – Administrative, Clinical, Data Management, Laboratory, and Pharmacy
- SOP for transporting cell products
- SOPs for hazardous chemicals and equipment
- Bundle of SOPs for human research administration
- SOPs for clinical trials
- SOP for patient recruitment

More information

Universities and research institutions often have online guidance on how to write SOPs. They are a good place to start your research. Below are a couple of examples to get you started.

- University of California SOP guidance
- Guidance from the Institute of Translational Health Sciences

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