



ADS Writing Guidelines and Style Guide

A Mandatory Reference for ADS Chapter 501

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1. Overview

The purpose of this document is to establish the writing guidelines and style guide that govern the development and issuance of policies in the Automated Directives System (ADS).

- The [ADS Writing Guidelines](#) in Section 2 provide general guidelines on the structure of ADS writing – both document structure and sentence structure – to ensure that operational policies in the ADS are consistent, clear, and user-focused.
- The [ADS Style Guide](#) in Section 3 establishes formatting conventions for ADS documents. It also provides guidance on grammar, word usage, and punctuation in accordance with the [USAID Style Guide](#).

Per [ADS 501.3.4.2](#), ADS Points of Contact (POCs) must ensure that new or revised ADS policies submitted to the ADS Team in the Bureau for Management, Office of Management Policy, Budget, and Performance’s Policy Division (M/MPBP/POL) conform to the ADS writing guidelines established in this document. ADS POCs should also ensure that submitted policies conform to the ADS style guide as much as feasible. The ADS Team must copy and line edit policies prior to issuance to ensure that they fully conform to the ADS style guide.

2. ADS Writing Guidelines

ADS POCs should develop operational policies based on the following writing guidelines:

- Develop an Outline/ Table of Contents (TOC) that helps users find information quickly. The ADS POC should develop an outline and associated TOC that provides users with a brief overview of the topics addressed in the document and how they relate to each other. ADS POCs should place special emphasis on ensuring that they structure the outline/TOC such that most users will be able to quickly find the content they need, when they need it. If the ADS document is an ADS chapter, the POC must ensure that the outline aligns with the six mandatory sections described in [ADS 501.3.3.3](#). The ADS POC should keep in mind that TOCs for ADS chapters only show up to three levels of section headings, in which the first level headings is the mandatory section title.
- Write each section such that it stands alone. The ADS POC should write each section such that it can be understood if read in isolation from other sections. This is important because most USAID staff only read the section(s) that they believe are necessary to answer their immediate questions or needs.
- Write all requirements and recommendations using the auxiliary verb “must” or “should.” The ADS POC must write all directives using the words “must” or “should” to clearly communicate whether such directives are required, or whether they are a recommendation. (Note: If the ADS POC intends to express

permission or possibility, the POC should use the auxiliary verb “may.”) The ADS POC should defer to “should” language wherever possible to preserve operational flexibility to the extent consistent with law and regulation, and sound management practices. For each “must”-level directive, the ADS POC should ask themselves whether the directive should be universally required wherever the criteria for conformance applies, or whether there should be some degree of discretion. For additional guidance on Agency requirements versus non-mandatory guidance, see [ADS 501.3.3.4](#).

- Write all directives in the active voice. The ADS POC must write all directives such that a responsible party is the subject of the sentence. Known as “active voice,” this type of writing eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities by making it clear who is supposed to do what. Rather than writing, “It must be done,” the ADS POC should write, “[Responsible party] must do it.”

In constructing active voice sentences, the ADS POC should identify the responsible party with as much detail as possible. In some cases, the responsible party may be a role or function, such as a Program Officer, Contracting/Agreement Officer, or Gender Advisor. In other cases, the responsible party may be an organizational unit, such as a Mission, division, or team.

Correct and incorrect examples of active voice include:

- Incorrect: Telework hours must be recorded for each period in the Agency’s time keeping system.
 - Correct: *Direct Hire employees* must record telework hours for each pay period in the Agency’s time keeping system.
 - Incorrect: Acquisition and Assistance plans must be continually updated.
 - Correct: *Operating Units* must continually update their acquisition and assistance plans.
 - Incorrect: A gender analysis must be completed for each activity design.
 - Correct: *Activity Design Teams* must complete a gender analysis for each activity design.
- Use plain language that is easy to understand. The ADS POC should avoid long, complex sentences with unnecessary words, or multiple clauses. These sentences often confuse readers by losing the main point in all the details. Instead, the ADS POC should break up complex sentences into their constituent parts and make each the subject of its own sentence. The ADS POC should also ensure that language gets to the point as fast as possible by eliminating unnecessary details that the reader does not need to know.
 - Refrain from paraphrasing requirements in other sections to the extent feasible; instead, reference the section in which the requirement resides. The ADS POC

should refrain from summarizing requirements in other sections to the extent feasible. This is important because small changes in language can inadvertently distort the original meaning, resulting in misinterpretation, misunderstanding, or error. Instead, the ADS POC should either refer the reader to the section in which the requirement resides, or quote directly from such section.

Examples include:

- The ADS POC must follow the ADS writing guidelines in [ADS 501mac, ADS Writing Guidelines and Style Guide](#).
- The ADS POC must follow the ADS writing guidelines (see [ADS 501mac](#)).
- Per [ADS 501mac](#), “[T]he ADS POC should “refrain from summarizing requirements in other sections to the extent feasible.”
- Use mandatory references or additional help references to reduce clutter. In ADS chapters, the ADS POC should avoid supplementary details that take up too much space or disrupt the flow of other sections. Instead, the ADS POC should create subsidiary mandatory references or additional help references that allow users to access additional information when they need it. For additional guidance on these two types of references, see [ADS 501.3.3.2](#).

3. ADS Style Guide

a. Formatting

While primarily based on the USAID Style Guide, some formatting guidelines differ to align with ADS-style guidelines.

1. Standard Fonts

ADS cover pages:

- Microsoft Sans Serif or Helvetica Neue 24 for the title of the document.
- Microsoft Sans Serif or Helvetica Neue 20 for the type of document. For example: A Mandatory Reference for ADS Chapter 501.
- Microsoft Sans Serif or Helvetica Neue 14 for the Revision Date, Responsible Office, and File Name.

Body of ADS documents:

Text must be in Arial 12. “Effective Dates” (found in ADS chapters) must be in Arial 10.

2. Headers and Footers

Headers and footers must be in Arial 10.

- Headers: Do not place headers on the cover page. In ADS chapters, the header must state the revision date and type of revision and must be right justified (i.e., xx/xx/xxxx Partial Revision).
- Footers: Do not place footers on the cover page. In ADS chapters, the footer must state “ADS Chapter xxx” and it must contain the page number. If the chapter was partially revised, the footer must also contain a line stating, “Text highlighted in yellow indicates that the adjacent material is new or substantively revised.”
- Footnotes: Footnotes are not allowed in ADS chapters. Footnotes are allowed in ADS mandatory references and additional help documents.

3. Pagination

Do not add page numbers to the cover page. Use page numbers on all subsequent pages in Arial 10.

4. Spacing

Ensure single-line space throughout the document. Double-space in bullet lists and between paragraphs.

For additional guidance on spacing, please see the [USAID Style Guide](#).

5. Lists

While there is no standard format for lists, you must stay consistent within the document. If you use letters, then numbers, then bullets in one section, use that same format when creating a list for a different section within the document. All lists must contain at least two items, i.e., if there is an “a” there must be a “b”.

6. Table of Contents (TOC)

ADS chapters must contain a TOC page. This page must contain the following:

- ADS Functional Series Number and title
- Name of the chapter

- POC line that states: POC for ADS xxx: See [ADS 501maa, ADS Chapters and Point of Contact List](#)
- If the chapter is new, before the TOC listing, it must state “**This is a new ADS Chapter**”.

7. Sections and Sub-sections

- ADS Chapters have six standardized sections, see [ADS 501.3.3](#) for more details.
- In the Policy Directives and Required Procedures section, you can drill down twice, i.e., 501.3.1 and 501.3.1.1.
- An “effective date” must go under each section unless there is no text under the section.
- If a section or sub-section is new or revised, the section, along with the new or revised text, must be highlighted in yellow.
- ADS mandatory references and additional help documents do not have a standardized format.

b. Style

For guidance on the following subjects, please refer to the corresponding sections in the [USAID Style Guide](#):

- **Section III:** Numbers, Symbols, Dates, and Times
- **Section IV:** Terminology
- **Section V:** Grammar
- **Section VI:** Punctuation
- **Section VII:** Abbreviations and Acronyms
- **Section VIII:** Capitalization

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