# HOW TO POST AN ACCESSIBLE MANUAL

WHY SHOULD A POLICE DEPARTMENT POST ITS MANUAL ONLINE?

When a manual is posted online, it informs the community about the department, demonstrates the department's commitment to transparency and community involvement, and allows the department to showcase new or innovative policies. Overall, posting the manual is key for policy transparency.

WHY DOES IT MATTER HOW THE MANUAL IS POSTED?

Policy transparency is easier said than done: simply uploading the entire department manual as one document is not enough. Manuals can run hundreds if not thousands of pages. They are often full of jargon, technical terms and details (like how to wear the uniform) that may be of little use to the public. Meanwhile, information relevant to topics that do interest the public (like use of force) might be scattered across multiple policies and difficult to find.
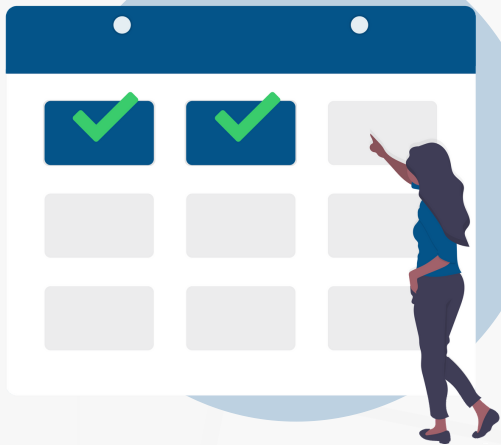
Our recommendations for best practices are designed to make a policy manual more **accessible** to the public. Accessibility means making policies easy to find, easy to search, easy to understand, and easy to contextualize.

TIPS FOR AN ACCESSIBLE MANUAL

A manual should be **easy to find** on the police department's website.

A manual should be **easy to navigate** either through a logical structure or a table of contents.

A manual should be **fully searchable**, including having machine-encoded text that is compatible with web browser search functions.

Policies should be written in language that is **easy for the public to understand**. This includes not only minimizing jargon, but also offering the manual in all the major languages of the police department's jurisdiction (or ensuring the manual can be translated by a web browser).

Policies should be **updated regularly** to reflect advances in technology, new standards of conduct, and community needs, and all policies should include their **revision dates**.

Sensitive text should be **redacted**, **not omitted**, and **redactions should be minimal.**

Ideally, a manual should have an **FAQ section or summaries of policies** to make it easier for community members better to understand the content.

Recommendation #1

A manual should be **easy to find** on the police department's website.

Why it matters: The police department manual is most useful to the community when community members are able to easily find it. We recommend choosing a **name for the manual that is clear and self-explanatory**, such as "Policy & Procedure Manual" or simply "Policy Manual." Titles such as "Patrol Guide" or "Written Directives" are less clear.

Additionally, **where the manual is posted** within the department's website is equally important. If the manual is buried within a subpage, it may be difficult for the public to locate. We recommend linking to the manual **from the home or index page**, and placing the manual **within the site's main navigation**.

Recommendation #2

A manual should be **easy to navigate** either through a logical structure or a table of contents.

Why it matters: Many departments post their manual in one chunk (*i.e.* a single, large .PDF). This can make the document appear overwhelming and makes it more difficult to find specific policies or see how they relate to each other. Conversely, breaking up the manual and **creating a clear structure** for how to navigate its parts **helps the public to orient themselves** and find what they're looking for more easily.

A **table of contents**, particularly one that is **hyperlinked**, can increase the ease with which a reader can navigate the manual. Some jurisdictions achieve this through simple links within a .PDF, while others use drop-down or collapsible **menus**. There are many ways to approach navigation—just be sure the structure is clear and **covers all the manual's content**.

Recommendation #3

A manual should be **fully searchable**, including having machine-encoded text that is compatible with web browser search functions.

Why it matters: Sometimes information about a certain topic is scattered throughout the manual, and a table of contents alone won't be able to properly direct the public to all the information they need. For example, someone wanting to know about policies relating to use of force could easily find the actual "Use of Force" policy in a table of contents. But what if they wanted to know about procedures for investigating complaints of excessive force, which may be found under "Investigation Procedures?"

There are many approaches to search functionality, but however your department decides to proceed two components are critical. For one, you need to enable a search function that can **scan across the full text of all the policies**. There are many ways to approach this, but we like the manuals for Chicago and Seattle, which utilize built-in search functions that not only return all the policies containing the search query, but highlight the results within the policy. Just make sure the search is scanning not only the titles of the policies, but their full text as well—otherwise you're achieving little more than what the table of contents already provides.

Next, make sure the policies are posted in **machine-encoded text** so that readers can use their web browser's search function (*i.e.* "Ctrl + F") to search withing the policy. This is especially critical for departments posting their policies as .PDFs, and is also important for translation services and screen readers, as we will discuss next.

Recommendation #4

Policies should be written in language that is **easy for the public to understand**. This includes not only minimizing jargon, but also offering the manual in all the major languages of the police department's jurisdiction (or ensuring the manual can be translated by a web browser).

Why it matters: Policing, in particular, is a field that comes with a lot of technical terms and jargon. While these terms are clear to the officers who use them everyday, members of the public may become frustrated or confused when trying to read a jargon-heavy manual. Simplifying the language of policies so they are **written in plain English** is an important step for improving accessibility and transparency, but it's not the only one. An accessible manual should also be available in **all the major languages of the jurisdiction** so that all members of the public can understand and have a say in how their communities are policed.

At a minimum, we recommend ensuring all manual text is machine-encoded so that screen-readers and web browser functions (like Google Translate) can read or translate the policies automatically. We thought Portland's manual does a great job of highlighting this function by embedding a Google Translate button within its site. However, as machine translations can sometimes be inaccurate, we recommend working with professional translators or native speakers to offer key policies in non-English languages.

Recommendation #5

Policies should be **updated regularly** to reflect advances in technology, new standards of conduct, and community needs, and all policies should include their revision dates.

Why it matters: Communities and their needs change with time, and public servants like police should respond to the new needs of their community. However, in addition to updating the policies themselves, police departments should let the public know when policies go into effect and when they are revised. This empowers the public to hold the department accountable to its own manual. We further recommend posting a future revision date for each policy so the department can hold itself accountable for carrying out regular reviews and updates of its procedures.

Recommendation #6

Sensitive text should be **redacted, not omitted**, and **redactions should be minimal**.

Why it matters: There are some aspects of policing that we should all know about — a department's policies on consent searches or the use of force, for example. But there are some aspects of policing that have to remain confidential, such as the protocol for protecting the identity of informants. It's not always easy to tell the difference, but we believe police departments should strive to be transparent even when withholding information. Using **redacted text**, instead of wholly omitting a policy or chapter from the public manual, provides a better balance between ensuring public safety and informing the public of the policies that impact their lives.

When navigating this issue, we suggest deciding whether an aspect of a policy is an **operational detail** or a **governing rule.** Operational details concern specific investigations and the techniques used to make those investigations. If made public, operational details would allow people to circumvent the police and put others in harm's way. In contrast, governing rules are rules that direct the use of those specific techniques. These can be made public without undermining officer safety or undercutting their ability to investigate crime.

Recommendation #7

Ideally, a manual should have an FAQ section or summaries of policies to make it easier for community members better to understand the content.

Why it matters: Making policies accessible and understandable helps the public understand how police officers approach critical decisions and also evaluate whether these decisions are made fairly. While we do recommend all policies be written to minimize jargon and technical terms, summaries or FAQs written in **plain, non-legal language** can help to add a critical level of comprehension, especially for policies that inherently feature a lot of complicated details or which the public may be unfamiliar with.

Policing Project
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ABOUT THE POLICING PROJECT

The Policing Project at the New York University School of Law partners with communities and police to promote public safety through transparency, equity, and democratic engagement. our work focuses on front-end, or democratic, accountability, meaning the public has a voice in setting transparent, ethical, and effective policing policies and practices before the police or government act. Our goal is to achieve public safety in a manner that is equitable, non-discriminatory, and respectful of public values.

Learn more about the Policing Project at **PolicingProject.org**, or follow us on Twitter **@PolicingProject**.