

The Use of *Shall* and *Will* in Policies and Procedures Documents

Raymond E. Urgo

While assessing a set of departmental policies and procedures (P&P) for a county government during a consulting engagement, I found many *shalls* and *wills* sprinkled throughout its documents. Here are some examples: “Case workers shall be required to...,” “All requests will be submitted on...,” “Managers will report all findings....”

I asked several of the department’s P&P writers as to why they used *shall* and *will* so plentifully. In essence, the best and only substantial answer I got was “we’ve always done it that way!” We all laughed in agreement – because these P&P were written in a way saying what shall or will be done in the future, the end user would not have to take any responsibility for doing what was written. Not taking responsibility to perform is just the opposite reason of why organizations issue written P&P!

The words *shall* and *will* (and even their cousins *should* and *would*) are auxiliaries to verbs. If I say, “I shall go...,” or “Managers will report ...,” I refer to an action that will take place in the future. Some might further cite grammatical rules which say to express simple futurity, use *shall* when the subject is the first person and *will* when the subject is the second or third person. Another grammatical rule states to do just the reverse if you want to express strong determination, a promise, or a threat.

I’d like to suggest a rule, at least for writing policies and procedures, that takes the place of all these other rules. My suggested rule is this: Avoid using *shall* or *will* in writing policies and procedures unless futurity, a strong promise, or a threat is intended. The rationale is that when truly needed, these auxiliaries can only help us when we in fact want to indicate an action that is to take place in the future or to make a strong promise or a threat. Also, the present tense is more direct because it does not qualify the verb with an auxiliary verb.

So why then do some P&P writers use the future tense when the present tense is more suitable? I have heard, found, and observed several reasons. These reasons include being unconscious, not writing to one’s audience, using an authoritative tone from a previous era, and using P&P information or a standard intended for an intermediary (not an end user) audience.

According to the Shipley Associates Style Guide, “most writers choose their tenses unconsciously, but several basic conventions exist for selecting tenses in tech writing.” A related reason for using the future tense is that some P&P writers unfortunately are writing to themselves, not their audience. When they sit down to write, they think “people don’t follow this today, but they will soon follow it in the future.” In essence, these writers are thinking for the future, not for the present in the future. When their audience reads their P&P, the P&P are in existence; therefore, the present tense is needed.

Another reason writers use *shall* and *will* excessively in P&P is to give the information an “imperial tone”, according to Leslie Matthies, author of the New Playscript Procedure. An imperial tone in P&P documents tends to sound legal, authoritative, or even biblical. Matthies points out that as P&P writers, we are not kings (and I add queens, gods, prophets), or their ministers writing proclamations to be issued to subjects of the kingdom. I think that an imperial tone in P&P writing stems largely from the post-WW II era when large business organizations valued authority and conformity in their cultures. Many people working in this era probably found an imperial tone acceptable because they were already familiar with an authoritative tone from military-style command media used during WWII.

Unfortunately, I find there are many organizations communicating their P&P in an imperial tone (and even other styles) that is obsolete to their present day culture. For example, a client organization in the water industry writes its P&P using an imperial tone (and other obsolete approaches) when its leaders are positioning the culture to become a learning organization of the early 21st Century. This type of organizational culture values and promotes continuous process improvement, team problem solving, cross-functional team management, and self-learning. I have suggested that the P&P writers shift from the future to the present tense in their writing to coincide with the way members of the organization speak and interact in the desired culture. They agreed.

Still another reason P&P writers use *shall* and *will* excessively in documentation for their end users is because they have been given documents with excessive *shalls* and *wills* to work from. Such documents are often intended as sources for intermediary P&P writers to adapt and rewrite for their end users. Intermediary P&P writers may typically receive their source documents from a corporate headquarters, government, regulatory, or certification standards agency. Such entities may write to tell other organizations what shall, will, or should be done. These recipient or intermediary organizations are not necessarily required to convey *shall* and *will* in their writing to their audiences, yet they often do so.

One example of an intermediary organization involves the P&P writers for the county government that I mentioned earlier. These P&P writers received P&P documents filled with *shalls* and *wills* from their State government agency whose source was primarily Federal and State legislation. One P&P writer who is a recipient at the county level said “we just find it easier to copy what we received and make only the necessary changes in content to meet our county department’s unique needs.” In essence, they are unconsciously perpetuating an imperial tone in the content to their end users: administrative staff, case workers, social workers, and supervisors. Another P&P writer in this county department said, “I once tried communicating in the present tense. My director, a long-time employee, returned the document to me to redo because he had never read such a document expressed that way at the county.” Hopefully these intermediary P&P writers will gradually nibble off the many *shalls* and *wills* they inherit from their higher governmental agencies. In doing so, they may eventually convince their top-level administrators that writing in the present tense is more effective for their intended end-user audience.

A second example of an intermediary role concerns those organizations writing P&P on their quality management systems as part of their effort to become certified under one of the ISO

standards. (ISO stands for the International Organization for Standardization.) The ISO standards use *shall* to mean compliance is required and *should* to mean compliance is recommended. According to Ralph Robinson, a Canadian-based teacher and author on P&P for ISO standards, “the use of auxiliaries is something that stems from legal language and is often found in standards documents, as it is felt they clearly separate requirements from recommendations. Actual practice, however, seems to indicate that they too are confusing terms. There is no requirement in the ISO standards for organizations to use the words *shall*, *will*, *should*, or *would* in their P&P documentation. In fact, in all my teaching I strongly advise people not to use these words.” (Robinson’s most recent book is “Documenting ISO 9001:2000 - Documentation for a Robust QMS”, published by Government Institutes in Maryland.)

In summary, be conscious of the tense you are using and the use of the auxiliaries *shall* and *will* in your P&P writing. Use *shall* and *will* only to indicate futurity, a strong promise, or a threat. When writing P&P for future use, remember to focus on your audience. Your audience reads your P&P in the present of their time frame, not the future of yours. If your organization’s P&P are written with excessive *shalls* and *wills* that yield an imperial tone, consider why this is so and whether a shift to the present tense might better coincide with the organization’s culture. Finally, if you are an intermediary P&P writer who uses others’ P&P or standards containing loads of *shalls* and *wills*, adapt the information for your audience by using the present tense where appropriate.

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Examples of When to Use and Not Use *Shall* and *Will*

Examples of when to use *shall* and *will*

Use <i>shall</i> or <i>will</i> to indicate...	For example...
futurity	If you are not satisfied within 30 days, Acme Corporation <i>will</i> refund your money in full.
a strong promise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are not satisfied within 30 days, Acme Corporation <i>will</i> refund your money in full. • In hiring and staffing, Acme Corporation <i>will</i> not discriminate based on age, race, creed...
a threat	Violators <i>will</i> be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

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Examples of when not to use *shall* and *will*

Change this example from...	To this...
Acme Corporation <i>will</i> reimburse employees for the full tuition of a job-related course when...	Acme Corporation reimburses employees for the full tuition of a job-related course when... [Appropriate if a strong promise is not intended.]
Managers <i>will</i> reconcile their department's petty cash account on the last day of each month.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconcile your department's petty cash account on the last day of each month. [Appropriate if only "managers" are your audience.] (or) • Managers are responsible for reconciling their department's petty cash account on the last day of each month. [Appropriate if "managers" and others are your audience.]
Step 3. You <i>will</i> type the vendor's name and press Enter . <u>Result</u> : The Vendor Detail screen <i>will</i> appear.	Step 3. Type the vendor's name and press Enter . <u>Result</u> : The Vendor Detail screen appears. [The action and the result occurs in the present time frame of the user; not the future time frame of the writer.]

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