

CONSTITUTION WRITING

Creating a Constitution, By-Laws, and a Policy Book

The following outline should help you frame your constitution, by-laws, and policy book to better serve your organization and constituents. Items that are central to your organization should be included within your constitution while items subject to revision should be placed within the by-laws. All of these documents should be dynamic; they should reflect your organization, not hamper it.

A Few Things To Remember when revising these documents, or starting from scratch.

- Use a small group, usually five, who represent the diverse viewpoints of your organization
- If possible, participate in a whole-group process to establish (re-establish) organization mission, tenets, norms, and vision
- Collect input on what needs to be established, or changed, from as many different points of view as possible *before* you begin writing
- Strive for consensus; these documents represent organizations, not individuals
- Make the documents understandable to non-members
- Aim for efficiency; avoid loopholes and inconsistencies
- Solicit input and opinions during the process
- Represent your constituents, organization, and mission first and foremost!

Constitutions state the purpose, describe the structure, and establish the identity of an organization. A well-written constitution should be clearly written and provide a complete picture of an organization. Although regular review should occur, each revision should clarify inconsistencies, remove loopholes, and hone in closer toward defining what is at the core of the organization. A Constitution is the hardest document to change as it defines the organization and provides consistency from year to year through a changing membership. Below is a list of articles that should be included within any constitution. A sample template follows detailing the Articles, Sections, and Subsections.

CONSTITUTION ARTICLES

- Preamble
- I. Name
- II. Purpose
- III. Organizational Powers
- IV. Membership
- V. Officers
- VI. Structure and Operations
- VII. Legislative Process
- VIII. Standing Committees
- IX. Impeachment/Censorship
- X. Amendments
- XI. Review and Ratification

By-Laws serve as the supporting documents, practices, and policies that support the internal working of an organization. Where all constituents should accept a constitution, by-laws need only be approved by the governing organization that lives out the purpose stated in the constitution. Below is a brief outline of what should be included within an organization's by-laws; a sample template follows detailing the Articles, Sections, and Subsections.

BY-LAW ARTICLES

- I. Election and Replacement Process
- II. Officer Duties
- III. Representative/Member and Duties
- IV. Meeting Set-Up and Duties
- V. Agenda Structure
- VI. Committee Set-Up and Duties
- VII. Budget Process and Allocations
- VIII. Review and Ratification

Policy Books serve to track the decisions of an organization as it exists over time. Various decisions or practices can become formal policies. These policies are recorded in a Policy Book. This collection of policies should be organized into categories when appropriate, and policies should be adopted into the By-Laws (or even the Constitution) if appropriate. Other decisions, for example an organization stance on campus issues, may be stated through a policy.

CONSTITUTION OF [FULL ORGANIZATIONAL NAME]

Established [Date] Revised [Date]

Preamble

This is a statement about the establishment and purpose of the constitution. The name of the organization, a general reference to the constituency, and the purpose of the organization should be briefly included.

Article I. Name

- Section 1.* This organization shall be known as [Formal Name of the Organization]
A. Throughout this document, this organization shall be referred to as [Acronym, abbreviated name, etc.]

Article II. Purpose

- Section 1.* What is the purpose of the organization? This may be a point-by-point copy of the mission. To what ends was the organization formed?
A. What are its objectives?
Section 2. How does the organization fit into the university's mission?
Section 3. There should be some statement and/or commitment to abide by all university policies.

Article III. Organizational Powers

- Section 1.* Similar to the purpose, *how* does the organization intend to live out its purpose? This is a limiting article designed to self-impose organizational power and limits. This article should only address the organization at large, individual members' powers will be listed below.

Article IV. Membership

- Section 1.* Who can become a member? Is membership open to every student (per campus policies) or is membership exclusive?
A. How does someone become a member?
B. Who maintains the roster of the organization?
C. How are voting members identified?
D. Are there attendance/dues requirements?
Section 2. How can a member voluntarily withdraw?
A. Are there different levels of membership? (Active, Inactive, Alumni, etc.)
B. How does a member change status?
Section 3. Can a member be forcibly removed? (perhaps simply a referral to Article IX, with no subsections)
A. What are the grounds for removal?
B. What is the process?
C. What is the timeframe of this process?
D. Is there an option for appeal?
Section 4. Is there an Advisor?
A. How is the advisor selected/placed?
B. Can the advisor be replaced? On what grounds?

Article V. Officers

- Section 1.* What are the officer positions?

- A. List the positions
- Section 2.* Are the officers known collectively as an Executive Committee or some other designation? It is good to label them as such if officers will be granted additional powers, not just additional responsibilities. Is the advisor considered a part of this executive body?
 - A. List officer committees or sub-organizations
- Section 3.* Are there requirements to be an officer?
 - A. Delineate requirements such as student status, gpa, concurrent/ additional memberships, etc.

Article VI. Structure and Operations

- Section 1.* What is the general make-up of the organization? Is it composed of an Executive body, general membership, forum, additional positions not considered executive positions? Describe the organizational structure.
 - A. Is there a quorum requirement to hold a regular meeting? (refer to Robert's Rules of Order for quorum guidelines; usually 2/3 of the general membership and some fraction of the executive body is a safe number)
 - B. Listing of membership positions (Committee Chairs, Senators, Liaisons, etc.) You will want to identify any position to which you will be ascribing powers or responsibilities.
- Section 2.* What is the voting process? Who may vote? Is there an alternative voting practice (open, roll-call, secret ballot, etc.) that the organization may wish to use at specific times?
- Section 3.* What is the selection process for organizational positions? Are they elected or appointed? Are positions based upon seniority? What is the timeframe for elections (semester, academic year, calendar year)?
 - A. How are mid-term vacancies filled?
- Section 4.* If there is an advisor, what role does the advisor play? What are the organizational expectations for the advisor/s?

Article VII. Legislative Process

- Section 1.* How does the organization conduct business? (Recommendation of Robert's Rules for Parliamentary Procedure)
- Section 2.* What are the guidelines for proposals? Is there a separate internal or external process? Who may approach the organization for business (financial, collaborative, otherwise)?
- Section 3.* Are there guidelines for funding issues? (Depending upon the strictness of these organizational decisions, this section might be better placed in the by-laws so as not too be overly binding.)
 - A. Are there allocation limits?
 - B. Are there financial considerations that should be applied to every decision?

Article VIII. Standing Committees

- Section 1.* Are there standing committees (perhaps as described in Article VI)?
 - A. Listing of committees
 - i. Committee membership (expectations/duties, number of people, structure, etc.)

Article IX. Impeachment/Censorship

Section 1. What are the grounds for removal?

A. What is the process?

B. What is the timeframe of this process?

C. What is the option for appeal?

Section 2. Are members bound to any form of confidentiality or behavior expectations? Are there issues about which members may not discuss outside of a meeting?

Article X. Amendments

Section 1. How, and by whom, can amendments be proposed?

Section 2. What is the review process for amendments?

A. Are there specific voting policies or guidelines to approve amendments?

B. What is the timeframe for the process?

C. Are there different policies for amendments to the constitution and by-laws? (recommended – constitutions are for the constituency, by-laws are for the organization)

Article XI. Review and Ratification

Section 1. Who shall have the power to approve the constitution, and by what standard?

Section 2. What is the process and timeframe for constitutional review?