



1 October 2024

Editorial directive

**Prepared by the Department for General Assembly and
Conference Management**

To: All those concerned with drafting United Nations documents

Subject: **Secretariat policy on the preparation of official documents**

I. Background

1. The regulations for the control and limitation of documentation, as set out in administrative instruction [ST/AI/189/Add.3/Rev.2](#), define documents and publications as follows:

“A document is a text submitted to a principal organ or a subsidiary organ of the United Nations for consideration by it, usually in connection with item(s) on its agenda.”

“The term ‘United Nations publication’ refers to any written material which is issued by or for the United Nations to the general public.”

2. Official documents have been published since the Organization was founded. Rule 47 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, for example, stipulates that “the Secretariat shall receive, translate, print and distribute documents, reports and resolutions of the General Assembly”. Official documents are identified by unique alphanumeric symbols, a practice initiated in 1946. They have been posted on the Official Document System (ODS) since 1993. Collectively, official documents are important historical records and constitute a lasting legacy of the work of the Organization.

3. Generally, all documents submitted to intergovernmental bodies for consideration must have a mandate (individual or standing mandate), which is based on the Charter of the United Nations or the rules of procedure of said bodies, and/or which is an express legislative request (resolution or decision) from the body that receives such material, such as the General Assembly, the Security Council or the Economic and Social Council. Documents may be classified as official and receive a symbol when they are submitted pursuant to such a mandate and/or request. However, communications from Member States may be submitted to the Secretariat for circulation as official documents without a mandate.



II. Scope of application

4. The present policy applies to documents within the meaning of the administrative instruction mentioned above ([ST/AI/189/Add.3/Rev.2](#)). The terms “documents” and “official documents” are used interchangeably.

5. Matters relating to United Nations publications, in all formats and media, are generally governed by the Publications Board¹ and are not within the scope of the present policy.

6. The policy is applicable to all official documents prepared by officials of the United Nations.

7. The policy is also applicable to official documents prepared by authors other than officials of the United Nations (including intergovernmental organs, States and experts on mission), where the relevant aspects of the policy are based on rules relevant to the preparation of official documents which are applicable to those authors (such as decisions of an intergovernmental organ of the United Nations). References to the relevant rules are indicated accordingly.²

8. In all other cases, the substantive secretariat should, where necessary, approach the authors other than officials of the United Nations (including intergovernmental organs, States and experts on mission) with a view to ensuring that official documents prepared by them are consistent with this policy.

9. In instances where the present policy is not consistent with any subsequent rules pertaining to the preparation of official documents (including decisions of intergovernmental organs), those rules shall prevail over this policy.

III. Content, length, format, layout and style of official documents

A. General policy

10. Official documents are subject to editorial and formatting rules and guidelines issued by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

11. In addition to the stylistic rules set out in the United Nations Editorial Manual,³ the policy applies to official documents.

12. As a general matter, official documents should focus on core issues; be based on facts supported by evidence; present facts accurately and concisely; present analyses in a logical and coherent manner; be drafted in plain but non-colloquial language; and adequately fulfil the relevant mandate. In addition, reports to be considered by the General Assembly should be “as brief as possible and contain precise information confined to a description of the work done by the organ

¹ See [ST/SGB/2012/2](#).

² In preparing official documents, officials other than Secretariat officials and experts on mission must also comply with the Regulations Governing the Status, Basic Rights and Duties of Officials other than Secretariat Officials and Experts on Mission, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution [56/280](#) of 27 March 2002, as well as other decisions of the relevant intergovernmental organs, such as the Code of Conduct for Special Procedure Mandate Holders of the Human Rights Council, adopted by the Council in its resolution [5/2](#) of 18 June 2007.

³ See www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/editorial-manual.

concerned, to the conclusions it has reached, to its decisions and to the recommendations made to the Assembly”.⁴

13. In line with the General Assembly’s mandates on multilingualism,⁵ equal treatment for all languages and equally authentic documentation in all languages, both authors of official documents and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, as appropriate, should ensure that official documents are equally clear, accurate, logical, coherent and consistent in all official languages of the relevant organ.

B. Content of official documents

14. Official documents may not contain, inter alia, content:

(a) That is manifestly contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as set out in Articles 1 and 2 of the Charter of the United Nations, unless direct quotations of such content are absolutely necessary to fulfil the mandate;

As an illustration, a communication from a Member State called for the dissolution of [State 2] by stating that, “The ... part [of State 2] should join [State 3], the ... part should join [State 4] and the ... and ... parts should join [State 5]”, which was considered as directly attacking that Member State’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in violation of the principles of the Charter.⁶

(b) That is blatantly inflammatory, including:

(i) Content that constitutes hate speech;

For the purpose of this policy, the term “hate speech” means “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”⁷

(ii) Content that constitutes incitement to hate speech;

(iii) Content that constitutes incitement to acts of violence;

(c) That is potentially libellous, including content that constitutes attacks on the honour and reputation of a person;

(d) That is or should be classified as confidential or strictly confidential pursuant to the Secretary-General’s bulletin on information sensitivity, classification and handling (ST/SGB/2007/6) or any future administrative issuances on the matter;

(e) The publication of which may be contrary to the Secretary-General’s bulletin on data protection and privacy policy for the Secretariat of the United Nations (ST/SGB/2024/3) or any future administrative issuances on the matter.

15. Tables may be included in official documents. Author departments are responsible for the construction of tables and for their accuracy.⁸

⁴ See annex IV to the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

⁵ Most recently, resolution 78/330 of 6 September 2024.

⁶ *United Nations Juridical Yearbook 2009* (United Nations publication, 2010), p. 396.

⁷ United Nations, United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019. Available at www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf.

⁸ For more information on how to organize tabular material, see www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/editorial-manual/tables.

16. Maps and figures (charts, graphs and photographs) are the only types of non-textual content that may be considered for inclusion in an official document.⁹

17. Works of art, including paintings, drawings, prints, cartoons and digital art, shall not be included in official documents. Poetic works shall also not be included in official documents. Instead, a hyperlink may be provided to websites containing such material.

18. Given that graphic-intensive documents are less accessible to readers with visual impairments, people who use screen readers to access content and users of mobile phones or other small-screen devices, author departments are encouraged to include only necessary figures; data may be better stated in the text. Overreliance on visual elements, especially elements that are not designed to United Nations standards, may detract from the formal parliamentary process, undermining the gravitas of an official document.

19. Official documents may, nevertheless, be published initially as an official document and subsequently as a United Nations publication with visual elements that may not be included in official documents (see, for example, the report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization).

20. Before submitting a document to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management for processing, authors shall review the document and remove any content that is inconsistent with this policy.

21. Where, upon review, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management considers that any content that is inconsistent with this policy is still reflected in the submitted document, the Department shall request the author to remove or modify the relevant content.

22. With regard to content that is inconsistent with this policy and contained in a document prepared by an author other than officials of the United Nations, the Secretariat will approach the author with a view to having such content removed or modified. If the content can be separated from other parts of the document (such as annexes to a document), such content shall be retained on file by the Secretariat and made available for consultation upon request.

23. Given that mentioning the names of commercial firms, industrial enterprises and other businesses and their products or services in official documents may imply endorsement or criticism by the United Nations, generic descriptions should instead be used whenever possible.¹⁰

24. Given that text that has been produced using artificial intelligence can be factually inaccurate, any such text should be reviewed by the author of the document before submitting it to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Author departments remain responsible for the quality, accuracy and appropriateness of their submissions.¹¹

⁹ For more information on rules governing the submission of maps and photographs, see www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/editorial-manual/maps.

¹⁰ For further examples and exceptions, see www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/mention-names-commercial-firms-united-nations-publications.

¹¹ For more information, see the guidance from the Office of Information and Communications Technology at <https://unitednations.sharepoint.com/sites/APP-Gateway/SitePages/Generative-AI.aspx>.

C. Length

1. Word limits

25. In line with General Assembly resolution [52/214](#), reports originating in the Secretariat must not exceed 8,500 words in length (10,700 words for documents not originating in the Secretariat), including any footnotes, headings or hidden text. Pursuant to the memorandum of the Secretary-General of 25 April 2002, entitled “Page limits for reports originating in the Secretariat”, a waiver must be sought from the Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management for any document that exceeds the mandated length.

2. Footnotes

26. Footnotes should account for no more than 10 per cent of the total word count of the document as submitted. Excessive referencing undermines not only the overall readability of documents but also multilingualism, as many references do not exist in the six official languages of the United Nations, and reduces the accessibility of documents to persons with disabilities. Material submitted by Member States is exempt from the footnote limitation.

3. Quotations

27. Official documents should not include lengthy quotations from texts previously circulated as official documents, such as General Assembly resolutions and earlier reports of the Secretary-General, nor should such texts or excerpts therefrom be attached as annexes. Necessary quotations and references should be carefully checked for accuracy.

D. Format and layout

28. Documents must be drafted in Microsoft Word in plain text. Embedded hyperlinks should not be used.

29. Author departments must use the Microsoft Word file of their most recent report, as published on ODS, as a model for future submissions.

30. Official documents are not printed in colour. Non-textual elements should therefore be submitted in greyscale and formatted in such a way as to be legible when printed in monochrome.

31. For technical specifications on format and media to be used in preparing official documents, see the submission guidelines prepared for each duty station.¹²

E. Style

32. The Editorial Manual serves as an authoritative statement of the style to be followed in drafting, editing and reproducing official documents in English. It provides editorial guidance for all parts of the Secretariat and is updated as necessary. The directives set forth in the Manual supersede all earlier guidelines on the subjects dealt with therein.

33. For information on drafting documents in other official languages of the United Nations, the relevant translation service of the Documentation Division in New York

¹² Available at www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/editorial-manual/instr-prep-docs.

or the Editing Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva should be contacted for guidance and assistance.

IV. Changes to the present policy

34. Proposed changes to the present policy must be submitted to the Editorial Managers group¹³ of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management for its consideration, which will formulate recommendations, as appropriate, and present them to the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management for review and approval. Other departments (e.g. the Office of Legal Affairs) shall be consulted as necessary prior to the approval.

¹³ The Editorial Managers group comprises the Chief of the English Translation and Editorial Service in New York (Chair), the Chief of the Editing Section in Geneva, the Chief of the English Translation and Editorial Section in Vienna and the Chief of the English Language Unit in Nairobi.