



OMSA

Ontario Medical
Students Association

Guidelines for Writing Position Papers & Policy Statements

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INTRODUCTION

The **Ontario Medical Students Association (OMSA)** is the dedicated voice for medical students across Ontario. To represent the concerns and interests of this diverse body of over 3000 students at six medical schools, OMSA requires a voice that is identifiable, influential, and informed. This aim is achieved in part through engaging in policy and taking positions on matters related to health and education.

Policy is used by many institutions and organizations to guide the planning, development, and implementation of interventions. Policy development helps OMSA to implement its own interventions and influence those of key decision makers. Developing policy requires rigorous research and clear communication. These guidelines are intended to assist members in advancing OMSA's representation by fulfilling the following objectives:

1. Outline key aspects of **OMSA representation** and its importance.
2. Define the **types of guiding documents** used for OMSA representation.
3. Outline OMSA's **protocol for endorsing** and reviewing guiding documents.
4. Provide a **guide and checklist** for writing advocacy documents.
5. Describe the need for **actionable recommendations**.
6. Provide **additional resources** for writing advocacy documents.

OMSA Representation

OMSA represents Ontario medical students to the government, the public, health organizations, and to Ontario medical students themselves. OMSA council and committee members constantly strive to act in the best interest of the students they represent, often relying on experiences, student surveys, and research. Through both council and member initiatives, OMSA advocates for change in medical education, provincial health policy, legislation, and health care delivery that benefits both OMSA members *and* the people they serve.

As medical learners, we devote great efforts to developing our clinical knowledge and skills to improve our medical care to patients. However, policy also shapes our learning and medical practice. Political, economic, health, education and social policies affect health in many ways including: social determinants of health, allocation of care, health human resource training, and access to treatments.

Many advocacy efforts, documents, and initiatives involve members of the Ontario Political Advocacy Committee (OPAC), a branch of OMSA, as well as the Education Committee for matters related to medical education. OPAC, led by the Director of Representation, consists of students dedicated to advancing the interests of Ontario medical students through local and province-wide advocacy initiatives and fostering collaborations with health system stakeholders, universities, and the government. More information on OPAC is available at omsa.ca/opac.

The Role of Guiding Documents

Statements and papers provide a platform for OMSA to inform stakeholders of the medical student perspective. These advocacy tools are referred to as **guiding documents**. These documents guide OMSA council members and representatives both in internal committee discussions and in meetings with external organizations. Additionally, guiding documents highlight OMSA’s advocacy efforts with its membership and the public, and can also be used as educational resources. Expressing principles and recommendations in writing solidifies OMSA’s influence in medical and educational affairs and contributes to institutional memory, ultimately strengthening OMSA’s representation of Ontario medical students.

Types of OMSA Guiding Documents

OMSA produces two types of guiding documents: **position papers** and **policy statements**. The main distinction is that a position paper provides specific recommendations whereas a policy statement expresses a stance on an issue.

Position Papers	Policy Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Longer in length• Comprehensive background• Contains policy solutions or recommendations• Typically based on policy analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shorter in length• Basic background and context• Contains a statement of agreement or disagreement• Typically value-based

Position papers provide justification for an opinion or stance taken by OMSA. Therefore, these documents include a comprehensive background and a persuasive argument to justify its position and its policy recommendations. A position paper should outline a current issue, provide examples of successful solutions, and describe the benefits and risks if its recommendations were implemented. All position papers must contain some component of actionability. Position papers are a significant undertaking, usually suited to topics explored in the literature that align with OMSA’s priorities.

Policy statements are shorter guiding documents that take a stance on a certain issue. They contain a background section, which explores the context and importance of the issue, but recommendations are replaced with statements of agreement or disagreement regarding the current situation and norms, or positions taken by other organizations. As a result, policy statements are successful tools when a quick and united organizational stance is needed on an issue or when the organization is trying to call attention to an issue or perspective. These documents tend to be more value-based and focus less on argumentation and policy analysis.

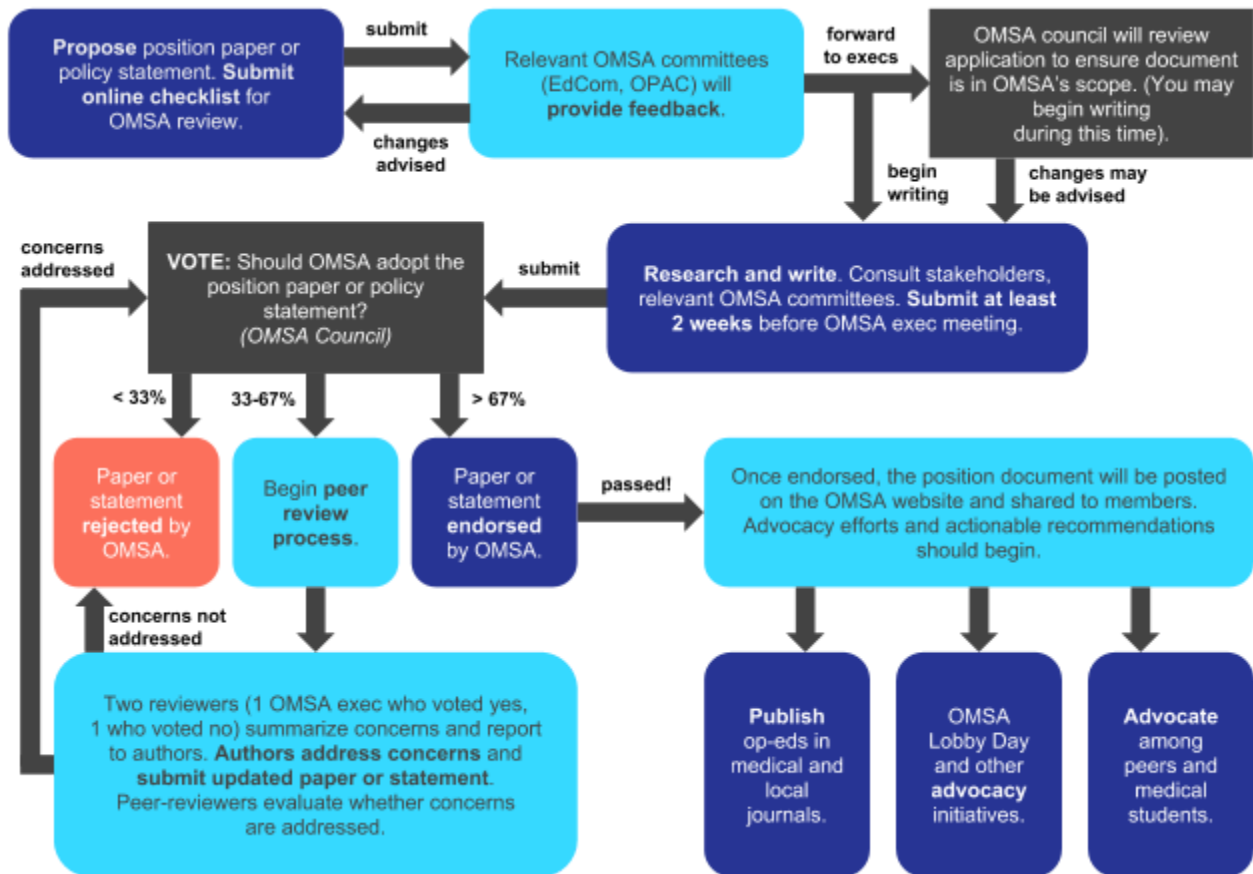
Deciding what type of document to use is not always black and white – the key is to reflect on what you want the goal of the paper to be as the first step. Timely issues may be best expressed as a policy statement, while larger, complex topics may better addressed as a position paper.

THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Policy development is a multi-step process. Developing new policies and positions requires a detailed study of the problem and its context. For position papers, recommendations need to be proposed to address the problem, including proposed steps for implementing change and the identification of anticipated barriers. Guiding documents are then drafted, reviewed, implemented, and monitored.

OMSA's Guiding Document Endorsement Protocol

OMSA advocacy documents should reflect a reputable and recognizable voice to the health policy community and OMSA members. Thus, OMSA has developed a strongly recommended protocol for paper and statement endorsement, which was last updated on January 15, 2018 to maximize the quality and relevancy of its guiding documents. This protocol employs a stepwise approach to allow authors to gain feedback from OMSA council prior to the adoption of a document, as outlined in the flowchart below. A two-thirds majority of the OMSA Council is required for a position paper to pass, ensuring that OMSA endorses papers that are representative of the larger majority of medical students.



To start the process of writing a guiding document, OMSA members should identify a problem, research its context, and understand the medical student perspective on the issue. **The topic should be within the scope of OMSA, which includes:**

- supporting the role of OMSA and its political advocacy committee;
- representing the views and concerns of 3,000 Ontario medical students; and
- advocating for the health of Ontarians (i.e. changes in medical education, health policy, or health care delivery that will benefit Ontario medical students and/or the people they train to serve)

Topics should also be important to medical students (see [values statement](#)). Each year, the Ontario Political Advocacy Committee surveys medical students to identify [advocacy priorities](#); reviewing these results and ensuring a similar document has not been written is a good starting point for identifying your topic of interest.

Next, the problem should be presented to OMSA executive and relevant committee members to gain approval prior to creation of the full document. To facilitate this process, [an online application form](#) has been created to submit proposed topics. This application will be reviewed by members of relevant OMSA committees (i.e. education or policy) in a timely manner, who may provide feedback and suggest changes. Once committee review is complete, authors may begin writing. The application will also be forwarded to the OMSA executive, who will ensure the paper falls within OMSA's scope and may provide additional feedback. This step also allows council to be aware of the various documents in progress and develops familiarity with the topics of interest.

Throughout writing, authors are encouraged to consult external stakeholders and OMSA committee members for feedback, editing, and advice, who can also inform you of the schedule of OMSA council meetings. Once your document is finalized, an OMSA executive council vote will determine whether your paper is adopted. Papers need to be submitted **2 weeks** in advance of the next council meeting to the Director of Representation (representation@omsa.ca). While a two-thirds majority is required, a peer-review process (outlined in the flowchart) helps to develop position papers that do not initially meet this majority.

OMSA council will receive and evaluate completed position papers but strongly encourages authors follow the process outlined above. This protocol allows OMSA council and committee members to review guiding documents early and provide authors with feedback in order to best support its endorsement.

WRITING GUIDE

Before starting, authors should characterize the problem (i.e. monetary issue, governance issue, program issue, etc.) and identify prior research. Has the issue received media attention? Are other stakeholders suggesting policies on this issue? Finally, identify the stakeholder tasked with your recommendations (i.e. Council of Ontario Universities, the Government of Ontario, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, OMSA etc.).

Research & Data Collection

Strong evidence and data are critical for any guiding document, especially for supporting recommendations in a position paper. Data collection can involve both primary and secondary research. Examples of primary research include conducting surveys and consulting relevant stakeholders. A position paper on mental health may involve surveying medical students, healthcare providers, or members of your local community to identify problems in care delivery. Contacting stakeholders, including the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Canadian Mental Health Foundation, or content experts, can guide and strengthen a guiding document. In addition to using these resources for initial research, authors may also contact these organizations or individuals for feedback on their recommendations at later stages in your writing. Secondary research includes literature searches, case studies, and news or media reports. Using these sources is also encouraged to provide the evidence required for policy recommendations. Peer-reviewed research is preferred over news articles, though use of the latter can be useful when discussing a recent topic or an issue at the centre of public debate.

Recommendations

Recommendations are the lifeblood of any advocacy document, informing the reader what OMSA wants and why. Having too many recommendations (five or less is preferable, with no more than ten) may draw attention away from your points and confuse the reader. They should be **concise but actionable**. Recommendations should be listed (**in bold**), with related evidence and rationale discussed in following body paragraphs. Evidence should be presented to support the recommendation and demonstrate why your suggestion is the preferable solution to the problem. To ensure quality recommendations, use the acronym **SMART** (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable/**A**ssignable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-bound) as a guide. Policy is often influenced by societal values, beliefs, and norms; frame your recommendations in a way that will be relevant your target audience.

As discussed later in the section *Accountability and Review*, position paper recommendations should be actionable and clearly identify the responsible party. **At least one of the recommendations must be actionable**. Recommendations can targeted at stakeholders in the healthcare system, including Local Health Integration Networks, hospitals, health care organizations, and commonly, the government. **Be specific**, making sure you identify the level of government and the relevant Ministry. Recommendations can also be geared towards universities, including the faculties of medicine, especially if the policies are related to medical education. Lastly, recommendations can be internal, seeking change or action by OMSA members, committees, and/or leaders. Policies may be proposed that will facilitate action on your behalf (i.e. an OMSA position paper on supporting medical student parents may help you to write letters to your faculty to advocate on the issue). Recommendations that are clearly defined and actionable will help strengthen your paper and promote adoption by OMSA council.

Position Paper Checklist

Position papers should contain the following sections: **title**, **background**, **principles**, **recommendations**, and **references**. The paper should be logically structured and ensure that each element of your arguments are supported. The problem description, principles, and recommendations should be clearly connected. Sub-headings can be used to organize your argument and positions. Content should be clear, concise, and coherent. Most position papers are between 5–10 pages.

The following checklist includes questions you should ask yourself as you write, edit, and refine your paper. Feel free to look at previously passed [position papers](#) for guidance when writing your own, noting that these guidelines were updated in 2018. A [template and tips](#) for writing position papers is available on the OMSA website.

Title	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the title succinctly describe your paper? (avoid acronyms)
Background: Define your problem and provide context for your recommendations (1-3 pages).	<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you included all features to construct a coherent introduction (i.e. context, problem definition, scope of paper)?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the context brief and focused on the problem?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you communicated the nature/significance of the problem?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there key studies/research/laws that should be mentioned?
Principles: List the guiding principles for your recommendations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	How has your problem been addressed in the past / in other jurisdictions?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do your principles reflect the mission and values of OMSA? (see values statement)
Recommendations: List your policy suggestions and provide reasoning for each recommendation. <u>At least one of your points must be actionable</u> (2-5 pages).	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are your principles stated as general beliefs that can be broadly applied to a variety of issues?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do your recommendations reflect your stated principles ?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are your recommendations logically divided ?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are your recommendations SMART (S pecific, M easurable, A ttainable/ A ssignable, R elevant, and T ime-bound)?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the targets of your recommendations clear? Who will be held accountable to your recommendations?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there recommendations that are actionable by OMSA?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there recommendation that facilitates action on your part?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you considered alternative policy options to yours?	
References	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is your referencing style consistent? (Vancouver-style preferred)

Policy Statement Checklist

A [template and tips](#) for writing policy statements is available on the OMSA website. Policy statements should contain the following sections and should not exceed five pages.

Title	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the title succinctly describe your policy statement?
Introduction: Define the problem and provide context for position (1-2 pages).	<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you included all features to construct a coherent introduction (i.e. context, problem definition, scope)?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the context brief and focused on the problem?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there key studies/laws that should be mentioned?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	What positions have been adopted by other related groups?
Principles: <u>List</u> the values that support your position.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do your principles reflect the mission and values of OMSA? (see values statement)
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are your principles stated as general beliefs that can be broadly applied to a variety of issues?
Position: Describe the endorsed position (1-2 pages).	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does your position reflect your stated principles ?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does your position reflect the mission and values of OMSA?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you addressed possible controversy or considered alternative positions to yours?
References	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is your referencing style consistent? (Vancouver-style preferred)

FORMATTING & STYLE GUIDE

Writers should use the [Microsoft Word templates](#) downloaded from the OMSA website for document submission. Following these templates will facilitate a consistent format and style across all OMSA guiding documents. Writers are welcome to use other word processors (i.e. Google Docs) for collaborative writing, and can copy the finalized content over to the template for final submission. Below is a detailed breakdown of the OMSA formatting and style guidelines that should be applied across guiding documents and other advocacy materials,.

Logo & Signature

Logo size is variable. Ideally, the logo goes on the top left of the document. The signature can go at the bottom of a document. Variations to the logo can be made (e.g. OMSA blog logo). Full resolution images can be found in the templates.











Typeface & Colours

Headers: Twentieth Century (*also named Tw Cen MT*)

Text: Arial

Colours: The main colours are the blue and white seen on the logo, while body text should be black. The secondary colour is grey. Other colours may be used as needed. A list of these colours and their RGB or HEX codes are shown below.

Main		Secondary	Other				
							
39,52,148 #273294	255,255,255 #ffffff	0,0,0 #000000	115,115,115 #737373	118,164,203 #76a4cb	204,133,63 #cc853f	160,195,186 #a0c3ba	251,214,142 #fbd68e

Headings & Text

Headings can vary in size depending on the document. Preferred styles are: 1) blue on white, and 2) white on blue. Other combinations are also acceptable.

HEADING 1 (Tw Cen MT, 30 pt)

HEADING 2 (Tw Cen MT, 30 pt)

HEADING 3 (Tw Cen MT, 30 pt)

Subheadings can vary in size depending on the document.

Subheading (Tw Cen MT, 24 pt)

Text can vary in size depending on the document.

Use Arial font for normal text. Text can be variable in size dependent on the document. (Arial, 10 pt)

Additional Style Tips

- Write clearly, concisely, and coherently. Shorter is better.
- The Ontario Medical Students Association is abbreviated as OMSA; do not precede the abbreviation with an article (i.e. “OMSA represents thousands of Ontario medical students”, not “The OMSA represents thousands of Ontario medical students”).
- Use acronyms sparingly; if used, list acronyms in full before abbreviating.
- Use Canadian spelling: colour, not color.
- Ensure your referencing style is consistent. Vancouver style is preferred.

ACCOUNTABILITY & REVIEW

As described in previous sections, position paper recommendations should be **actionable**. Document adoption should facilitate further **advocacy**, by the authors and by OMSA. For **OMSA position papers, at least one** the following requirements for recommendations need to be met:

1. **One or more recommendations** must be within reasonable scope to be carried out by the authors independently or with OMSA support. Consider the mnemonic **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Attainable/Assignable, Relevant, and Time-bound).
2. **At least one** advocacy action must be taken by the authors independently or with OMSA support. Examples include
 - a. Writing and publishing a news media or op-ed piece
 - b. Speaking about the document and its contents with a relevant stakeholder
 - c. Writing a media release for the document for distribution by OMSA and the authors via all relevant social media channels

If your position paper is adopted, one of the above action items should be completed in a timely manner, with the exact timeline to be decided between the authors and OMSA. **OMSA policy statements should follow the second requirement** of being supported by at least one advocacy action.

Paper Review

Documents can be rescinded or revised by general membership at executive meetings. The Ontario Political Advocacy Committee aims to review each position document every five years, though documents can be revised earlier than that if necessary. The main question: “is the document still accurate and is there any new evidence to support it?” All revisions must be approved by the same process as approving original documents.

RESOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Resources

- A. **Finding and using research evidence: Summary Sheet.** www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/resources/ure_summary-sheet.pdf Prepared by the McMaster Health Forum, last updated on July 14, 2017.
- B. **OMSA's Health and Political Advocacy Values Statement:** omsa.ca/sites/default/files/page/29/omsa_advocacy_values_statement_2017.pdf
- C. **An evaluation checklist for a position paper**, adapted from the American Dietary Association. Answer the following *yes or no* questions.
 1. Does the document express an opinion on an emerging issue which may be controversial or may fill a professional/student need?
 2. Does the document relate to an issue which either impacts the healthcare of the public or impacts medical students?
 3. Is the document derived from an analysis and synthesis of current facts, data, and literature?
 4. Does the document facilitate appropriate action by the target stakeholder?
 5. Is the document proactive in promoting the optimal health and well-being of the public?
 6. Does the document reflect OMSA's mission, vision, philosophy, values, and strategic initiatives?
 7. Will the document serve to educate members, other professionals, and/or the public?
 8. Would the position paper result in practice guidelines?
 9. Is the position paper negative with respect to an issue?
 10. Has the topic been addressed in previous OMSA position papers?

If questions 1–7 were answered “yes” and questions 8–10 were answered “no,” the preliminary requirements for a position paper have been met.

Acknowledgements

These guidelines were updated by Austin Yan, based on the 2015 OMSA Position Paper Primer by Heather Smith, then OMSA's Director of Representation. Her document was based on a 2014 document prepared by Justin Neves for the Canadian Federation of Medical Students' (CFMS) Health Policy committee chair.