



**OMSA**

Ontario Medical  
Students Association

# Summarized: Guidelines for Writing Position Papers

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**Complete *Guidelines for Writing Position Papers and Policy Statements* [found here](#).**

# INTRODUCTION

The **Ontario Medical Students Association (OMSA)** is the dedicated voice for medical students across Ontario. It represents the concerns and interests of the diverse body of over 3500 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 healthcare and medical education.

OMSA represents Ontario medical students to the government, the public, health organizations, and to medical schools themselves. OMSA council and committee members constantly strive to act in the best interest of the students they represent, through student surveys and research. Our advocacy initiatives involve members of both the Advocacy Portfolio (previously called OPAC) and Education Portfolio of OMSA. Through both council and member initiatives, OMSA advocates for changes in medical education, provincial health policy, legislation, and health care delivery that benefits both OMSA members *and* the people they serve.

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:

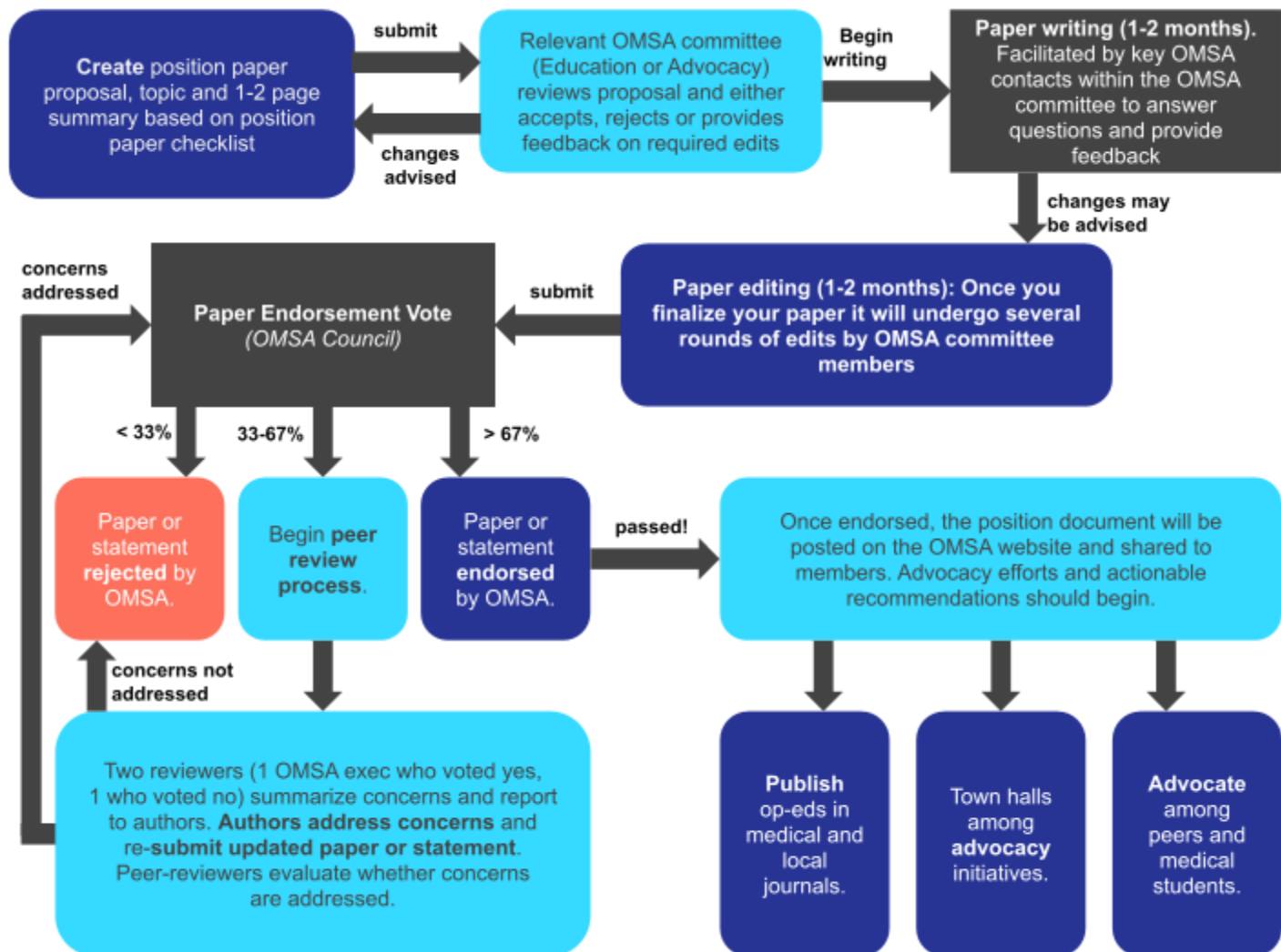
1. Provide the context required to facilitate submission of position papers by medical students.
2. Outline OMSA's **protocol for endorsing** and reviewing position papers.
3. Provide a **guide and checklist** for developing and writing position papers.
4. Provide **additional resources** for writing advocacy documents.

## Position Papers

Position papers provide a platform for OMSA to inform stakeholders of the medical student perspective. These papers guide OMSA council members and representatives both in internal committee discussions and in meetings with external organizations. Position papers can be created by any general member(s) of OMSA, and provide justification for an opinion or stance that should be taken by the organization. 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 current policy topics that align with OMSA's priorities. Once completed, position papers are approved by the OMSA council in a voting process.

## Position Paper Endorsement Protocol

OMSA position papers should reflect a reputable and recognizable voice to the health policy community and OMSA members. Thus, OMSA has developed a strongly recommended protocol for position paper endorsement to maximize quality and relevancy. This protocol employs a stepwise approach to allow authors to gain feedback from OMSA council prior to the adoption of a position, 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 and education committee;

- representing the views and concerns of 3,500 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 [Advocacy Values & Guiding Principles document](#)). Each year, the Advocacy Portfolio surveys medical students to identify advocacy priorities, reviewing these results and ensuring a similar position paper has not been written is a good starting point for identifying your topic of interest. You can view past papers [here](#).

Next, the position paper proposal should be submitted through the [online application form](#). As outlined in the flowchart above, the proposal will be reviewed by members of relevant OMSA portfolios (i.e. Education or Advocacy) in a timely manner, who may provide feedback and suggest changes. Authors will be contacted once committee review is complete to begin writing the full paper.

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, it will be submitted through the [VP Advocacy](#) or [VP Education](#) to the OMSA executive council, who will vote to determine whether your paper is adopted as an official OMSA position. While a two-thirds majority is required, a peer-review process (outlined in the flowchart above) helps to develop position papers that do not initially meet this majority.

## 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 the recommendations are aimed at (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. Recommendations can target stakeholders in the healthcare system, including 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. Recommendations that are clearly defined and actionable will help strengthen your paper and promote adoption by OMSA council.

## Position Paper Checklist

The following checklist includes questions you should ask yourself as you write, edit, and refine your **final, full position paper**. It is included here as you may wish to consult it during the organization of your proposal summary as well. 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.

<b>Title</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the title <b>succinctly</b> describe your paper? (avoid acronyms)
<b>Background:</b> Define your problem and provide context for your recommendations (1-3 pages).	<input type="checkbox"/>	Have you included all features to construct a <b>coherent introduction</b> (i.e. timeline of the issue, problem definition, relevant historical/legal/political/social/economic context, major stakeholders and impacted communities)
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the context <b>brief</b> and <b>focused</b> 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 either contributed, sought to address, or otherwise interacted with your topic that should be mentioned?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	How has your problem been addressed in the past / in other jurisdictions?
	<input type="checkbox"/>	What are the differing opinions on the problem?

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- Principles:** List the guiding principles for your recommendations.
- Do your principles reflect the **mission** and **values** of OMSA? (see [Advocacy Values & Guiding Principles document](#)).
  - Are your principles stated as general beliefs that can be broadly applied to a variety of issues?
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- Recommendations:** List your policy suggestions and provide reasoning for each recommendation. At least one of your points must be actionable (2-5 pages).
- Do your recommendations reflect your stated **principles**?
  - Are your recommendations **logically divided**?
  - Are your recommendations **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Attainable/Assignable, Relevant, and Time-bound)?
  - Are the targets of your recommendations clear? Who will be held accountable to your recommendations?
  - Are there recommendations that are actionable by OMSA?
  - Are there recommendations that facilitate action on your part?
  - Have you considered alternative policy options to yours, along with their benefits and harms/costs?
  - Are your recommendations backed up by research evidence or validated in other jurisdictions?
- 

- Implementation Strategy:** Please describe how the proposed recommendations could be implemented.
- Does each recommendation have specific success metrics that can be objectively evaluated?
  - Are foreseeable barriers to implementation clearly identified?
  - Have alternative strategies for implementation been listed in case the suggested strategy doesn't work?
  - Have the authors included how the OMSA can support implementing the position paper recommendations? Examples: formal endorsement, connecting with stakeholders, social media promotion
- 

- References**
- Is your referencing style consistent? (Vancouver-style 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.

## Paper Review

All position papers have a shelf life of five years before they expire, after which point they can be revised or rescinded.

Documents can also be rescinded or revised by general membership at executive meetings. The Advocacy Portfolio and Education Portfolio aim 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. **Complete** [Guidelines for Writing Position Papers and Policy Statements](#)
- B. **Finding and using research evidence: Summary Sheet.** [www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/resources/ure\\_summary-sheet.pdf](http://www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/resources/ure_summary-sheet.pdf) Prepared by the McMaster Health Forum, last updated on July 14, 2017.
- C. **OMSA’s Advocacy Values & Guiding Principles:**  
[https://omsa.ca/sites/default/files/media/omsa\\_advocacy\\_values\\_guiding\\_principles.docx.pdf](https://omsa.ca/sites/default/files/media/omsa_advocacy_values_guiding_principles.docx.pdf)
- D. **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

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