



WHAT MAKES A GOOD SOP?

10 Essential Characteristics of an SOP People Can Actually Use

CLEAR • CONSISTENT • MEASURABLE • CONTROLLED

A PRACTICAL ACS GUIDE

A Standard Operating Procedure should do more than document how work is performed. A well-designed SOP converts expectations into a practical system for achieving repeatable, measurable performance.

RESOURCE CENTER

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Why Good SOPs Matter

A Standard Operating Procedure should do more than document how work is performed. A well-designed SOP converts expectations into a practical system for achieving repeatable, measurable performance.

Good SOPs help employees understand what is expected, give supervisors a consistent basis for training and oversight, establish standards against which work can be evaluated, and preserve important organizational knowledge.

THE CENTRAL TEST

A good SOP should make it easier for the right person to perform the right work, in the right sequence, to the expected standard - and to know what to do when something does not go as planned.

The 10 Characteristics

- 01 Clear Purpose & Scope
- 02 Defined Roles & Responsibilities
- 03 Step-by-Step Procedures
- 04 Clear, Action-Oriented Language
- 05 Measurable Performance Standards
- 06 Required Tools, Materials & Resources
- 07 Safety, Quality & Compliance Controls
- 08 Verification & Documentation
- 09 Exceptions & Corrective Action
- 10 Review & Continuous Improvement

01 Clear Purpose & Scope

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP begins by explaining why the procedure exists, what it covers, and where it applies. The purpose tells the reader what the procedure is intended to accomplish. The scope establishes its boundaries - which activities, locations, departments, employees, equipment, customers, or circumstances are covered and, where necessary, which are not. This information should appear near the beginning so the reader does not have to interpret whether the procedure applies.

WHY IT MATTERS

An SOP can contain technically correct instructions and still fail if employees do not understand when or where they are supposed to use it. Clear purpose and scope reduce ambiguity and help prevent a procedure from gradually being applied to situations for which it was never designed.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

"Purpose: This procedure explains how to inspect work." The statement provides little useful information: what work, who inspects it, what kind of inspection, and when does it apply?

BETTER APPROACH

"Purpose: This procedure establishes the process used by site supervisors to conduct and document weekly quality inspections of contracted janitorial services at customer facilities." The activity, role, frequency, and service are clear.

QUICK CHECK

- Does the SOP clearly state why it exists?
- Can a new employee determine when and where it applies?
- Are important exclusions or boundaries identified?

02 Defined Roles & Responsibilities

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP identifies who performs the work, who supervises it, who verifies the results, and - when applicable - who approves or authorizes key decisions. The procedure should distinguish roles clearly enough that responsibility does not disappear between departments or employees.

WHY IT MATTERS

Many process failures occur not because nobody knew what needed to happen, but because nobody clearly understood who was responsible for making it happen. Clear responsibility also supports accountability and makes handoffs visible.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

"After the work is completed, it should be inspected and any problems should be reported." Who inspects it? Who receives the report? Who owns correction?

BETTER APPROACH

"Upon completion, the Site Supervisor will inspect the work using the approved inspection checklist. Deficiencies will be documented and assigned to the responsible team lead for corrective action."

QUICK CHECK

- Does every important activity have a clearly identified responsible role?
- Are handoffs between employees, departments, or contractors defined?
- Is responsibility for verification or approval clear?

03 Step-by-Step Procedures

WHAT IT MEANS

The procedure should present work in a logical sequence with enough detail to support consistent execution. Each step should tell the reader what action to take and, where necessary, what must happen before proceeding. Complex processes may be divided into phases such as Prepare -> Perform -> Verify -> Close Out.

WHY IT MATTERS

Experienced employees often fill gaps from memory; new employees cannot. The objective is not to document every hand movement, but to capture enough information that important steps are performed consistently regardless of who is doing the work.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

"1. Prepare the area. 2. Complete the work. 3. Clean up." The sequence is understandable but provides almost no operational guidance.

BETTER APPROACH

Use a real sequence: confirm requirements; gather tools/materials/PPE; place required signage; perform the approved method; inspect against the standard; correct deficiencies; restore the area; complete required documentation.

QUICK CHECK

- Are steps presented in the order the work actually occurs?
- Are critical activities missing because "everyone already knows them"?
- Could a properly trained employee follow the sequence without repeatedly asking what happens next?

04 Clear, Action-Oriented Language

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP uses direct instructions and avoids ambiguity, unnecessary jargon, and vague expectations. Instructions should normally begin with a clear action: Inspect. Record. Verify. Remove. Notify. Compare. Approve. Document. Technical terms may be necessary, but they should be used consistently and explained when the intended audience may not understand them.

WHY IT MATTERS

An SOP is an operational document, not an academic paper. Employees frequently use procedures while performing work. Vague wording produces inconsistent results because different employees interpret the same instruction differently.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

"Make sure the equipment is properly checked before using it." "Properly checked" does not define an action or standard.

BETTER APPROACH

"Before each use, inspect the power cord, plug, housing, and safety guards for visible damage. Do not use damaged equipment. Tag the equipment out of service and notify the supervisor."

QUICK CHECK

- Does each instruction tell the employee what to do?
- Have vague words such as properly, regularly, adequately, as needed, or thoroughly been defined where necessary?
- Is the language appropriate for the people who will actually use the SOP?

05 Measurable Performance Standards

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP defines acceptable performance using observable or measurable criteria wherever practical. A procedure explains what to do; a performance standard answers a different question: How do we know the work was done correctly? Standards may address quantity, quality, frequency, time, accuracy, condition, tolerances, response requirements, completion criteria, or inspection results.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without a defined standard, employees may complete the same procedure differently and still believe they performed it correctly. Measurable standards connect the SOP to quality control, inspection, coaching, corrective action, and continuous improvement.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

“Clean the lobby thoroughly.” “Thoroughly” depends on individual interpretation and provides no common basis for inspection.

BETTER APPROACH

“At completion, lobby floors must be free of visible litter and loose soil; entrance glass free of visible fingerprints and smears; waste receptacles within the established fill level; and the area must pass supervisor inspection before closeout.”

QUICK CHECK

- Does the SOP define what successful completion looks like?
- Could two supervisors evaluate the same result using the same criteria?
- Are important quality, frequency, time, or accuracy requirements stated clearly?

06 Required Tools, Materials & Resources

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP identifies what employees need before beginning the procedure. Depending on the work, this may include tools, equipment, materials, forms, checklists, software access, reference documents, personal protective equipment, approved chemicals or supplies, and job aids.

WHY IT MATTERS

A procedure can be perfectly written and still fail when employees lack the resources required to perform it. Identifying resources reduces interruptions, substitutions, shortcuts, and inconsistent methods and helps supervisors distinguish a performance problem from a resource problem.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

“Gather the necessary supplies before starting.” The employee is expected to know what “necessary” means.

BETTER APPROACH

“Before beginning, obtain the approved inspection checklist, tablet or inspection form, required PPE, and access to the current service specification for the area being inspected.”

QUICK CHECK

- Does the employee know what is required before starting?
- Are approved tools, materials, forms, or systems identified?
- Does the procedure reference supporting resources the employee must use?

07 Safety, Quality & Compliance Controls

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP builds critical safeguards and requirements directly into the procedure. Controls may relate to safety, product or service quality, equipment protection, authorization limits, customer requirements, internal policies, regulatory requirements, or other process-specific controls. Controls should appear where they matter in the procedure.

WHY IT MATTERS

Employees are more likely to follow an important control when it is connected directly to the activity that creates the risk. Controls also help prevent errors rather than merely documenting them after they occur.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

“Follow all applicable safety and quality requirements.”
This tells the employee requirements exist but provides little operational guidance.

BETTER APPROACH

“Before servicing the equipment, disconnect it from the power source and follow the applicable lockout/tagout procedure. Do not proceed until required energy-control steps are complete.” For quality: do not close an inspection until critical deficiencies are corrected or formally escalated.

QUICK CHECK

- Are critical safety, quality, and compliance requirements located at the steps where they apply?
- Does the SOP identify actions that must not be taken?
- Are required approvals, safeguards, or escalation points clear?

08 Verification & Documentation

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP specifies how completion and compliance are checked, documented, and retained. Verification may include supervisor review, inspection, checklist completion, electronic confirmation, sign-off, measurement, photograph, system record, customer acceptance, or another appropriate form of evidence.

WHY IT MATTERS

There is an important difference between “the work was supposed to be done” and “we verified that the work was done correctly.” Documentation creates evidence and supports later quality reviews, customer discussions, training, investigations, corrective action, and improvement.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

“The supervisor should make sure the work is complete.” How, when, against what standard, and is anything recorded?

BETTER APPROACH

“At the end of each shift, the supervisor will inspect designated areas using the approved quality checklist. Deficiencies will be recorded in the inspection system and assigned for correction before the inspection is closed.”

QUICK CHECK

- How does the organization know the procedure was completed correctly?
- Who performs the verification?
- What evidence or record is created, and where is it maintained?

09 Exceptions & Corrective Action

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP explains what happens when the standard is not met or normal conditions do not apply. Real work does not always proceed exactly as planned. The SOP should tell employees when to stop work, correct a problem, notify someone, escalate, document an exception, obtain approval, or use an authorized alternate process.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without defined exception handling, employees are forced to improvise precisely when the normal process has failed. Corrective action also creates an important feedback loop: a deficiency should not merely be discovered; it should be addressed and, where appropriate, verified as corrected.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

“Report any problems to management.” This does not define what constitutes a problem, whether work should continue, who is contacted, or what happens next.

BETTER APPROACH

“If the inspection identifies a critical deficiency, document the condition, notify the Site Supervisor immediately, and do not close the inspection. The responsible party will complete corrective action, and the supervisor will verify the correction before closure.”

QUICK CHECK

- Does the SOP explain what to do when the normal procedure cannot be followed?
- Are significant deficiencies escalated appropriately?
- Is responsibility for corrective action and verification defined?

10 Review & Continuous Improvement

WHAT IT MEANS

A good SOP establishes ownership, revision control, periodic review, and a method for improving the procedure over time. At minimum, the organization should know who owns the SOP, which version is current, when it was issued or revised, who approved it, when it should be reviewed again, and how needed changes are incorporated.

WHY IT MATTERS

Processes change. Equipment, customers, technology, responsibilities, and methods change. Without document control, multiple versions may circulate. Continuous improvement turns the SOP from a static document into a managed business tool.

WEAK SOP EXAMPLE

An SOP exists in several folders, has no revision date, identifies no owner, and employees are unsure which copy is current. Even excellent content can no longer be relied upon.

BETTER APPROACH

Use controlled information such as: Document Owner: Operations Manager; Version: 2.1; Effective Date: September 15, 2026; Approved By: General Manager; Next Review: September 2027. Trigger earlier review after significant changes, incidents, recurring deficiencies, or improvement recommendations.

QUICK CHECK

- Is there a clearly identified SOP owner?
- Can employees readily identify the current approved version?
- Are lessons from inspections, corrective actions, employee feedback, and process changes used to improve it?

The 10-Point SOP Self-Check

Use these questions to take a quick look at one of your existing SOPs. This is intentionally not a numerical scoring system. A “Needs Attention” response does not automatically mean the underlying process is poor; it means the SOP may not yet communicate or control that aspect adequately.

Characteristic	Yes	Partly	Needs Attention
1. Purpose and scope are clear.	☐	☐	☐
2. Roles and responsibilities are assigned.	☐	☐	☐
3. Steps are logical and usable.	☐	☐	☐
4. Language is direct and action-oriented.	☐	☐	☐
5. Performance expectations are measurable or observable.	☐	☐	☐
6. Required tools, materials, forms, and resources are identified.	☐	☐	☐
7. Safety, quality, and compliance controls are built in.	☐	☐	☐
8. Completion and compliance are verified and documented.	☐	☐	☐
9. Exceptions, deficiencies, and corrective actions are addressed.	☐	☐	☐
10. The SOP is controlled, reviewed, and improved.	☐	☐	☐

LOOK FOR PATTERNS

Several weak areas may indicate that an SOP was written primarily as a record of the process rather than designed as an operational tool.

From Document to Business System

A good SOP is not the end of the process. Documentation becomes significantly more useful when it operates within a larger management cycle:

DEFINE → DOCUMENT → TRAIN → PERFORM → VERIFY → IMPROVE

DEFINE - what should happen and what acceptable performance looks like.

DOCUMENT - the process clearly enough to be repeated.

TRAIN - the people responsible for performing and supervising it.

PERFORM - the work according to the established process.

VERIFY - that the process was followed and the expected result was achieved.

IMPROVE - the process and documentation using what the organization learns.

A Good SOP Should Ultimately Answer Six Questions

- What are we trying to accomplish?
- Who is responsible?
- What exactly should happen?
- What standard must be achieved?
- How will we know it was done correctly?
- What happens when it isn't?

THE RESULT

When those answers are clear, consistent, measurable, and controlled, the SOP has a much better chance of doing what it was created to do: turn expectations into repeatable, measurable performance.



Would You Like an Independent Look at One of Your SOPs?

As part of ACS's introduction to the local business community, eligible businesses may request one complimentary SOP & Training Introductory Assessment.

ACS reviews one SOP, procedure, work instruction, or recurring task for areas including clarity, completeness, usability, training support, competency, controls, and document management.

COMPLIMENTARY INTRODUCTORY ASSESSMENT

There is no fee, no obligation, and no requirement to purchase an ACS service.

Learn more or request an assessment: acsllc-nc.com/assessment

Affiliated Corporate Services, LLC

Al Summers, Owner

(336) 338-3454

info@acsllc-nc.com

acsllc-nc.com

EXPECTATIONS DEFINED. PERFORMANCE MEASURED. RESULTS MANAGED.

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