

# Northwestern University Student Organization Constitution Writing Guide

This guide assists student organizations at Northwestern University in writing/revising their constitution. Student organizations may govern and structure themselves in any way deemed appropriate, so long as it does not violate University policy. In other words, your group's articles may vary from this guide, but should follow the same basic pattern. All registered student organizations **MUST** have their most up-to-date constitution available on their Wildcat Connection profile (under the 'About Us' section) as well as in the Documents tab. Organizations will have varying restrictions and requirements on membership, different officers, and a myriad of committees, so these guidelines are intentionally general and may need to be adjusted for specific student organizations.

**Please note that there are a few sections of this document where the language must be directly copied and pasted, word for word, into your group's constitution. They are highlighted in yellow within this guide.**

These sections are:

- Membership Eligibility
- Grounds for Removal
- Constitutional Review
- Not-For-Profit Statement
- Statement of Non-Discrimination
- Statement of Non-Hazing
- Statement of Compliance with Campus Regulations

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## ARTICLE I - INTRODUCTION

This article is meant to provide an introduction and overview of the organization. It sets the context for which the rest of the Constitution is interpreted and read. This section of the Constitution is vital, as it provides an understanding of what and who the organization is. The sections generally included in this article are name, mission statement, and objectives.

### Section I - Name

The name should be unique from any other currently recognized student organization and should reflect the nature and activities of the organization. In addition, any organization abbreviations or acronyms must be formally referenced in this article. **Your name shall not begin with the words “Northwestern University”, “NU”, “Wildcats” or any other words, which would identify the group with Northwestern University.** If the organization is affiliated with a local or national organization, that information must be stated here.

Questions to Consider:

- Does it convey quickly and eloquently what the organization will do?

Example: *The name of this organization is Volunteer4Science. This organization will utilize the acronym V4S in all publicity materials and correspondence. Volunteer4Science is affiliated with [affiliate organization (if applicable)] operating in [City, State]. The website of [affiliate organization] is [www.affiliateorganization.com].*

### Section II - Purpose

The purpose must be clearly stated and must be unique from all other currently registered student organizations. This statement should be broad enough to allow for flexibility within the organization, while fulfilling its mission, but specific enough to convey understanding of the uniqueness and purpose of the organization.

Questions to Consider:

- What is the overarching purpose/mission of the organization?
- What is the intended impact of the organization on the Northwestern community?
- What services will be provided and for whom?

Example: *V4S is established for the purpose of developing leadership skills and to encourage Northwestern University students to participate in community service projects.*

### Section III - Objectives

Objectives should be written as action statements (“to...”), which act as specific things the organization strives to achieve in order to fulfill its mission. These statements are specific concepts, ideas, or issues that provide tangible examples of what the organization does.

Questions to Consider:

- Do the objectives of the organization focus on its long-range intentions for existing/operating?
- Are these objectives achievable given your resources?
- How relevant are the objectives to the organization’s purpose?
- Are these objectives written as action statements (“to...”)?

Example: *To bring together inquiry-based, hands-on science lessons to middle-school students.*

## ARTICLE II - ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

This article is a detailed description of the structure of the organization. The description provides an opportunity to define responsibilities of the executive board/officers. This allows for current and future members to understand the role of executive board positions and provides an ability to create a culture of accountability within in the organization.

### Section I - Executive Board

#### A. List of Executive Board Positions and General Responsibilities

Questions to Consider:

- Do the responsibilities allow for flexibility for the person assuming the position to make it their own?

*Example: The elected officers of the organization shall be the President, Vice-President, and Treasurer. The President shall be the chief executive officer of the group and shall have general supervision and control of its activities and programs.*

#### B. Qualifications for Becoming an Officer

Questions to Consider:

- Who is eligible for office?
- Are there specific skills and/or relevant experience desired or required to be eligible to hold an officer position?

*Example: The President shall be the chief executive officer of the group and shall have general supervision and control of its activities and programs.*

#### C. Terms of Office

Questions to Consider:

- What is the time frame (e.g., quarter, academic year, etc.)?
- When do officers assume their positions?
- Are the terms of office consistent with election/selection processes?

*Example: A written request by at least three voting members of the organization shall be submitted to the President, Vice President, or Treasurer. Written notification shall be sent to the officer in question asking that officer to be present at the next meeting and prepared to respond to the removal request.*

#### D. Procedure for Filling Vacated Offices

Questions to Consider:

- Are special elections held?
- Is ascending order used (moving up the rank order of officers to fill a position)? What is the order of succession (the rank order of officers to be used in ascending order)? Is the order of succession used for each position down the ladder, or can it stop along the way?
- Are appointments made, or are interviews coordinated?

*Example: In the event of the removal of an officer, a special provision may be granted to the remaining officers to appoint an interim replacement until an election may be held.*

## Section II - Committees

This section should be used to describe committees within the organization (if applicable). The description should provide an overview of what the role/purpose of the committee is within the organization. *Note: Committees will vary according to the purpose and activities of the organization. Not all organizations have committees and those listed below are merely to serve as a guideline.*

### A. Committee Identification and Appointments

Questions to Consider:

- What are the names, purposes, and responsibilities of the various standing committees (e.g., executive board, publicity, fundraising, etc.)?
- How are members selected for each committee?
- How is the head of the committee chosen?

*Example: The Fundraising Committee shall be responsible for planning and setting the focus of all fundraisers for the organizations with approval of the Executive Board; communicating its plans and activities to the general membership of the organization; communicate at least monthly with the Treasurer regarding costs and receipts, and shall maintain accurate files, information, and records of its activities. It shall work with the organization's advisor and SOA to ensure that its activities are consistent with the objectives and regulations of the University.*

### B. Temporary/Special Committees

Questions to Consider:

- How and when are such committees formed?
- What are the purposes and responsibilities of special committees?
- What is the duration of a temporary or special committee?

*Example: Special committees, including requirements and length of time, may be appointed by any officer and voted upon by the remaining officers.*

## Section III – Advisor

An advisor required of each student organization. The advisor must be a salaried staff/faculty member or full-time graduate student at Northwestern University and provide advisory support for the officers and members of the organization. In addition, they must complete required paperwork and are encouraged to attend any trainings/professional development sessions led by Student Organizations & Activities. Resources for advisors are available on the SOA website.

### A. Roles and Duties of an Advisor

Questions to Consider:

- What are the responsibilities of the advisor?
- What is the group's expectations for the involvement of the advisor?

*Example: The advisor shall serve as a resource person and provide advisory support for the officers and members of the organization. The advisor may attend executive and general. The advisor shall be nominated by the officers and confirmed by a majority vote of the members. The advisor will serve a term of one (1) academic year. In the event that the advisor is unable to continue in their position, officers may nominate a replacement at any time, to be confirmed by a majority vote of the members.*

## Section IV – Dissolution of Organization

This section should outline the requirements and procedures for the dissolution of the student organization.

Questions to Consider:

- What is the procedure for dissolution?
- When would dissolution of the organization be considered?

## ARTICLE III - MEMBERSHIP

This article outlines the requirements and expectations for membership to be granted into the organization. It typically includes three levels of eligibility: general membership, committee membership, and executive board/officer membership. These sections detail the initial requirements to be eligible for participation.

### Section I - Membership Eligibility

Membership in this organization is open to all Northwestern University students in good academic standing who have paid their Student Activity Fee. Faculty, administrators, staff members, and alumni of the University may also be included in meetings and events (but cannot vote on any decisions related to member positions, like who should be the next President).

You may also add to the statement above. Questions to Consider:

- What is minimum meeting attendance?

Example: *As a general member, one is required to attend organization meetings regularly, pay dues if required, and actively support organization projects.*

### Section II - Executive Board Eligibility and Qualifications

Please note: if a student is graduating early and would like to hold a leadership position in an organization beyond their graduation date, they must contact SOA and the Dean of Students to seek permission.

Questions to Consider:

- Who is able to hold an executive board position?
- What are the requirements/expectations to be eligible?

Example: *All candidates must be full-time registered students of Northwestern University and have already maintained active membership for one academic year.*

### Section III - Committee Eligibility

Questions to Consider:

- Who is eligible to serve on committees?
- What are the requirements/expectations to be eligible?

Example: *All active members are eligible to participate.*

### Section IV - Executive Board Resignation

Questions to Consider:

- What is the process for withdrawal from the organization?
- What is the timeline for resignation?

Example: *Under exceptional circumstances, an officer may resign. Two weeks before their resignation, the resigning officer must submit in written reasonable reason for resigning to the Executive Board. Resignation only becomes effective after the Executive Board approves and a general discussion at the general meeting had taken place.*

## **ARTICLE IV - EXECUTIVE BOARD ELECTION/SELECTION PROCESS**

This article outlines and details the process and procedures for electing/selecting executive board positions. There are various methods to selecting officers or executive board positions, which can include: selection committee and interview, nomination and vote, or appointment. The elements contained within this section depend upon the method the organization decides to utilize. What should be stated in this section is who oversees the process; requirements to enter the selection process; how the process operates; how a new officer/executive board member is affirmed or selected; and when their term begins and ends (recommended April 1 through April 1).

*March of Spring Quarter is the recommended time for leadership transitions to occur, as all student organizations must complete SOA's annual registration process to maintain their status as a recognized student organization on campus, which typically launches in early May. Mid-quarter transition in leadership allows for new officers/executive board members to shadow departing members for at least a month before the incumbent leaves their position. This shadowing provides a vital period of learning and training for the coming year ensuring a smoother transition and greater passage of knowledge and information.*

### **Section I - Selection Timing**

Questions to Consider:

- How often and what time of year is selection held?
- Are there any special elections?

Example: *Nominations for all officers will take place annually from the members starting in April.*

### **Section II - Nominations**

Questions to Consider:

- How are nominations made?
- Are there self-nominations?
- Is an application process required for nomination?
- Does a nomination committee exist that monitors the nominating process?

Example: *Any member may nominate any other voting member, including himself or herself. Nominations may also be made during the election meeting prior to closing of nominations.*

### **Section III - Election and Voting Procedures**

Questions to Consider:

- What is the specific procedure followed for elections?
- What is the voting method (paper, electronic, etc.)?
- What number or percentage of members or quorum is necessary for elections to be complete?
- How many members need to be present in order to hold elections and how many of those members must vote for someone in order for that person to be elected? What if the vote cannot take place if not enough members are present? Can people vote by email or by proxy?
- Who is eligible to vote?

Example: *Voting will occur by secret ballot and a simple majority vote by active members is required to elect an officer. If there are more than two candidates running and no candidate receives a majority vote, there shall be a run-off vote between the top two vote recipients at the next general meeting. No person shall be eligible to serve more than two consecutive terms in the same office. Elections should take place in late March to early April to allow for turnover between old and new board.*

#### Section IV - Notification and Posting of Elections

Questions to Consider:

- What is the process for notifying others or posting information regarding elections (e.g., letters, flyers, poster, announcements, etc.)?
- How long is the notification and posting period?

Example: *Posting of or handing out fliers and giving out of candy or tokens of any kind is not permissible.*

#### Section V - Grounds for Removal

Questions to Consider:

- What are the grounds for removal of an executive board member?
- Who can initiate the removal of an executive board member?

Example: *Two-thirds (2/3) of the Officers must agree or two-thirds (2/3) of active members must sign a petition to ask for impeachment.*

#### Section VI - Procedure for Impeachment

SOA has seen a lot of vague language in constitutions around how impeachments are conducted, which ultimately results in a lot of confusion when impeachments are executed. With that in mind, **please use this language verbatim in this section:**

Active members, Officers, Advisor, or the Officer member being impeached must be notified at least one academic week in advance of the impeachment hearing. The person in question must have the option to be present during the hearing, and they must be informed of why their impeachment is being considered at least one week in advance of the hearing. If it is not the advisor being impeached, the advisor, as well as Hayley Kretchmer ([hayley.kretchmer@northwestern.edu](mailto:hayley.kretchmer@northwestern.edu)) from SOA, must be notified at least one week in advance of the impeachment hearing via email. The impeachment hearing must occur while classes are in session and take place on Northwestern's Evanston campus. The moderator of the impeachment hearing will be the President unless they are being impeached, in which case it will be the Vice President. The moderator cannot be the Officer being impeached. Three-fourths (3/4) of active members must be present in order for the impeachment hearing to begin. Each side will be given the opportunity to present their case and the active members may ask questions. A two-thirds (2/3) vote of active members present is needed for impeachment. Failure to notify SOA and the organization advisor at least one academic week in advance of the impeachment hearing may invalidate subsequent impeachment actions.

It is suggested that the process for removing a member of the group be framed in the following way:

1. Charge or complaint brought against an individual
2. Evidence to support complaint presented
3. Individual given opportunity to argue a defense and offer counter evidence
4. Vote is taken (vote count must be specified in the Constitution)

#### Section VII- Procedure for Appeal of Impeachment

Questions to Consider:

- Is there a set time period to carry out an appeal?
- What steps are involved with the appeal?
- Who oversees the appeal process?

Example: *Any student whose position/ membership is revoked will have 4 calendar days to appeal the revocation. The appeal must be submitted in writing to the Executive Board and must include any relevant information that has not already been presented. The President will then submit the appeal to the Appeals Committee. This committee consists of 3 executive board members and 3 general members. This committee will then render a decision at the next general body meeting or in 7 calendar days, whichever occurs first. If no appeal is submitted, the Board's decision is automatically binding.*



## ARTICLE V - MEETINGS

This article should detail any meeting the organization holds, which can vary from executive board meetings, committee meetings, general body meetings, and special meetings. The process of how and who can call a particular meeting, who runs the meeting, and the purpose of the meeting should be outlined. Each different type of meeting needs to have its own section so full understanding of the process and procedures can be conveyed.

### Section I - Types and Occurrence of Meetings

Questions to Consider:

- Are there different types of meetings (e.g., business, regular, special, executive, etc.)?
- Who is required to attend each type of meeting? What happens if a meeting is missed?
- How often meetings are held (e.g., weekly, monthly, etc.)?
- Is there a set date for meetings?

Example: *General member meetings will be held on the first Sunday of every month during the academic year and open to the entire organization.*

### Section II - Special Meetings

Questions to Consider:

- What are the circumstances under which special meetings may be called? Who can call the meetings?

Example: *Special meetings may be called during the quarter upon the approval of the majority of the Executive Board.*

### Section III - Quorum

Questions to Consider:

- What's the purpose of the quorum?
- What is the percentage or number of members needed for quorum?
- What happens if quorum does not exist at a meeting? What if quorum is not reached for a few meetings?

Example: *A quorum shall consist of at least one half of the total membership. No votes may be taken in absence of a quorum.*

### Section V - Parliamentary Procedure

Questions to Consider:

- What rules shall govern the conduct of business for the organization?
- Revised, General Consensus, etc.?

### Section VI - Meeting Minutes and Records

Questions to Consider:

- Who is responsible for taking notes and/or meeting minutes?
- How are these records stored and who is responsible for them?
- How does the organization share the meeting minutes with the membership to solicit corrections to the minutes?

Example: *The secretary shall distribute meeting minutes 48 hours before the next general meeting, or by Fridays at noon, whichever comes first. During executive meetings, the secretary shall ask for a motion to approve the previous week's minutes and make corrections as needed.*

## ARTICLE VI – HANDLING OF FUNDS

**This article outlines procedures for handling organization funds.**

### Section I—Student Organization Finance Office

All funds collected will be deposited in our student organization’s Student Organization Finance Office (SOFO) account.

### Section II—Treasurer

The treasurer shall be the primary officer designated to handle organization finances.

### Section III—Dissolution of Organization

Should any organization assets and/or debts exist, appropriate means for disposing of these assets and/or debts must be specified clearly and unequivocally. A specific charity must be designated as the recipient of any remaining assets at the dissolution of the organization.

*Example: In the event this organization dissolves, all monies left in the treasury, after outstanding debts and claims have been paid, shall be donated to “Name of charitable organization.”*

## ARTICLE VII - CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

**This article outlines the process and procedure to amend the organization’s constitution.**

### Section I - Amendment

Questions to Consider:

- Who can propose an amendment and what is the procedure (e.g., verbal, written, how much time must pass between an amendment being introduced and it being voted on, etc.)?
- When can an amendment be proposed?
- Is there any notice required in advance for amending the constitution?
- How many members must be present for adoption of the amendment?
- Who can vote on the amendment?
- How many votes are required for affirmation?

*Example: Amendments to this constitution may be made at any general meeting provided notice of the proposed amendment was given one week prior to a vote. Amendments require a two-thirds vote of the voting members in attendance at the meeting and are subject to final approval by the Student Organizations & Activities.*

### Section II - Ratification

Questions to Consider:

- How many votes are required for ratification?
- When does a newly ratified constitution become in effect?

**Please note: if an organization’s Constitution is changed in any way, a new copy of the Constitution must be submitted to the Student Organizations & Activities**

*Example: This Constitution shall become effective upon its ratification by a two-thirds majority of the ballots cast in a general election. Upon ratification of this Constitution, all prior constitutions shall be null and void.*

### **ARTICLE VIII - CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW**

As a recognized student organization, we will participate in a constitutional review process every three (3) years. It will be updated according to the new sample constitution (if necessary) and will meet with the Student Organizations & Activities staff to review it.

### **ARTICLE IX – NOT-FOR-PROFIT STATEMENT**

This is not-for-profit organization. Any funds obtained through fundraising or other means must go back to the organization.

### **ARTICLE X – STATEMENT OF NON-DISCRIMINATION**

As a student group seeking affiliation to Northwestern University, we hereby state that this student organization does not discriminate or permit discrimination by any member of its community against any individual on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, parental status, marital status, age, disability, citizenship or veteran status in matters of admissions, employment, housing or services or in the educational programs or activities it operates. Harassment, whether verbal, physical or visual, that is based on any of these characteristics, is a form of discrimination. This includes harassing conduct affecting tangible job benefits, interfering unreasonably with an individual's academic or work performance, or creating what a reasonable person would sense is an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment. While Northwestern University is committed to the principles of free inquiry and free expression, discrimination and harassment identified in this policy are neither legally protected expression nor the proper exercise of academic freedom.

\*NOTE: Recognized student organizations at Northwestern University are required to be non-discriminatory in membership.

### **ARTICLE XI – STATEMENT OF NON-HAZING**

This organization will not engage in or permit hazing. The University forbids hazing and all other activities that interfere with the personal liberty of an individual. The University defines hazing as any action taken or situation created, whether on or off University premises and whether presented as optional or required, to produce mental or physical discomfort, servitude, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule for the purpose of initiation into, affiliation with, or admission to, or as a condition for continued membership in, a group, team, club, or other organization. Hazing activities may also violate the Illinois Hazing Act 720 ILCS §5/12C-50

### **ARTICLE XII – STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH CAMPUS REGULATIONS**

This organization shall comply with all Northwestern University policies and procedures, including but not limited to, those policies set forth in the Northwestern University Student Handbook and The Guide to Student Organizations, as well as local, state, and federal laws.