

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing a Mission Statement

This reference guide aims to help museums develop a mission statement. A mission statement is one of the five documents designated as core because they are fundamental for professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices.

This guide explains what a mission statement is, why it is important, and what to consider when developing one. It reflects the standards of the field that all museums should adhere to and aligns with the requirements of the Alliance's [Core Documents](#) Verification and [Accreditation](#) programs.

What It Is

A mission statement is the heart of a museum. It articulates the museum's educational focus, purpose, and role, as well as its responsibilities to the public and its collections. Some museums also choose to develop vision and value statements as a way of extending the concepts expressed in the mission statement. These are different but related guiding documents for the museum: mission is purpose; vision is future; and values are beliefs.

Why It Is Important

A mission statement drives everything the museum does; vision, policy-making, planning, and operations are all extensions of a museum's mission. The mission gives the governing authority a foundation from which it can strategize. The governing authority sets the museum's strategic direction through the mission, which impacts the policies and plans influencing staff actions and behaviors.

Required Elements of a Mission Statement

Each core document has a set of required elements associated with it that are based on the [Core Standards](#). When writing or revising their mission statements, museums should ensure that they align with those standards and contain the required elements listed below.

Required Elements of a Mission Statement:

- » Asserts the museum's public service role
- » States why the museum exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts
- » Bears date approved by the governing authority

Anatomy of a Mission Statement

There are as many different ways to create mission statements as there are museums. That should be the case, as each museum has its own distinct history, community, and set of challenges. Typically, a mission statement explains the museum's purpose and reason for existing and explains its intended impact on its audiences. A museum may look to other mission statements as a helpful starting point for drafting and discussing its own, but must create its own specific mission statement in order to create a strong foundation for everything the museum does.

Here are a few examples of mission statements from accredited museums:

- » **Museum of Science, Boston**
The Museum's mission is to play a leading role in transforming the nation's relationship with science and technology.
- » **Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum**
The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum advances creative thinking by connecting today's artists with individuals and communities in unexpected and stimulating ways.
- » **Missouri History Museum**
The Missouri History Museum seeks to deepen the understanding of past choices, present circumstances, and future possibilities; strengthen the bonds of the community; and facilitate solutions to common problems.

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Process

Creating or reviewing a mission statement is not easy, but it can be a stimulating and enlightening process. Missions may evolve as the museum does and therefore need to be reviewed from time to time. Most importantly, missions must be practiced; mission statements are only useful if they are being realized every day.

A museum reviewing its mission statement might consider reasons for review and how long it has been since the mission was changed. A mission statement is usually revisited or revised when change arises (e.g., institutional planning, applying for accreditation, shift in audiences served). Since it can evolve over time, it is important for the mission statement to be flexible.

Keep in mind that:

- » The process of creating and implementing a mission statement is as important and beneficial to the museum as the mission itself. The mission may seem like the end result but, in actuality, the end result is a broad understanding of why the museum exists.
- » There are many different ways to create mission statements. Museums should take time to explore their unique circumstances and articulate them accurately in their mission statements.
- » Policy-making should be integrated in order to be effective. Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.

“A good mission statement leans toward societal impact rather than simply an explanation of operations, “transitioning from being *about* something to being *for* someone.”
Stephen Weil (*Daedalus*, 1999).

Here are steps in the development of a mission statement:

- » *Assemble the team.* Consider who will be involved and how they will contribute. This team can consist of people from different functions of the museum. Many times, the team incorporates members of the governing authority and staff, but a smaller group is usually more productive than a larger one. The team's responsibility will be to facilitate the process, identify key stakeholders, and use feedback to shape what will eventually become the mission. Those leading the review must ensure that the development and end result are effective.
- » *Do research.* Museums may find it helpful to do research on the origins and history of the museum to explore how its purpose has evolved over time.
- » *Examine the current mission statement.* Missions do not always need to change, but it is important to recognize when they should. The strengths and weaknesses of the current statement can be considered in order to determine what types of revisions are required. Does it need just a few tweaks or a complete rewrite?
- » *Solicit feedback.* While the team will lead the process, feedback from other stakeholders is essential. Broad input from board, staff, volunteers, and other stakeholders will help to explain why and how the museum is a vital part of its community. Input from many people can build excitement and passion, which a mission statement should reflect.
- » *Draft the mission.* The team can use the feedback collected to start drafting the statement. Drafts can go to stakeholders to refine the mission, making it more succinct and powerful over time, but do not allow this to prolong the process unnecessarily. It is important that museums strike the fine balance between getting the necessary input needed to create a strong mission, and moving forward to finalizing and implementing the mission.
- » *Consider if other statements should accompany the mission.* The museum may opt to create or refine vision and values statements based on the new mission.

- » *Get governance authority approval.* Present the mission to the museum’s governing authority for approval. This can be accompanied by an explanation of the process and the decisions made throughout.
- » *Integrate the new mission statement into planning efforts, policies, documents, and publications.* At this point, it would be prudent for the museum to consider documents needing revision in order to reflect this new mission. Those documents can be revised as needed and distributed to key stakeholders.

Where to Find Out More

- » [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. It includes a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums, the seven areas of performance they address and commentary. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » [Sample Documents](#)

AAM’s online sample document collection is a valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans, and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can use sample documents in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority, and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.

- » [Small Museum Toolkit](#) by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (AltaMira Press, 2011)

This collection of six books serves as a launching point for small museum staff to pursue best practices and meet museum standards. These brief volumes address governance, financial management, human resources, audience relations, interpretation and stewardship for small museums and historic sites. Book One addresses mission.

Core Standards

Having a strong mission statement helps museums adhere to standards for mission and planning. Those standards and the other [Core Standards for museums](#) are available on the [Alliance’s website](#).