

Article Style Guidelines & Content Code

This document lays out the general style guidelines and content standards we adhere to.

In the main, these follow the AP style guidelines (notable exception: commas).

The Content Code

The Content Code is all about providing clarity, support, and specificity around what makes the best, most valuable, and high-quality content digital writing. These rules have been developed after working with dozens of Clients online, for both B2B and B2C formats. Whether you're a Writer writing a piece of content and want specific, non-fluffy guidance on how to make your writing better or you're an Editor wondering what to look for (or need a good resource to redirect your Writer to), these writing "rules" create a standard for writing.

The rules of the Content Code are broken up into "do's" and "don'ts." It's equally important to embrace the do's as it is to ensure your writing is free of the don'ts.

DO...

- Rule #1: Focus on the reader's needs - what are they trying to achieve, what does your article aim to leave them with, and how will they be changed once they finish reading the ideas and information you've provided?
- Rule #2: Build a story that connects each of the sections together and takes the reader by the hand, guiding them with one continuous narrative from start to finish.
- Rule #3: Use simple words that people will understand. Your ideas and observations can be unique. But when you're choosing words, it's more important to be clear than unique:
 - "Begin" rather than "commence."
 - "Find out" rather than "ascertain."
 - "Encourage" or "reward" rather than "incentivize."
 - "Write" rather than "author" or "compose."
 - Write "goal" rather than "objective."
 - Write "get" rather than "obtain."
 - Write "improve" rather than "optimize."
 - Write "buy" rather than "purchase."
 - Write "use" rather than "leverage."
 - Write "find" rather than "discover."
- Rule #4: Aim for specifics:
 - Use "FaceTime" rather than "video communication tool."
 - Use specific names, data points, and proof points, instead of sweeping claims
- Rule #5: Use transitions to:
 - Develop "micro" connections through your writing using words or phrases that connect ideas between sentences >>
 - Examples: As a result; although; while; because
 - Introduce additional evidence >>
 - Examples: Also, too, and, as well as, another, in addition, even more, equally, let alone
 - Compare multiple thoughts or ideas >>
 - Examples: Similarly, just like, likewise, by the same token, in a similar fashion
 - Contrast multiple ideas or thoughts >>

- Examples: On the other hand, at the same time, although, even though, even so, despite, that said, granted, regardless, admittedly, instead, but, though, still, yet, while, whereas, otherwise
- Describe something that happened, happens, or will happen during a certain time frame >>
- Examples: Previously, back then, nowadays, today, sometimes, once, this time, during, immediately, next, then, following, soon, while, meanwhile, simultaneously.
- Spell out a complicated concept >>
- Examples: In other words, to clarify, to rephrase, to put it another way, that is, actually
- Emphasize a thought or idea you just previously stated >>
- Examples: In fact, of course, indeed, even, more importantly
- Summarize or conclude a paragraph >>
- Examples: In a nutshell, to put it briefly, altogether, after all, ultimately
- Segue into the explanation of an abstract concept or idea and ground it in an example >>
- Examples: To illustrate, to demonstrate
- Rule #6: Always, always, always vary your sentence structure. Read it aloud to discover issues with sentence structure that make your writing boring, dry, unengaging, and low-quality.

Check out this example by Gary Provost:

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring.

The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen.

I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals-sounds that say listen to this, it is important. So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

- Rule #7: A powerful intro can make even the most unoriginal topics and ideas feel new and fresh.
- Stick to ONE and only one big, main idea in the intro. Carry it all the way through.
- What the reader needs is a strong hook to lure them in. A hook is how you grab a reader's attention through framing and phrasing. It could be a one-liner bold sentence designed to "trigger" your reader. Or it could be an intriguing statistic or research point that contradicts common assumptions. Here's more on hooks.
- What a Writer needs is an angle: a way into the story. The hook is how you stylistically frame that angle or way in. The only way to find and develop this article is through strong research. This allows you to look at a topic from a particular angle. Your intro is where you begin unfolding that angle.
- Some other ways to find a way "into" a topic could include using a recent news development as an example starting point or developing a metaphor to describe a situation that's very specific to the reader's experience.
- If at any point you find yourself starting with "Imagine..." abort the mission and start again - you're going down the wrong path.

- Rule #8: Conjure poignant images that resonate with the audience. You don't need to exaggerate or be outlandish with those images. Sensationalism is sloppy. Honesty is professional - and that's a combination of accuracy and presenting a balanced viewpoint that examines an idea from multiple angles, once that idea is introduced.
- Rule #9: Trust is way more valuable than "authority"
- If you make a claim about a product, or a statement about how X idea results in Y outcome, you need to back it up with a clear and illustrative example that showcases the claim or statement in action.
- When using a statistic that's sourced from a survey, a study group, a journal, a research body or project, an association, a publication, a data report, etc., mention the name of the report within the sentence.
- Maintain journalistic integrity. Provide proper attribution of all quotes, industry statistics, and other third-party sources. DO NOT link to, or even use as examples, content or results by competitors.
- Rule #10: If possible, work in some of the following writing devices to generate interest
 - Sound repetition to create sentence fluency, like:
 - Alliteration: the same letter or repetitive sounds at the beginning of adjacent words, or closely connected words., (example: "Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered weak and weary, sweet birds sang)
 - Consonance: repetitive sounds produced by consonants (e.g., "The fair breeze blew, the white / foam flew / The furrow followed free...")
 - Assonance: repetitive sounds produced by vowels (e.g., "I must confess that in my quest I felt depressed and restless.")
 - Use word repetition to create rhythm:
 - Anaphora: repetition at the beginning (e.g., "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right...")
 - Epistrophe: Repetition at the end (e.g., "Government of the people, by the people, for the people...")
 - Polyptoton: Repetition of the root (e.g., "No end to the withering of withered flowers...")
 - Rule #11: Be positive: avoid negative language.
 - Avoid telling users what they can't do. For example, replace "You can't continue without signing in" with "Sign in to continue".
 - Rule #12: Use terms the target audience will understand.
 - If you don't know what terms the audience will understand, you don't know them well enough to write for them.
 - If you don't know, research. Write it down. Make a list.

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DON'T...

- Rule Take
 - the shortest route to your idea » Don't use superfluous expressions.
 - Instead of "at this moment in time", use "now"
 - Instead of "by virtue of the fact that", use "because"
 - Instead of "in the absence of", use "without"
 - Instead of "was of the opinion that", use "thought" Instead of "with the exception of", use "except"
- Rule #14: Take readability for granted - it affects quality and how valuable the reader finds your work.
 - Aim for grade level 6 or 7 (refer to Hemingwayapp.com).
 - Use contractions

- Don't overuse phrasal verbs
- Don't embellish with complicated or unnecessary words
Don't use buzzwords, like "hyper-automation," "power up," or "supercharge"
- Don't confuse readers with lengthy sentences
Don't use formal language or words that are hard to understand
- Avoid vague words such as "maybe," "might," or "some."
Don't keyword stuff
Don't use jargon
- Don't use overused words or phrases, like: ["seamless integration" and "real-time, data-driven insights"]

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Avoid dramatic metaphors and flowery language

- "amazing," "artisanal," "beautiful," "dynamic," "industry-leading," "innovative," "memorable," "intuitive," "natural," "powerful," "revolutionary," "unique," and everyone's favorite, "it's never been easier." > Replace these with data or concrete ideas.



Grammar and usage rules

Abbreviations

Spell out any abbreviations or acronyms the first time they are referenced, then put them in parentheses (eg "you can purchase shares in a real estate investment trust (REIT) to diversify your portfolio."). Avoid abbreviations or acronyms that the reader would not quickly recognize.

U.S., D.C., with periods. EDT/time zones, AI, people's initials, without periods. Spell out state names.

Bullet points

Match your items; they should be all verbs or all nouns, all sentences or all not-sentences.

N periods after bulleted list items unless they are complete sentences

Capitalization

In general, capitalize proper nouns and beginnings of sentences. Don't capitalize anything that's not a proper noun.

Colon

If what comes after a colon is a complete sentence, it needs to be capitalized.

Commas

with all punctuation, clarity is the biggest rule. If a comma does not help make clear what is said, it should not be there. If omitting a comma could lead to confusion misinterpretation, then use the comma. We do use serial commas, in exception to AP style.

Commas go inside of closing quotation marks.

Common spellings

American English spelling by default. Use merriam-webster.com, not dictionary.com.

Email: One word, no hyphen. Ebook, ecommerce, etc can follow the same rule Healthcare, daycare, nonprofit are one word.

Web: web, website, webcam, webcast, webpage, web address, web browser, internet

Compositions

Capitalize the principal words in the names of books, movies, plays, poems, operas, songs, radio and TV programs, works of art, events, etc. Use italics or quotes when writing about them online.

Culture/inclusion

Black, Hispanic, Latino/a/e/x, Asian. Capitalized, adjectives, not nouns ("a Black person," not "a Black"). Asian American, etc. are not hyphenated. gay, transgender, white person. Uncapitalized, adjectives, not nouns.

Generally "person with a disability" but align with the client.

Data

Singular. The data is sound; the data has been collected.

Dates

Use figures for date, abbreviated month when used with a specific date. So: January 2018 but Jan. 2, 2018. Use ans without an apostrophe to indicate spans of decades or centuries: the 1900s, the 1920s.

Styling for specific dates is Oct. 7, 2016, not 10/7/2016 or 7/10/16, et

Months longer than 6 letters can be abbreviated to their first three letters in dates, but not whel talking about the month itself. ('I went in September," not "I went in Sep.")

Em dashes

Em dashes — these things — have a space on both sides. Make sure what's typed is actually an em dash (—) and not an en dash (-) or a hyphen (-).

En dashes

For ranges of numbers, and no space on the sides. (eg "Dogs live 10-17 years." "He went to school from 2004-2008.")

Gender

For general specific/hypothetical people: "they" not "he or she" or 's/he"; thier" not his or hers. If you're talking about a specific person, use what they go by. Identifying someone by the singular pronoun 'they' is fine. This still takes a plural verb though in sentences. "They are going to their mom's place," not "they is."

Headers

H1s use title case. H2s and below use sentence case. No periods at the end. (Follow client's writer's guide of course, which may require something different)

Title case: How To Prevent Burnout In 7 Easy Steps

Numbers are numerals in title case, and everything but a/an/the starts with a capital letter.

Sentence case: How to prevent burnout in seven easy steps

Sentence case is "normal capitalization, and normal rules for numerals.

Numerals

In general, spell out one through nine. Use figures for 10 or above.

Exceptions:

Use figures for academic course numbers (eg German 101), addresses including highway numbers, ages, dates including years and "the 19th century" or "in the 60s," decimals and percentages, the whole-number portion of fractions (eg "2 and two-thirds"), measurements including distances and dimensions, scores including court decisions, and money.

Spell out fractions less than one (eg "one-third") and at the start of a sentence (a year at the start of the sentence is still a numeral, eg "2016 was awful but 2020 was worse.")

If it's millions/billions, say 2 million, 10 million, 185.6 billion, etc., unless it actually requires the precision of "14,785,011."

Years are 2016-20, unless it crosses a century mark (don't do 1985-16).

Otherwise, use the entire number. 11,000-18,000, not 11-18,000.

Passive voice

This is when the subject is acted on, instead of acting. "The ball was thrown" instead of "Someone threw the ball." Grammarly will suggest changing it, but unless the client specifically calls it out (e.g., EdX) it's probably fine. "The shares can't be used for voting purposes" is passive but "Nobody can use the shares for voting" sounds weird.

Time

Use the 12-hour clock followed by a.m. or p.m. Place a space between the number and the a.m./p.m. Avoid the redundant "10 a.m. this morning."

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Formatting and other miscellaneous rules

Sentences between headers and images, except featured images.

In addition to banned sources from the topical resource packs, check the client writer guides to see who they consider competitors and don't link to those either.

Image alt text is for SEO and for screen readers. For SEO purposes, it should be something like

"List of reasons to invest" not "invest_reasons_list."

Some clients may be more focused on the screen-reader usage of it. If you're describing an image for a screen reader, think of what would be useful if you couldn't see it or see it very well.

"Photo of bride and groom. He is smiling and laughing, but she has cake on her face and is angry." "List of reasons to invest, same as text below."

If the editing checklist is missing, the basics are:

- Word count matches, +/-12.5% (250 words out of 2000)
- Headers match style guide
- Meta title <60 characters, meta description <160 characters
- Frase score matches or beats the competition
- 3+ internal links (none to competition)
- Minimum of 2 statistics per article
- Statistics cannot be older than 2 years old unless highly relevant