# UX Guide Content Style Guide

Version 0-4

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This document will help content creators for the User Experience Guide website write in a way that best meets the needs of the site’s visitors and follows the brand guidelines for the site.

## About the UX Guide

Our goal is to help people working on health information technology projects in the Veterans Health Administration create products that are easy for clinicians to use — so they can provide the best care to Veterans.

We do this through **education about human-centered design** in health IT and by providing **tips and** **tools** they can use in their daily work.

## General Guidelines for the UX Guide

To help our audience achieve their goals, we create content that is:

* User-focused
* Easy to understand
* Accurate and complete
* Grammatically correct

## Plain Language and Readability

VA web managers must ensure all home pages, major entry points, and navigational elements of their VA websites are written in plain language.

In addition, VA internet pages should be written at a 7th grade level. All web pages must be written at the most elementary level of understanding for the subject matter presented.

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# Voice and Tone

A key to a great experience on our site is using a consistent voice and appropriate tone. Voice and tone are sometimes confused or thought to be interchangeable terms. As this document defines them, they aren’t the same, and they aren’t interchangeable, but they’re related.

* **Voice** is the personality of the site.
* **Tone** is the mood of that personality, depending on the type of content being used or surrounding circumstances.

### Voice

The adjectives we use to describe the UX Guide voice include:

* Clear
* Helpful
* Informative
* Respectful
* Understanding
* Positive

### Tone

The mood of the site’s content can be:

* Enthusiastic
* Appreciative
* Inspiring

Guard against being:

* Condescending
* Chatty
* Aloof
* Negative

# Preferred Uses and Quick References

Here are some terms that are relevant to our site or often raise questions.

## Preferred Uses and Terms to Avoid

* **UX**: Use the phrase "user experience (UX)" in the first instance and "UX" in subsequent mentions on every page in which UX is mentioned.
* Also keep an eye out for places where "UX" is redundant and leave it out.
* **Clinical reminder**: The alert that clinicians receive; the output of CRDT.
* **Clinical reminder dialog template**: A template used by CACs to generate clinical reminders; involves checkboxes and radio buttons. Also referred to as CRDT.
* **Tool**: In the text, try to use specific terms that are in users' language (i.e. template, checkbox, etc.), rather than the generic term "instrument."
* **Heuristics**: Use the term "rules," except in the name of the method itself.
* **Artifacts**: Avoid using “artifacts.” Instead use "example outputs.”
* **Click here**: Avoid this phrase for link text. Users know that underlined text is a link, so this directive doesn't add any value. Use the link text to set up an expectation of what the user will get on the page it links to.
* **Pain points**: Avoid “pain” in this context. Can have a different meaning in medical environment.

## Quick References

### Grammar and Style

* Use the serial (Oxford) comma.
* Health care, not healthcare
* Preventive, not preventative
* Veteran: Capitalize in all references
* Use second person: you, we

### Naming References

* VA Health Systems
* U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
* Veterans Health Administration

## Common Acronyms

* CAC: Clinical Applications Coordinators
* CHIO: Chief Health Informatics Officer
* CIDMO: Clinical Informatics and Data Management Office
* CPRS: Computerized Patient Record System
* CRDT: Clinical reminder dialog templates
* EHR: Electronic health record
* HFE: Human Factors Engineering
* VistA: Veterans Health Information System Technology Architecture

# Style Guidelines

In addition to the guidelines in this document we use the following resources:

* [Merriam-Webster Online](http://m-w.com/)
* AP Stylebook

**Acronyms**

An acronym is a word formed from the initial letter of each of the major parts of a compound term. (Ex: UX, HCD)

* Spell out the words that an acronym stands for on the first reference on a page, followed by the acronym in parentheses.
* In an FAQ that uses anchor links, spell out the acronym on first reference in each answer.
* Avoid acronyms in page titles when possible.

**Ampersands**

Do not use an ampersand unless it is part of an official title.

**Bold**

Use a bold typeface to place emphasis on a word or phrase. When used in moderation, bolding can make long paragraphs easier to digest. Don’t use all caps for emphasis.

**Capitalization**

* **Title case:** All the major words are capitalized — everything except articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. Question marks and exclamation points are used where appropriate.
* **Sentence case:** The first word of a sentence is capped, along with all proper nouns. For example: Debbie knew something was wrong immediately.
* **Fragment case**: The first word of a fragment is capped, along with all proper nouns. No period at the end of the sentence. Question marks and exclamation points are used where appropriate.

**Commas**

Use the serial (Oxford) comma. It helps reduce potential confusion when reading.

**Dashes**

Use m-dashes, n-dashes, and hyphens as established in the AP Stylebook. Don’t use a double dash. Put spaces around dashes.

**Footnotes**

Footnotes are notes of reference, explanation, or disclaimer that are placed below the main content on a page.

* Footnotes should be placed at the end of a page, below the main content.
* Use numerals, beginning with 1, as references.
* References should be superscript.
* Footnotes are page-dependent.
* Do not place information that's important to the user in a footnote. Important information should be in the main content.

**Italics**

Use italics for names of books and publications. For emphasis, use bold instead.

**Lists**

A list is a grouping of content that contains a series of similar items.

* Lists should be bulleted or numbered, depending on the content. If items are sequential (such as step-by-step instructions), use a numbered list. If the items are non-sequential, use a bulleted list.
* There should be a paragraph break after the end of a bulleted or numbered list.
* Capitalize the first letter of the first word of each bullet point.
* Use periods after complete sentences, but not after phrases.
* In cases where mixed sentence construction (full sentences and phrases) can’t be avoided, put a period at the end of each line.

**Phone Numbers**

* Format should be XXX-XXX-XXXX
* For numbers that require an extension use: XXX-XXX-XXXX, extension XX.
* If a phone number includes letters, show the numeric equivalent in parentheses immediately following the alphanumeric number.
* Include area code with all phone numbers.

**Navigation Labels**

Navigation labels are the text that denotes the elements in the top and left navigation.

* Use title case.
* In general, do not use articles in navigation labels.

**Numbers**

* Spell out all numbers zero to nine. Use numerals for 10 and higher.
* Exceptions:
* Dates: September 15, 2020 (no “th” on 15)
* Ages: 8 years-old; he was a 60-year-old man
* Percentages: 15 percent (percent is always spelled out)
* Temperatures
* Spell out first, second, third, etc.

**Page Titles**

Page titles are located above the body content within a page, and are usually represented by a larger font. They are similar to headlines, and function as "road signs" that indicate what page a user is on.

* All pages should have a page title.
* Page titles should help users orient themselves.
* Page titles should be meaningful and avoid "marketing-speak."
* Use title case.
* Do not include a period at the end of a page title.
* In most cases, the URL should match the page title exactly.
* Use “and” rather than “&”.

**Subheads**

Subheads are headings for subdivisions of text within a page.

* Each subhead should reflect the main idea of the content within its subdivision.
* Subheads are effective at breaking up long pages of text.
* Use title case without period at end. If a question, end with question mark.
* Use “and” rather than “&”.

**Time References**

* When referencing a spread of time, include hyphen with no spacing before or after:
* 6-9 p.m.
* 11 a.m.-noon
* 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
* 12 p.m. is always noon.
* Avoid relative time references, such as soon, last year, or now. Instead use specific dates.

# Web-Writing Guidelines

When people visit our site, they are focused on achieving a goal. We can help them by writing in a style that makes it easy to find what they are looking for.

Some people will read every word, but most will only skim the content looking for the answer they need. To help scanning, you should:

* Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
* Use active voice.
* Use as few words as possible without losing meaning.
* Use subheads to organize content on the page.
* Use bullet when you have content that can be broken into a list.

## Web Elements

**Alt text**

Alt text is a text label for images. All images should include alt text.

* Alt text should be descriptive of what is in the image.

**Buttons**

Buttons are links that have a graphical treatment. When a user clicks on a button, they go to another page.

* Buttons should be used for actions such as "Search," "Continue," and "Submit."
* Use sentence-case capitalization.

**Forms**

A form is a page on which a user enters information, such as name, address, or phone number.

* Form labels should use sentence case.
* Instructional text should provide key information to help users avoid common mistakes and provide an expectation of what they will get from filling out the form (if necessary).
* Required fields should be clearly indicated.
* After a form is submitted, the user should see a confirmation message. The confirmation message should acknowledge the action, and include at least one link with an encouraged action for the user (such as “Go to home page”).

**Links**

A link is text or a graphic that is hyperlinked to another web page, a file, or another place on the same page (anchor link).

* Links are activated by user action, and can be embedded within the text or grouped as menu items.
* Link text should create an expectation of the content that users will receive.
* If you're referring to a page in a link, the link text should match the page title.
* Links should provide users with clear direction.
* If a link requires an application other than your Web browser to access content, it should be noted. (Ex: PDF, PowerPoint)
* Empty phrases such as "Click here" and "Follow this link" should not be used. These phrases do not tell the user what they will find, and won't positively impact search engine results.
* “Learn more” and “get info” link text should be followed by descriptors of where the link leads. Example: Learn more about user interviews.
* Limit the number of embedded links in each paragraph. Too many links dilute effectiveness and don’t give users clear expectations.
* Use text links for navigation within the page. Use buttons for actions (send, submit).

**Metadata**

Metadata is information about a Web page that is used for indexing and search engines.

* All pages must include page title tag information. This is the page title that appears in the browser's title bar.
* Use title case for page title tags.
* Descriptions should be full sentences and include strategic keywords describing the content on the page. Descriptions should be 160 characters at most.

**Tables**

A table is information arranged in rows and columns.

* Column and row labels should be title case.
* Content within tables should be sentence case.
* Try to avoid abbreviations in table labels and content, unless you are certain that the audience will understand the meaning without hesitation.

**Underlining**

In web conventions, underlined text indicates a hyperlink. Do not underline text for emphasis.

## Accessibility

Creating accessible content helps people who use screen readers, keyboard navigation, and other assistive technologies interact with our site. But the principles of accessibility help all of our site visitors.

Tips to improve accessibility include:

* Make each page title unique and descriptive of what’s on the page.
* Put the most important information first.
* Use subheads to divide the content into meaningful sections and provide structure to the page.
* Use meaningful link text that describes what users will get when they get when they click. Don’t use “click here” or “this link.”
* Use alt text for images to describe the contents of the image.
* Add transcripts to videos and audio files.
* Use plain language. Especially avoid technical jargon in instructions and error messages.
* Follow our web-writing guidelines to create content that is easy to read and understand.

# Resources

[AP Stylebook](https://www.apstylebook.com/)

[Merriam-Webster Online](http://m-w.com/)

[How People Read Online: New and Old Findings](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-people-read-online/) (nngroup.com)

[Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/plain-language-experts/) (nngroup.com)

[F-Shaped Pattern of Reading on the Web: Misunderstood, But Still Relevant (Even on Mobile)](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/) (nngroup.com)

[Writing for Accessibility](https://www.w3.org/WAI/tips/writing/) (w3c)

[plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/)