

# Digital Commons Content Standards and Style

April 27, 2015

## Default Style Guide:

AP Style Guide.

## Writing Philosophy

**Plain language** on government websites should be our goal, as described in [webaim.org/techniques/writing/](http://webaim.org/techniques/writing/) and [www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/).

## Voice

The voice of North Carolina government on the web should be human, friendly, and credible.

<b>Human</b>	Use first-person plural “we, us, our” to refer to the agency/department/office.
<b>Friendly</b>	Use the command tense when addressing the reader, and second person (“you”) sparingly.
<b>Credible</b>	Customers should be confident that they could come to our website and find the answers to their questions.

### Examples:

- **Good:** apply online
- **Not:** interested persons can click here to apply.
- **Good:** At the XYZ Division, we examine and maintain all ABC documents that are filed by more than 400,000 entities. Start the filing process by ...
- **Not:** The XYZ Division is responsible for the examination, custody and maintenance of the ABC documents filed by more than 400,000 entities. To file, the applicant must ...

## Metadata

### Page Titles

Page titles in metadata have this construction: NC [Acronym]: [PageHeading]. Try to keep within 55 characters, which is the maximum that Google will display in search results.

### Examples:

- NC DOT: Motor Vehicle Registration
- NC DCR: Calendar of Events
- NC DPS: Amber Alerts
- NC DHHS: About Us

### Page Descriptions

Page descriptions appear in search results and are a best practice, especially for landing pages. A good length is 100-150 characters. Page descriptions, especially ones that contain keywords and phrases, help search engine optimization.

## Outline Structure to Pages

Header tags used in proper outline order. Only one page header (H1 tag). Don't skip, for example from H1 to H3.

## Link Text

Link text should be meaningful out of context (not "click here" or "learn more"). Link phrase does not include the word "link" or "click here." When a button with text that is not meaningful out of context, such as "Learn More" is employed, it must be preceded by the same link with meaningful link text.

### Example:

- **Good:** Learn more about the ABC initiative.
- **Not:** Learn more about the ABC initiative here.

## Acronyms/Abbreviations

Spell out on first reference, except NC and US.

### Example:

- NC (not N.C.)
- US (not U.S.)
- Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)

## Capitalization

Never use all caps.

Initial caps for headings, except for prepositions and linking words.

## Conjunctions

- *and* not & (ampersand) in text and headings

## Dates

Abbreviate when space is an issue: Jan., Feb., Mar., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

Don't end days of the month with st, nd, rd or th: March 4 not March 4<sup>th</sup>

## Images

Each agency is responsible for maintaining a file of permissions and licensing of all photographs and images used on their website(s). For non-stock photographs of people, permissions are maintained by the agency.

## Alt Text for Images

Meaningful alternative text when a graphic is included that conveys meaning. Blank alt attribute when graphic is simply decorative. See <http://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/>.

## Matters of Style

### Ampersand

Use “and” rather than an “&” unless it’s a part of the branding, logo, or widely recognized name of whatever you are referring to, such as “BB&T.”

### Bullet points and steps

You can use bullet points to make text easier to read. Make sure that:

- you always use a lead-in line
- the bullets make sense running on from the lead-in line
- you use lower case at the start of the bullet
- you don’t use more than one sentence per bullet point – use commas, dashes or semicolons to expand on an item
- you don’t put “or,” or “and” after the bullets
- if you add links they appear within the text and not as the whole bullet

### Steps/Numbered Lists

Use numbered steps instead of bullet points to guide a user through a process (for example, “How to apply for a hunting permit”). You don’t need a lead-in line and you can use links and downloads (with appropriate markdown) in steps. Each step ends in a period because each step should be a complete sentence.

### Date ranges

Use “to” instead of a dash or slash in date ranges. “To” is quicker to read than a dash, and it’s easier for screen readers.

Always explain what your date range represents -- *e.g.*, “tax year 2013 to 2014” or “September 2013 to July 2014.” Date ranges can be the academic year, calendar year, fiscal year, tax year or some other range. This is why date ranges must be very, very clear.

If you’re comparing statistics from two different tax or financial years, use “Comparing the financial year ending 2011 and that ending 2012, there was a 9% decrease.”

### Dates

The formatting for dates in the website theme has not been finalized. However, the principles for date formatting in free text have additional considerations in terms of accessibility issues for the reading impaired.

Although they may change slightly once the theme is completed, the following guidelines will probably remain unchanged:

- use upper case for months -- *e.g.*, January, February
- when space is an issue (tables, publication titles, etc.) you can use abbreviations -- *e.g.*, Jan., Feb., Mar., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.
- use “to” in date ranges – not hyphens. For example: tax year 2011 to 2012; Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Nov. 10 to Dec. 21
- don’t end specific days of the month with st, nd, rd or th. For example: March 4, not March 4th.

## Email addresses

Write email addresses in full, in lower case and as active links. Don’t include any other words as part of the [MW1] .

## Hyphenation

Hyphenate:

- “re-” words starting with “e”( *e.g.*, re-evaluate)
- co-ordinate
- co-operate

Don’t hyphenate:

- reuse
- reinvent
- reorder
- reopen
- email

## Links

Avoid using “click here” in your text as a way to link to information. Use words that are already in your text as active links. For example:

*Our [boater’s guide](#) offers tips on how boaters can help protect water quality.*  
*not*

*[Click here](#) to download our Boater’s Guide to Protecting Water Quality.*

## Measurements

Use numerals and spell out measurements at first mention.

Abbreviating pounds to lb is fine – you don’t need to spell it out.

If the measurement is more than one word -- *e.g.*, “miles per hour” -- then spell it out the first time it is used with the abbreviation. From then on, abbreviate. If it is only mentioned once, don’t abbreviate.

## Money

- Use the \$ symbol – \$75.
- Don’t use decimals unless cents are included, For example use: \$75.50 but not \$75.00
- Don’t use “\$0.xx million” for amounts less than \$1 million.
- Write out “cents” in full (*e.g.*, “Calls will cost 4 cents per minute from a land line”).
- Currencies are lowercase.

## Numbers

For numbers one through nine, write out the word unless you’re talking about a step, a point in a list or another situation where using the numeral makes more sense. For example, “In step 1 of the design instructions...”

If a number starts a sentence, write it out in full (“Thirty-four hula-hoops were found in the researcher’s closet”) except where it starts a title or subheading.

For numerals over 999 – insert a comma (*e.g.*, 9,000).

Spell out common fractions, such as one-half. Use a % sign for percentages (50%).

## Ordinal numbers

Spell out first to ninth. After that use 10th, etc.

## Quotes

Use quotes in body text for direct quotations. In long passages of speech, open quotes for every new paragraph, but close quotes only at the end of the final paragraph.

You can use the block quote style for quotes longer than a few sentences. (Apply from the CMS editor to apply the themed appearance)

## References and Citations

References should be easy to understand by anyone, not just specialists. When writing a reference:

- use italics for publication titles, quotes for article titles
- write out abbreviations in full, for example “page” not “p”
- don’t use periods after initials or at the end of the reference
- If the reference is available online, make the title a link.

## Spacing after periods

Use only one space after a period ending a sentence, not two.

## Telephone numbers

Use this format: XXX-XXX-XXXX

## Times

- use “to” in time ranges – not hyphens, en rules or em dashes (e.g., 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. (not 10–11 a.m.)
- 5:30 p.m. (not 1730hrs)
- midnight, not 00:00
- use “a.m.” and “p.m.”
- do not use “am” and “pm” or “AM” and “PM”

## Titles

Titles should:

- be no more than 65 characters
- be unique, clear and descriptive
- use a colon to break up longer titles
- not contain dashes or slashes
- not have a full stop at the end
- not use acronyms unless they are well-known (*e.g.*, U.S.)

## Trademarks

Avoid using trademarked names where possible (*e.g.*, tablet, not iPad).

## Digital Commons

[Content Style Guide and Guidelines](#)

[About NC.Gov: Digital Commons](#)