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Skip to main content Tips for what to do and what not to do when writing for Harvard Library. This guide was created for Harvard Library employees, but we hope it's helpful to a wider community of content creators, editors, producers — anyone who's trying to communicate a message online.If you work at Harvard Library This is our website style guide. It helps us create clear and consistent digital content that's welcoming and useful for our users. Please use it as a reference whenever you're writing content for library.harvard.edu.If you work at another organizationWe invite you to use and adapt this style guide as you see fit. It — like our entire website — is available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.ThanksSpeaking of credit: Several other writing guides inspired this one. Those include: MailChimp's Content Style Guide, Harvard University Style Guidelines & Best Practices, 18F's Content Guide, Federal Plain Language Guidelines, and City of Boston Writing Guide. These are great resources for additional reading on the topic.Questions?We love to talk shop. If you have questions about this writing guide or the Harvard Library website contact the Harvard Library communications team at harvard_library@harvard.edu. With every piece of content we publish, our goal is to empower our users so they can use our services and tools to get their work done and discover new ideas. We do this by writing in a clear, helpful and confident voice that guides our users and invites them to engage with us. Our voice is: Straightforward Conversational Trustworthy FriendlyConfident Proactive HumanKnowledgeable Our voice is also positive — instead of rules and permissions, think options and opportunities. It's also welcoming and accessible to all audiences. The Harvard brand brings with it a lot of history. We want to highlight our association with the positive attributes — credible, trusted, secure, historic, bold. But we also want to do our best to break down barriers, which means overcoming other attributes some people may assign to Harvard, such as elite, academic, exclusive, traditional.Part of being credible, trusted, and secure is ensuring every bit of content we have on our website is up to date, accurate, and relevant to our users. The tips that follow in this guide will help us fulfill these goals. "Damn those sticklers in favor of what sounds best to you, in the context of the writing and the audience it's intended for." —Merrill Perlman, Columbia Journalism Review Before you start writing, ask yourself: Who is going to read this content? What do they need to know? What are they trying to accomplish? How might they be feeling? Put yourself in their shoes and write in a way that suits the situation. Remember: You're the expert, not your users. Put the most important information up top Users tend to scan web pages until they find what they need. Most people will only read 20 percent of a page. Use the "inverted pyramid" technique by putting the most important information at the top of a page. That's the section users are most likely to read. Say what you mean and avoid using figurative language, which can make your content more difficult to understand. Address users directly Use pronouns to speak directly to your users, addressing them as "you" when possible. If necessary, define "you" at the beginning of your page. And don't be afraid to say "we" instead of "the library." Instead of: The Harvard Library has staff members who can assist with research. We'd write: Our expert librarians are here to help answer your research questions. Be concise Shorter sentences and paragraphs make your content easier to skim and less intimidating. Paragraphs should top out around 3 to 8 sentences. Ideal sentence length is around 15 to 20 words. Using words people easily understand makes our content more useful and welcoming. Don't use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. Use the active voice The active voice supports brevity and makes our content more engaging. Using the passive voice deemphasizes who should take action, which can lead to confusion. It also tends to be more wordy than the active voice. Instead of: Overdue fines must be paid by the borrower. We would write: The borrower must pay any overdue fines. How to recognize the passive voice: If you insert "by zombies" after the verb and the sentence still makes sense, you're using the passive voice. It's not dumbing down your content. It can actually be harder to to make information simple and easy to understand. The truth is: even experts or people with more education prefer plain language. Be human Imagine your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-on-one, with the authority of someone who can actively help. Try reading your writing out loud and listen for awkward phrases or constructions that you wouldn't normally say. Better yet, have someone else read your writing to you. Large paragraphs of text can lose readers. Using subheads and bullet points is a way to help provide clear narrative structure for readers, particularly those in a hurry. Tips for breaking up your content: Add useful headings to help people scan the page. Use bulleted lists to break up the text when appropriate. Write short sentences and short sections to break up information into manageable chunks. "Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away ... Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there." —William Zinsser, On Writing Well Jargon and acronyms are often vague or unfamiliar to users, and can lead to misinterpretation. If you feel an acronym or a jargon term must be used, be sure to explain what it means the first time you use it on a page. FAQs We strongly discourage writing FAQs, or Frequently Asked Questions. Why? Because FAQs: If you think you need FAQs, review the content on your site and look for ways to improve it. Take steps to give users a better experience. Ask yourself: Is the content organized in a logical way? Can you group similar topics together? Is it easy to find the right answer? Is it clear and up to date? If people are asking similar questions, the existing content isn't meeting their needs. Perhaps you need to rewrite it or combine several pieces of content. Pay attention to what users are asking for and find the best way to guide them through the process. Linking users to PDFs can make your content harder to use, and lead users down a dead end. The Nielsen Norman Group has done multiple studies on PDFs and has consistently found that users don't like them and avoid reading them. Avoid using PDFs for important information you're trying to convey to users. Some supplementary information may make sense as a PDF — or something a user would need to print. If you must link users to a PDF, be sure to let them know. For example: Our pricing guide (PDF) provides estimates for various reproduction formats. Duplication If something is written once and links to relevant information easily and well, people are more likely to trust the content. Duplicate content produces poor search results, confuses the user, and damages the credibility of our websites. Before you publish something, check that the user need you're trying to address has not already been covered. With some exceptions, we're following Associated Press style guidelines on the Harvard Library website. Here are some common tips: Spell out abbreviations or acronyms the first time they are referenced. Avoid abbreviations or acronyms that the reader would not quickly recognize. Capitalization In general, capitalize proper nouns and beginnings of sentences. For nouns specific to Harvard University and other common academic uses, please refer to these Harvard-specific guidelines. Commas As with all punctuation, clarity is the biggest rule. If a comma does not help make clear what is being said, it should not be there. If omitting a comma could lead to confusion or misinterpretation, then use the comma. We do use serial commas. 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. Email One word, no hyphen. However, use the hyphen for e-book and e-reader. Data A plural noun, it normally takes plural verbs and pronouns. However, it becomes a collective noun and takes singular verbs when the group or quantity is regarded as a unit. Right: The data is sound. (A unit.) Also right: The data have been carefully collected. (Individual items.) Use figures for date, abbreviated month when used with a specific date. So: January 2018 but Jan. 2, 2018. Use an s without an apostrophe to indicate spans of decades or centuries: the 1900s, the 1920s. Headlines/Headers/Subheads Capitalize all words that aren't articles. Numerals In general, spell out one through nine. Use figures for 10 or above and whenever preceding a unit of measure or referring to ages of people, animals, events, or things. Use figures for: Academic course numbers, addresses, ages, centuries, dates, years and decades, decimals, percentages and fractions with numbers larger than 1, dimensions, distances, highways, monetary units, school grades. Spell out: at the start of a sentence, in definite and casual uses, names, in fractions less than one. Phone numbers 123-456-7890 Times am, pm, Lowercase, no periods. Avoid the redundant 10 am this morning. Web web, website, webcam, webcast, webpage, web address, web browser, internet Here are tips for Harvard-specific terms and other terms you may encounter more frequently based on the nature of our website. They're based on guidelines provided in the Harvard University Style Guidelines. Capitalize the full, formal names of: Departments Colleges and schools Offices Centers Institutions Buildings Residential houses Academic associations Libraries Programs Awards Scholarships However, do not capitalize names used informally, in the second reference. For example, when calling it the center, or the department. Example: The Science Center contains five lecture halls; you can reserve space at the center by submitting a room request. The exception is to capitalize College, School, and University when referring to Harvard, as well as the Yard. Always capitalize Harvard Library. Do not capitalize Harvard libraries. Be careful in referencing Harvard Library, so as not to give users the idea that the Harvard Library is a place. Titles Capitalize formal titles when used immediately before a name. Lowercase formal titles when used alone or in constructions that set them off from a name by commas. Use lowercase at all times for terms that are job descriptions rather than formal titles. Named professorships and fellowships are capitalized even following the person's name. Terms designating academic years and terms are lowercased, like senior, first-year student, fall semester Class titles Capitalize the name of classes. Course titles and lectures are capitalized and put in quotes. Example: June teaches Literature 101. Professor John Doe is teaching "The Art of Guitar Playing" this semester. Concentrations Concentrations are not capitalized. Harvard academic titles Unlike AP, use title case for named professors, like Jane Mansbridge, Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values. Treat all other academic titles as formal titles: capitalized when used immediately before a name. Degrees The preferred format is to spell out the degree. Capitalize an individual's specific degree, but do not capitalize when referring to a degree generically. For example: John Smith holds a Master of Arts in English. She is working toward her bachelor's degree. If abbreviating degrees, use capitalized initials with periods: A.B., S.B. Class Year When referring to someone's year of graduation, capitalize "class." Example: John Harvard, Class of 1977, was in town for a lecture. "Writing is an instrument for conveying ideas from one mind to another; the writer's job is to make the reader apprehend his meaning readily and precisely." —Sir Ernest Gowers, The Complete Plain Words

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