

<version 1 – Nov. 2015>

WEB COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

Appendix 1: Style Guide



Style Guide

We aim to provide a consistent voice and vocabulary across the entire county website. By following this guide, we can better serve our web customers with a consistent, direct style of writing.

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Headings

Headings and subheadings are sentence case.

→ Only capitalize the first letter of the first word and proper nouns.

Do not use end punctuation in your headings (most of the time).

→ You may want to use a question mark if your heading is phrased as a question, but avoid using periods to punctuate headings.

Headings are important for usability and accessibility on the web.

→ Organize your content under meaningful headings and subheadings.

→ Be clear with what you're presenting and what your audience can expect to know after reading your content.

Addressing the user

Our web content is often speaking directly to our

web visitors, so write as you would speak and be direct.

Address the user as 'you' when possible.

Example

- You can contact us by phone or email.
- We will process your application within 10 days.

Acronyms

Avoid using acronyms or abbreviations in the page title or headings.

Spell out acronyms and abbreviations on first mention (on every page), unless they are well known to everyone (e.g. FBI; NASA).

Symbols

Do not use the ampersand (&) unless it is part of a logo or department name (e.g. Public & Government Affairs).

- Use 'and' instead.
- Ampersands are difficult to read on the web.

Percentages

For percentages, use % symbol with number.

Example

- Write 30% instead of thirty percent.

Hyphens

Use hyphens in compound words to clarify meaning.

Example

- client-centered counseling

Use the word 'to' in time ranges rather than hyphens, en dashes or em dashes.

Example

- 5:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Dollars

Use dollar symbol and number to indicate dollar amount.

Example

- Write '\$20 million' instead of 'twenty million dollars.'

@ symbol

Reserve the @ symbol for email addresses. Do not use it in place of the word 'at.'

Capitalization and bulleted lists

DON'T USE ALL CAPITALS. THEY'RE DIFFICULT TO READ.

References to Clackamas County:

- Capitalize 'Clackamas County'—the two words together.
- Do not capitalize 'county' unless used on its own at the beginning of a sentence.

Boards, commissions:

- Always use lower case unless it's part of a proper title.

Example

- 'The Board of County Commissioners will review...' and 'the board will review...'

Use lower case for departments unless using full, proper name.

Example

- The department will be closed...
- The Department of Transportation and Development will be closed...'
- (Better yet, write 'We will be closed...' More on that below.)

Words in bulleted lists:

- Try not to use more than one sentence per bullet point.

- Do not use periods on bulleted lists with single words or simple phrases.
- Do use periods on bulleted lists with complete sentences.
- Only capitalize the first letter of the first word if the bullet begins with a proper noun or forms a complete sentence.

Example

- households below 60% median income
- Veterans Workforce Program
- reinstate 2 shelter care beds

Numbers

Use numerals for numbers (rather than spelling them out)—even those under 10.

- Numerals are more concise and easier to read on the web.

Round large numbers.

Example

- Newly adopted budgets total nearly \$825 million

For numbers over 999, insert a comma for clarity.

Example

→ 8,500

Make sure sentences are written so they don't start with a number.

Phone numbers

Use the following format for telephone numbers:

→ 503-555-5555

→ 1-800-555-5555

Dates

Write out dates (most of the time).

When writing out dates, abbreviate the following months: January (Jan.), February (Feb.), August (Aug.), September (Sept.), October (Oct.), November (Nov.), and December (Dec.).

Example

→ We will be closed Nov. 11 for Veterans Day.

When writing just the month or the month and the year (without the day), write out the full month.

Example

→ October 2015

Use the following format for numerical dates:

10/1/2015.

Use the following format for fiscal years:

→ FY 2015-16

Time

Use periods with the abbreviations 'a.m.' and p.m.'

For top-of-the-hour times, do not include minutes.

Example

→ The meeting will begin at 3 p.m.

Quotation marks

Use quotation marks around exact quotes from people and the names of articles.

Italics

Use italics for emphasis (sparingly).

Use italics to highlight book, magazine and newspaper titles.

Measurements

Use numerals and spell out measurements at first mention.

Example

→ The plant receives nearly 12 million gallons

per day (mgd).

Email

Embed email links rather than listing the email address.

Example

- Use 'Email us' instead of 'Email: name@clackamas.us'

Use shorter format of email addresses:
name@clackamas.us.

- We have discontinued the use of the name@co.clackamas.or.us format.

Contractions

Use contractions to write in a conversational tone.

Example

- Use 'shouldn't' and 'haven't' instead of 'should not' and 'have not.'

Links

Do not use 'click here' or 'read more' links.

- This wording does not meet accessibility standards.
- Use descriptive links

Example

- Write 'See the full board agenda' instead of 'For the full board agenda, [click here](#).'

Do not list out URL addresses for links.

Example

- Write 'See the full board agenda' instead of 'See the full board agenda here: <http://www.clackamas.us/bcc/business/bcc20151008.html>'

Do not underline text for emphasis; underlined text can be mistaken for links.

Use of 'citizen' or 'citizens'

Use 'citizen' and 'citizens' only to refer to people who are or should be legal citizens of the United States or some other jurisdiction.

- 'Citizen' is NOT a substitute for 'public,' 'community,' 'people,' 'residents,' 'customers,' or other more inclusive terms.

Write gender-neutral copy

Avoid using masculine or feminine pronouns, unless referring to a specific person.

Example

- Before: Each applicant should submit his or her resume to Employee Services.

After: Job applicants should submit their resumes to Employee Services.

Or better yet: Submit your resume to our recruitment coordinator.

Do not refer to people as characteristics

Do not limit people to a single characteristic.

Example

→ Instead of 'the deaf' write 'people who are deaf.'

Always keep people at the forefront of your writing, rather than generalized characteristics.

Use a concise, active voice

Use a personal, conversational and active voice.

Less is more when it comes to online writing; keep it brief for your audience.

Example

→ Passive: Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Transportation and Development.

Active: We have proposed new regulations.

Use plain language

We follow the Federal Plain Language

Guidelines.

→ www.plainlanguage.gov

FAQs

Work to eliminate FAQs on our website. If you write content with user needs in mind, you shouldn't need a catch-all of questions and answers.

Other web writing best practices

Group like items in short paragraphs

Web readers are accustomed to 'scan, grab and go.'

Write web copy in short, 'chunky' paragraphs to aid readers through content.

Use the inverted pyramid style to put the most important content first.

References

GOV.UK Style Guide. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide>

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