Style Guide – [Company and Product Name]

Revised: [date]

***What’s this document for?*** This is a statement of [Company/Product’s] house style as it applies to online content. Ensuring all our online content is consistent, professional, and accurate builds our credibility in the market.

***Who should use this document?*** Everyone. Certainly, staff actually editing content directly in the website content management system will want to refer to this guide regularly. But all staff who produce anything externally-facing should use this guide as a tool to support their content planning, since one way or another it will almost all appear on the website, or refer people back to the website, eventually.

***So then this is the final word?*** Yes and no. Particularly in the online space, conventions of usage change over time. The scope of our online efforts will change over time, and the style guide will be updated to reflect these changes.

# Style Manual

## Writing style: Voice and tone

[NOTE: Edit this paragraph to reflect the nature of your organization’s business, the kinds of content on your website, etc.]

[Website] contains many different types of content: magazine and news articles, press releases, marketing and promotional copy, instructions and help documents, biographies, blog posts, etc. The proper voice and tone for these different types can vary. Usually, the type of content dictates the tone and voice quite clearly: Blog posts are informal and conversational while news articles use journalistic conventions, for example.

In general, most staff writing copy for the website will be writing copy that is promotional or explanatory in nature- it promotes a product or viewpoint, or describes how to use a tool.

For this kind of writing, keep in mind that the attributes we want our site to embody are: [Replace the list with brand attributes for your product]

* Approachable
* Conversational
* Personal

Of course, we want our content to be professional, but when you’re writing, think about how you’d explain something to a customer in person, with other customers and potential customers listening, and translate that to your writing. You can be conversational while also being professional.

When in doubt, remember Facebook’s content principles:

1. Keep it simple.
2. Get to the point.
3. Talk like a person.

Consider these examples: [Edit examples to reflect actual use cases in your organization’s content]

* Avoid constructions like “[Company] is excited to announce…” or “[Company] would like to thank…” The reader does not care that we are excited. Just announce. If we want to thank someone, we should just thank them.
* Make sure you’re announcing the real news. “Award nomination form now available for download!” is not exciting or interesting, but what you can do with that form is. Instead of talking about the mere fact that a file has been put online, say, “Have a colleague doing great work? Nominate them now for professional honors!”
* Avoid things like “Please read this important information.” While it’s true that users often don’t read, using text (that they’re already unlikely to read) is not a solution.

Finally, refer to [this checklist from the Center for Plain Language](http://centerforplainlanguage.org/5-steps-to-plain-language/) to help you ensure your content is clear, useful, and to-the-point.

## Grammar and usage

For general grammar and style questions, the *Chicago Manual of Style* [pick your preferred style manual] is the primary reference.

The official reference for spelling and usage is the [*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*](http://ahdictionary.com/) ([www.ahdictionary.com](http://www.ahdictionary.com)). [Pick your preferred dictionary.]

**Note:** Press releases may follow AP style rather than Chicago style at the discretion of the External Communications Department. Other content originated by EC should follow Chicago style.

### Commonly-needed usage rules:

[Edit/add/remove these based on common inconsistencies you find in your content, common questions your content creators have, etc. The idea of this section is to knock out the biggest issues so everybody doesn’t have to constantly be digging around in big published style manuals and has the obvious stuff at their fingertips. DON’T FORGET: You may need a section for the proper, brand-approved ways of referring to your organization’s products and services.]

**Chicago-specific styles:** We use the serial, or Oxford comma: “Jane purchased pain reliever, bandages, and antibacterial ointment at her local pharmacy.”

One sentence after a period. Never two.

**Academic degrees:** Omit periods in abbreviations of academic degrees (PhD, PharmD, MBA).

Degrees that are written out should be lowercase (master’s degree). Never use “Dr.” before a name.

**Time:** In running text, spell out units of time (second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year). In parentheses, virgule constructions, tables, or charts, use abbreviations (s, min, h, d, wk, mo, y).

Specific times should be written with “am” and “pm,” lowercase, no periods, with a single space preceding. For example, “4:00 pm” rather than “4:00 P.M.”

**Junior, Senior:** Do not use commas to separate “Jr.” and “Sr.” from name or with Roman numerals after name (John Kennedy Jr.; John Kennedy II).

**Legislation:** Bills in U.S. Congress: S. 100 [Senate]; H.R. 1000 [House of Representatives]

Bills in state legislatures: SB 100 [senate]; HB 1000 [House of Delegates]; AB 100 [Administrative]

Laws: PL 585; 21 USC 341 [U.S. Code]; 21 CFR 101 [Code of Federal Regulation]; 65 CFR § 101

**Military Titles:** Follow *AMA Manual* style [pick your preferred style reference] for members of the U.S. military (section 14.2). Grades and ranks should precede the officer’s name. The Army, Navy, and Coast Guard use all-capitalized titles, while the Air Force and Marine Corps use only initial caps.

**Political Titles:** Examples: President Barack Obama; Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS); Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-KS); Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado. Use parentheses and a hyphen for political party and state.

Leave titles lowercase unless immediately preceding the person’s name: the president, the vice president, the emperor, the senator, the congressman, the representative, the state senator; “Secretary of State John Kerry,” but “the secretary of state.” However, “Member of Congress” should always be capitalized.

Always use full name on first reference—do not assume that the full name is understood—and last name or title thereafter. For example, second reference to Sen. Jerry Moran would call him “Moran” or “the senator.”

**Plurals of abbreviations:** Form plurals of acronyms by adding “s” without an apostrophe (e.g., “several OTCs”).

**State abbreviations:** Use standard two-letter postal abbreviations when a state follows a city name, but spell out state names when they are standing alone. Be sure to set off the postal abbreviation with commas—before and after.

There are several exceptions to this rule. The following cities do not need to be accompanied by the state in original [website] content:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Atlanta | Indianapolis | Philadelphia |
| Baltimore | Iowa City | Phoenix |
| Boston | Jersey City | Pittsburgh |
| Buffalo | Las Vegas | Sacramento |
| Chicago | Los Angeles | St. Louis |
| Cincinnati | Miami | St. Paul |
| Cleveland | Miami Beach | Salt Lake City |
| Colorado Springs | Milwaukee | San Antonio |
| Dallas | Minneapolis | San Diego |
| Denver | Nashville | San Francisco |
| Detroit | New Orleans | Seattle |
| Honolulu | New York | Virginia Beach |
| Houston | Oklahoma City |  |

**Acronyms and Abbreviations:** Provide the acronym or abbreviation immediately after the first reference if using it two or more times in a unit of content. Omit the abbreviation if there is only one reference. Do not use “the” before acronyms when used as a noun in a sentence. In a headline/title, acronyms and abbreviations may be used without expansion as long as expansion is provided early in the content. If using the full expansion in the title or headline, do not use the acronym or abbreviation with it; just use it in the body copy.

Many common abbreviations can and should be used without expansion. Use the following without expansion: [Fill in the table with common domain acronyms you can reasonably expect your readers to know. If it’s government, perhaps the abbreviations of major agencies. If it’s health care, it may be commonly used medical acronyms.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

**Brands and Trademarks:** Capitalize drug brand names, but lowercase generic names.

In general, when using another company’s trademarks in promotional copy (as opposed to news copy), care must be taken to ensure we are adhering to the brand and trademark guidelines for that company. At a minimum, the appropriate TM, R, or SM symbol should be applied to the mark at the first non-title reference, and we should ensure that we are displaying any logos of corporate partners in accordance with their brand guidelines- approved colors, the most up to date version of the logo, proportional image, no bits of the image cropped off, etc.

When in doubt, Googling “[company name] brand guidelines” will usually yield the information we need, but if not, the contact at the partner company may be of assistance.

**Contact information and website addresses:** Never introduce a telephone number or e-mail address with a phrase like “reached by phone at” or “by e-mail at.” Instead, assume the reader can identify a telephone number, email address, or web address: “Contact Jane Smith at 202-555-1212 or [jsmith@gmail.com](mailto:jsmith@gmail.com).”

In general, web addresses should be embedded in anchor text (clickable link text) rather than spelled out. The exceptions are for domain names and major landing pages that need to be branded independently as products, and citations inscholarly articles. In those cases, only include the http:// portion of a web address if the address doesn’t begin with [www.](http://www.)

Anchor text must be descriptive and related to the content being linked. Avoid the use of anchor text that explains how to use a link- no “click here,” “click the following link,” and similar constructions. Remember that users are often scanning for interaction cues, so we must give them anchor text that is informative, rather than a series of “click here,” “click here,” and “click here.”

**Exception:** On a page or in an e-mail message with a single call-to-action (an e-mail calling people to register for Annual Meeting, for example) a “Click here to…” construction may be used provided that the entire sentence is linked.

**Titles** of article type content (including for newsletters like Focus and Legislative and Regulatory Update) should be sentence case, rather than title case.

## Text formatting, visual styling, and spacing

The website has a number of pre-set styles built in to the editor. These include multiple levels of subheadings, a block quote style for long quotations, bold, and italics. No other forms of text styling should be used.

In particular, avoid the use of:

* Text colors not applied through the existing style palette. Text may not be colored red for emphasis, for example.
* Underline. This makes the text look like a link, which is confusing when it is not clickable.
* All caps. IT LOOKS LIKE SHOUTING; DO NOT DO IT.
* Extra hard returns to add spacing. All the section headers have the correct amount of preceding and following spacing applied already. Do not add additional blank lines with the return key.

## Downloadable file usage (PDF, PPT, DOC, etc.)

In general, text and image content for website users should be presented as text and images entered directly into the content management system. But from time to time, we will need to make downloadable documents available to our users. When considering whether this approach is appropriate, consider the following:

* Is the information intended to be printed out by the user? (i.e. reference materials, white papers)
* Is the document intended as a template or sample for the user to download, edit, and reuse? (i.e. sample presentation templates, membership recruitment materials for student chapters)

In general, documents not intended to be edited by the user should be presented as PDF. Documents intended for use and editing by the user (templates, forms, etc.) should be presented in their native file format- DOC, PPT, etc.

Caution should be exercised in preparing these files to ensure maximum usefulness:

* **Respect the user’s resources:** Users downloading these files on their mobile devices may be using their cellular data plans, which cost money on a per-megabyte basis. Users printing the files will be doing so using either their personal printers or their (perhaps poorly-maintained) office printers. Every kilobyte, unnecessary page, or extraneous image is therefore a waste of the user’s financial or other resources. Be ruthless in reducing waste. Blank or nearly-blank cover pages, high-res images, design elements that would take a lot of toner to print should all be reduced if not eliminated.
* **Findability:** Ensure that the PDF’s metadata fields (Title, Author, Summary, etc.) are properly filled out. This helps search engines index PDFs and Office documents.
* **Descriptive content:** All PDF content should be associated with at least a short bit of text content that explains what it is, for whom it is intended, and why that audience would find it useful or interesting. Lists of links to PDF content are neither useful nor engaging, so this little bit of effort will go a long way to ensure that your content can be found and used by its intended audience.

## Image guidelines

[Edit this section based on your requirements- if your site background is not white, you’ll want transparent PNGs. If you’re using a lot of headshots provided by the photo subject, you’ll want guidelines for having the images resized before upload. Consider the technical needs of your site’s platform, as well as the skills of your content creators and any internal resources they may have to ensure that imagery is produced professionally.]

Images must be uploaded in PNG format with a transparent (not white) background. To create PNGs, ensure that they are saved in PNG-8 format, between 64 and 256 colors for illustrations to save on file size. You may use a higher color setting for photographic images if needed to preserve image quality.

Images used on our site must be images we have the rights to use- stock photography, images created in-house, images where the owner has given permission for them to be used, or licensed through the Creative Commons or public domain. Do not use general image search tools like Google Images to find art. If you need stock, please work with [art department?] to purchase appropriate images.