

Writing for the Web

A style guide for Northern Ireland
departments and agencies



An online version of this guide is also available at <http://online.bds.nics.gov.uk/acc/styleandtone>

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Introduction

About the Web style guide

Northern Ireland government aims to achieve a **professional and consistent style and tone** on the web. The Web style guide is an essential tool in achieving this objective. Much of the content currently on government websites, for example, corporate plans, consultation documents, reports, and other publications, was not written specifically for the Web. These documents are important, but should not be the primary content of a website.

This guide will **help you to write content specifically for the Web**; to help your readers understand what you do, use your services, and find the larger reports and documents they may want from time to time.

Who the guide is for

The style guide is aimed at managers, writers, and editors of Northern Ireland government and related public websites and intranets.

The information here is intended for non-technical users and technical terminology is avoided where possible. If you have any questions about the technical aspects of your website, your department's web manager will be able to help you.

Guidance on accessibility

Guidance has been prepared on the standards to be met to make sure that government websites can be accessed by people with disabilities. This can be found at <http://online.bds.nics.gov.uk/acc>

Guidance on corporate identity

The corporate identity manual for use by all NI departments and their agencies can be found at www.northernireland.gov.uk/identity

Information on how the identity should be used on websites is in section 3 of the manual.

How people read on the Web

People read differently on the Web. They are impatient, so they scan read, their eyes running quickly over the text. It's harder to read from a screen than from print, so people like shorter pieces of content. Writing for the Web involves being clear and concise at all times. You need to write simply. You need to get to the point as quickly as possible. This Style Guide is about helping you do just that.

Style and Tone

Readers are very action-oriented when they come to your website. It is much easier to engage them with the second person voice – YOU. Where possible, write content that directly relates to the needs of your readers. Avoid starting a heading or sentence that begins with the name of your department or the name of some initiative. Rather, focus on what the benefit is for the reader.

When writing for the Web you must always seek to get the reader's attention as quickly as possible. Assume that the first question everyone asks is "What's in it for me?"

The core characteristics that Northern Ireland government websites should exhibit include:

- ◆ clear, simple and unambiguous language;
- ◆ content that is informative and useful;
- ◆ content that is concise and to the point;
- ◆ content that is authoritative but friendly;
- ◆ content that is action-orientated.

Clarity is the single most important characteristic your content should exhibit. If it is not absolutely clear to you, don't publish it. Simple writing is not simplistic. Simple writing is hard work. Make sure your content is always informative. What will the reader know after reading what you have written?

People will not read long documents on the Web. You've got to keep your content concise and to-the-point at all times. Be ruthless with editing and chop away all those unnecessary sentences and paragraphs.

You need to strike a careful balance between a tone that is authoritative and formal and one that is friendly and engaging. If the tone is too formal, it can be off-putting. However, if it's too informal, it may not come across as credible and authoritative. Using a second person voice helps to create a friendly tone, but don't get too friendly. Avoid colloquialisms and humour.

Keep content action-orientated. Writing for the Web is about writing content that is linked. A link gives a reader an opportunity to act. You haven't written Web content until you've written its links. Always ask the question, "What do I want the reader to do as a result of reading this content?"

At the end of every piece of content there should be at least one choice of action, such as:

- ◆ read the full story;
- ◆ fill out the form;
- ◆ get further information;
- ◆ join a newsletter.

Writing effectively for the Web

Writing for the Web is not the same as writing for print because people read differently on the Web. The fact that people scan read on the Web has an impact on how we write:

- ◆ web documents
- ◆ headings
- ◆ summaries
- ◆ sentences
- ◆ paragraphs
- ◆ list and bullet points.

Web documents - Web is different from print

A web document is a document that has been specifically written for the Web. It is not the same as a document written for print and then converted into PDF or HTML. Just because you turn a print document into a PDF or translate it into HTML does not mean you have created a web document. It certainly does not mean that you are writing for the Web.

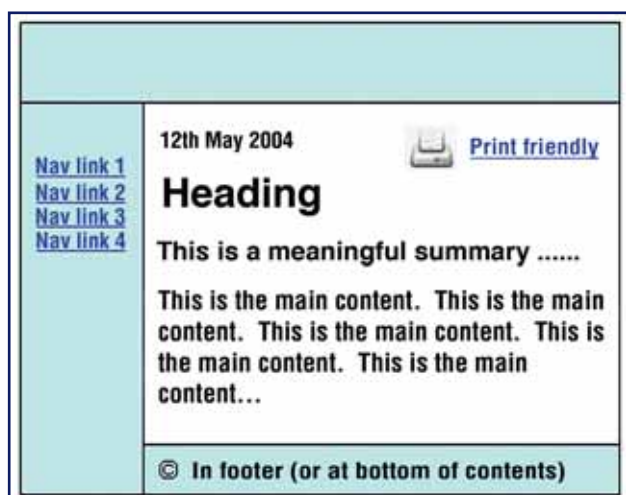
It will be necessary from time to time to place print documents on your web pages. However, try not to overdo it, try to prepare content specifically for your website. For example, if your reader needs to find quickly a telephone number, send an email, get a brief overview of a service, or find out the closing date for a grant application, they don't want 'print' content. They want content they can find quickly and which gives them the facts and the ability to act.

Web documents should be as short as possible. Five hundred words or less is ideal, however, certainly no more than 1,000 words should be used.

Documents shorter than 500 words

- ◆ Give all documents a heading, summary, and body text. See Figure 1.
- ◆ Text should have high contrast, ideally black on a white background, making it easier to read.
- ◆ The font and relative sizes of headings and body text will be controlled by the style sheets and templates in use for your website. Your web manager can advise.
- ◆ If a heading or summary is used to publicise a document on the homepage, directly replicate it on the document page.
- ◆ If a document is to be dated, place the date at the very top of the document.
- ◆ Place the heading under the date, after a paragraph break.
- ◆ If copyright information needs to be published, place it at the end of the document. Otherwise, place copyright in the footer of the webpage.
- ◆ Printer-friendly versions are recommended for all document pages. In most cases this will be built in automatically to templates, however, if in doubt, please see your web manager.
- ◆ Place 'printer-friendly' links at the beginning and end of the document.

Figure 1: Document Structure



Documents between 500 and 1000 words

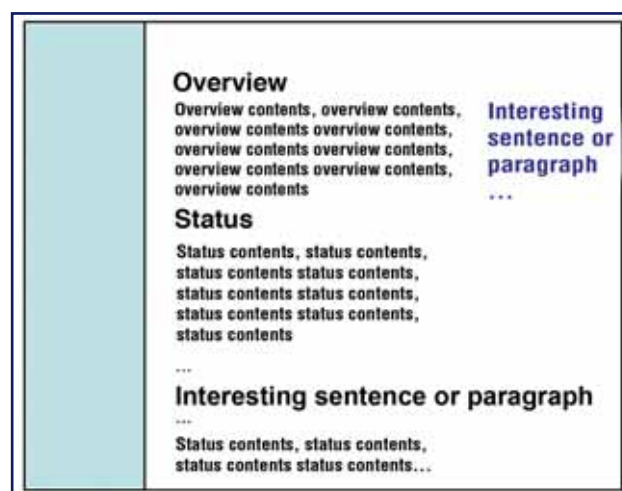
Follow guidelines for documents of less than 500 words, but also use **subheadings** to create structure and in-document navigation, and consider using **pull quotes** to catch attention and encourage further reading.

- ◆ **Sub headings and in page contents** should be included every four or five paragraphs. Provide in-page table of contents from headings and use a bulleted list of links to the appropriate heading. This should be placed under the main heading and preceded with a title e.g. 'in this document'. See Figure 2.
- ◆ **Pull quotes.** Select an interesting sentence further down in the document (every 500 words or so) and place to the right of text, three to four paragraphs above where it exists in the text. Use colour for emphasis - but ensure strong contrast. See Figure 3.

Figure 2: Subheadings



Figure 3: Pull quotes



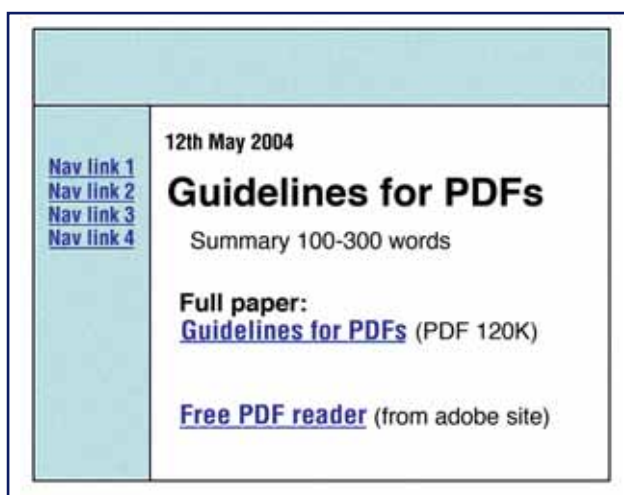
Documents longer than 1000 words

People rarely read a document over 1,000 words on screen - they will tend to print it out.

- ◆ Treat documents of this size as a print document and publish it as an Adobe PDF. For Intranet you can also use Word or other formats. See Figure 4.
- ◆ For the PDF document, also write a summary document which should appear on your web page with a link to the PDF document. This could be the executive summary taken from the document (NB: It should not be another PDF). The summary should contain:
 - a heading;
 - 100-300 words summarising the larger document;
 - date information - if appropriate;
 - copyright information - if appropriate.
- ◆ When **linking to a PDF**, use the heading for the document as the link text. Also, you should always indicate type and file size after the link ie. (PDF 20KB) and provide a link for the free Adobe PDF reader.
- ◆ For very large documents provide the full document, and split it into chapters and sections with separate PDFs. Remember: large file size = long download time.

It is accepted that most government websites need to include PDFs, however a website that is dominated by them looks unprofessional. To most readers it will feel like it was thrown together in a quick-fix manner. Remember, content that is specifically written for the Web is much more effective and accessible for the reader. In particular, don't publish content that is less than 1,000 words in PDF unless there is a compelling reason.

Figure 4: PDFs



Headings: make clear and informative

The heading is the most important piece of text you will write. If the heading isn't powerful and descriptive the reader will probably hit the back button.

See Figure 5.

- ◆ Keep short - aim for maximum eight words.
- ◆ Use keywords. The heading is the description of what the document is about. Thus it is very important to get the essential keywords that describe the document into the heading. It is OK to remove certain prefixes, e.g. 'the', 'a' from headings.
- ◆ Capitalise first word only - this makes it easier to read. Proper nouns are excepted from this rule.
- ◆ Write for how people search, using the words that people would enter into a search engine.
- ◆ Be direct and clear:
 - Describe content succinctly.
 - Use key words and phrases from the document.
 - Avoid being clever, using puns or word plays.
 - Make headings self contained so they can be understood if seen alone.
 - If used on pages to publicise document the heading text should be used as the link.

Figure 5: Headings

Poor: Minister X's announcement on the next stage of the review

Good: Post primary review: Minister X announces next steps

Poor: Maternity decision announced

Good: New Belfast maternity hospital for Royal Hospitals

Poor: Electricity consumers make the switch

Good: Electricity consumers get new voice in General Consumer council

Summaries: include good, short summaries

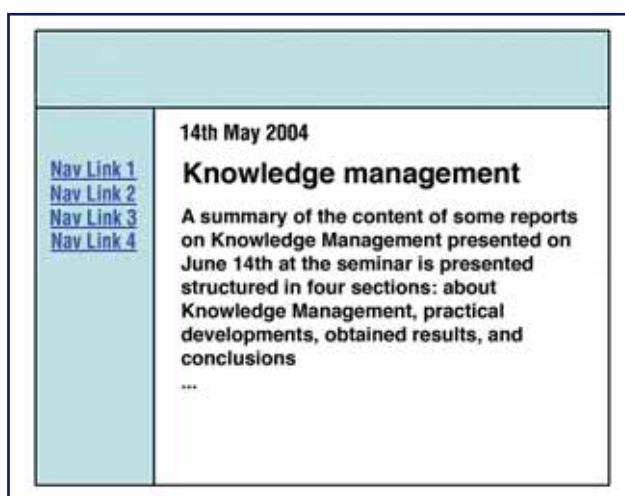
Every document should have a summary - a summary sells the rest of the content and makes you want to read more. See Figure 6. Summaries have many benefits:

- ◆ People scan read on the Web and the summary tells the reader if the document is of interest to them.
- ◆ They can be used for description metadata. This is an important type of metadata that search engines use.
- ◆ A heading and summary can be placed on the homepage to promote the document.
- ◆ Many search engines give emphasis to the first 25-30 words on a webpage. This is generally the summary.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Keep short - aim for maximum 50 words.
- ◆ Aim for clarity and succinctness.
- ◆ The summary should be information packed: who, what, where, when, how? It should give a clear idea of what the rest of the document is about.
- ◆ Make it self contained, as it may have to stand alone - for example on a search results page or home page.
- ◆ When a summary appears on another page, for example the home page, link it to the full document via the heading and with a link at the end of the summary.

Figure 6: Summaries



Sentences: make short and simple

Sentences should be short. A long sentence leaves the reader out of breath and requires a lot of focus, attention and comprehension. The shorter the sentence, the easier it is for people to read. See Figure 7.

Sentences should be simple. Using complex words and convoluted phrases is rarely the sign of a good writer. Avoid colloquialisms, humour and pet words or phrases. Remember, write for your reader, not for your ego. Keep it clear, keep it simple, keep it short.

- ◆ Keep short - aim for maximum 15-25 words.
- ◆ Avoid complex sentence constructions that use dependent clauses.
- ◆ If it is possible to cut a word, always cut it.
- ◆ Never use a foreign phrase, scientific word, or jargon if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- ◆ Keep sentences active, and where possible, write in the second person, i.e. 'you'. Remember that the objective of web content is to encourage action.
- ◆ Make sentences self contained as they may have to stand alone, for example, on a search results page or home page.
- ◆ Use single spacing between sentences.

Figure 7: Sentences

Poor: It is not limited to land use planning but recognises that policies for physical development have an important bearing on other matters such as developing a strong spatially based economy, a healthy living environment and an inclusive society which tackles inequalities relating to health, education and living standards.

The previous sentence is 48 words long. It could be more effectively written as:

Good: It is not limited to land use planning. It also recognises that policies for physical development have an important bearing on other matters. These include developing:

- ◆ a strong spatially based economy;
- ◆ a healthy living environment;
- ◆ an inclusive society which tackles inequalities relating to health, education and living standards.

Paragraphs: make short, get your main point in quickly

Readers scan the first sentence of a paragraph, looking for the key idea. If they don't find it, they are likely to skip to the next paragraph. Therefore, it is important to get your central point across in the first sentence of the paragraph. See Figure 8.

- ◆ Keep paragraphs short. Aim for maximum 50-70 words - roughly four sentences. The longer the paragraph, the more difficult it is to read.
- ◆ Leave a line between each paragraph.
- ◆ Get the main point across in the first sentence.

Figure 8: Paragraphs

The Centre, core funded by ESRC and jointly hosted by the University of Manchester and UMIST, draws upon the expertise of colleagues from the Faculty of Economic, Social and Legal Studies, the Manchester Business School, the Centre for Policy Research in Engineering, Science and Technology (PREST) and Centre for Research on the Management of Technology (CROMTEC) its parallel organisation in UMIST. This research is also enhanced by our collaborative work with many international scholars who are associate fellows in CRIC. My co-Directors are Professor Rod Coombs, Professor Jeremy Howells, Professor Ian Miles and Professor Alan Warde.



The Department is one of the key channels through which the Northern Ireland Executive is working towards a vision of a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society.

It is responsible for third level education, training and a range of employment measures, all aimed at giving the people the skills, knowledge and opportunities to work.



Lists and bullet points: construct properly, use liberally

Numbered lists and bullet points are well suited to scan reading – you are encouraged to use them. See Figure 9.

- ◆ Use a colon to introduce a list only when the text following the colon does not flow naturally from it.
- ◆ Flow is normally broken by phrases such as ‘the following’ – avoid using these phrases.
- ◆ If the list items are fragments, not full sentences, they should start with a lower case initial and have no end punctuation.
- ◆ If the list is splitting up a long sentence, each list item should end with a semicolon, except for the final one, which should end with a full stop.
- ◆ If the list items are full sentences they should start with a capital letter and have end punctuation.

Figure 9: Lists/Bullets

Good examples:

The colours to be used are

- ◆ red
- ◆ brown
- ◆ orange

People are action orientated on the Web.

They want to

- ◆ find a telephone number;
- ◆ send an email;
- ◆ get a brief overview of a service.

Links: make meaningful, place appropriately

A fundamental difference between web content and print content is linking. After writing a piece of content ask yourself what the links and actions are that the reader might choose after reading it? Most content should have two or three associated action links.

- ◆ Write a link to read as much as possible like a heading, it should be meaningful if seen in isolation – see Headings section.
- ◆ A link must behave like a signpost, indicating what content the reader will get if they click it. See Figure 10.
- ◆ Text in links is given special priority by search engines, so try to get appropriate keywords into your links.
- ◆ Avoid link text such as 'click here', 'find out more', 'download now' – these make no sense when read out of context, for example by a screen reader.
- ◆ Be wary of placing links within body text, this can disrupt readability. The best place is often at the end of the document. They may also be placed near the top of the document (in the right column). Also repeat them at the end of the document. See Figure 11.

Figure 10: Links

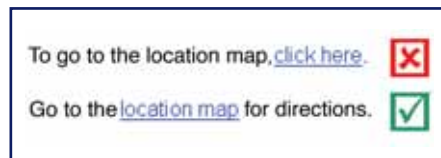
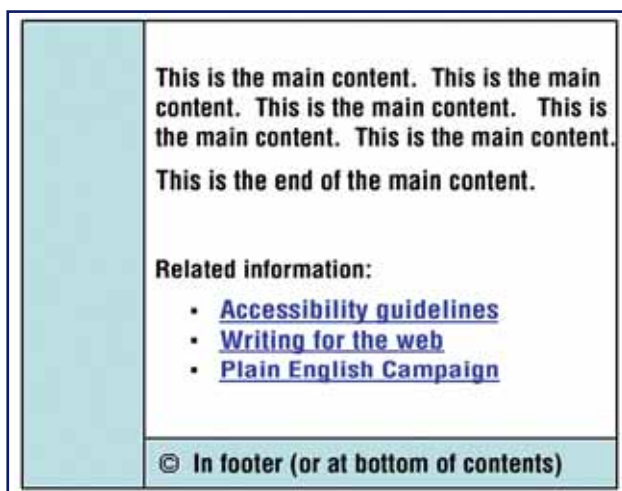


Figure 11: Placing links



Searching: use metadata to enhance content for good search results

Metadata is descriptive information about web content and other forms of electronic records. It is the Internet-age term for information that librarians have traditionally put into catalogues. Metadata consists of a set of descriptive fields which should be completed by authors when they create web content. This will enable searches to be performed and ensure the rapid discovery of relevant content.

- ◆ Always enter metadata when creating content.
- ◆ Make sure keywords used throughout the content reflect the keywords people would use when searching for that content.
- ◆ Make sure that the title metadata is unique for each page. It should consist of 10 to 15 words. If an index of keywords is provided, include terms from the index in the title.
- ◆ Provide meaningful and unique description metadata - this will add value to many search engines as they index description fields and display them on the results page.
- ◆ Write a good summary of the web page – see Summaries section on page 12.
- ◆ Include keywords in links.

Images: as small as possible, always with alt text

Be careful with the use of images and graphics. Images add substantially to the page size, making the page slower to download. Remember that people hate to wait on the Web and will quickly abandon if the page takes too long to download.

- ◆ Keep as small as possible. If larger then consider 'thumbnail' images - smaller images linked to their larger high resolution counterparts. See Figure 12.
- ◆ Provide appropriate white space between any images and text.
- ◆ If copyright for an image is different from the copyright for the page imbedded copyright in the image itself, or place directly under the image.
- ◆ All images must have appropriate alt text. See section 7.1 of the accessibility guidelines for guidance. See Figure 13.

Figure 12: Thumbnails

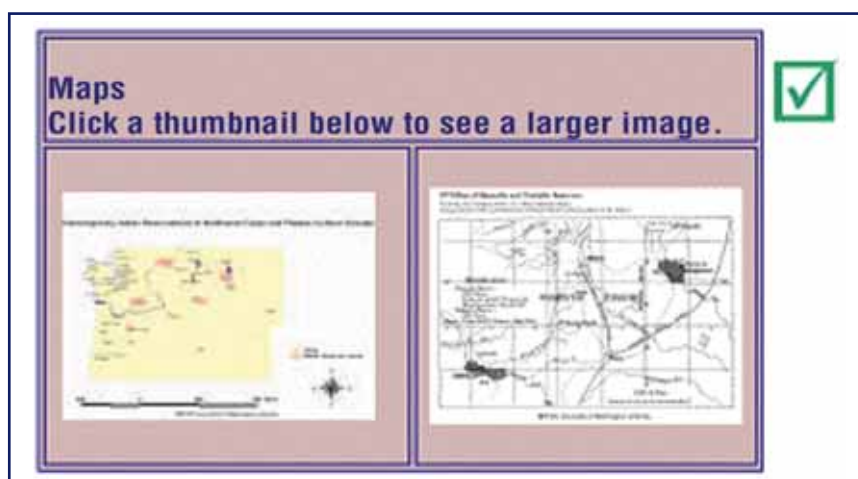
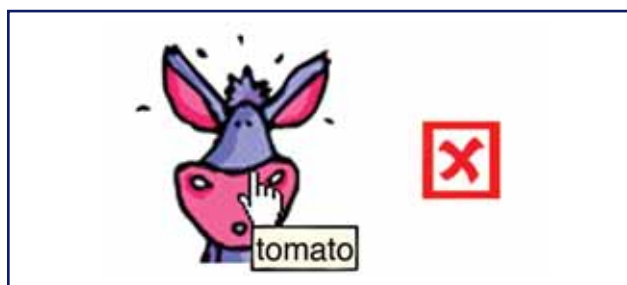


Figure 13: Inappropriate Alt text



Editing

Editing is quality control for content. Without editing, some content will be good, some will be poor. This style guide is an essential tool for both author and editor. It sets standards for content. If you are an editor, then part of your job will be to ensure that this guide is being implemented properly.

There are three fundamental types of editing:

- ◆ **Managing editing** - strategic editing.
- ◆ **Editing** - essential for all content.
- ◆ **Copyediting** - checking spelling, grammar and facts.

Managing editing

Managing editing is about looking at the website strategically and asking key questions such as:

- ◆ Are we really getting the right content for our readers?
- ◆ Are our readers' needs changing?
- ◆ Are the department's needs changing?
- ◆ Are our readers changing?

Editing

Every piece of content must be edited if it is to achieve a desired quality. There are four fundamental questions an editor must ask:

1. Is it necessary? The editor should always be on the side of the reader. One of the best things you can do for a reader is to save their time. Don't publish any more content than is required to communicate the message.
2. Is it clear? It's good to be brief but it's better to be clear and complete. If you have any sense that the content is not crystal clear, then rewrite it. Because if you - a member of the organisation - don't understand it, what chance has the reader?
3. Is there a simpler way to say this? Simple writing does not have to be simplistic. If there is a choice between a longer word and a shorter one, choose the shorter one.
4. Is there a shorter way to say this? Keep sentences short (15-25 words). Keep paragraphs short (50-70 words). Keep documents short (500 words or less).

Copyediting

Copyediting is about checking for grammar, spelling and facts. It is always the last stage in the editing process. There's no point in spell-checking a paragraph that may get edited out.

Tips for better editing

Someone else should edit your copy. It is not a good idea to edit your own content. It is particularly not a good idea to copyedit it. We get too close to our writing. We tend to see what we meant to write, not what is actually on the page.

However the reality is that because of time and cost pressure, you will often end up editing your own work. Here are some tips to help you get a better result if you have to self-edit.

- ◆ Take your time. If you rush editing you're bound to make mistakes. Allocate at least 30 percent of the overall writing time to editing.
- ◆ If you can, take a break between writing and editing.
- ◆ Aim for three edits. At minimum, you need an edit and a copyedit. However, a final read through the content is always advisable. (Some people edit their content 5-10 times.)
- ◆ Use your 'Word Count'. The word count is one of the greatest tools an editor can have. If you are commissioning content, tell writers you want a specific number of words. When self-editing, set a word count for yourself and stick to it. Never listen to that little voice in your head that pleads for more words.
- ◆ Avoid throwing away your first draft. Many writers find writing the first draft a difficult and arduous process. The impulse is to throw it away and start again. Don't. Instead, cut it by half. (There will nearly always be good ideas in the first draft.)
- ◆ When editing, change the environment, for example, print it out; read it aloud; change font size; or use double spacing. When we're editing our own writing, we tend to see what we think should be on the page, rather than what is actually there. So, we need whatever device we can find to break that habit.
- ◆ Role play. Pretend that you have received the copy from someone else. Better still, pretend that you've received it from your worst enemy and that you're going to show them how good content should be written.
- ◆ Edit first for style and tone. Ask these four questions:
 - Is it necessary?
 - Is it clear?
 - Is there a shorter way to say this?
 - Is there a simpler way to say this?

- ◆ Leave copyediting and fact checking until last. If you want to do a very thorough copyedit, print the content out. Get a ruler. Go to the end of the content. Read backwards through the text, moving the ruler up each line as you go. It makes the words and punctuation stand out.
- ◆ Copyedit tables, text in pictures, pull quotes, headings, etc, separately. It's easy to forget this sort of text, so set it as a separate task.
- ◆ Avoid major changes near the end of the editing process. This is what kills editing. If you've planned your document well, you should not have major changes near the end of the editing process. Avoid them at all costs.
- ◆ Proof your corrections. This is where many errors are introduced. Make sure your corrections haven't affected the sentence and paragraph they are in.

Tips for fact checking

- ◆ Print out the document and physically mark every fact that requires verifying.
- ◆ Ask questions such as "Says who?" and "Is the writer really sure about this?"
- ◆ If an organisation or brand is mentioned, check the relevant website to verify spelling.
- ◆ Avoid using secondary sources to verify facts, as you may be perpetuating an error.
- ◆ If you have to use secondary sources, find at least three and make sure they agree.
- ◆ Verify phone/fax numbers, web and email addresses. Copy the URL from the document and paste it into a browser. Ring the phone number.
- ◆ Make sure your 'millions' and 'billions' don't get mixed up.
- ◆ Don't mix-up your dollars, pounds and euros.

A to Z glossary and usage

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations should be capitalised. Abbreviations formed by using the first initials of separate words should not have any full stops between the letters.

Correct: DARD, US, UK, PDF

Make an abbreviation plural by adding an s. An apostrophe should not be used.

Correct: MLAs

Incorrect: MLA's

Spell out unfamiliar abbreviations at first mention, with the abbreviation immediately following in brackets, for example, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Thereafter, you may use the abbreviation only. However it is highly recommended that you avoid the use of too many abbreviations within your text. They can make it look technical and off-putting to the average reader. Abbreviations can also cause accessibility problems.

am/pm

Use small capitals and no full stops. Have a space between the number and the am/pm.

Correct: 7 am

9 pm

12 noon

ampersand (&)

Not to be used in general text unless referring to a company or brand where it is used as a convention.

Correct: Ernst & Young

apostrophe

Apostrophes are not to be used in plural words. A very common misuse of the apostrophe is with 'its' and 'it's'. Remember, when 'it is' or 'it has' is shortened, it becomes 'it's.' When you say 'its sales declined' do not use an apostrophe.

Correct: 1990s

Incorrect: 1990's

articles (the, a, an)

Use 'an' before words that begin with a vowel sound and words that begin with a silent h.

Correct: an employee
an honorary degree

Where the h is pronounced use 'a'.

Correct: a heavy burden

billion

For people or things, spell out billion. For money use bn. Leave a space after the figure.

Correct: £20 bn
1 billion people

bold

Avoid using bold within body text ie. text that is not a heading or summary. The exception is for press releases which use bold within the body of the release for ministerial quotes. Also, because many websites don't use underline for their links, some people may think bolded text is a link and try to click on it. Bold may be used in instructional text. For example, if you are providing information on how to subscribe and unsubscribe to an email newsletter:

To **subscribe**, please...
To **unsubscribe**, please...

buttons

Capitalise the first word only.

Correct:

A rectangular button with a 3D effect, containing the text "Enter your credit card details" in a sans-serif font.

When referring to the name of a button, use the capitalisation style that is used on the keyboard.

Correct: To delete text, press the Delete key.

capitals

Avoid overuse of capitals, as capitalised text is more difficult to read. For headings, only capitalise the first letter of the first word and other words that require capitalisation from a grammatical point of view.

click here

Do not use 'click here'. Instead, put the keywords into the link text. Using 'click here' causes accessibility problems; another reason not to use it.

Correct: Get more information on 2003 clean air study
Incorrect: Click here for more information

collective nouns

Government is a collective noun. As a general rule, collective nouns are treated as being singular.

- Correct:** The government is
The company closed some of its offices
- Incorrect:** The government are
The company closed some of their offices

currencies

Use the symbol for a currency on the website.

- Correct:** £200 m, \$200 m, €200 m

dates

The following conventions should be used for dates:

- ◆ 21 May 2003
- ◆ Monday, 21 May 2003
- ◆ May 2003

Don't abbreviate dates.

decades

Depending on the context, decades may use numbers or text. Remember not to use an apostrophe when writing the plural of a decade in numbers.

- Correct:** Seventies or 1970s

e.g., i.e., etc.

Avoid using e.g., i.e. Instead, use 'for example' and 'in other words'. The use of etc. should also be avoided.

ellipsis (...)

Use three dots for the ellipsis, even when dealing with text left out between sentences. Always leave spaces between the ellipsis and the preceding and following text.

- Correct:** Prior to the passing of the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 ... it was widely agreed that reform was necessary.

e

The letter e has become very popular in relation to all things Internet. For a while, it seemed that every word in the English language required an e before it if it was to seem modern. It is recommended that you use words such as eGovernment and eBusiness sparingly. If you are using e, do not use the dash and do not use a capital E. Avoid beginning sentences with e words.

- Correct:** eGovernment Unit
- Incorrect:** E-Business, e-Business, E-government

email

One word – email

email addresses

Keep email addresses in lowercase. Always make them a link. The general rule is to spell out email addresses.

Correct: john.maguire@xyz.gov.uk

Incorrect: John.Maguire@xyz.gov.uk

fewer, less

Use 'fewer' when dealing with things that can be counted and with plural nouns. 'Less' is used to refer to a degree or amount of effort - something measurable but not countable.

Correct: Fewer voters turned out to vote.

There was less of a welcome this time.

Internet, Net

Capitalise Internet (as there is only one). If you're writing for a young audience, you may use Net.

intranet

Lowercase (there are many intranets).

italics

Italics are difficult to read on a screen and should not be used.

its, it's

'Its' is the possessive form, 'it's' is a contraction of 'it is' or 'it has'.

kilobyte

Abbreviate as KB. Leave a space between number:

Correct: 232 KB

links

Links are a navigation aid, not a graphic design feature. Adhere to the following:

- ◆ Underline all text-based links as this makes them stand out better as links.
- ◆ Use blue for an unclicked link and purple for a clicked link.
- ◆ If you must use other colours, make sure you stick to just two.
- ◆ When writing links, remember to use descriptive keywords, rather than phrases such as "click here".

Technical Note: The most important factors for constructing good links are: consistency; easy to distinguish from normal text; visited links are easily distinguished from unvisited links.

See also section 4.3 of the accessibility guidelines.

log on, logon

The verb is to 'log on'. Logon is the adjective and noun:

Correct: You will need to use your logon name when you want to log on to the members section of the website.

measurements

Measurements should be expressed as numbers. Leave a space between the numbers and the measurement unit. There is no full stop and no "s" in the plural. Capitalisation is important. For example, Mb means megabit, but MB means megabyte.

Correct: 123 KB, 12 MB

megabyte

Abbreviate as MB. Leave a space between number

Correct: 12 MB

metadata

Metadata is the who, what, where, when and how of a particular piece of content. The principal function of metadata is to help people quickly find the content they are looking for.

Metadata has three core functions:

1. To help people navigate quickly and easily to the content they need. This is achieved through the development of an intuitive classification for your content. Make sure that the words you choose for your classification will be clearly understood by your target audience.
2. To help people to quickly find the content they need by providing them an effective search process. Critical metadata here is title and description.
3. To help people to quickly decide if they have found the right content. When someone arrives at a new webpage, they have certain questions they want answered quickly. These questions might include: Is this up-to-date? Who wrote it? What are the key points? Metadata in the form of date, author, heading, summary should answer these questions, where appropriate.

Technical Note: See also section 6.1 of the accessibility guidelines.

million

Spell out million for people or things. Use m after currency.

Correct: 10 million people
£5 m

numbers

As a rule, spell out numbers up to and including nine. Numbers over nine should be given as figures.

Correct: There are five major issues to understand.

Almost 40 members voted against.

If, in the same sentence, a mix of numbers above and below nine appear, use figures.

Correct: It is expected that 7 of the 20 members will abstain.

Avoid starting a sentence with a figure. Either rephrase it or spell it out (even if it's over nine). The spelling-out-below-10 rule does not apply to: figures containing decimals; dates; clock time; numbers with percent; units of measurement; sums of money; degrees of temperature; and building numbers. In these situations, always use figures.

Thousands are normally in digits, millions in words. Spell out million for people or things. Use m where money is involved. Use commas in four-digit numbers and upwards.

Correct: 1,000
10,000
10 million people
£10 m

offline

One word - offline

online

One word - online

parentheses and punctuation

If the parentheses enclose a full sentence, place the full stop or question mark for that sentence inside the parentheses.

Correct: The new Dublin-Belfast motorway takes an hour off the commute time between the two cities. (The Drogheda bypass is where most of the time is saved.)

When it is not a full sentence within the parentheses, the period or question mark should be left outside.

Correct: The chairperson agreed with the motion put forward (as did most of the other members).

percentage

Spell out percent for both web and email text.

Correct: 20 percent

phone, fax numbers

Telephone and fax numbers should be published as follows:

- ◆ Local: 028 4444 3333
- ◆ International: +44 (0)28 4444 3333

plug-in

Use a dash - plug-in

quotation marks

Put quoted text into double quotation marks. For quotes within quotes, use single quotation marks.

Correct: "We are very happy to be here tonight, and as our chairperson says, 'honoured and excited', by your staunch support."

Always use a comma before a direct quotation.

Correct: Then he said, "We have achieved much but there is much more to do."

Closing quotation marks should come after the full stop and before other punctuation.

Correct: "The Council", Mr Brown said, "can now deal with all energy issues and ensure that the consumer has a stronger voice."

In continuous quoted material that is more than one paragraph long, place opening quotation marks at the beginning of each of the paragraphs, but place closing quotes at the end of the last paragraph only.

quotations

Avoid using special formatting, such as bold or italics, for quotations (except for ministerial quotations in press releases). Italics are hard to read on a screen and bold looks like shouting.

Avoid altering quotations. As a rule, always reproduce exactly the wording, spelling, capitalisation, and internal punctuation of the original. The following are exceptions to the rule:

- ◆ Change quotation marks if required-from single to double and vice versa.
- ◆ Commas or full stops outside/inside the closing quotation mark may be moved if required.
- ◆ Change the initial letter to a capital or lowercase letter.
- ◆ Omit the final full stop or change it to a comma as required.
- ◆ Omit part of the quote by using the ellipsis (...).
- ◆ Correct obvious typographical errors in modern works (preserve idiosyncrasy of spelling in older works).

sentence spacing

Use a single space between sentences.

sexist language

Be careful in the use of "he" when referring to people in general. The use of he/she looks stilted, so it should be avoided as well. The best approach is to write in the second person or in the plural.

Correct: We are here to serve your needs, so please get in touch.

spam

Unsolicited, mass distributed email.

titles

Don't use full stops with titles.

Correct: Mr Jones, Mrs Brown, Ms O'Neill

Incorrect: Mr. Jones, Mrs. Brown, Ms. O'Neill

trademarks

Avoid the use of trademark symbols in body text, as it makes the text more difficult to read on a screen. Place such information in the legal section of the website, with a link to it at the bottom of the page.

underline

Never use underlining except for links.

webpage

One word - webpage

website

One word - website

World Wide Web, the Web

Capitalise World Wide Web. Use Web for short. Capitalise when referring to the noun.

Correct: The Web

Lowercase when using as an adjective.

Correct: web content management

NOTES

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