CHHS Web Writing Guide

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To some extent, communications are communications. The primary goal is to deliver your message to your audience clearly and effectively. But writing for the web is a two-way conversation. With today's range of devices giving people the power to view your content on their own terms, learning to write like an interaction designer is more important than ever.

All about goals

Content rarely has a singular goal. Most online content has a number of needs and audiences to balance. Here are some of the most important goals you'll want to consider:

- User needs
    - What do people who visit this page want to know? What questions do they have?
    - What did they come to our site to do? Is there a task they're trying to complete?
    - How should you balance/prioritize multiple audiences and varying goals?

- Organizational factors
    - What is the larger goal of your company or organization?
    - What sets your organization apart from the competition?
    - How does this piece of content fit in with the rest of your messaging?
    - How will you evaluate the effectiveness of this content?
- Site priorities
    - Where are we in the user path through the site? What's next?
- Brand standards
    - Are you making sure to keep brand tone/messaging style in mind?
- Search engine standards
    - Should this page be optimized for certain search keywords?
    - What metadata text will encourage users to click?
- Design requirements
    - Does this page need photos? What kind, size, and dimensions?
    - Are there graphic elements like callout boxes or pull quotes this layout could use?
- Functional specifications
    - Word counts for structured content areas
    - Relationships between content types in the CMS (from simply linking to pages to complex tagging requirements)

Think of your user's goals as the focus driving any specific piece of content, with organizational goals, site structure, branding, competition, and other factors as context framing and informing the process. *What* you say and do should be rooted in user needs, but *how* you say and do it is shaped by the other factors.

Also, keep in mind that one of the benefits of writing in the digital space is that unlike in traditional media, you can see what's working and what isn't and adjust accordingly. If your content isn't driving the desired user action (or getting the desired user feedback), rethink it and update it.

Internal vs. external audiences

Not all users enter the website from the home page. Any page of your site could serve as the front door, depending on a person's search query or what link they came across in an advertisement, reference article, or social media site. That means even pages that are designed for internal audiences must be understandable to a new user and represent the university well.

On top of that, audience research shows that prospective students don't just browse the admission section of the website, or the pages that belong to the department they're most interested in. Instead, they hop around looking at student life, academic department sites, the course catalog, career-related services, events and activities, and other seemingly internal content for clues on what their experience as a student would be like, to help them determine whether this school will be a good fit.

There's no need to "dumb things down" for newcomers. But you should provide important contextual cues by keeping site navigation simple and well-organized, spelling out acronyms on first reference, linking to pages with more detail, and aiming for a 10th- to 12th-grade reading level.

Your section of the site might not *only* be for prospective students, but it's *also* for prospective students, so take the time to look at your content through the eyes of someone who has never heard of your department before.

Voice and Tone

A university's brand voice works similarly to an individual's. Its tone changes according to the situation — lighthearted for an event announcement, to-the-point in a campus safety policy — but the voice is the personality that remains consistent.

Use brand and messaging guides to inform the institutional voice in your writing (what to say), and use the following to craft your tone depending on the context (how to say it).

First and second person

Web content should have a conversational tone, addressing readers as though you were speaking directly to them. Use the first-person plural ("we") to refer to the university, department, or unit, and speak directly to the user ("you") so your content will sound approachable instead of detached or impersonal.

Less like

Students who wish to change a major or minor offered under the Department of Biology must submit a completed Change of Major and/or Minor form.

More like

Use this form if you want to change a major or minor from our department.

When you're writing about a person in a feature story, news announcement, bio, or individual profile, use third-person voice ("he" or "she"). If you decide to use first-person voice singular ("I"), make sure it's obvious that it's a direct quote.

Contractions

Use contractions for common phrases, "we don't" or "you'll" or "it's." It may seem informal coming from an organization, but this small change makes text seem much more personal, and has become a common practice in web writing.

Plain language

Users come to your site with specific tasks already in mind, and information buried in long, difficult text slows them down and gives them the wrong impression of the university or your department. Research shows that online readers and even experts prefer plain, simple language to formal, academic-style text on the web.

Things to avoid

- **Internal jargon.** Avoid any terms you would need to explain to a new person.
- **Overused marketing language.** Use specific examples to make your point more meaningful, rather than clichés that could describe any organization, such as:
    - "our unique, innovative programs"
    - "world-class facilities"
    - "engaged faculty"
    - "cutting-edge research"
- **"Academic" words.** Avoid words like "utilize" or "methodologies" when a simple "use" or "methods" will do.
- **Acronyms.** Always spell out on first reference, and eliminate altogether when possible.

Layering content

If a page is so long it's obscuring what's important, break into several; if it's too short, combine with a related one. The key to layering content is to provide the right amount of information at the right time, guided by empathy for the reader. Read more about layering content.

- Be brief and efficient on routing pages that present readers with lots of choices to move quickly past.
- Provide a little more context on pages that describe the features of a program or process in more depth.
- Be thorough on pages that represent the end of their road, like instructions, explanations, and timelines.

Show, don't tell

Instead of telling people what you want them to think with adjectives like "exciting" or "groundbreaking," show them what you mean with proof points like rankings, participation rates, testimonials, and examples so they can come to those conclusions on their own.

For example, your mission page may say you believe in teaching through hands-on experience, but if your curriculum pages don't show what those experiences feel like — through photos, videos, testimonials, examples, and descriptions — you're missing an opportunity to practice what you preach.

Style and Mechanics

Consistency matters. CSU provides specific standards for writing content in the Writers Style Guide. Some common style errors to avoid when writing for the website are listed below. For information on how to apply the CSU brand, logos, and marks, see the Brand Style Guide.

• **academic degrees –** Capitalize full names of academic degrees and majors. Lowercase degrees in generic form: e.g., bachelor's degree in Psychology. Use periods in abbreviations, e.g., B.S. in psychology; M.B.A.

• **acronyms –** In general, avoid the use of acronyms. Spell out the organization's full name on first reference. Do not follow the first reference with an acronym, whether set off within parentheses or by dashes or commas. The acronym may be used on subsequent reference only if the acronym is easily identifiable. Consider your audience when determining how easily identifiable an acronym is.

• **addresses –** Abbreviate St., Ave., Blvd., but spell out Drive and Road when an address is written with a numbered address. Spell out all when it is just the street name, e.g., 123 Main St.; the house is on Main Street. Also, standard state abbreviation, NOT the postal abbreviation, should be used when a state name is included with the name of a city or town, e.g., Fort Collins, Colo., **NOT** Fort Collins, CO. Use the postal abbreviation only when a full address with a ZIP code is used. For correct standard state abbreviations, see the CSU Writers Style Guide under the heading "state names."

• **adviser –** Spell with an "e" in generic use.

• **alumni –** Use alumna for a woman; alumnae for a group of women; alumnus for a man; and alumni for a group of men or a group of men and women. Do **NOT** use the term alum.

• **benefited, benefiting –** Spell with one "t"

• **colleges, departments, offices –** Capitalize full official college, department, and office names. In all other instances, do not capitalize. The official format for names of CSU colleges and departments is "College of …," "Department of …," e.g., "College of Natural Sciences," "Department of Athletics."

• **Colorado State University –** Always spell out on first reference (and the logo doesn't count as first reference)

• **comma –** CSU style requires use of the final comma in a series. Use commas to separate elements in a series, including a final comma in a series of three or more elements. (This differs from AP Stylebook), e.g., She took Microbiology, Psychology, and Art History.

• **composition titles** – General rule of thumb is to italicize the titles of larger works (this differs from AP style), such as books, magazines, newspapers, movies, plays, TV shows, that contain smaller parts, such as chapters, articles, or episodes that would be enclosed in quotation marks.

• **dates –** Do not write dates as ordinals (e.g., May 10th). Correct usage is May 10. When using months with dates, the following are abbreviated: Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec. (When used with only a year, month should be spelled out: e.g., August 2017). The ONLY exception to abbreviating months is **formal** invitations.

• **email –** No hyphen. All email addresses should be written in lowercase.

• **first references –** Use full names on the first reference to a person; last name only on subsequent reference.

• **Game Day(s)** –When Game Day(s) is referring to days when CSU plays, it is to be two words, capitalized. This style was adopted Fall 2017 when the new stadium opened.

• **majors/minors/fields of study** – Capitalize the field of study in which a degree is awarded, but not the words major, minor, or concentration.

• **months –** When months are used with dates, the following are to be abbreviated: Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec. (But when used with only a year, the month should be spelled out: e.g., August 2011). The following months are spelled out in all uses: March, April, May, June, and July. The ONLY exception to abbreviating months in full dates is for **formal** invitations.

• **nonprofit (and most other "non-" words) –** One word, no hyphen. According to *AP Stylebook*, rule of prefixes applies when forming a word that does not have special meaning and can be understood if "not" is used before the base word. Use a hyphen, however, before proper nouns or in awkward combinations, such as "non-nuclear."

• **numbers –** There are a lot of rules about numbers. In general, spell out whole numbers one through nine and use figures for 10 and above. Always use figures for specific quantities such as dimensions, percentages, ages (of people and animals, but not inanimate objects under age 10), weights, distances, addresses, computer-storage capacities, and room numbers. When in doubt, look it up.

• **ordinals –** Do not use superscript with ordinals (e.g., 19th anniversary), and never use ordinals with dates.

• **over, more than –** Over refers to spatial relationships; more than (or greater than) is preferred when using figures and quantities, e.g., "More than 500 people attended" (not "Over 500 people attended.")

• **percent –** It's okay to use a percent sign with a number.

• **postgame, pregame –** One word, no hyphen

• **state names** – Write out names of states. The only exception to that is when postal abbreviations are used, and postal abbreviations are used ONLY when a state is written with a full address that includes a ZIP code.

• **student-athlete, student-veteran –** Hyphenate as a compound noun

• **telephone numbers –** Use area codes with all phone numbers. Place the area code in parentheses and use hyphens, not periods, without spaces to separate numbers: (970) 555-6565; (800) 555-6565.

• **times –** For time references, use figures with a.m. and p.m. and do not capitalize. Eliminate the ":00" in the time (e.g., 5 p.m., not 5:00 p.m.). Use noon and midnight in place of 12 p.m. and 12 a.m. respectively. When stating a range of times, be sure to include a.m. and p.m. as needed, but do not repeat if the times are in the same part of the day — that is, morning or afternoon. (e.g., 9-11 a.m.; 9 a.m.-5 p.m.). Also, no spaces on either side of the hyphen in a time range.

• **titles –** A title should be capitalized only when it appears before a person's name, ie: President Tony Frank. If it appears after the name, it should be lower case, e.g., Tony Frank, president of Colorado State University.

• **too –** "When the adverb 'too' (in the sense of 'also') occurs at the end of a clause or sentence, the comma preceding is omitted."

• **University –** Uppercase when it stands alone if it is referring specifically to Colorado State University. Use lowercase for college or department, unless they are being used in the full name, such as Department of Health and Exercise Science.

• **-wide –** Rule of suffixes; no hyphen, e.g., Universitywide, nationwide, statewide.

Formatting for online reading

People read web pages very differently from print materials, or even other digital media like email and newsletters. Even the best writing will fail if it's not formatted to accommodate online reading behaviors. These guidelines help users scan, comprehend, and retain information:

- **Make the page purpose clear within 10 seconds.** If users aren't sure they're in the right place, they're more likely to click elsewhere in the site or leave altogether.
- **Write less, say more.** A standard mobile screen fits approximately 100 words. Divide text into paragraphs of 50 words or less. Try to not have more than 100 words between headers. And you should almost never have sentences longer than 25 words.
- **One-sentence paragraphs are OK**. Really. And so is starting a sentence with "and."

- **Use inverted pyramid style**, much like a journalist (especially for content-heavy pages). Put the most important information right up top, using short, simple sentences.
- **Eliminate greetings, transitions, and framing phrases** like "the following information" or "welcome to the department." Say what you mean in as few words as possible.
- **Use subheads** that summarize what readers will find in the paragraphs below. Scan the page. Could the reader get a sense of what it says just by reading the subheads?
- **Convert sentences with lists into bullets**. It creates visual space that helps readers scan.
- **The first 11 characters** of a header are about all that users searching for information will read before skipping to the next element on a page. Use short, simple words in subheads, and start with the most important words. ("Program Requirements" rather than "Information About Pre-Application Requirements.")

Formatting for mobile

Even if you're just migrating existing pages into a newly responsive website design, you can eliminate some immediate problems that might render your pages poorly on a phone or tablet:

- **Convert files** that open in desktop-based programs. Recreate Microsoft Word docs and PowerPoint slides in HTML format. Use PDFs if necessary for stand-alone documents like student handbooks, but don't hide important information in files users have to download.
- **Take essential information out of the sidebars**. If something needs to display at the top of a page, include it in the main text field. Sidebars often get bumped down on a vertically stacked mobile screen.
- **Avoid using tables** for non-comparative information. They get mangled on mobile screens, so consider converting to a simple list, image, or PDF.
- **Check pages on a phone** if they have graphic elements or structured content areas, and flag any that need a designer's or developer's help. Infographics and special layout elements can cause disasters for mobile phone viewing.

Optimizing for Search Engines

It's important to consider how people will find the pages you publish. Sometimes users will browse to a page they want using navigation menus or type an address into their browser directly. But especially for new users, often they find your content by searching. There are some things you can do to make it easy for search engines to see your content, determine what it's about, and serve it up to people who might be looking for it on their search results pages.

Using their vocabulary

Recent updates to search engine algorithms mean that certain manipulation techniques like keyword "stuffing" are no longer useful, and may even count against you. But search engines still run on search

terms, so the single most important thing you can do to make a page visible is to use words that match your audience's search queries.

That means using vocabulary that your users would think to use on their own rather than proper names for programs and services, acronyms, or technical terms that may be more precise but don't match the way users would think about them (yet).

Think about what search terms your users would type into a browser to find your page. Create a list of common search terms for your department or school programs.

Where to put keywords

You can use internally branded words on the page, too, just make sure that you pair them with explanations that make sense to an outsider. The most important places to use search-friendly keywords in content are:

- Page titles
- URL paths
- Subheadings
- Link text
- Filenames for photos, PDFs, and other media assets
- Alt tags for images

The #1 rule is to write for humans first, search engines second. Focus on one keyword phrase per page, incorporating it into headers and every 100 words at most. Be careful not to make your page sounds like spam (which will turn away readers *and* hurt search engine rankings). Not all pages need optimization; the ideal length is 200-550 words, so you can repeat a keyword phrase three to six times "organically."

Metadata

Most content management systems have a separate tab or panel on the content entry screen where you can enter text explicitly for search engines to use in their rankings and results pages. Have a goal of getting metadata on every page, but start with the pages users will most likely search for such as program pages, cost and financial aid, contacts, instructions and forms, etc. Some of the process can be automated through the CMS, but it is important to check the most important pages with the human eye.

Meta titles: This is the link text that displays on a search result listing as well as the title that will appear in a browser tab. It should begin with a descriptive page title and end with a consistent branding construct, e.g., "Majors and Minors | [University Name]." Search results pages typically display up to 65 characters including spaces, so length can be tricky.

Meta descriptions: This is the text that displays beneath the link on search results pages and can convince users to choose you from the list of search results. Descriptions should be **unique for each page** and contain no more than 265 characters, though only the first 150 (including spaces) will display in results.

Alt tags: Alt tags are descriptions of an image or graphic. If you're optimizing a page for a particular keyword phrase, include the phrase in the alt tag if possible, as well as in the filename of the image.

Technical Specs of a High-Quality Web Photo

A good web photo should:

- Have adequate lighting that clearly highlights the subject.
- Have a resolution of 72 pixels per inch at the maximum size it will display on the page — usually at least 800 pixels wide for photos that will only display at small or medium size, and at least 2700 pixels wide for photos that are meant to stretch full width on a desktop view. To ensure optimal load times, maximum width should be 4000 pixels. JPG is the best format for images.
- Be saved in the correct color model: RGB (for screen viewing), not CMYK (for printing).
- Be saved in the right format: JPG for most instances and PNG when you need transparency.
- Be copyright-free, or taken by a staff member or contracted photographer. Avoid stock photos, which users are great at identifying and can harm your site's credibility.
- Contain alt text, caption, and a filename with descriptive keywords.

Pre-Publishing Checklist

STOP! Before you hit "Publish," make sure your page meets the following criteria.

Does this content...

Usability

- ❑ Fulfill an important user goal?
- ❑ Answer a question your audience might actually have?
- ❑ Include a link to more details, if there are any?
- ❑ Organize information in a way an outsider might expect?

Voice and Tone

- ❑ Communicate one of the university's key messages?
- ❑ Convey the brand appropriately?
- ❑ Speak in an active voice?
- ❑ Use a personal, human-to-human tone?
- ❑ Use "we" and "you" when speaking about the university or department?
- ❑ Explain acronyms?

Optimize for Web Reading

- ❑ Use headings, subheads, and bullet lists for easy scanning?
- ❑ Link to related content on other pages?
- ❑ Use descriptive keywords in links, rather than “click here” or “learn more”?
- ❑ Include a call to action?
- ❑ Include meta tags, alt tags, and a descriptive URL?

Check for Accessibility

- ❑ Images contain alt tags?
- ❑ Use of descriptive headings so a user can easily scan the page?
- ❑ All PDFs and Word docs are saved in an accessible format?
- ❑ Videos include captions and audio descriptions?
- ❑ A good resource is Accessibility for Content Designers and CSU’s Accessibility by Design