



Web writing standards

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Document summary

Content submitted for publication should follow these broad guidelines. These are followed by our web team in preparing your message for publication.

Contents

Publishing online – thinking about your reader	2
Make it easy to read – tone and style	2
Key points.....	2
Your language	3
Calculating ‘readability’	3
Make it easy to use – structure	3
Key points.....	3
Drafting.....	3
Using links	4
Make it easy to find - search engines and getting listed	4
Key points.....	4
Publicising web in print documents – shortened web addresses.....	4
Make it easy to maintain - keeping it fresh	5
Key points.....	5
Do’s and don’ts.....	5
Use the A-Z as a single point of contact	5
Making documents easier – PDF format	5
Key points.....	5
Why we avoid PDFs	6
Recommended reading	7

About this document:

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Accessibility help

Zoom in or out by holding down the Control key and turning the mouse wheel.

CTRL and click on the table of contents to navigate.

Press CTRL and Home key to return to the top of the document

Press Alt-left arrow to return to your previous location.

Writing for the web is different from other kinds of writing. We want to organise the site so that the most common tasks are some of the easiest to find and complete.

Publishing online – thinking about your reader

Imagine...

Turn off your monitor. Picture yourself as a visually impaired user, who would be using software to read out the text you would be seeing. Their settings might be selected to read out only page titles, perhaps including subheadings and links.

Think about the new text you are preparing for the website – how would you find it? What search terms might you use? What related advice would you be glad to be told at the same time?

What page titles, heading or links would make you confident you had arrived?

What would happen if your PC started to download a large pdf file? Is that compatible with their screen reader?

If we can help users of screen readers, we help all our other readers at the same time. So these are the kinds of questions that you need to think about when publishing online, and this is why we follow the conventions and standards mentioned below.

Make it easy to read – tone and style

Key points

As an organisation, we promote the use of plain English in all our written communications.

The aim of plain English is for the intended reader to understand it the first time they read it. It is about writing suitable English, not dull English.

- It takes longer to write short pieces that have meaning than it does to write 1,000 words.
- Our writing should be accessible to all, so that people don't find unnecessary barriers to understanding.
- Readers will be put off by copy that is full of unfamiliar words, abbreviations or jargon. Some readers may see bureaucratic language as simply uncaring, 'them and us'.

Picture the person you're talking to, their life, their day, what they are feeling right now and what you can do for them. Think of the big picture and your part in it.

Your language

- **Know your audience.** Identify who you want to communicate with, then write in the appropriate language and tone. Write copy which shows you understand their needs and any questions they might have. Write as if you are representing their community, rather than from outside.
- **Be clear about what you want to communicate.** What do you expect your audience to do with the information and what are the opportunities, benefits or dangers for them?
- **Use simple language.** Avoid jargon and management-speak.
- **Be concise.** Keep sentences short and to the point – aim for less than 15 words. Cut out unnecessary words – for example, ‘we are developing’, not ‘we are currently developing’.
- **Be honest.** Don’t mislead the reader or leave them with unanswered questions.
- **Be active.** Always try to use active rather than passive verbs. ‘The committee approved the new policy’ rather than ‘the new policy was approved by the committee’.
- **Be positive.** Put statements in the positive form rather than the negative. Turn ‘You will lose your right to vote if you don’t register’ as ‘Register today so that you can vote’.

Calculating ‘readability’

We aspire to a SMOG (Simplified Measure Of Gobbledygook) readability score below 16. This is between the Sun newspaper (at around 14) and the broadsheets (17+).

This index is widely used. For a free booklet from the Basic Skills Agency about readability, and a SMOG readability calculator, see the NIACE website (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education):

- <http://shop.niace.org.uk/readability.html>

Make it easy to use – structure

Key points

Readers can arrive at any page by a number of different paths. So each page must be easy to understand on its own, and as part of a logical structure.

Readers should be able to know quickly where they are within the website at any point.

Readers should be able to scan a piece of text and immediately assess whether it is relevant.

Drafting

- **Follow the journalistic style** and write your most important information first, least important last. This is known as the ‘inverted pyramid’. Print material is linear - it starts with an introduction, goes into more detail and then ends. Linear writing is not suitable for the web.
- **Make one point or fact for each sentence.** Vary sentences in length to give texture.
- **Make one general point or fact for each paragraph.** Sometimes two sentences are enough.

- **Use half the number of words** you would for print, and then edit the content again to see if you can cut it down any more. But don't leave out important information.
- **Headings and titles** should be short – five words or fewer – and written in the present tense. They should be clear, meaningful and describe the content that follows.
- **Subheadings help to guide the user** through the content, by breaking up the text into easy-to-read chunks. If the reader scans the page, they should understand what information is on that page from reading the heading and subheadings.
- **Use bullet points** to draw out major points – they are a good way of turning dense information into easily readable chunks.

Using links

- The text of your link must match the title of the target page.
- Try not to use the same link more than once on any one page – it can be a sign of a poor information architecture.
- Don't embed links within a chunk of text – it's distracting for the reader and harder to spot for those scanning the page. We normally arrange the text so that links are shown on their own bulleted line.
- Those who have difficulty controlling a mouse should have good-sized links to aim at.
- Readers must be told if a link will take them to a new site, ideally within the link text itself.

Make it easy to find - search engines and getting listed

If your information is important, it deserves to be read. Search engines are complex but there are simple ways to help ensure that your message will be found.

Key points

- Make sure that your page title uses the plain English words that your readers will be searching with.
- Make sure those words appear in the first few paragraphs,, in headings and in other links within that page.
- Use those words in the metadata for the page.
- Make sure it's cross linked from all related pages and sites.
- Test your content and navigation, using real people.

Publicising web in print documents – shortened web addresses

- For radio broadcasts, leaflets and posters, we can create a special short and memorable web address such as eastsussex.gov.uk/apprenticeships.
- Remember that the main sections are themselves 'short URLs' such as eastsussex.gov.uk/socialcare.
- We keep the list of available short URLs to a minimum, and governed by basic rules:
 - must be short, memorable and unambiguous
 - preferably in plain English without acronyms or project names which might change
 - need to be required on a permanent basis for clarity and ease of maintenance.

List of short URLs and how to request a new one:

- <http://esccewebsite/managerwebsite/redirects/shorturls.aspx>

Make it easy to maintain - keeping it fresh

Key points

There are thousands of pages on our site. Each page is checked at least every six months to make sure that it is still up to date.

We also create special seasonal pages about holiday activities or publications. If we need to draw attention to new information around the site we can create 'Latest' announcements at the top of relevant pages, or add an announcement to our home page.

We have to assume that people may still remember the key facts they saw on our web site many months ago. They would be right to complain if we updated a price, a timetable or a policy without making it clear when this was due to happen, and when it had happened.

Do's and don'ts

- Avoid phrases like 'recently' 'for the past three years' or 'new' in static text – you will need to go back and change it!
- Wherever prices are mentioned, say when they will be revised and when they came into effect.
- Documents must show a publication date.
- Say when newsletters are published and how to subscribe.
- Whenever you update a document, make that fact unmissable for regular and future visitors to your page.
- 'Latest' announcements can be set to disappear at a set time and date and time.
- Set the page expiry date to remind you when the document is due to be refreshed.

Use the A-Z as a single point of contact

- Staff move between teams, leave, or are replaced. Make sure you use a generic contact which won't go out of date, such as the name of the post or team.
- Linking from many pages to a single entry is easier to maintain.
- The A-Z is shared by the District and Borough Councils and the Access East Sussex site. Entries are updated overnight.

Making documents easier – PDF format

Key points

PDF is great for printing documents. Paper is superior to computer screens in many ways, and users often prefer to print documents that are too long to easily read online. But for online reading, pdfs present serious drawbacks.

Printed brochures or booklets can't automatically be published online in that format. It may be preferable to break the information down so that it can be incorporated seamlessly into the website.

Where a long document is justified, our document creation and conversion standards provide clickable navigation so that readers can find what they need as seamlessly as possible. This also provides a clean and economical print version.

With especially long or image-heavy documents the author should offer to supply a pre-printed copy in the post if the readers needs one.

Refer to our 'Guidelines for electronic documents', and take the accompanying course if necessary:

- www.eastsussex.gov.uk/publishingstandards

Why we avoid PDFs

1. Readers generally don't like using them – it breaks the flow and they lose the navigation they were just using.
2. Depending on how they are organised, they may not get comparable search rankings as an equivalent web page.
3. The Equality Acts says that if someone with a disability, such as sight loss, can't access the information on your website then it could be seen as discrimination. PDFs don't meet the same accessibility standard as the rest of our site and so are not a good way to provide key messages. They are:
 - a. harder to read when it doesn't re-wrap on the screen, but people need to magnify text
 - b. impossible to change the font or contrast unless you have the correct software
 - c. harder to use for those using screen reading software.
4. Many users don't have printers or might worry about printing costs.
5. PDF versions of print materials can mean very large files, which discriminates against users with low bandwidth.
6. They don't re-size correctly when viewed on smaller screens, as the website does.
7. They are more laborious to maintain and update, and are not scanned by broken links checkers.
8. We need to create additional metadata and author details compared to converting to web pages.

Recommended reading

Plain English Campaign

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

The Web Content Style Guide

Gerry McGovern, Rob Norton and Catherine O'Dowd

The Stranger's Long Neck

Gerry McGovern

Content Critical

Gerry McGovern

Letting Go of the Words

Janice Redish

Don't Make Me Think

Steve Krug

The Online Copywriter's Handbook

Robert Bly

Hot Text – Web Writing that Works

Jonathan and Lisa Price
