



OKDHS Style Guide

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Section 2.2

General Guidelines for the Web

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Writing for the Web

Writing for the Web is very different from writing for presentations, reports, official documents, print or broadcast. Here are some statistics:

- Reading from computer screens is 25 percent slower than from paper
- Web content should have *50 percent of the word count* of its paper equivalent
- Seventy-nine percent of customers, clients or the general public *scan the page* instead of reading word-for-word; only 16 percent read word-by-word¹

This part of the OKDHS Style Guide helps Web Content Authors learn how to organize content, define writing purpose and craft clear messages that are powerful enough to impact Web site guests and their understanding of the information on the OKDHS Web site. It is designed to introduce you, if you are not already familiar with broadcast or print writing styles and techniques, to sound Web writing principles and discusses how technologies, interfaces and data are impacted by the choices the writer makes.

OKDHS Web Content Authors must be professional, creative and yet experimental in their approach to writing, technologies, information and ideas so that site guests understand OKDHS Web content. This section of the style guide aims to provide a clear explanation of basic Web writing techniques to provide authors with the vocabulary, concepts and basic technology structures they need to know.

¹ Note: Documentation from Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines, NIC and DHHS

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Differences between Paper and Online Presentation

In print, your document is understood as a whole and the reader is focused on the all the information contained in each page. On the Web, you need to split each document into multiple pages since site guests are not willing to read long pages.

Research shows that site guests find it painful to read too much text on screens. They typically read about 25 percent more slowly from screens than from paper. Reading on the Web can be hard work for anyone. Eyestrain runs rampant in the online crowd.

In addition, site guests may enter a Web site at any page and move between pages as they chose. Make every page independent and explain its topic without assumptions about the previous page seen by the user. As they don't like to scroll through masses of text, put the most important information at the top. Be sure to use simple sentence structures because convoluted writing and complex words are even harder to understand online.

Use explanatory, or background information to help site guests who do not have the necessary knowledge to understand or use the page. Keep it brief; make the word count for the online version of a given subject about half the word count used when writing for print.

Web site guests are impatient and critical. They have chosen the OKDHS site not to be entertained, but because they have something they need to do. As a result, it is important to establish credibility. You have to work to earn the site guest's trust, which is rapidly lost if you use OKDHS jargon and employee terms rather than an objective style.

Writing for the Web is an informal and immediate medium, compared to print, and site guests appreciate a somewhat informal writing style. Write in the conversational or "how we talk, not how we write" style to allow users to quickly find the information they want. Do not use clever or cute headings since site guests rely on scanning to pick up the meaning of the text. Limit the use of metaphors, particularly in headings, because the site guests might take you literally.

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Some Common Mistakes

Two of the most frequent errors are run-on sentences and paragraphs that seemingly never end. Both of those mistakes can often contribute to the difficulty in reading material on the Web.

Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences are simply two independent clauses (meaning either could be a sentence by itself) that run together without connecting words or punctuation.

An example: *Our TV Station is great it is the best in Oklahoma City.*
Just the sound of the sentence tells you something is wrong.

Correctly written, that phrase would have been either two separate sentences or contained punctuation (such as a semi-colon) or connecting words. When in doubt, break run-on sentences into to simple sentences for clarity.

Some correct examples:

- Our Station is great; it is the best Oklahoma City.
- Our Station is great and is the best in Oklahoma City.
- Our Station is great, and it is the best in Oklahoma City.

We learned in English class that paragraphs include related subject matter, and that is technically correct. However, differences exist on the Web. The reason is that the printed word can become confusing and difficult to follow when it extends beyond a reasonable number of lines.

Because of the screen width, reading online content involves a wide area for the eye to scan, and it can become difficult to keep one's place within a long paragraph.

Therefore, it is best to break those paragraphs into two or three shorter paragraphs to help the readers. A general guideline is to have no more than 45-50 words per paragraph. Again, less is better.

Scanability

Design your Web document to be scannable. To make keywords stand out, highlight only **key information-carrying words**. Avoid highlighting entire sentences or long phrases since a scanning eye can only pick up two (or at most three) words at a time.

Highlight words that **differentiate key content** from other content and words that symbolize what a given paragraph is about (for example, do *not* highlight the word OKDHS, or your division's name when writing for the within the Web site since *all* the pages are about OKDHS.)

Bulleted and numbered lists slow down the scanning eye but can draw attention to important points.

Each paragraph should contain one main idea; use a second paragraph for a second idea, since site guests tend to skip any second point as they scan over the paragraph.

Start the page with the conclusion as well as a short summary of the remaining contents; use the "top down first" style.

Effective Use of Sub-Heads

The use of sub-headings to break up content is absolutely crucial for both usability and accessibility. Web users can scan through sub-headings on any page to find what they're looking for more quickly and easily. Be sure to use sub-headings to their full effect by following some of these guidelines:

1. **Stand out from regular text.** In order for users to actually spot sub-headings, make sure they're at least two point sizes larger than regular text. You can also use a different colour to make them stand out further, either by changing the text colour or by using a background colour. Finally, ensure there's plenty of white space both above and below the heading.
2. **Used frequently.** There's no hard and fast rule about exactly how frequently sub-headings should be used, but as a general rule of thumb try to insert a sub-heading every 3 to 4 paragraphs. This is just a general guideline and shouldn't be stringently adhered to. It's far more important to insert a sub-heading when the content topic changes.
3. **Make sense out of context.** When scanning through a page, web users can utilise sub-headings to quickly hone in on the information they're after. If each sub-heading is descriptive of the content beneath it then users only need to look at the headings when scanning the page. Non-descript headings will force your site visitors to have to read the text underneath the heading to gain an idea of the content theme in that section.

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Write to be Read and Found

Say What You Mean: Don't use Your Favorite Clichés

Here are a few examples of what not to use, "Get the show on the road," "Beat a dead horse" or "Wake up and smell the coffee." Clichés like these are common expressions that have been overused. They can make your writing wordy and cluttered, without contributing much to the meaning.

Cut Wordy Phrases and Redundancies from Your Writing

Shorter is nearly always better. Replace wordy phrases with concise alternatives.

Some examples that you should replace:

- after the conclusion of
- along the lines of
- like at the present time
- now despite the fact that
- although it has been proved to be

Get to the Point! How to Prune Wordy Writing

The more words you use, the less likely it is that site guests will read and understand what you are saying. Simply stated, shorter is better. Get to the point more quickly. Make your writing clear and concise.

Fix Wordy Writing by Making It More Conversational

When you use more words than you need to convey your message, you risk losing your reader's attention and confusing the meaning. One easy way to make wordy writing clear and concise is to make it more conversational. Write the way you speak, not the way you think your English teacher may have taught you. Don't over write and don't get technical.

Here's an example of wordy and technical writing:

"Our Internet support infrastructure automatically collects information from the user's system, facilitates effective communication between support personnel and customers, clients, or the general public and enables self-healing and automated problem resolution."

Do You Know What They are Trying to Say?

Two things happen here. First, the use of long words makes it harder for the reader to process the meaning of what you are saying. This is an issue with all writing, but even more so online,

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because we have to read on a screen. Take the time to sit back and think through what it is you are really trying to say.

It is easier to express yourself in short, simple words and sentences, once you know what you want to say. When you do that, you'll write in a way that people can grasp the meaning quickly.

Should you always write with short words? Of course not, but try it from time to time. Above all, try it when you find yourself writing in a way that goes on and on, with one long word tripping over the next.

Don't Call Attention to the Web

When writing for the Web take advantage of Web technology, but not calling attention to them. "Click here," "follow this link" and "this Web site" are just a few terms to avoid.

Use Capitalization and Other Style Standards

Inconstancies like capitalization can cause clients to read meaning into things when they shouldn't. Follow consistent sentence style capitalization. Don't use all upper case letters.

Generally, if the words or phrases are specific to Web use, then they are probably words to avoid. A good test of Web-term overuse is to print the page, read it out-loud and ask if it makes as much sense on paper as it does on screen.

Spell Out Abbreviations, Initials and Acronyms

Site guests will not know internal abbreviations and acronyms. This is particularly useful for anyone using a screen reader. Abbreviations that have become widely known, such, as DVD are exceptions to this guideline. Please refer to the chart in the style guide of common abbreviations and use the long form or unabbreviated versions in OKDHS writing.

The exceptions for the OKDHS Web site are: **OKDHS**, Oklahoma Department of Human Services. (Do not refer to the department as *DHS*, this causes much confusion with the federal Department of Homeland Security, commonly called DHS.); **TANF**, Temporary assistance for needy families.

Use Customer-Focused Language

Label pages and channels according to the value they hold for our customers, not according to what they do or mean to OKDHS. Use imperative language and sentences sparingly. Please reference the OKDHS Standards for the Web section on naming conventions for more information.

Online Writing Resources

- www.firstgov.gov/webcontent/managing_content/writing_and_editing.shtml