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Introduction and Purpose



What is the purpose of tone and style guidance?

How does tone and style impact a site experience?

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for writing for our website, [REDACTED]. It offers best practices, tone, and style guidance that helps ensure all content within our site is consistent, and that it feels ‘on brand’ for our desired tone of voice.

Tone and style shapes how users feel, understand, and interact with our content.
Writing with the correct tone:

- ☒ Builds trust and credibility amongst site visitors
- ☒ Improves comprehension and usability of pages
- ☒ Humanizes our digital experience
- ☒ Guides users to target content and information
- ☒ Supports accessibility and broad access across user types



Top 10 Writing Practices Checklist

Use this section to do a quick check on content you've written for . If you can confirm these best practices have been followed, your content is in pretty good shape!

- ☐ 1. You have identified your [target audience](#) and the associated reading level, and have validated that your content meets or is at least close to your [target reading level](#).
- ☐ 2. You have put effort into making sure your content meets  [tone targets](#) of being warm, approachable, friendly, succinct, action-oriented, optimistic, and empathetic. If someone else reviewed this content, they would use terms like this to describe the tone.
- ☐ 3. Your page has at least [one clear next step](#) and you've considered how to make sure that option is visible and prominent on the page.
- ☐ 4. You've used [accessible, person-first, inclusive language](#) that avoids making assumptions about the reader's demographics, family situation, financial status, or abilities.
- ☐ 5. You've avoided the use of industry jargon, favoring [plain language](#), and have ensured proper treatment of acronyms and abbreviations throughout your page.
- ☐ 6. Your page is well-constructed with the [use of subheaders](#) to break up large chunks of text, and you've incorporated visual interest through the use of page components.
- ☐ 7. Language is primarily [first- and second-person](#), with references to  being represented as 'we' and 'us', and references to the reader being 'you'.
- ☐ 8. Your [page title](#) is short but descriptive, and is not already used elsewhere in the site.
- ☐ 9. You've determined [where this page fits in the site](#) as a whole, including what its parent page is, and any related pages that should link to or from it.
- ☐ 10. You've reviewed [related pages](#) to make sure you are not contradicting or duplicating content that already exists in the site, and considered whether it is best to edit or add to an existing page rather than adding a new one.



Audiences

Who are [REDACTED] target audiences?

Who are you speaking to?

What do they need from a particular webpage?

Our target audiences are:

- ☒ Students ★
- ☒ Parents and guardians
- ☒ Counselors and administrators
- ☒ Financial aid administrators and other institutional staff, as well as college access professionals
- ☒ Legislators, media, and the general public

[REDACTED] Philosophy Around Target Audiences

While students may not currently comprise the largest portion of site users, our communications strategy emphasizes [REDACTED] **service to students**. Site visitors who are not themselves students typically visit with a student need in mind, or are otherwise working in service to students with posts [REDACTED].

Students represent a unique need that is [REDACTED] meet; if we meet the student's needs well, we will generally find other users' ne [REDACTED] lso met. Speaking



to and for students will help engage this important audience, and increase utilization of our organization as a key resource for them.

This means you will often be writing with the student visitor in mind. Students and youth in general have grown more accustomed to short-form content, so brevity and succinctness will be of utmost importance. Limiting important details to the first few sentences, and writing them in a way that makes them available ‘at a glance’, will be an important part of your writing process.

Know Who You’re Speaking To

When writing or editing content, it’s important to consider *who* the page is directed to, *why* they are visiting the page, and *what* information they need from the page.

While some of the site content will be specifically intended for a particular audience’s needs, other site content will be valuable to a variety of users, who each have differing needs. **You should not create duplicate content by creating separate audience-specific pages on the same topic.** Instead, hard-working, well-constructed pages can meet multiple users’ needs.

For example: financial aid program pages will prioritize student-focused information *as well as* provide details that FAAs are looking for. This eliminates the need to have a student-oriented page on a particular program separate from an FAA-focused page on the same program.

What We Know About Students

Students favor digital experiences for college planning and research. They are very likely to use their phones for research, so the user-friendliness of a page on a mobile device is of utmost importance for catering to this audience.

They are more likely to use tools that are recommended to them by their school counselors. They find short, to-the-point content to be most helpful, and are often deterred from reading through lengthy narratives. They value varied media, such as videos and infographics, to augment text-based content. They appreciate different forms of content, like FAQs, testimonials, and case studies.



through the college planning and financial aid can feel stressful and overwhelming for students and families. Simple language and a friendly tone on our website is consistent with the agency's goal to make navigating the college and financial aid process simpler and less intimidating for students.

What Comes Next for a User Visiting This Page?

Avoid dead ends. Ideally, no page in is a 'road to nowhere'. Your pages should include cross-links (e.g., links to other pages that may be of interest to the site visitor) and logical next steps they might take. [See also the section on content governance and 'fit'.](#)

When you create or edit a page, ask yourself: *What is the next step that I expect a user to take after visiting this page?*

Many pages will have a high priority key action - a natural next step, or an action that users interested in this content are likely to take. Some pages will have multiple potential next steps the user can take. Even informational pages that don't have an obvious next step should provide options for the user to continue exploring, through cross-linking to related pages or topics that may be of interest. It is important to highlight what else a user can do, to help them avoid getting stuck or lost.

Tone and Style

Our website contributes to our ability to meet our mission because it is our face to the world. It is how we describe ourselves, how we engage with constituents, and it provides information and functionality that is critical to the student's college-going experience.

Our core values should be reflected in our website's messaging. Language, information, and presentation should all be embedded with the themes of integrity, focus on service, accountability, collaboration, innovation, and inclusion. This will require that your writing for uses plain language, is clear and succinct, and assumes a positive outlook that seeks to reach and benefit as many students as possible.



Brand Identity - Key Descriptors for Web Content

Our website content should reflect the ‘personality’ of our brand. There are several qualities or descriptors that should be kept in mind when writing for

- Conversational (instead of formal)
- Warm (instead of reserved)
- Approachable (instead of authoritative)
- Friendly (instead of serious)
- Succinct (instead of verbose)
- Action-oriented (instead of passive)
- Optimistic / uplifting (instead of negative or cautionary)
- Empathetic (instead of inconsiderate or cold)

It can be a challenge to perfect your language to reflect these descriptors, and you may sometimes feel you have competing needs in meeting your overall communication goals. For instance, writing with a conversational and warm tone should not mean you include a lot of superfluous content, or that your message meanders. Likewise, while we want to engage and invite users, we are still a professional, official State of organization, so our content should not become too casual.

Key Writing Practices

1. Eliminate unnecessary words and aim for brevity.

All web copy should be as straightforward and to-the-point as possible. Strip out unnecessary modifiers and adjectives, adopt phrasing that is more concise, and keep sentences simple. Avoid the tendency to ‘over explain’.

Example:

“Some careers require a portfolio of work and job-related samples. If your career path requires this type of presentation in an interview, make sure to have the portfolio updated and available when you enter the interview.”



Eliminating extra words and descriptors in this excerpt allows the same information to be delivered in a shorter message. Whereas the above example is 36 words, the following edited version is just 25, or 30% shorter:

“Some careers require a portfolio of work examples. If that applies to your career path, make sure to have your portfolio ready when you interview.”

2. Use accessible, inclusive, person-first language.

Review copy carefully to ensure that it is not inadvertently exclusive and that it does not make assumptions about site visitors, including about their physical abilities, language abilities, dependency status, and personal and family circumstances. Exclusive language can be disrespectful and distracting for visitors, while inclusive language reduces ‘emotional friction.’

Example 1:

“Click here to see the form.”

This brief instruction makes reference to physical abilities - “click” and “see” - which might not be how site visitors are actually interacting with the site (such as if they are using assistive technology). You can instead refer to the action the user is taking, or refer to the function or content the user interacts with:

“Download the form now.”

Example 2:

“...the state's largest need-based grant program for low-income college students.”

This excerpt places the label on the person as a qualifier. A more person-first version of this would be:

“...the state's largest grant program for college students with financial need.”

Note that the improved example emphasizes the person first as a whole being who has



a particular circumstance, rather than labelling the person based upon their circumstance.

3. Use plain language and aim for an 8th grade reading level.

Writing in plain language requires simple sentence structure, common vocabulary, and avoiding industry jargon. The use of plain language helps avoid assumptions as to the vocabulary or language ability of the people you're trying to reach. It also helps ensure your information can be better understood by individuals who are non-native English speakers. Use [Hemingway Editor](#) to get a grade level evaluation and feedback on how to simplify your language. [Plainlanguage.gov](#) is another helpful resource.

Note: Content that is aimed at a professional audience specifically can have a target reading level of 11th to 12th grade.

Example:

“If you received financial aid through a program that has a requirement that must be fulfilled as a condition of receiving the financial aid, such as teaching or practicing optometry, you must factor that commitment into your job search.”

The above example is rated as a post-graduate reading level. This is a complex sentence with multiple related clauses. It also repeats some language, which can impede the user's ability to quickly and easily understand the message. The following edited version involves multiple shorter sentences, and is rated as a 9th grade reading level:

“Some financial aid programs have a work requirement after you graduate. If you received aid through one of these programs, you should consider that in your job search.”

4. Use optimistic, uplifting language.

College planning can be intimidating and overwhelming, and  ants to make it easier. The first way to do this is to try to eliminate negative language that is focused on obstacles rather than possibilities.



Example:

“You know college is where to start. But a dream is not enough. College doesn't just happen; you have to work to make it a reality. [REDACTED] can help you and your family navigate...”

This excerpt leans negative, in that it emphasizes what is lacking and the obstacles the student may face, rather than inspiring possibility. This could be revised to say:

“You know college is where to start. With dedication and planning, you can turn your dream into reality. [REDACTED] is here to help.”

This avoids cautionary tones and warnings, and emphasizes the successful path even while recognizing the work involved in achieving it, including [REDACTED] role in supporting the goal.

5. Use short but descriptive page titles.

Page titles should not be full sentences, but they should be adequately descriptive to help a user understand what to find on that page. Similarly, whenever a page is offered as a link (including in a menu), the link text should be identical or very similar to the page title. That way, when a user navigates to the page via that link, the title isn't confusing or unexpected.

Example:

“College and Career Exploration and Planning”

This page title may have been crafted to be as specific and descriptive as possible. At 45 characters, it is not excessively long but could be shortened. The following edited version would be as helpful to users and is just 27 characters (40% shorter).

“College and Career Planning”



6. Avoid repetition and redundancy in web copy...

...even when the goal is to expand upon an idea or provide additional examples. Analyze long sentences and lengthy paragraphs to see what can be reduced, simplified, or deleted. Commonly, paragraphs should only have 2-4 sentences, and sentences should be kept as simple and short as possible.

The example in item 5 is relevant to this practice as well. In some cases, at least, ‘exploration and planning’ does not carry significantly more meaning than just ‘planning’.

7. Use subheadings throughout the page to make it more digestible.

Pages that have a lot of text benefit significantly from being broken down into sections with the help of nested semantic subheadings. This practice supports usability because it allows a site visitor to scan the page to find a section of interest to them. This is also a crucial accessibility practice since that is often the way users of assistive technology navigate a page (by tabbing between subheaders to find a section of interest). Generally, chunking up your content this way makes each section smaller and easier to understand. The negative space between sections improves comprehension and readability as well.

Proper use of the subheadings involves first having a brief page title, which is classified by an h1 tag. A page always has just one h1. Subheaders get ‘nested’ from there, so the first section on the page could be headed by an h2 tag and heading style. Sections WITHIN an h2-headed section would receive an h3-level tag and style. Styles should not be skipped, so you would not typically assign an h4-level heading to text that is within an h1- or h2-level section; h4 would only exist within a section that is classified as h3. And, subheading styles should not be applied to non-heading text. These styles should not be used for visual emphasis only, such as to add a bold, larger text style on an important sentence or clause. These styles should only be used for headings.



8. Limit the use of acronyms and industry jargon.

To help ensure plain and inclusive language, keep acronyms to a minimum and don't assume a user will know what the acronym means. Spell out the full term the first time you introduce an acronym, putting the acronym in parentheses.

9. Use primarily first and second-person language.

In general, refer to [redacted] as 'us' and 'we', and to site visitors as 'you'. You may occasionally still use third person terms, such as referring to 'students' when speaking to counselors. First and second-person language is more conversational, warm, and friendly.

10. Other technical writing guidance

- a. **Use serial commas** in lists of three or more. Serial or oxford comma use can change the meaning of a sentence. Consider the following example: "I dedicate this book to my parents, Oprah Winfrey and Dwayne Johnson." As this does not use a serial comma, the implied meaning of this sentence is that Oprah and The Rock are your parents, when in reality the INTENDED meaning may be that the book is dedicated to your parents as well as to Oprah and The Rock.
- b. **Format dates and times** by spelling out weekday and month names. Use the hour and minute values even for references to the top of an hour. Always specify a.m. and p.m. and format them as shown here, with periods. An example of a properly formatted date and time is:
Monday, January 11, 2025 at 8:00 a.m.
- c. **Hyphenate key terms**
- d. **Use bulleted and numbered lists** to make lengthy descriptive content more organized and clear. But do not create lists preceded by a negative instruction such as 'Avoid the following:' because search engines and artificial intelligence-based agent searches may fail to recognize the list is what *not* to do.
- e. **Emphasize text using bold formatting.** Alternatively, italics can be used if for some reason bold is not suitable. All-caps text should never be



used, and multiple forms of emphasis should not be used concurrently. Underlining text should generally not be used for emphasis, as it is a style that has come to be associated with hyperlinked text. Excerpts you wish to emphasize with bold or italics should be short - generally less than a full sentence.

Content Structure and Governance

When you embark on an edit to an existing page, or especially when adding new content to the site, it's critical to think beyond what makes the information on that page helpful. Consider how the topic is handled in [REDACTED] site broadly to understand the proper fit of the page you're creating or editing.

Questions to ask yourself when adding or editing content in [REDACTED]

- Should you be editing an existing page (such as adding to it) or adding a new page entirely?
 - It is commonly better to refresh and refine an existing page than it is to add a new page, if an existing one refers to the topic you're writing about. However, you should avoid 'catch all' pages that cover a wide variety of topics, so if a topic does not fit into an existing page, it is best to add a new one.
- If adding a new page, where does it fit into the information architecture (IA)? What is its 'parent' page?
 - Review the existing site organization, or the IA diagram, to determine what level of depth your content belongs at, according to the hierarchical framework of the site. Understanding what page is directly 'above' your page can be the best way to determine the proper fit into the site map. This needs to be determined and configured when you publish your page.
- Are you filling a gap by creating content that is currently missing? If so, how does this content fit into other related or similar content already on the site?
 - This should help you determine a suitable title for the page and should ensure you don't inadvertently duplicate content that is already offered



within the site. Establish cross-links between related pages as needed to make sure this page is accessible from other logical paths.

- Is there any other content that should be retired when you post this content?
 - As time passes, you may find you're replacing content, like prior versions of program updates. Content that is no longer relevant should be removed, or it may be archived, which would mean the information is still available but is clearly labeled so that users know it is no longer current.
- Who is this for? Who benefits, and who is expected to see this page?
 - If the page is only for use by an internal group as reference material, (even reference material they use in working with constituents) [REDACTED] is most likely not where it should be published. Talk to your Communications partners about a place or channel for communications aimed at or for use only by internal audiences.
- What is the expected lifespan of the content?
 - [REDACTED] does not wish to have an ever-growing website that accumulates content over time, and [REDACTED] should not be seen as a filing cabinet to place content just in case it may be needed in the future. Active management of content and cautious writing of new content is needed to ensure all pages in the website are of value and benefit to [REDACTED] target users. Talk to your Communications partners about content that becomes out of date or obsolete; it may need to be archived within the site or elsewhere.

