Website Writing Style Guide

Summary

This document is to help anyone who edits web pages on the college website so that the site is user-friendly. It helps with getting your message across with data-driven concepts and tips while making sure that pages are accessible to everyone. If ever you need assistance, advice, consultation, or to go beyond this guide, you can always get help by contacting the Web Administrator at extension 521 or emailing webmaster@ivcc.edu.

Target Audience

The website supports the college's mission by providing a content-rich, user-friendly, and accessible information source primarily for students, but also for members of the community, business and industry, and college employees.

Accessibility

In the United States about 25% of adults have some type of disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Accessibility is built into the information in this guide with data-driven user research and user testing in mind. The visitors to the website are a diverse population with many specific needs. Having an accessible website helps everyone. Thankfully, our content management system (CMS) provides warnings on many accessibility issues, along with a spellchecker and broken links report, whenever you publish web page content. This can be a great time saver.

Find more information on making accessible websites on the government's Section508 page.

Before You Write

Answer these questions before you write, rewrite, or edit a current web page.
1. Who is your audience?
2. Why are you writing this document?
3. How will your reader use this information?
4. How should you present the information?
5. How are you going to measure success?
   - from user experience specialist Anna Kaley

Language and Voice (or Writing for People)

"Never use a sentence when you can use a phrase or a phrase when you can use a word." - Brenda Bailey-Hughes

Have empathy for your audience, who is not you. This means focusing on your audience and not on the institution. Keep the tone casual. The tone used in writing helps build trust a user has for the institution.

Use plain language

Plain language takes less cognitive work and is easier to remember. It also helps make it easier to understand. Nobody complains about something being too easy to understand. Focus on the main point and keep to writing short and easy to understand informative content.

The benefit for someone is more important than the feature. Use features to support the benefits.

Consider these questions:

- Where will your users be reading this content?
- What will they be trying to do?
- Will they be multitasking?
- How quickly do they need an answer?
  - from user experience specialist Anna Kaley

Use as few words as possible to say what you need to say.

- Around 15-20 words per sentence.
- Instead of "in the future" say "later".
- Be sure not to be redundant and do not repeat yourself.
- Use inclusive language when possible.
  https://counseling.northwestern.edu/blog/inclusive-language-guide/

Avoid drawn-out explanations and long sentences. Users will have access to the information in other, detailed formats you can link to like: catalog, guidesheets, departmental handouts, etc. Write your content and then cut 50% or more.

- Use positive wording.
- Use active verbs to motivate people to take action.

Use keywords that are familiar to your audience. Be mindful of your audience when using technical terms or abbreviations that are common to employees. They are not common to everyone.

- Avoid extra adverbs and adjectives.

- Avoid jargon, slang, idioms, clichés, and expressions.
- Avoid words like "revolutionary", "the best at", "groundbreaking", and sales pitches.

Write in the present tense when possible. Programs like Microsoft Word can help show passive voice problems.

Passive voice: The bottle was knocked from the table by Jill.
Active voice: Jill knocked the bottle from the table.

Format and Structure

"Less than 20% of text is read on an average content page." - Nielsen Norman Group
"Decide on the message, not the page length." - Nielsen Norman Group
"A headline is the first piece of content people read. Often, it's the only piece of content they'll read." - Nielsen Norman Group

Planning

Put information in order of importance. People scroll but focus first happens at the top of the page.

1. Put the Who, What, When, Where, and Why first
2. Facts and then more details
3. Least important stuff goes at the bottom

Benefits of putting information in order of importance:

- Users can quickly determine whether to read
- Readers can stop at any point and come away with the main points
- Boosts search engine rankings
  - from user experience specialist Anna Kaley

Fast Reading - People are looking for information quickly, not reading for pleasure.

- Have a consistent, casual style.
- Write for the page to be scanned, not read.
- Chunk text by breaking up content into small units of information. Chunk related content.
- No walls of text, which is text with few or no text sections, links, bold words, or headings.
- Try putting a summary at the top of the page if you have a lot of content on the page and label it "Summary".
- Bold main ideas or concepts but do not bold large amounts of text. Use keywords and a clear hierarchy. However, use bold sparingly. Not everything on the page can be the most important or urgent.
- Bulleted lists can be helpful to view information quickly. However, do not turn paragraphs into bulleted lists.

Writing

- Make headings concise.
- Keep content current.
- Well-structured content drives web traffic through search.
- Text should be left justified so it is easy to scan.
- Check grammar and spelling.

Front-load headlines and links with the information-carrying words
- Write a summary in a few sentences
- Include most important keywords at the beginning
- Front-load every paragraph
- Limit each paragraph to one main point
- Start each paragraph with the conclusion
  - from user experience specialist Anna Kaley

Do not use "heading 1". That heading should only appear once on a page and each page's title is in heading 1. An example can viewed at Heading Example 1.

Use proper headings in numeric order: heading 1, heading 2, heading 3, etc. Do not have a heading 3 at the top and then a heading 2. This makes it difficult to understand the content for people with certain disabilities and for those without. An example can viewed at Heading Example 2.

Avoid misusing the heading structure for making emphasis, adding color, or size to text.

Avoid making headings bold.

Avoid the use all caps in headings.

Rule of Twos - pay attention to:
- First two paragraphs
- First two sentences of each paragraph
- First two words of each sentence
  - from user experience specialist Anna Kaley

Avoid relying on only non-text elements like graphics and color to provide information. Use descriptive text as well with those elements.

Avoid words in all capital letters unless needed for abbreviations and acronyms.

Links

Give descriptive names for a link. Links should be succinct and describe what they are linking to because they are a promise. Using the heading of the page you are linking to for the link name is a great start.

- Use text for links not buttons. There is one exception: using a button for a link works for a Call-To-Action as long as it is obvious that it is clickable. In addition, be sure to have only one Call-To-Action on a page.
- Avoid phrases that are not descriptive like "Learn More", "Click Here", "Check out this page", "Get Started".
- Avoid having links open in a new window or tab.
- Avoid the use of underlined words as they can be mistaken for hyperlinks.
- Tell the user if a document they might click on is a PDF.
  EXAMPLE: [Fake Document Example](#) (PDF)

Images

- Images should not decorate but communicate.
- Visitors want to identify with the college. Outdated images create a distance between the visitor and the brand.
- Be sure these elements do not obfuscate the clean design of the website and do not hinder the visual integrity of the site.
- Make sure you use a short, descriptive text to describe the image.

Technical Tips

- Avoid the use of PDFs when a web page can do just as well or better. PDFs should be for documents needed for printing. They should not be used because "there's not enough time" to make it into a web page.
- Use fonts and their sizes preselected by the web template.
- Use the colors preselected by the web template.
- Use a comma when in a list of a series. Example: I like bears, cats, and dogs.
- Avoid italics as it makes text difficult to read.
- Correct use of accordions. https://www.nngroup.com/articles/accordions-complex-content/