

Web Content Cheat Sheet: Writing for the Web

Ultimately, our goal is to help our customers:

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs

Write for your audience (*Hint: It's not "everyone."*)

The same information may need to be presented in different ways for different audiences to understand. Different audiences will have different questions. You would discuss building permits differently with an experienced contractor than a homeowner doing their first DIY project.

Keep it conversational

Write like you're talking to the customer on the phone. You're a person, not a faceless government entity.

- Use common words. Always try to explain industry-specific jargon or technical terms in common language that the general public can understand. Write with clarity. Spell out acronyms on first reference.
- Write in the first and second person. ("**We** will get back to **you** in two days.")
- Use the active voice.
- An active voice writing style gets ideas across in a simple and clear manner:
 - The Board proclaimed Aug. 8 as Purple Heart Day in Manatee County.
- The passive voice is the bureaucratic tone we're trying to avoid.
 - Aug. 8 was proclaimed Purple Heart Day by the Board.

Think mobile

More than one-third of our website visitors come on their phone or tablet. How will your content look on a small screen? Can I tell from the first sentence if I'm on the right page for what I'm trying to accomplish?

Make content easy to skim

Most people skim online content for keywords that relate to what they're looking for. Blocks of text with long, winding sentences are difficult to scan and often contain a lot of fluff.

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Break up text with headers that describe a new block or paragraph of content.
- Use bullet points and tables.

The inverted pyramid

We tend to write like we were taught in school, starting with an introduction and easing into our main point, trying to fill as much space as we can.

Cut out at least half of your words and move your main point to the top. Start with the most important information to cut down on the time your reader has to find things. Beneath the critical information, add the extra "nice to know" information.

Preferred uses for common terms

Manatee County Government should always be capitalized. "MCG" and "the County" may be used on second reference.

Use the word "online" instead of "On-Line." Only capitalize the word if it begins a sentence, as in: "Online applications can be found by clicking ... "

Use "email" instead of "e-mail."

Capitalize an employee's title when it is used immediately before the person's name (i.e., Building and Development Services Department Director John Barnott). Lowercase the employee's title if it follows a name (i.e., John Barnott, director of the Building and Development Services Department).

On first reference use Manatee County Board of County Commissioners. Subsequent references include the "BCC," "the Board" and "the Commission."

Manatee County Government Administrative Center, 1112 Manatee Ave. W.

Additional Resources

- Plainlanguage.gov

Web Content Cheat Sheet: Style Guide Standards

The Manatee County Government website generally follows [AP Style](#) writing guidelines. If you aren't sure about something, a Google search of "AP Style" and your question will likely find your answer. These rules are to ensure we communicate effectively with citizens in a consistent way that's easy to understand.

Topics	Rules	Examples
Acronyms & Jargon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid using acronyms and jargon. • Try to use common or generic terms instead of acronyms and jargon (the Board instead of BOCC, trash instead of solid waste). • If you must use an acronym, spell out on first mention followed by acronym in parentheses. 	<p>The Board of County Commissioners meets each Tuesday. The board's agenda is available online before the meeting.</p> <p>Manatee County Area Transit (MCAT) is hiring bus drivers. MCAT drivers must complete two weeks of training.</p>
Bullets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use bullets, not hyphens or numbers (unless listing steps). • Capitalize the first letter of each bullet. • Avoid beginning list items with "a," "an," "the" or other repetitive words or phrases. 	<p>You can use your online account to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make payments • View statements • Request paperless billing • View billing history
Dates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use just the integer for dates (May 5, not May 5th or 5th of May). • Abbreviate months in a date (Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.). • Spell out the month if it's just month and year (do not put a comma after the month). • Set off the year with commas when using full dates with month, day and year. 	<p>Our regular schedule will resume on Monday, Oct. 10.</p> <p>The next event will be in October 2018.</p> <p>Submit your application by Dec. 1, 2017, to be considered.</p>
Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not write out a link (unless it is a short URL). • Hyperlink descriptive text - this should be similar to the name of the page you're linking to. 	<p>Pay your water bill online or visit www.mymanatee.org/water for more information.</p>
Number	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spell out numbers one through nine (except addresses, ages, percentages, money, measurements and distances). Use figures for numbers 10 and higher. • Spell out first, second, third, etc. • Fees/Money: Do not spell out numbers, do not include .00 for even amounts. • Phone Number: Put area code in parentheses. For extensions, type the full number then a space and ext. #####. 	<p>Waste must be placed in one location, no more than 3 feet from the curb or road, before 6 a.m on the day of collection. We pick up a maximum of two furniture items per collection day.</p> <p>Collection is the third Saturday of each month.</p> <p>The minimum fee is \$20.</p> <p>Call (941) 748-4501 ext. 1234.</p>
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a.m. or p.m. (lowercase with periods). • Don't include a colon and two zeroes (:00) for an even hour. • Always use noon instead of 12 p.m. 	<p>We are open weekdays from 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.</p>

Web Content Cheat Sheet: Do's & Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Emphasizing important information	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use headers, spacing or bullet points to separate and call attention to the information. • Use bold to highlight important key words or phrases. • Use buttons for important links that users need to follow to accomplish their tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make full sentences or paragraphs bold • Write words or sentences in all capital letters • Use exclamation points or asterisks • Change the color of text <p style="color: red; text-align: center;">***DO NOT CALL ATTENTION TO INFORMATION LIKE THIS!!!***</p>
Frequently asked questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement your main content with limited FAQs, but don't try to replace or repackage the main content. • Use real customer feedback to create helpful FAQs rather than assume what questions they'll have. • Provide unique content with your FAQs and link to existing information rather than repeating it. • Be concise. Too much content can be overwhelming and it won't be read by someone looking to find information quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use FAQs to explain an entire process • Repeat content that already exists elsewhere • Add an FAQ every time you get a new question, even if it's not frequently asked • Create a new page just for FAQs (this is usually a sign your main content needs to be rewritten or reorganized)
Codes and ordinances	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When referencing enacting language for your program or service, link to an ordinance on the Municode site, providing context or a simple summary of the code along with the link. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paste the full copy of an ordinance or upload a PDF of an ordinance
PDFs and downloadable documents	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write out the content on the page if the document is a few pages or less (you can still include a PDF for download if necessary). • Provide context with a description of the document when linking to a PDF. • Make it clear a link is going to download a PDF. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create long lists of documents with vague names and little context • Upload or link to Word, Excel or PowerPoint documents – many people don't have access to Microsoft Office
Infographics, flyers and images with text	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use captions to include information that goes with your page's hero image/banner. • Include all text on the photo in the meta data for the image (this is an accessibility requirement). • Use photos from the County's Flickr and Google Photos accounts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose images with text as the hero image/banner for your pages (they won't resize well) • Create a page with nothing but a PDF or image of a flyer • Use clipart or generic stock photos