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Content Authoring Standards

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The council's public web presence

Guidance for writing good quality web-based content that is also in the council style.

Council staff	•
Suppliers	•

- *target audience*
- *awareness desirable*

Service managers	
Project managers	○
System implementers	
System developers	○
Content authors	•

Document history

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0.1	ALL		Valerie McFarlane	Working copy.
0.2	ALL		Ralph Ballon	Initial review.
1.0	ALL		Valerie McFarlane	1 st version as published by Corporate Communications.
2.0	ALL	25/01/08	Andrew Jones	2 nd version, combining additional information making it suitable for inclusion in the accessibility & usability pack.
3.0	ALL	15/10/08	Andrew Jones	3 rd released version to account for restructuring of the overall pack.
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Associated documents

Reference	Document	Version	Date

Definitions

Term	Meaning

Contents

Document history.....	2
Associated documents	2
Definitions	2
Contents	3
1 Overview	4
1.1 Other documentation in the pack	4
2 Writing for the web and in plain English	5
2.1 Write concisely	6
2.2 Writing clearly and objectively	7
2.3 Keep content up to date and relevant.....	8
2.4 Consistency of grammar and punctuation.....	9
2.4.1 Capital letters	9
2.4.2 Abbreviations and acronyms	10
2.4.3 Apostrophes.....	11
2.4.3.1 Comparing it is, it's and its.....	11
2.4.3.2 Unnecessary apostrophes	11
2.4.3.3 Possession and plurals	11
2.4.3.4 Collective nouns	11
2.4.3.5 Contractions.....	11
2.4.4 Dates and times	12
2.4.5 Exclamation marks.....	12
2.4.6 Numbers	12
2.4.7 Technological terms.....	13
2.4.8 Telephone numbers.....	13
3 Web page structure.....	14
3.1 Pages	14
3.2 Paragraphs	14
3.3 Headings and subheadings	15
3.4 Lists	15

1 Overview

Our overriding aim is to achieve professional content that will be respected and is easy to read.

To achieve this we believe there are three key factors to success:

- Writing in a way that is more appropriate for the web medium, rather than print.
- Writing in plain English.
- Writing with consistent grammar and punctuation.

1.1 Other documentation in the pack

We have produced a pack of documents that explain our requirements and offer additional guidance. Use this document in the context of the others within the pack.

1. An introduction to our package of guidance - Introduction.doc

Here we explain what the pack contains and why we have created it.

2. A guide for content authors that has relevance to everybody - Content.doc

Guidance for writing good quality web-based content that is also in the council style.

3. Web standards requirements - Standards.doc

Requirements for meeting web standards, specifically in areas of accessibility and usability.

4. Implementing our website skin - Skin.doc

Guidance for a consistent approach to implementing the council brand and site navigation.

5. Hosting requirements - Hosting.doc

Requirements for hosting systems with detail about domain names and security considerations.

APPENDIX: Supplier specific guide - Appendix-{Supplier}.doc

a supplement to the pack that is tailored to the individual system being provided by the supplier.

2 Writing for the web and in plain English

Before publishing any information, you should consider your audience.

There is a big difference in the way that people read and understand screen-based information as compared to the printed page. Not only has the structure of the information to be considered, but the style and use of language is equally important.

You should imagine that the reader has: no previous knowledge of the subject or the council and its structure; has average intelligence and literacy; and is looking for specific information - not an authoritative article.

To write content successfully for the web therefore, each page will:

- Be re-written. Do not simply cut and paste text from existing printed materials, or old website pages, when creating a new page.
- Be titled unambiguously. For example do not use: Top tips; Help; Training, etc. Imagine the title appearing in a search engine - would the content of the page be obvious?
- Be concise, clear and objective, using around 50 per cent less words than its printed counterpart
- Be written with the knowledge that it will be scanned over, not read in full, by the reader
- Have an opening paragraph that summarises the page.
- Be written without a *context*. That is, an understanding that the reader has not necessarily read any 'preceding' pages or even the home page: for example, if they found a page via Google.
- Use paragraph headings in the correct style, not bold text, to break up the page and aid comprehension.
- Be jargon free. Use language that the user will be familiar with. Put yourself in the position of someone who doesn't know anything about the council.
- Have a familiar tone, but not overly friendly or condescending. Do use "we" instead of "the council".
- Do not repeat information from other pages.
- Do not refer to council departments or service areas, or teams unless they have direct contact with the public. This is important as it 'protects' the information on the site from organisational change.

There may be cases where you have to put legal or technical information on a website. In these cases you should link to a PDF document (containing the detailed information), and use the article page and the publication synopsis to summarise the document's contents.

When you've finished writing content for a web page, read it back to yourself or get a colleague to do it. Check that it sounds 'right' and that it will make sense to the reader, regardless of how they have ended up at that page.

The easier it is for web users to find information, the clearer and more up to date that information is, the less likely they are to contact the council by telephone or by e-mail - which is costly and non-productive.

2.1 Write concisely

Information should be both concise and factual. Keep sentences short, avoid jargon and cut out all unnecessary words – be punchy.

As a rough rule, aim for no more than 250 characters within two or three sentences per paragraph. Sentences should contain no more than 15 words.

Example 1

Encampments on Private Land

Action to remove trespassers and deal with any environmental nuisance arising from unauthorised encampments on private land is primarily the responsibility of the landowner.

- The Council and the Police will offer landowners information and advice.
- The Traveller Unit at the Council acts as a one-stop shop for the public and will pass on information, but the landowner will initiate any action relating to removal.
- Action open to landowners includes taking repossession through the civil court or asking the Police to exercise powers under Section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to remove unauthorised campers. It can be used where there is serious or continuing crime, threatening, abusive, insulting or violent behaviour or serious disruption to everyday activities. The Police power is discretionary and does not impose a duty. Its use is subject to Home Office guidelines.

Example 2

2-3-4 Encampments on private land

It is the responsibility of the landowner to remove trespassers and to deal with any environmental nuisance.

The council and the police can offer landowners information and advice and the traveller unit at the council will pass on information.

Action available to landowners includes:

- Taking repossession through the civil court
- Asking the Police to exercise powers under Section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 - to remove unauthorised campers

Police power is discretionary however; its use is subject to Home Office guidelines.

Example 1 illustrates a page where there is little formatting, sentences are long and the language is verging on the legalese.

Bullet points should only be used to create a list, which is not the case in the first two items in example 1 - these are statements. In the second example, the same text has been broken up, using bullet points and white space, and the language simplified. This makes it easier for the reader to pick out important points - to find the information they are looking for without having to read the entire page.

Simple formatting changes can make a huge difference to the readability of a web page.

2.2 Writing clearly and objectively

Readers prefer text that is objective and quick to scan.

If you have used 'frequently asked questions' (FAQ) convert them to a structured page or pages. Just state the facts and keep it simple.

Headings style text also helps search engines to find this information.

For example:



Question: Where can I take my plastic bottles for recycling?

Answer: There are bottle banks at the following locations in South Gloucestershire: [followed by a list of all locations]



Recycling plastic bottles

There are bottle banks at the following locations [refer to a list of all locations]

The first example is hard to scan, especially in a long list of questions, and assumes you know all of the possible questions and answers! (And don't repeat "South Gloucestershire" everywhere - readers know which site they are on.)

In the second example the reader scans the page to find this paragraph quickly and knows where to take their plastic bottles for recycling.

Don't bombard the reader with marketing hype. If the reader wants to know how often their bin gets emptied, the answer should *never* start with "South Gloucestershire Council's award-winning refuse collection service delivers excellent value for money..." but rather something along the lines of "Bins are emptied weekly, and should be left at the kerbside on collection day. If you do not know when your collection day is, find out here."

2.3 *Keep content up to date and relevant*

Web content should be checked and updated regularly in order that it remains useful.

The public (and staff) expect information to be up-to-date. Whenever new content is added to a website, a review date should be scheduled (perhaps by setting a reminder note in an electronic diary), and consideration should be given to whether the information needs revising at this time, archiving, or removing from the site altogether.

By keeping a careful eye on wording when creating content, time can be saved when it comes to reviewing it. In the first of the examples shown below, the information will be outdated within 24 hours - and will then need revising again once the meeting has taken place. In the second example, the information will only need revising once, after the committee meeting has taken place.

- ☒ “At its meeting tomorrow, the committee will consider...”
- ☒ “At its meeting on 24 September 2006, the committee will consider...”

It may sometimes be possible to amend wording to such an extent that the need for further revisions can be avoided. The second of the two examples below illustrates how this could be done:

- ☒ “The council will begin sweeping streets to clear them of leaves on Monday November 1 2003.”
- ☒ “Every November, the council sweeps the streets of the district to clear them of fallen leaves.”

The other trap to avoid is the news statement appearing as a regular article page:

- ☒ “We have just introduced a new service as part of the latest government proposal for x....”

Instead create the above as a news item, which has a finite life. The outcome however, can be described in a regular article page.

- ☒ “Our service to deliver x, provides”

2.4 Consistency of grammar and punctuation

Consistency of grammar and punctuation is key to achieving well written content in plain English. This section describes in detail the standard we want to see implemented across our web presence.

2.4.1 Capital letters

Read the text in the two illustrations below, and consider which one you are able to read the fastest. Use capital letters only in their proper place; there is a reason why the world's books are not written in ALL CAPS!

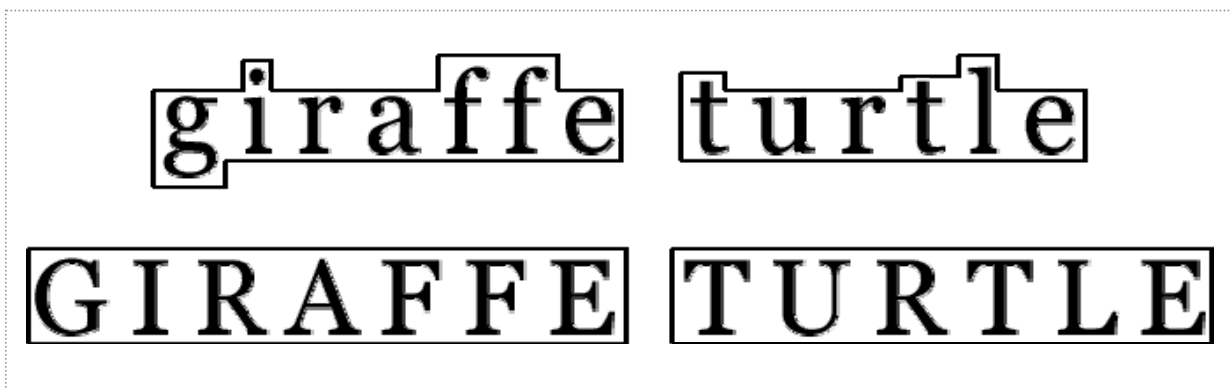
COUNCIL BEST IN THE SOUTH WEST

SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNCIL IS ONE OF THE BEST-PERFORMING COUNCILS IN THE SOUTH WEST - AND IT IS GETTING BETTER. THAT'S THE JUDGEMENT OF THE AUDIT COMMISSION, WHICH HAS AWARDED THE COUNCIL A RATING OF THREE STARS OUT OF A POSSIBLE FOUR IN ITS LATEST COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT (CPA).

COUNCIL BEST IN THE SOUTH WEST

South Gloucestershire Council is one of the best-performing councils in the South West – and it is getting better. That's the judgement of the audit commission, which has awarded the council a rating of three stars out of a possible four in its latest Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

Capitalisation is one of the most commonly used - and least effective - ways of drawing attention to text. When reading, our eye recognises the shape of letters, and so is able to quickly identify a word without reading each letter in detail. When letters are all in block capitals, the words they form all take the same basic shape: a rectangle. This slows the eye down, and makes the reader's job hard work.



As you can see in the example above, the two words form distinctive shapes when they are set in lower case, but when written in all capital letters, the shape is the same.

This doesn't mean capital letters shouldn't be used at all.

A capital is used as follows:

- The first word in every sentence
- It follows a full stop, question and exclamation marks
- At the opening of a quote if it begins a sentence
- For months and days of the week
- Proper nouns or names (words referring to a particular person or place)
- Formal titles
- Names of companies and organisations
- Political parties
- Titles of newspapers and magazines, books, films
- Trade names
- Names of ships and aircraft types
- They are usually used for abbreviations - also see *Abbreviations and acronyms*

In particular the rules for the word 'council' are as follows.

It receives a capital C when used:

- As part of the full title of an organisation, for example "South Gloucestershire Council", "Bristol City Council".
- To refer to the gathering of all elected members at which they make key decisions. For example, "The proposal was to follow plan A but Council opted for plan B."

It receives a lower case c when used:

- As an adjective to describe something, for example, "the incident happened on council-owned land"; "the decision followed council policy".
- To describe the organisation in general: John has worked for the council for four years.

If you are unsure about whether a word needs an initial capital letter, check in the dictionary and consult colleagues to see if there is a consensus view. If this fails to provide an answer, make a decision and stick with it, using the word in the same way throughout your writing.

2.4.2 Abbreviations and acronyms

You know what CPA means, but your readers may not. If you use abbreviations and acronyms, spell out the phrase or title in full the first time you use it on the page. The only exception is where the abbreviation is better known than what it stands for: BBC or Aids.

Acronyms - abbreviations that spell words, such as Aids, Acas - take a capital letter at the beginning. Abbreviations that do not spell a word - BBC, CPA - should be presented all in upper case.

Use 'and' rather than an ampersand (&).

2.4.3 Apostrophes

Pay attention to apostrophes within your writing.

Common errors include:

2.4.3.1 Comparing it is, it's and its

"It's" is a shortened form of "it is," and should only be used where it would also be correct to write, "it is". "Its" is a possessive pronoun, implying ownership.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> □ The dog wagged its tail.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X The dog wagged it's tail.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> □ It's starting to rain.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X Its starting to rain

2.4.3.2 Unnecessary apostrophes

Apostrophes are not needed in abbreviated expressions such as: the 1960s; CDs; over-50s. To test whether an apostrophe is needed, consider how the expression would look if the full non-abbreviated version were to be used: the nineteen-sixties; compact discs; over-fifties. If an apostrophe is not needed in the full version of a phrase, it will not be needed in the contraction.

2.4.3.3 Possession and plurals

When an apostrophe is used to show possession of something it appears after the noun and before the 's', unless the last letter of the noun is an 's'. In this case the apostrophe is shown after the 's'.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> □ John's book	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X The circus' animals were well cared for
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> □ The world governments' view (all of the world governments)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X The circus's animals were well cared for
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X The circuses' animals were well cared for (all of the circuses)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X □ The world government's view (there isn't one world government!)

2.4.3.4 Collective nouns

Words such as group, Cabinet, etc, can take a singular or plural verb according to meaning: *The Cabinet was shocked to learn of Councillor Jones's resignation, the Cabinet were meeting in committee room 1.* The most important thing is to be consistent. Go with what sounds right and stick to it throughout the piece.

2.4.3.5 Contractions

Avoid using these (isn't, hasn't, wouldn't, can't etc) in written text, except when quoting someone directly.

2.4.4 Dates and times

Dates should not include “rd”, “th”, “st”, “nd”. used, dates should be separated from the month. Never prefix a date with “the”.

The correct format is: Tuesday 23 April 2006. No commas are needed.

When writing times, there should be no space left between the time and am/pm, for example, 10am, 2.45pm. Zeros are not needed after the figure. Expressing the time as 9.00am adds nothing and looks cluttered.

Decades should be written without apostrophes, for example, 1990s, and 21st century is the correct format.

2.4.5 Exclamation marks

These are rarely necessary and if you must use them, one is enough. Using more can look frivolous and childish!!!

2.4.6 Numbers

Numbers one to nine should be written as words, 10 and above as figures. The exception is when a number appears at the start of a sentence, when it should be written as words. For example,

Forty people attended the meeting.
Mrs Jones has three children aged two, six and 12.

Use first, second, third etc up to ninth, then change to figures: 10th, 21st, 102nd etc.

When abbreviating sums involving millions, use the format “£4.5m”. For billions, “3bn people” is the correct format. Do not use k as an abbreviation for thousands.

Use commas in figures over 999 to make them easier to read. For example,

A total of 1,500 homes will be built this year.
Or, the new area will have a population of 300,000.

2.4.7 Technological terms

Use lower case and the following spellings for:

- *internet*
- *intranet*
- *website*
- *email*

2.4.8 Telephone numbers

Take care over the formatting of telephone numbers: they need to be consistently and clearly presented. Always include the area code, and break the number up with spaces so that it is easy to read.

The format used should be as follows: 01454 86 0009, 0117 123 4567.

3 Web page structure

The structure of a web page is very important. Many readers of web pages have no intention of reading the whole thing. Rather, they are there because they are looking for something in particular.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why a structured page containing meaningful headings and subheadings is more usable than paragraph after paragraph of unbroken text.

3.1 Pages

People read information from a screen differently when compared to reading from printed material:

- They read more slowly.
- People rarely read a page sequentially. They tend to scan, rather than read, so headings and subheadings are very important.
- Most people do not like to scroll too far down a web page, if at all.

Keep content to a maximum of 2 screen pages. Ideally all of the information on a topic or article will be visible without scrolling.

Remember that if you have to scroll you lose sight of the menus, navigation and link panels.

If your page is too long, examine it to see if the article can be split into more than one page - in which case it might need a separate topic of its own.

3.2 Paragraphs

- Start with a short, summary, paragraph - use the leading paragraph text style.
- Break up large sections of text into smaller paragraphs wherever appropriate, but don't simply break up content arbitrarily, make it concise too. Less is more!
- Only use bold text in a sentence to draw the reader's attention.
- Content is always left justified.

3.3 Headings and subheadings

Breaking up text with headings allows a reader to scan a document and to quickly get an idea of its content.

- Use the right level nesting of heading style. Do not use bold text to create a heading, use the in-built styles.

Our overall page titles are always <h1>. The "South Gloucestershire Council" name is always <h2>. That means author's own page subheadings should start from <h3>.

- Be meaningful and make titles snappy. Make sure they contain keywords related to the topic. This information is also used by external search engines such as Google.
- Use a mixed case. Only capitalise the first letter of the first word in a heading, and also the first letter of any proper nouns used. If in doubt about whether a word needs a capital letter, consult a dictionary.

"Renewal of marriage vows" not "Renewal of Marriage Vows"

- Only real names should have leading capitals. For example, "Children's Fund" is correct, as it is the name of an organisation.
- Do not use questions in titles. For example, "Where can ceremonies be held?". This could be headed simply: "Ceremony venues".

3.4 Lists

If a section of text contains a list of things, it may be better presented as an indented list rather than within a paragraph.

Numbered lists should only be used to indicate a series of events or items that must be followed in a particular sequence.

Be careful not to use bulleted lists containing statements as sentences. For example,

- *"The Traveller Unit at the Council acts as a one-stop shop for the public and will pass on information, but the landowner will initiate any action relating to removal."*
- *"The Council and the Police will offer landowners information and advice."*

This would be better presented as:

"It is the responsibility of the landowner to remove trespassers and to deal with any environmental nuisance. The council and the police will offer landowners information and advice and the Traveller Unit at the council will pass on information."