

Content, Accessibility & Plain Language

Page Organization

Page organization is critical to helping your users access the information they need.

Each page should follow a structure as if you were writing a Word document. Headings should provide a clear outline of the page's content.

Headings

Headings are one of the most important ways you can guide your users through your content. Web users tend to scan content. Well-organized page headings will help your users identify the most relevant information.

Always put headings in a sequential/hierarchical order. **Don't skip headings.** Use different levels of headings to show hierarchy in your content.

On the City of Madison website, you should always **start with a Heading 3** within your webpage content. The site name and page title are a Heading 1 and 2, respectively.

Most Important Content First – Inverted Pyramid

Put the most important information first. Follow it with background information later on the page. Put the main idea before exceptions and conditions.

Short Paragraphs

Break up long paragraphs into several shorter paragraphs.

Users will scan the first few words of each paragraph. If you break content into more than one paragraph, they can absorb the content more quickly.

Lists

Use lists to break up long paragraphs of text.

Lists also allow screen readers to skip long lists of content. If the user knows the content they're looking for is not in that list, they should be able to skip past that content.

Use **Numbered Lists** for:

- Items that occur in a specific order.
- Items where some carry more importance than others.

Use **Bulleted Lists** for:

- Items where order does not matter.
- Items with roughly the same value or importance.

Accessibility

Content must be available to all our users, regardless of technology or ability. Learn some ways you can make your content more accessible and give a better experience to our residents.

Images

Always add Alternative Text on your images.

Avoid putting text on images. Any information on those images will not be available to users browsing the page on a screenreader or over a slow internet connection. Instead, pull all text off the image and place it in a caption.

Link Text

Never use “Click here” or “View more” for link text.

Link text should describe what your user would get if they click the link. Use keywords and important phrases.

For example, your link text should be “[Register for the Photo Workshop](#)” instead of “[Click here](#) to register.”

Responsive Design

Consider how your content will look on mobile, tablets and other devices.

More and more, web users are viewing websites on a mobile phone. As you create content, be aware of the ways that content will change between devices.

For example, don't use phrases such as “See the left side of this page for contact information.” The content will move if the user is on mobile, and they won't know where to find that information.

PDFs & Documents

Do not put main content in PDFs. Instead, put main content directly on a webpage. PDF documents can be difficult for screenreaders to interpret. They also do not convert to mobile, and can put a burden on mobile users with limited data plans to download a large file.

Forms

Consider converting your PDF forms to web forms so people using mobile devices or screenreaders can access them. Contact the IT Web Team with any requests to create web forms.

Naming Conventions

Do not use **spaces** in your filenames. Instead use:

- Underscores: file_name.pdf, image_name.jpg
- Dashes: file-name.pdf, image-name.jpg
- Camel case (capitalize the first letter of each word): FileName.pdf, ImageName.jpg

Web URLs convert spaces in file names to “%20”, resulting in less readable names like File%20Name.pdf.

Do not use **abbreviations** in your filenames. This makes it more difficult for search engines to identify documents.

Versioning and Dates

Do not include dates for versioning in document names. If you put out a new version of a form every year, name the document “form_name.pdf”, and replace it each year.

Search engines will find old versions of documents and return them to users. Using this convention, you overwrite old documents and maintain a consistent URL for returning users to find.

You should use dates in web documents when you are maintaining records. For example, you might have a report you publish each year. In that case, name the document “report_name2018.pdf”.

Plain Language

Reading Level

All web content should be at an 8th grade reading level or lower. Use simple words and phrases that are understandable to our residents.

See *Resources* (below) for some ways to assess the reading level of your content.

Task-Oriented Content

Write your content with the goal of simply explaining tasks users need to complete. Limit a page to only content directly related to a topic. If the user may need more background information, place the supplemental content on a subpage.

Use numbered lists to outline the steps in a process. A list of tasks will help a process feel more manageable to the user. It will also help them to identify what they need to do and will place their tasks in chronological order.

Tone

Active Voice

Use active voice instead of passive voice.

For example, use “You must complete an application” instead of “An application must be completed.” Use “We proposed new regulations” instead of “New regulations were proposed.”

Active voice removes ambiguity about what the user's responsibilities are. The simpler sentence structure also makes comprehension easier for users with a low reading ability.

Conversational Language

Use conversational pronouns as if you are talking with your reader (you, your, we, us, our).

When you need to use third-person pronouns, use “they” instead of “he or she” and “their” instead of “his or hers.”

Things to Avoid

Abbreviations & Acronyms

Cut out abbreviations wherever you can.

Instead of using an abbreviation, use a simplified name. For example, if you are talking about the Pedestrian, Bicycle & Motor Vehicle Commission, use the full name once. After that, say “the commission” instead of “the PBMVC.”

If you do need to use an abbreviation or acronym, always define it the first time you use it. For example, say “the Pedestrian, Bicycle & Motor Vehicle Commission (PBMVC).”

Complex Language & Jargon

When you make word choices, choose everyday words over unusual words.

Replace jargon with everyday language as often as you can. If you do need to use technical language, provide a brief definition the first time you use it.

The Federal Plain Language Guidelines have a list of complex words and possible replacements.

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases>

Expressions & Figurative Language

Avoid expressions and figurative language. They make content more difficult to understand. A person's language fluency, regional or cultural history, and cognitive ability can all change the meaning of an expression.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) as Main Content

Do not use FAQs to explain an entire process. A landing page should explain the basics.

A supplemental page is a much better use of an FAQ page. Use customer feedback to answer questions real people ask. Keep answers free of jargon and acronyms, and limit the number of questions and the length of answers so you don't overwhelm users.

“Shall”

Use “must” to state requirements, instead of “shall.”

“Must” is more conversational. It makes it clear that your statement is an obligation, not a prediction.

Resources

Federal Plain Language Guidelines

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines>

This guide provides examples, tips, sources and explanations for plain language guidelines.

Readability Checkers

Microsoft Word Reading Level Test

Enable Readability Statistics in Microsoft Word

1. Go to **File > Options**.
2. Click **Proofing**.
3. Under “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word”, select “Check grammar with spelling.”
4. Select “Show readability statistics.”

After you enable this feature, **check the spelling** of your document. Word will display information about your document's reading level when the spellcheck completes.

Hemingway App

<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

The Hemingway App evaluates your content reading level. It also gives you color-coded instructions to lower the reading level of your content.

Perry Marshall

<https://www.perrymarshall.com/grade/>

The Perry Marshall tool gives you five evaluations of your content's reading level.

Contact:

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