

Digital Content Writing Standard

Last reviewed: Jan 2024
Next review: Jan 2025

Digital Citizen Experience, Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement

This document outlines the Digital Content Writing Standard as a component of the Digital Public Services Policy. These standards inform Government of Saskatchewan service design for public-facing digital services.

Background

Writing for digital communications is different than writing for print. Citizens visiting digital information services do not read word for word, or even line by line. Online visitors will scan pages looking for information that catches their eye, such as: headings, subheadings, bullets, links, etc. This is called information scent. Eye tracking studies have shown that if they don't find anything of interest, they will move onto the next page in as quickly as 15 seconds.

The following standard will outline the best way to present digital information with the purpose of attracting the citizens' eyes and maintaining the scent of information.

This standard should be referenced along with the Sitecore Publisher Training documents.

Standard Framework

The goal is to maintain consistent writing practices across all Government of Saskatchewan (GoS) enterprise digital services:

- saskatchewan.ca;
- Public-facing digital services including Saskatchewan Account; and
- GoS social media channels, which also follows [Social Media Content Guide](#).

The framework of this standard is based on the following methodologies.

Usefulness and relevance

- Know and understand the audience reading your content.
 - Understand their goals and motivations.
 - Ensure the content meets these needs.
- Understand your goals as a content creator.
 - Is the content timely and relevant?
 - For how long will the content be useful?
 - When should it expire? Has its usefulness already expired?

Scanning vs. Reading

- 80% of us scan written content instead of reading word – for word (You can learn more about this by reading the [Nielsen Norman Group research](#)).
 - When writing for scanning, use:
 - headings and sub-headings when needed below page titles;
 - bulleted lists;
 - shorter words, sentences and paragraphs;
 - white space; and
 - bold key words.

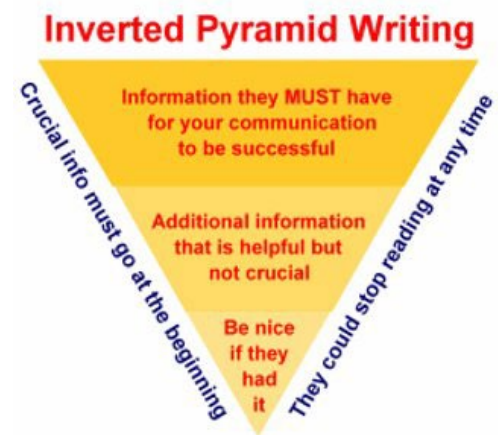
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- Display information in the order of the inverted pyramid style:
 1. Essential message
 2. Main point
 3. Supporting information in order that is relevant to readers
 4. History/background, if needed
- Chunk information into small, distinct units of information.
 - Easier for readers to process, understand and remember the information.
 - Keep it short and simple:
 - Use short words (up to five letters) instead of longer words (longer than nine letters). It's easier to recognize and understand.
 - Use short sentences – aim for 20 words or fewer.
 - Use short paragraphs – aim for one to three sentences per paragraph.
 - Focus on facts – stick to the main points and cut unnecessary information.



Clarity and accuracy

- Organize the content logically and coherently.
- Use clear and concise language that does not include government jargon.
- Check for factual errors, typos or grammatical errors.

Completeness

- Make sure to include all the information the readers will need on the topic.
- Not too much and not too little.

Voice and style

- Ensure the content consistently reflects the voice of Saskatchewan.ca – authentic, supportive and friendly.
- Adjust the tone appropriately to the context; for example, sales versus customer service.
- Writing clear, concise and to the point works for online user attention spans.
 - Using an active voice makes people think you're talking directly to them.
 - Avoid government jargon.

Core Principles

Most users will find your online content through a search engine like Google, Bing or Yahoo. This means your pages must be able to stand alone or, at the very least, link users back to relevant context-setting information. Before you begin writing, plan and review the keywords you will use in your content. Use the same words your target audience uses.

When you write for the digital content or services, give your audience only what they need to be:

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- **Actionable:** Content should cover a need or task for your target audience.
- **Strategic:** Content should cover a strategic goal for your group.
- **Current:** You should know how you're going to maintain your content, especially if it involves collaboration across groups.
- **Web appropriate:** Content will be published if it's written and organized in such a way that makes the page more scannable and reader friendly.

The voice and tone should be:

- **Authentic:** warm, human, down – to earth, inclusive.
- **Supportive:** direct, helpful, instructional, easy – to understand.
- **Friendly:** open, family-oriented, diverse, reassuring.

Add alt text

Alternative text (alt text) describes an image for people who are visually impaired and/or using assistive technologies. Alt text **must be used on every digital image**. Good alt text provides semantic meaning and a description of an image that helps search engines find results for images and graphics.

- Social media – additional reference [Alt Text Standard](#).
- Saskatchewan.ca – additional reference in [Sitecore Media Library Tip Sheet](#).

Break content into lists

Use bulleted or numbered lists to break up large blocks of text. It makes it easier for people to find the information they need quickly.

- Keep your list items short; this helps your readers remember them.
- For long lists, create several smaller lists.
- Use the same tense to ensure each bullet works as part of the full sentence.
- Only use numbered lists for instructions; it implies sequence and to complete the steps in the correct order.

Construct informative links

The introduction of a link should explain to the audience exactly what they will find when they click on it.

- Front-load your link text with the relevant terms and be explicit about what the link offers. Descriptive links work better.
- Use active words and phrases, but **never use “click here”**; people know to click on a link when properly labelled and formatted to look like a link. The hyperlinked text should identify the information the user will be viewing when they click on the link. This is especially important for users with visual impairments who may be using a screen reader or other assistive technology.
- Place links in the context that they should be in and not all at the end of a page. Avoid excessive use of links within prose and paragraphs.
- Write links as:

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- Headlines and titles:
 - Designating a heritage property
- Short sentences:
 - Find out more about the programs we offer.
- Action phrases with verbs – usually single nouns or short phrases:
 - Contact us, Sign in or Category labels

Create action-oriented content

People go online to do something – research information or complete a task. Every sentence should be written to move them towards an end goal: a piece of information, a digital service, a solution, etc.

- Place the most important information at the beginning and taper down to lesser detail.
- Write actions that you want your reader to take, such as: find a marriage commissioner, contact us, etc.
- Use active voice to make clear who is responsible:

Active: The nurse admitted the patient.

- The subject performs the action expressed by the verb.

Passive: The patient was admitted by the nurse.

- The subject receives the action expressed by the verb.

Define the digital assets and metadata

Digital assets – content, images and videos – require metadata to help search engines properly catalogue assets and provide relevant search results to our potential audiences.

Content

- **Page title:** 60 characters max. Each page needs a descriptive page title that incorporates important keywords.
- **Page description:** 150-200 characters max. Each page should have a unique page description that expands upon the important keywords of the page topic.
- **Page introduction:** First paragraph needs action-oriented words, trigger words and phrasing that the audience of the topic would typically use when typing into a search engine.

Describe the Data (Metadata)

Images

- **File name:** each image should be named using keywords applicable to the content. Words should be separated by hyphens e.g. education-apply-for-student-loan.jpg
 - If images are relevant to chronological events, include a date like month-year, month-day-year, or year e.g. Saskatchewan-advantage-scholarship-2013.jpg
- **ALT attribute:** each image **must** include alternate (ALT) text that also describes the related topic/section.

Video

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Next review: Jan 2025

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- **Video title:** incorporate important keywords and differentiate them from other videos e.g. in a series.
- **File name:** videos should be named in similar method to images, with important keywords separated by hyphens. Note: if the video is hosted on YouTube, the filename isn't as important as the other three points.
- **Video description:** 100-300 characters (20-60 words) describing the video contents, including keywords, names and other relevant information.
- **Video transcript:** highly recommended to include on the page or as captions within the video for the hearing impaired. It also allows for content discoverability, search and scannable versions for people in a hurry. [YouTube provides an automatic caption option](#) for its videos, which are editable.

Know your audience

The Government of Saskatchewan digital audience is potentially anyone living in the province who needs government information and services, or people abroad who want to do business in or travel to our province.

Using common words and working with [people's online reading behaviour](#) helps us to communicate in a way that most people will understand.

Give your audience only what they need to:

- find information;
- solve their problem; or
- complete a task.

Less is better. The content supplied should be concise and address any questions the audience may have.

Use plain language

No matter your level of education, the use of simple and plain language makes content quicker to read, easier to understand and simple to remember.

Plain language is defined by:

- Using common words. It's easier to understand information when it's written in its simplest form.
- Avoiding government jargon, slang, business acronyms or abbreviations and internal government terms.
 - If you need to use technical terms, explain the meaning of the terms immediately after using them.
- Writing for a Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease score of 50.0 and above. In the Flesch Reading Ease test, higher scores indicate material that is easier to read; lower scores mark passages that are more difficult to read.
- Aim for a readability level of Grade 8 and under.

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Score	Notes
90.0–100.0	Easily understood by an average 11-year-old student
60.0–70.0	Easily understood by 13- to 15-year-old students
0.0–30.0	Best understood by university graduates

You can use the Readability feature in Microsoft Word or [Readable](#) to score your writing.

Write descriptive page titles and headings

Clear, concise page titles and section headings help readers navigate both the text and the site as a whole. Search engines will often use the page title on their search results page. Headings may also be links to content.

- Keep titles to eight words or less (three to four is ideal). If you need to break up a long title, use a colon: it helps users to scan.
 - **Yes** - Health benefits appeal procedures: committee review
 - **No** - Committee review of health benefits appeal procedures
- Be clear and precise. Avoid puns or wordplay since these can make the content difficult to find.
 - **Yes** - Manage Your Health Needs
 - **No** - Health
- Front-load your titles and headings with the most important keywords. It's more descriptive and useful for search.
 - **Yes** - Hospitality industry: health and safety regulations
 - **No** - Health and safety regulations for the hospitality industry
- Cut out as many adjectives and prepositions as possible (and, the, a, of).

Page Titles

- A strong page title will improve Search Engine Optimization (SEO) on Saskatchewan.ca. Search engines use the page title to understand the content and structure of the page, which relates directly to where the page ranks in the search results.
- A descriptive page title tells readers and search engines what the page is about and helps search engines determine if your webpage satisfies search intent.
- A great page title can help cut down bounce rates and increase time on the page, which is important for SEO because it shows browsers that your page contains high-quality content.

Headings

- Breaking down large areas of content by using headings creates higher quality content that is easier to read and is better for SEO.
- Use headings to add structure to the page and to describe what each section is about. This in turn helps browsers to better understand the content.
 - Headings must follow designated order to provide proper accessibility for users that require assisted technologies.
 - Page order of headings is: H1, H2, H3 and H4.

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- H1 can only be used once on a page for the page title.
- Search engines pick up on people bouncing from your site – something that happens if users don't find what they are looking for quickly. When you have a high bounce rate, search engines can decide that your page doesn't supply the information users are seeking. This may result in lower search ratings.

Writing Standards

The Canadian Press Stylebook and The Canadian Press Caps and Spelling are used to guide our writing style – refer to these for any instances not covered by this guide.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Never abbreviate saskatchewan.ca or Saskatchewan Account.

Spell out acronyms the first time the phrase is mentioned with the acronym immediately following in brackets, such as: Government of Saskatchewan (GoS) – note: lower case 'o.' After the first reference, use only the acronym. However, if the page/document is very long, spell out the acronym at the first mention in each major section.

Do not use an acronym for your ministry name – write out the full name on first reference and “the ministry” on subsequent references.

Only use an acronym in the title if it's a commonly used search term (like BC).

Apostrophes

Use the apostrophe to denote possession: Bob's constituency; Saskatchewan's potash reserves.

Plurals like the 1990s don't require an apostrophe, such as: PCs (not PC's) and FAQs (not FAQ's), except when necessary to avoid confusion (Q's and A's instead of Qs and As).

Brackets (parentheses)

Use regular brackets (parentheses) to indicate a separate thought or expression within a sentence. When nesting brackets within brackets, use a contrasting style, such as [].

Capitalization

Always capitalize:

- Proper names
- Trade names
- Government departments
- Agencies of national and provincial governments
- Names of associations

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- Companies
- Languages
- Places
- Occupational titles when they refer to a specific individual (see full details at Forms of Address)
- Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nation(s), Métis, Inuit, Elders, Senators and Chiefs

Don't capitalize job titles when they are used in a general sense, such as: It's important that nurse technicians are careful on the job.

Use lowercase for generic terms standing alone: the union, the ministry, constituencies.

AVOID BLOCK CAPITALS; this indicates shouting in common online usage.

Commas

When there are two items in a list, don't use a comma to separate the list items. Where there are more than two items in a list, **do not**:

- place commas after each item before the conjunction
 - cars, trucks and motorbikes
- unless required to avoid confusion
 - manufacturing, forestry, and oil and gas

In longer and more complex series – or where the items in the list contain commas – you may wish to use a semicolon:

- Government of Saskatchewan maintains ongoing dialogue with a wide variety of key stakeholders, including: Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment; Saskatchewan Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport; Saskatchewan Ministry of Energy and Resources; and landowners.

Clarity trumps both conventions.

Currency

Use abbreviations for currency, such as: \$100, not one hundred dollars.

Cutlines (photo or illustration captions)

When identifying individuals in a photo, use abbreviations and separate names with commas, e.g. First place team (l to r): John Doe, Jane Doe, John Smith.

If there are two individuals in a photo, place the identifier (l) or (r) after the person's name e.g. Joe Smith (l), Senior Policy Adviser, Ministry of Health; Jane Smith, Health and Safety Audit Specialist, Ministry of Health.

Dashes

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A dash sets off mid-sentence lists or explanations. It can be used instead of commas, leaving a space in between the words and dashes:

- Home Care – services to help people who need acute, palliative and supportive care to remain independent at home – is a major initiative.

The use of the *en* dash is preferred. Dashes shouldn't be confused with hyphens, which are used to break a word over two lines or to join two compound words.

Dates

For months used with a specific date, spell out the month followed by the date, such as: “On August 14.” This format is better when Google Translate changes to other languages. It is also easier for screen reader technology to recognize. Do the same with full dates including years, such as: “August 14, 2024.”

Spell out all months when they stand alone or are used with a year alone, such as: “January was cold”, or “January 1998 was cold.”

Use “to” instead of a dash, hyphen or slash in date ranges. “To” is quicker to read than a dash, and it’s easier for screen readers: “2010 to 2018.”

Ellipses

Use ellipsis points to show the omission of words, phrases or lines from quoted material. In general, treat an ellipsis as a three-letter word, constructed with three periods and a regular space on either side of the ellipsis (...).

FAQs

FAQs should not be used as a form of online content. Any information concerning the subject matter should be clearly and concisely addressed within the page copy. If user questions result, then the page content should be modified to address any concerns and supply answers.

FAQs are **not needed** when your content:

- Is concise (FAQs often duplicate other content on the site);
- Is audience-focused (content needs to be where people expect to find it and in context);
- Answers your audience's questions; and
- Helps them accomplish their tasks.

Geography

Capitalize geographic and widely recognized descriptive regions, as in the North, Far North, Northern Canada, Western Canada, Central Canada, Prairies, Western Hemisphere, the Pole, North Pole. See The Canadian Press Stylebook for exceptions and variations.

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Headlines

Capitalize titles, headings and sub-headings as a proper title, such as: Becoming a Board Member; Health and Healthy Living; Emergency Assistance for Prescription Drugs.

Italics

Italicized type is used sparingly as it can be difficult to read online.

Provincial and federal legislation is cited in italics as follows:

- **Provincial laws:** include the article "the" in the title, as in *The Active Families Benefit Act*.
- **Federal laws:** don't italicize "the" in the title, as in the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*.

Italicize words like "A" or "The" only where they are part of the title.

Lists

Depending on the purpose of the list, punctuation requirements will vary. See examples below.

Part of lead sentence

Where the bullet points are part of the leading sentence, or where the list consists of phrases or sentences with internal punctuation, semicolons are used between the listed items. The second-to-last point includes the word "and" and the last point uses a period.

The Ministry of Environment ensures that vegetation will be managed in a manner that:

- Incorporates ecological principles;
- Considers community values;
- Uses herbicides responsibly; and
- Complies with relevant laws.

Contain short sentences

Capitalization and punctuation can be eliminated in bullets with few words.

Students returning to school should bring basic supplies, such as:

- pens
- pencils
- erasers
- 3-ring binder
- pencil case

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- calculator

Have long sentences

Periods can be used at the end of bullets if the content is longer and forms a complete sentence on its own.

Template Setup and Visual Standards

- When a new page is created, it is the ministry's responsibility to tag the ministry for analytics purposes.
- Include meta data on all webpages.
- Change meta data titles for browser tabs to match page titles.
- Related items must contain a description.
- Choose the proper asset type for related items.
- Delete the related items folder if it is not being used.
- If there is no contact info, disable the contact information.

Numbers

In general, spell out whole numbers below 10 and use figures for 10 and above. Use commas in larger numbers where appropriate, such as: 2,400. Use numerals with any measurement and for percentages: 88 per cent or 200 km.

Numbers at the start of a sentence should be spelled out or the sentence rewritten.

For telephone numbers, use hyphens to separate rather than spaces, periods or brackets, such as: 306-111-1111 and 1-888-111-1111.

PDFs

Unlike other file formats, a PDF is designed to be platform-independent, meaning it can be viewed, shared, and printed on various operating systems without the need for the original software or fonts used to create the document. PDF files are typically smaller in size, making them easy to store, transfer and download.

PDF files are easy to save, share and print on any operating system. They provide a secure format that prevents anyone from making modifications to the document once it is available.

PDF usage recommendations

PDF files can be used for:

- Forms or applications that are intended to be downloaded, printed, filled in, and mailed or faxed
- To deliver documents with large amounts of text, such as reports, eBooks or pamphlets, meeting minutes, bylaws, etc.

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PDF files aren't webpage substitutes.

The following limitations apply to PDFs:

- PDFs are designed for only desktop and print, and are, therefore, not responsive or mobile friendly.
- They are not always accessible to screen readers.

PDF	HTML
All files live in the Publications Centre	Content for Saskatchewan.ca
Forms or applications	Small documents
To be printed off, filled in, and mailed or faxed	If content fits on fewer than two pages of a Microsoft Word document, it should be HTML
Large Documents	Other
Reports or booklets	News releases
Manuals or guides	Public notices or alerts
Complicated tables or graphs	
eBooks/eMagazines	
Meeting minutes	
Backgrounders	
Fact sheets	
Information bulletins	

The following documents are not applicable for PDF or HTML, unless you can repurpose content for HTML.

Offline (print) advertising

- Ads
- Billboards
- Posters
- Signs

Other

- Infographics – should be saved as images (JPEG)
- Videos – use GoS YouTube account

Periods

Captions or cutlines accompanying photos are normally written as sentences ending with a period. Explanatory notes provided after graphs or tables require a period. Place periods inside quotation marks.

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Quotation marks

Use quotation marks to enclose direct quotations. Double quotation marks are preferred over single quotation marks.

- Double quotation marks are used to indicate:
 - A direct quote;
 - A piece of slang; and
 - When a word or phrase is used ironically.
- Single quotation marks are used to:
 - Set off a quoted word within a direct quote; and
 - Highlight key words within text that relate to online page titles or sub-sections within an online page.
- Punctuation and quotation marks
 - A period or comma goes inside the closing quotation mark.
 - A colon or semicolon goes outside the quotation mark.
 - An exclamation point, question mark or dash goes inside if the mark belongs to the quoted material; outside if the mark is not part of the quotation.

Spacing

Use a **single space** between sentences, after colons and semicolons, and before and after endashes (–). Use a single space between a number and an acronym, such as: 300 km.

Spelling

Use the Canadian (not American) spelling of words as they appear in The Canadian Press Caps and Spelling or Oxford Canadian Dictionary. Examples include: colour, favour, behaviour, humour, labour, metre.

Tables

Tables should be used to make it easier for users to understand complex information and are meant to display tabular data like a spreadsheet in rows and columns. They should make it easy for users to find specific information, such as precise numbers, dates, locations, etc. Tables help logically organize information and group similar things together.

Do not use tables to position text or format elements on a page. Content for informational purposes can be displayed in ways for easy scanning, such as using heads and subheads, bulleted lists, small paragraphs and proper sectioning of the page. These methods will increase white space on the page and provide opportunities to scan for important words.

Keep it simple. Do not create complex tables or nest tables/lists within each other.

Time

Lowercase references to the time of day, as in a.m. and p.m. Write noon or midnight – not 12 noon or 12 midnight. Write 5 a.m. – not 5:00 a.m. Write 10 to 11 a.m.

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