

University of Toronto Libraries Web Style Guide

Updated October 2014

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About the style guide

This guide is intended to assist UTL website content providers with the writing, formatting, and layout of webpage content. The majority of page style is controlled through CSS templates in Drupal, freeing you to focus on crafting the page content in a manner that is clear and understandable to your users.

Communicating online requires a consistent, clear, and concise format. We have a wide range of users accessing content through UTL sites and it is important to consider reading and visual comprehension levels, users with disabilities, and people where English is their second language.

More resources are listed in the 'Useful Tools' section, including accessibility testing tools, Drupal help, and LibGuides formatting help.

Contact [Marc Lalonde](#) and [Lisa Gayhart](#) in ITS for more information.

Writing best practices

Framing your content

Before writing a word of web content, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my target audience?
- What are the key services that I am offering users of University of Toronto Libraries?
- What information are they looking for?
- Are they likely to read everything I've written?
- Is all of the content on the page useful and/or of interest to them?
- How is this information going to help the reader?

Plain language

General communications, including web content, should be written at a grade 7-8 level. Specialized information for an informed audience should be written at a grade 10+ level. See Appendix 1 to assess your content for clarity and readability.

- Use as few words as possible – be concise, clear, consistent, and direct
 - Keep sentences to one or two ideas with an average of 20 words per sentence
 - Keep paragraphs between 40 and 70 words
- Use bullet points for lists instead of full sentences and long paragraphs
- Avoid using jargon, unexplained acronyms, and [library terms that users don't understand](#) like 'resource,' 'ILL,' 'index,' and 'reference'
- Use the active voice when possible and keep the subject (noun) and verb (action) close together (e.g. "There will be an open house for new students in September" instead of "An open house for new students will take place in September")
- Address the reader directly and refer to the library system and library staff as 'we' in pronoun form (e.g. "We will respond to *you* as soon as possible")
- Keep linked text actionable, short and direct (e.g. '[Register](#)' instead of "To register online, [click here](#)")
- Make statements in the positive (e.g. "Register before using the system" instead of "You cannot use the system until you have registered")
- Be direct and focus on the desired action (e.g. Avoid "Please..." or, "Be sure to...")
- Titles and headings must express the benefit to the reader and the scope of the page as simply and succinctly as possible (e.g. 'Borrow from other universities,' or, 'Copying, printing, and scanning')

- After you write instructions, try to follow them yourself (or get someone else to follow them) then make any necessary changes

Clear layout

- Use sub-headings to facilitate page scanning
- Use HTML to communicate headings, lists, emphasis, quotes, addresses and other elements (e.g. <h2> instead of changing the font size and weight)
- Place the most important information at the top of the page and supporting information below following the '[inverted pyramid](#)' journalistic style
- Present information logically with one idea flowing into the next
- Do not copy and paste text from Microsoft Word or other programs into the content management system. Instead, convert text to unformatted modes, such as rich text format, and then cut and paste the unformatted text into the page editor.

Rewrite examples

Before - 120 words

Postdoctoral Fellow - Obtaining Library Cards

Postdoctoral Fellows at the University of Toronto must obtain a letter from the Postdoctoral Office at the School of Graduate Studies. This letter contains the unique University of Toronto identifier (UTORid) which is used for a range of services in the University, including email, remote access to licensed library resources and the University's electronic calendaring management system. Please take this letter, and a piece of photo identification, to the TCard Office in the Robarts Library at 130 St. George Street, Room 2054A; they will issue you a photo-ID card, called a T-card, and an activation key to be used to set up your email account and your password, to be used with your UTORid.

After - 43 words

Library access for postdoctoral fellows

You can access the University of Toronto Libraries by getting a TCard at the [TCard office](#).

You will need:

- A letter from the Postdoctoral Office at the School of Graduate Studies containing your UTORid
- Official government photo identification

Before – 106 words

Archiving the web

The University of Toronto Library is a subscriber to [Archive-It](#), a service created by the Internet Archive.

[Archive-It](#) allows an individual institution to create smaller and more focused web collections, and to harvest data from websites at regular, specific times, chosen by the institution. The University of Toronto Library has created four distinct Web archives called ‘collections.’ Harvesting is accomplished using base URLs and all sites linked to the base site are archived. Rather than being accessible only by URL, all of these collections are full-text searchable and all are available to interested researchers.

For further information please write to (name) at name@utoronto.ca.

After – 60 words

Archiving the web

The University of Toronto Libraries subscribes to [Archive-It](#), a service created by the [Internet Archive](#).

[Archive-It](#) allows individual institutions to create small, focused web collections, and to harvest data from websites at regular intervals.

We have created four web collections. They are all full-text searchable and open to anyone on the internet.

Contact [\(name\)](#) for more information.

Writing style examples

Topic	Do	Don't
Active voice	We will evaluate our services every year.	Services are evaluated annually.
Verbosity	Access databases off-campus. Your card is blocked. We'll teach you time-saving tips.	In addition, databases can be accessed off-campus. Thus, your card is blocked. Basically, we'll demonstrate time-saving tips for you to use.
Jargon	Get	Acquire, obtain, access

Jargon (con't)	Use	Utilize
	Borrow from other libraries	ILL
Comma splices	The building is new. Students like it.	The building is new, students like it.
Clichés	Leaders	Movers and shakers
	Innovative	Ahead of the curve
	We will proceed	Going forward...no other direction in which to go!
Redundancies	10am	10 a.m. this morning
	Status	Current status
	Daily, frequently, often	On a daily basis
Links	Consult our FAQ for more details.	Consult our FAQ for more details: answers.library.utoronto.ca
	Instructions on how to proceed...	Instructions on how to proceed can be found here .

Standards

Spelling and punctuation

Topic	Do	Don't
Canadian Spelling	Use Canadian spelling if there is a difference between Canadian and American spelling. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Colour, not color• Centre, not center	Don't use Canadian spelling for these exceptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Program, not programme• Organize, not organise
Commas	Oxford comma: Oranges, apples, and pears	Oranges, apples and pears
Hyphens	Hyphenate compound words, and modification of words. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cross-cultural collections• Library-related	Do not hyphenate: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interlibrary loan• Intercampus delivery• Email
Dashes	Use the en dash without spaces to show sequence. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2005–2010• May–June	Do not hyphenate 'website' or 'email'. They should be one word, lowercase, unless they begin a sentence. Do not hyphenate words that begin with e or i such as ebooks, or iCloud.
Quotation marks	Double quotes ONLY for what someone has actually said. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• She said, "Forward ho!" Single quotes for other emphasis <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ...known as 'Coach House'	
Periods	Use periods with most abbreviations.	Do not use periods at the end of bulleted sentences or phrases.

- i.e. e.g.
- etc. et al. Mr. Dr.

Parentheses	Avoid unless necessary. Reconfigure your sentence construction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On Halloween, MMSt and MI students dress up. 	On Halloween, students (MMSt and MI) dress up.
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Colons	Use to introduce lists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List item 1 • List item 2 • List item 3 	Do not use colons in headings unless it makes sense. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact information [no colon] • Library hours [no colon]
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Dates and measurements

Topic	Do	Don't
Time	10am	10 a.m.
	1-5pm	1-5 p.m.
Dates	Use the full day and month in text. Abbreviate when needed for design purposes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will contact you on February 14. • We're open Monday to Friday. 	Abbreviate days and months in full sentences. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will contact you on Feb. 14. • We're open Mon.-Fri.
	January 15, 2014	15th of January, 2014
	January 2014	January, 2014
	310 BCE	310 BC
	800 CE	800 AD

Currency	\$10	10 dollars
	\$10 CAD or \$8 USD	\$10 Canadian or \$8 US
Temperature	15°C	15 Celsius
Length	Metric system	Imperial system
Numbers	One, two, three...ten	1,2,3...10
	13, 14...100	Thirteen, Fourteen... One hundred
	3 rd	3 rd
	416-978-5555	(416) 978-5555

Abbreviations and acronyms

Topic	Do	Don't
UTL	You may use 'UTL' within a web page as long as 'University of Toronto Libraries' appears first.	UTL is never acceptable in the title of a page.
Titles	Spell out the whole title when possible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor Bhandari 	Never abbreviate the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Page(s), chapter(s), paragraph(s), part, section, appendix, table, figure, professor Names of faculty member, other than in citations, e.g., Mariah W. Chen, M.W. Chen
Course codes	Be consistent with course codes: Put letters in uppercase. No spaces between letters and numbers. Use H and Y for half and full courses. Use four digits for sections, with two spaces between the course code and course	

section.

- BKS1002H
- INF1002H 0101
- INF1002 Y 0102

Leave two spaces between course designator and course title.

- INF1320H Introduction to Bibliographic Control
-

Degrees

Be consistent with degree abbreviations. Use the following format:

- BSc for Bachelor of Science
 - MA for Master of Arts
 - PhD for Doctor of Philosophy
-

Provinces and territories

Always spell Canadian provinces and territories fully within sentences.

Use Canada Post abbreviations for addresses (e.g. AB, BC, MB, NB).

Capitalization

Topic	Do	Don't
Title and headings	Use sentence case for titles. Only the first word and proper nouns have initial capitals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Style guide decisions so far	Don't use title case for headings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Style Guide Decisions So Far
Places	Dublin, Ireland	dublin, ireland
Organizations	University of Toronto	university of toronto

and Governments	Faculty of Law	faculty of law
	Government of Ontario	government of ontario
	The Faculty of Arts & Science, but the faculty...	The Faculty of Arts & Science, but the Faculty
Seasons and semesters	Course reserves for fall term	Course reserves for Fall term
	Course reserves for Winter 2012	Course reserves for winter 2012
People's titles	Provost Milena Poretsky	provost Milena Poretsky
	Pierre Girard, professor in the Chemistry Department	Pierre Girard, Professor in the Chemistry Department
	The chief librarian started his term in August 2011...	The Chief Librarian started his term in August 2011...
	Professor Paige Turner, but the professor who teaches readers' advisory courses...	Professor Paige Turner, but the Professor who teaches readers' advisory courses...
Bullet points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alpha dog owners Beta testing for web apps Omega 3 farm fresh eggs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> alpha dog owners beta testing for web apps omega 3 farm fresh eggs
Subjects	political science, philosophy, Spanish	Political Science, Philosophy, spanish

Formatting

Topic	Do	Don't
Colour		Do not use colour to indicate emphasis or to group content. Indicate emphasis through sentence structure, headings, or sparingly with bolding/italics.
Italics	Use italics sparingly. Italics are valid when used with an accepted citation format, such as MLA.	Do not use for emphasis.
Bold	Use bold font sparingly, and only when essential for emphasis.	
Title and headings	Use heading HTML styles to indicate titles and sections. This allows screen readers and other assistive devices to read the page in sections.	Don't indicate headings by increased font size or changing the colour or emphasis.
Links	Hyperlink actionable words <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More information	Show the URL of a link <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More information at answers.library.utoronto.ca
Tables	Use for tabular data and add text captions where appropriate.	Do not use tables to format pages.
Images	Resize and reformat all images before inserting into your webpage. Give your images meaningful filenames to ensure ease of retrieval and avoid duplication. Add alternative text to all images for individuals using assistive technologies. This includes website banner images and other advertisements online.	Do not use moving or flashing images.

**Images
(cont'd)**

If using a rotating banner, ensure that movement controls have been added to allow the user to advance, return, and pause movement.

Ensure colour contrast meets accessibility requirements.

Add text captions where applicable.

Audiovisual

Offer transcriptions of any audio or video used in a webpage.

If any media included in a webpage is inaccessible and cannot be made accessible, include the contact information of staff members who can provide individual assistance.

Appendix 1: Assessing Word documents for clear writing and readability

Readability describes how easy it is to read a document. You can use readability tests in the plain language process to help you identify where to make your writing plainer.

How to check for readability

To determine the readability of your document, follow these instructions:

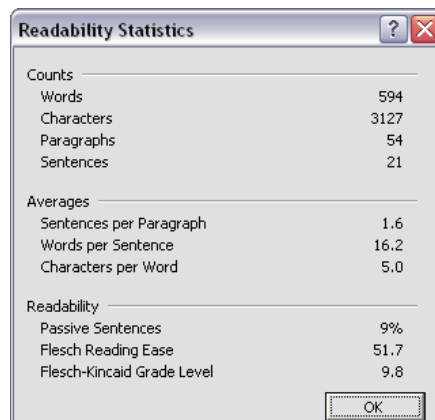
On a Mac OS

1. Open Microsoft **Word**
2. Select the **Tools** menu (across the top)
3. Select **Options**
4. In the **Options** window, select the Spelling and Grammar tab
5. Select **Show readability statistics** (at the bottom), to put a check mark beside the option
6. Click **OK**
7. Once your document has been written, **complete a Spelling and Grammar check** (go to Tools – Spelling and Grammar Check)

On a Windows OS

1. Click the **File** tab, and then click **Options**
2. Click **Proofing**
3. Under **When correcting spelling and grammar in Word**, make sure the **Check grammar with spelling** check box is selected
4. Select **Show readability statistics**
5. Open the file that you want to check, and under **Review**, click **Spelling and Grammar** to check spelling and grammar

After you complete a Spelling and Grammar, the following window will appear:



Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	594
Characters	3127
Paragraphs	54
Sentences	21
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.6
Words per Sentence	16.2
Characters per Word	5.0
Readability	
Passive Sentences	9%
Flesch Reading Ease	51.7
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	9.8

Flesch Reading Ease

The Flesch Reading Ease score determines readability based on the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence.¹

Scores range from 0 to 100. Standard writing tends to score 60 to 70. The higher the score, the greater the number of people who can readily understand the document you create.

Score	Readability
90-100	Very easy
80-89	Easy
70-79	Fairly easy
60-69	Standard
50-59	Fairly difficult
30-49	Difficult
0-29	Very confusing

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is based on the average number of syllables per word, and the average number of words per sentence, and provides an index based on the grade level a reader might need to read the sentence.

A score of 5.0 indicates a grade-school level; a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader would understand the document. Standard writing tends to be seventh-to-eighth grade level.

Please use caution when interpreting the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests on research and technical documents. Microsoft Word's version of the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test does not score higher than a grade level of 12 (although the original formula allows for higher grade levels). Documents written at a graduate level will be scored as a grade 12, which may be a significant underestimation.

¹ See a [detailed description of the formula](#) used in the Flesch Reading Ease Index

Using the readability tests

We tested the readability of this document, and used the results in the sample window at the bottom of page 1. This document has 9% passive sentences, a Flesch Reading Ease score of 51 (Fairly difficult), and is written at a grade level of 9.8 (or Grade 10).

The above tests can be useful in learning the overall readability of a document. However, it is important to use them in moderation, as the tests only score one aspect of constructing documents.

Readability tests are useful because they:

- Reduce the complex work of writing to simple formulas
- Provide a convenient check and measure of the level of one's writing
- Can be calculated by word processing software

Readability tests are limited because:

- A low style of writing can result from a slavish use of readability tests – a monotonous succession of short sentences and simple words can make your writing dull, and dull writing does not hold the reader's attention
- The tests can give conflicting results

Readability tests are best used when:

- You use the tests as a general guide, not a rule
- Tests do not replace the clear, logical thinking that is the foundation of all clear writing

Appendix 2: Accessibility of Word documents and PDFs

Word documents

Before creating your document, set the reading level checker: **File > Options > Proofing > check Show Readability Statistics**. This will calculate the reading level of your document at the same time as a spelling and grammar check (see Appendix 1).

1. Draft your document in Word. Write your content in plain and understandable language and use appropriate styles to format your content.
2. Save your document.
3. Check for accessibility issues: **File > Info > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility**
4. Export to PDF (saving and exporting to PDF will retain original formatting):
 - a. **File > Save As > change file format to .pdf > Save**
 - b. **File > Save and Send > Create PDF > Publish**

NOTE: The first time you save a Word document as a PDF, enable accessibility tags:

- **File > Save As > change file format to .pdf > Options > check Document Structure Tags for Accessibility > Save**
- **File > Save and Send > Create PDF > check Document Structure Tags for Accessibility > OK > Publish**

Adobe Reader

1. Open the PDF document.
2. Check accessibility: **Edit > Accessibility > Quick Check**

Adobe Pro

1. Open the PDF document.
2. **Advanced > Accessibility**
 - a. Full report
 - b. Quick report

Another good resource for checking PDF accessibility is the PAC PDF Check.

Appendix 3: Useful tools

- [Drupal Help Pages](#): Get assistance with using Drupal
- [Using LibGuides](#): Training and assistance using LibGuides; style guide for UTL LibGuides
- Accessible version of LibGuides is available at the bottom of every guide: “View this page in a format suitable for printers and screen readers or mobile devices.”
- [Communications at UTL](#): Details pertaining to UTL visual identity; templates; help with promotions and events
- List of ITS' commonly used [accessibility tools](#)
- [OCUL Accessibility Toolkit](#) (login required)
- [PAC PDF Checker](#) (download required)