**Vermont Department of Libraries’**

**Website Content Guide**

**Overview**

Both the Department of Libraries’ Mission Statement and the Vision Statement highlight the importance of access to information for all individuals. It is the role of the Department’s website to help meet the goal of “convenient access” for all website users. The information provided on our website should be easy to locate, navigate, and comprehend, with ready access to the answers they seek. The following guide will help create a cohesive look to our website and fulfill the Department goals for a website with rich content, helpful information, and meaningful graphics and images.

**Key Points**

Writing in print and writing for the web require two different styles of communication. We read differently when searching the Internet. Skimming content is more typical than deep reading. The Department of Libraries serves a variety of audiences and we want to meet their information needs. How this is accomplished on the web will look different than if we were writing a print document.

Since skimming is a more common method of discovery online the writing style for the website should include things such as:

* + Lists
  + Bullet points
  + Headers
  + Short paragraphs
  + Direct, simple statements

The type and style of language used online should be:

* Friendly
* Professional
* Helpful
* Conversational (ease of access)
* Knowledgeable, accurate and current

Things to avoid online are:

* + Excessive words
  + Library jargon and terminology when not appropriate for intended audience
  + Complicated instructions or navigation

**Specific Guidelines**

**Organization**

Good organization of content on a webpage can increase the ability of users to understand the intended message or information. When organizing webpage layout consider what task the user is likely trying to accomplish when arriving at the webpage. Do they require information? Are they seeking answers to questions? Provide the information users require and/or address information questions at the top of your page. Use headers to highlight the topics covered, and make the information useful. Do not waste time by creating excessive information which patrons will skim over. Adding a short introduction to what topics will be covered on that webpage can also help users understand the structure of the page, and if they’ve arrived at the correct location within the website.

There are various ways to organize online content. Consider using one of the following:

* Sequence/Time
* Information types
* Audience (state employee, librarian, general public, etc.)
* Order of questions asked
* Order of instructions
* By task

If you find your webpage content long, requiring users to scroll down the page, place a “Return To The Top” link at the bottom of the page or at various points on the page.

**Tone/Wording**

* Be professional. Social media, not the website, is the place for more casual writing styles.
* Avoid confusing library terminology and jargon. Consider the language used by the general public.
* Use second person in your writing. This style of writing is used for addressing the reader, using you/your/yours. The Department is referred to as we/us/our. (Example: Please check-in at our front desk. Example: For class be sure to bring your own pencil. Example: Our library service provides a wide variety of topics to meet your needs.)

Use an engaging, active voice as much as possible. (Example: NOT: The conference was attended by nine people. USE INSTEAD: Nine people attended the conference.)

* Avoid abbreviations and most acronyms.
* Use as few words as possible to get your point across.
* Numbers should be spelled out if they are zero – nine. Numbers 10 and above should be written in numeric form. (Example: We have four books on elephants but 14 books about unicorns.)
* An exception to the numbers rule is when writing a range; all numbers should be in numeric form. (Example: Librarians on average consume 8 – 12 ice cream cones a day.)
* Times should use the twelve hour clock, be written out in numeric form and include an ‘am’ or ‘pm’ at the end. (Example: The meeting starts at 12:45pm today.)
* Dates should be written in full. (Example: The party is on Friday, March 7, 2014.)

**Headers**

* Using headers on webpages allows users to quickly skim a page to determine if they are in the correct area of the website. Use them liberally.
* Words in headers should be kept to a minimum.
* Do not use punctuation in a header unless it is a question or the word requires use of an apostrophe or hyphen.
* In the Content Management System used for creating and updating content on the website use the ‘Formatting Styles’ button (second row, first button on left) to note which words are the headings. It will then automatically format those words correctly.
* Formatting Styles ‘sub-heading’ and ‘sub-sub-heading’ can also be used to denote important information on the webpage.

**Spacing**

* It is easier for users to scan/read a webpage with use of white space. Leave spaces between paragraphs and between headers and the paragraph that follows. If the Formatting Styles type is listed as ‘normal’ this will leave the correct amount of spacing necessary.
* Images should have space around them to allow easy reading of the content.

**Font/Color**

* Font should be in black. The Content Management System automatically uses black for ‘normal’ font and green for ‘heading’ font.
* Use the default font provided by the webpage editor.
* Limit use of bold to headers and other important information. Too much bold defeats the purpose.
* Avoid use of *italics*, it is difficult to read.
* Do not use underlining as this is associated with links.
* Avoid highlighting words; use bold if you want to emphasize a point.
* Never use all caps, except for acronyms and other obvious uses.

**Links to Other Areas of the Web**

* Do not use words such as “Click Here” when providing a link. Be descriptive of where patrons will be going when they use the link.
* Use short phases as the link, no more than 2 – 3 words, not a full sentence.
* Links to external websites should open in a new tab/window. Links to other areas of the Department website should open in the same window.
* Use no more than two links in the same sentence.

**Links to PDF and/or Word Documents**

* When a user opens a document it should open in a new tab/window.
* The link to the document should be descriptive, letting users know what to expect when they are opening the document.

**Lists/Bullets/Instructions**

* Using lists and bullets makes scanning information easier for patrons; use these tools to organize content.
* For instructions use numbers; otherwise use bullet points.
* Keep instructions short, simple and direct.
* End bulleted lists with periods only when there is a complete sentence.
* If embedding lists within lists, do not use more than one sublevel of list elements.
  + (Example: Top level is fine
    - Sublevel is fine
      * No good)

**Images**

* Always include an alternative description for an image. Remember that screenshots are images too. They will require an alternative description. The Content Management System provides an opportunity to do this when images are placed on the webpage.
* Recommendations for writing the alternative description include:
  + Repeat any text in the image.
  + Keep it short (5 – 15 words.)
  + Be clear. Put the image in context to the rest of the information and no more.
* Follow copyright law when selecting images to use on the website. Using Creative Commons images is a good place to go to find “safe” images.
* Images should enhance the content, not add to the clutter of the page. Choose wisely.
* Do not use animated images.

While the concept of the “average user” is often employed when building a website, in reality no such person exists. Each website visitor is unique; creating only for the average misses most users. Instead the Vermont Department of Libraries wants a website which offers a welcoming, informative and easy-to-understand experience for all users. Writing for the web does not have to be intimidating. Focus on making the information you provide easy to access and to understand, and grounded in the needs of users. Keep it simple, be direct and you will achieve a well-written website.

Thanks for reading over the style guide!

**Sources of Information on Writing for the Web**

Kreitzberg Library Web Style Guide, Norwich University – Vermont. Web Style Guide

Kennedy Library Web Communications: A Simple Guide to Good Web Content, California Polytechnic State University. <http://lib.calpoly.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2013/05/web_communications_handbook.pdf>

Krug, Steve (2014) Don’t Make Me Think, Revisited: A Common Sense approach to Web and Mobile Usability. (006.7 KRUG/State Library)

Redish, Janice (2014) Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content That Works. (006.7 REDISH/State Library)

**Vermont Department of Libraries**

**Recommended Styles, Terminology and Vocabulary**

**Who We Are**

On the website there are a few ways to refer to the Department of Libraries:

* + Use the name in full, capitalizing the words “Department” and “Libraries”
  + If in obvious context the words “Library” or “Department” may be used, and should be capitalized.
  + The abbreviation of VTLIB may be used if the context is easily understood by the intended audience. If addressing the pubic it is advised to avoid abbreviations.

When referencing other Vermont libraries use the full name of the library and include in parentheses the name of the town if it is not obvious by the library name. Example: Pierson Library (Shelburne)

**Vocabulary**

There are a number of words which will be used multiple times when writing on our website. The following list provides a common way of using those words throughout our content.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Examples** | **Correct Usage** |
| Ebook, ebook, e-book, E-book, electronic book | eBook, eReader |
| Vermont, VT | Vermont |
| internet | Internet |
| site | website |
| VSA | Vermont Statutes Annotated, or V.S.A. |
| catalogue, catalog, cataloging | catalog, cataloging |
| Vermont State Research Library | Vermont State Library |
| Interlibrary loan | Interlibrary Loan |
| docs | documents |
| Vermont Automated Libraries System | Vermont Automated Library System |
| reference or research | reference |
| eRate, e-rate | E-rate (program, not company spelling) |
| Gates foundation | Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation |
| SOV | State of Vermont |
| AoA | Agency of Administration (all government agencies should be fully spelled out) |
| Email, e-mail | email |

**Abbreviations**

Before using an abbreviation you should always use the full name first for the sake of clarity. It is also recommended if your webpage is long enough a user would need to scroll down losing sight of the original use of the full name, you use the full name again.

The appropriate format for abbreviations is to use the full name followed by parentheses enclosing the abbreviation you will be using. Example: Vermont Online Library (VOL). Even if you believe the intended audience would recognize the abbreviation you should first use the full name to avoid confusion.

Common Abbreviations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Full Name** | **Abbreviation** |
| American Library Association | ALA |
| Vermont School Library Association | VSLA |
| Vermont Library Association | VLA |
| Children’s Book Exhibit Center | CBEC |
| Vermont Department of Libraries | VTLIB |
| Library Services and Technology Act | LSTA |
| Continuing Education | CE |
| Vermont Online Library | VOL |
| Institute of Museum and Library Services | IMLS |
| Vermont Automated Library System | VALS |
| University of Vermont | UVM |
| Midstate Library Service Center | MLSC |

**Style Guide**

The Department uses the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide to assist in style and formatting questions. Assistance can be found on these two websites:

* Purdue OWL: APA Style and Formatting Guide <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
* American Psychological Association Style <http://www.apastyle.org/>

For issues of proper terms and/or vocabulary, use the Associated Press (AP) Style Book.

* <http://www.apstylebook.com/>