

Using This Guide

This guide is designed to put us all on the same page as the writing process begins. The hope is that by taking more responsibility for the consistency and clarity of our own work, we can reduce both the length of the editorial process and the number of discussions about the appropriateness of a piece of content.

Know it. Love it. Refer to it always.

What's Inside

- **Writing Strategies.** These basic rhetorical strategies will help create good web content. You may think some of these rules are obvious. Read them anyway. You would be amazed at how many times good writers break them.
- **Editing and Revising.** This is possibly the most important section—and the section most likely to be skipped. It includes advice on how to revise your own work, how to review others' work, and how to accept critiques of your work from others.
- **Style Sheet.** This is a reference list of some of the more commonly missed style points. You should familiarize yourself with these points before you write.

For any points not located in this document, follow Georgia State's official stylebook (www.gsu.edu/~wwwstl) and the *Associated Press Stylebook* for most style points.

Writing Strategies and Language Devices

Know your audience; write with the user in mind.

Remember that students are our primary users and they have specific goals and needs. After you've written a section of content, ask yourself, "Will this have value for users? Is it easy to read? Can users find information they need?"

This is Georgia State speaking.

Students should know that everything on the web site is coming from Georgia State. Therefore, when referring to the university, use first person plural pronouns such as "we," "us," and "ours."

With more than 40,000 students seeking degrees through our six colleges and schools, we have become one of the nation's leading urban research universities.

Do not use *GSU* in any web content. We are *Georgia State University*, or simply, *Georgia State*.

Talk to the users, not at them.

When you're talking about the students or giving them instructions, use second-person singular pronouns, such as "you" and "your" whenever appropriate (rather than third person—"they" or "the students").

If you need assistance with your application, contact the Office of Admissions.

Use the active voice.

In active sentences, the subject *performs* an action:

*The dog bit the boy.
Scientists experimented to test the hypothesis.*

In passive sentences, the subject *receives* an action:

*The boy was bitten by the dog.
Experiments were conducted to test the hypothesis.*

A frequent clue that you have lapsed into passive voice is that the person or thing performing the action is preceded by the word "by."

For www.gsu.edu, most situations will require the active voice. It is generally much clearer and easier to read than the passive, and it is also more concise. Active voice will also show that www.gsu.edu stands behind its message, and it will help keep users on task with action-oriented language.

However, don't be dogmatic about this guideline. There are times when the passive can be profitably employed to provide emphasis or create the appearance of objectivity. However, use it sparingly.

Choose simple, concrete words.

Everyday words are more immediate and understandable. Don't overdo clichés and slang, which can make your text confusing or trite. Carefully use colloquial words and phrases that may have different meanings to different people.

Make your labels clear.

Use labels that accurately reflect the content to which they refer. Terms used for buttons, navigation, and section titles must not give users false expectations or leave them wondering what the terms mean.

Maintain a natural cadence.

Good writing has a familiar rhythm that puts readers at ease. Read your copy aloud and listen for awkward or forced constructions.

Reflect energy.

Use action verbs, active voice, compact sentences, and short paragraphs. Shorter words with fewer syllables generally convey more energy than longer words with more syllables.

Be hip, not stodgy. Be frank, not evasive.

If used in the right context, humor can be an effective way of grabbing people's attention. But when visiting www.gsu.edu, students are focused on getting information. Don't let clever puns, wordplay, and sarcasm interfere with their tasks or obscure your message.

Don't be loud.

Avoid using exclamation marks, aggressive promotional messages, and bolded, oversized, or all-capped types that are not specified by the design system.

Avoid jargon.

Avoid university-speak. Newcomers could feel alienated by administrative terminology and education buzzwords. If you think a word might be unfamiliar to your audience, be sure to explain it in the context of your copy. Also, use acronyms sparingly and only when accompanied by an explanation.

Surface important information.

Cover the most important information in the first two paragraphs of your document. Often, students will want to scan a page for the most important content, then move on to their next tasks. If the topic is important to them, they'll read further for more details.

Be accurate and timely.

If you're uncertain about the name of a department, program, etc., research. Look for the official webpage and replicate the name from there, or if you can't find it on the web, pick up the phone and start calling around. A few minutes of your time can save users hours. Also if you post dates, prices, deadlines or any other time-sensitive information keep in mind that this content must be revisited whenever a change is made or a date is passed. Take responsibility for your own content. Also take the time every month or two to click through all the links on your page (or pages) to make sure none of the sites or pages you link to have moved or changed URLs.

Be courteous.

Use language in your text that is personal, with courtesy phrases ("please" and "thank you"), but without overdoing it. Be considerate of users' time by making the most important information easily accessible and avoiding information users don't need or probably won't use.

Avoid rhetorical questions.

These are handy devices for introductions, but copy that is peppered with questions can feel manipulative.

Organize consistently.

Create and organize similar content items similarly. Users will be jarred if they see too many different presentations or writing styles used for related content.

Explain the results of actions.

Write instructional copy that makes it clear to users the results for any actions they take on the site. This is particularly important with for features where users submit personal information.

"Chunk" content.

Write and package your content into discrete components, or "chunks," that users can quickly scan. Using short paragraphs, subheads, and bulleted lists are some ways to accomplish this. Avoid lengthy patches of text that look gray or force users to scroll.

Write short.

Craft concise sentences in brief paragraphs. Short sentences hold a user's interest and are usually clearer. The word count of content on a screen should typically be less than half of that on a printed page.

Make content flow smoothly.

Write content with a logical flow that takes users cleanly from one thought into the next without repeating information. Read copy out loud to listen for awkward or repetitive language.

Write good instructional copy.

Write instructional copy that is concise, friendly, and uses unambiguous imperative language that makes required actions clear ("Click" or "Please click" rather than "You should click" or "You may click"). Anticipate possible user errors and craft instructional copy to prevent them.

Links

Make link names descriptive and meaningful.

Create links that accurately describe the destination or the action that results from clicking the link. Avoid using meaningless labels such as “click here.” Instead, describe the destination: “The benefits of on-campus housing.”

Make links stand alone.

Users should understand where a link leads even if they read the link out of context of the page’s content. This is particularly important for vision-impaired users who use screen readers to scan for links.

Make links the right length.

Too few words may not be clear enough. Links longer than one line may be confused as multiple links.

Create connections to page headings.

The heading of a page that appears when users click a link should prominently display the same or similar words as the link itself, to assure users that they have arrived at the correct page. For example, if the link says “Options for living on-campus,” then the page heading should say “Options for living on-campus,” “On-campus living,” or something similar.

Use correct capitalization.

All links except top-level navigation should use sentence case capitalization—only the first word and proper nouns should be capitalized. Top-level navigation should use title case, capitalizing all important words in the name.

In-page Links

Some content will require that you include your links within the content of a page. This is fine, as long as you follow the above standards and also include the link in the page’s Related Links sidebar. Keep in-page links to a minimum, however, and only link the first reference to another page. Too many links can make a page hard to follow.

Related Links

The Related Links sidebar appears on almost every page on the site. It is an important part of the navigation system. Try to limit the number of Related Links to five, and absolutely no more than nine.

Keep links updated

As stated before, check your links often. Every month or two is reasonable. Any links that are no longer functional should be updated immediately or removed until the new URL is located. Most Georgia State web entities are going through migrations currently, so this happens very often! Be aware of what you link to and keep it current.

Editing and Revising Content

Revising Your Own Work

- **Edit conceptually first.** Conceptual editing is the first step in making content appropriate for the web. Ask yourself, “Is the information relevant? Is it pertinent to students? Is it organized consistently and intuitively?”
- **Cut verbiage.** Text should be as brief as possible, so it delivers its message clearly and quickly. Your mantra should be: “Maximum meaning, minimal text.” Make sure the path to action is clear to users.
- **Edit for international users.** Assume your users are proficient in English, but be careful about using dialect and unfamiliar abbreviations. Before using distinctive words, consider whether they would be meaningful to students from Helsinki to Houston to Hong Kong.
- **Read the text out loud to ensure a natural cadence.** Catch awkward-sounding phrases that looked OK on screen or paper. This will also help you proofread every word, rather than skimming.
- **Print out to proofread.** Computer screen text is hard to read—and proofread. Refer to the checklist in the back of this document for a list of issues that may come up often during proofreading.
- **Don’t rely exclusively on the spellchecker.** Many spelling errors result in the accidental creation of text combinations that are actually words (“public” vs. “pubic” being the quintessential example”). These will not show up in a spell check.

Critiquing Other People’s Work

- **Be constructive.** Our goal is to create the best image of Georgia State. The suggestions and criticism you offer should further that goal. They should be offered in the spirit of, “Here’s how we can make this better,” rather than, “This really isn’t very good.”
- **Be courteous.** Writing, particularly for people who do it rarely, can be a very personal activity. So be nice.
- **Don’t try to rework everything.** Realize that your fellow authors are not going to do everything the way you would have done it. That doesn’t mean it needs to be redone. By all means, if you think something needs to be changed, speak up. But be judicious.

Having Your Own Work Edited

- **Take suggestions seriously, not personally.** We are critiquing each other’s work to produce the best possible content. So look at feedback carefully before rejecting it and remember that changes to your work are made in the pursuit of excellence.
- **The editor is the subject-matter expert on editing.** Feel free to speak up if you don’t like the way your content was edited, but realize that the editor’s changes are designed to make your document fit in with the entire site and meet standards of consistent grammar and style. The editor also has experience in matters of grammar and style that you may not possess.

Style Points Commonly Missed

The items listed below outline the mistakes most often encountered in editing copy, as well as a few global style points unique to this project. Fervent adherence to these points while creating copy will speed up the editing process and result in better content.

- **Do not use the serial comma.** When a conjunction joins the last two items in a series, do not place a comma before the conjunctions. (Example: “You have a choice of red, blue or green” rather than “You have a choice of red, blue, or green.”)
- **Avoid random capitalization.** Capital letters are generally used for the first word in a sentence, for formal nouns (the names of people, companies, and specific products, and for acronyms). They should not be used in other instances. A good rule of thumb is that when in doubt, DON'T capitalize.
- **Internet and web.** “Internet” is always capitalized. “Web,” used alone, is capitalized only at the beginning of a sentence. It is not usually capitalized when used as a modifier (web site, web master, but World Wide Web), but check if you aren't sure.
- **Use only one space between sentences.** Don't insert two spaces. There should also never be two spaces between words.
- **Don't indent paragraphs.** To indicate paragraph breaks, hit the Enter key twice.
- **Use double quotations marks for quotes.** The single quotes are only used in isolated instances that will probably rarely arise.
- **Put periods and commas inside quotes.** Right: “I'm falling,” she said. Wrong: “I'm falling”, she said. However, other punctuation goes outside the quotation marks unless they are part of the quotation.
- **Don't use the ampersand (&).** Instead, spell out “and.”
- **Spell out numbers less than 10.** “There were five golden rings,” not “There were 5 golden rings.”
- **Use numerals for numbers greater than 10 except at the beginning of a sentence.** “There were 11 pipers piping,” not “There were eleven pipers piping.” But, “Eleven pipers were piping.”
- **E-mail is ALWAYS hyphenated.** The “e” is only capitalized at the beginning of a sentence.
- **Web site is two words. Homepage is one.**
- **Georgia State University.** The university should always be known by its proper name, Georgia State University—never by the initials GSU, GS or by the abbreviated Ga. State. Georgia State and State are acceptable upon second reference.

Style Sheet

This table contains a list of style points that you should refer to as you prepare content for GSU.edu. This should be considered a living document, to be updated as additions or changes are identified in the content creation process.

When an issue or question is not addressed here, use these references, in this order:

*Georgia State University Stylebook, www.gsu.edu/~wwwstl. This guide lists stylepoints specific to Georgia State and official preference regarding general style issues.

*The Associated Press Stylebook, 2002

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition (www.m-w.com)

	STYLE POINTS	EXAMPLES
Amounts: singular versus plural	Use the plural verb form when talking about discrete, countable items. Use the singular form when talking about a collective quantity or amount.	Ten million barrels of oil were sold. Ten million gallons of oil was sold.
assure/ensure/insure	<i>Ensure</i> means to make sure; <i>assure</i> means to comfort; <i>insure</i> generally refers to the business of insurance.	After ensuring that the baby was buckled in, he assured the mother that things were fine and reminded her that the car was insured.
because/since	Should not be used interchangeably. <i>Because</i> refers to cause and effect; <i>since</i> is a reference to a point in time.	Because he loved acting, he refused to give up his dream of being in the movies. Since the 1980s, workers have been able to telecommute.
Bullets	Use bulleted lists to draw attention to key information that would get lost in a paragraph of text. The most common problem with bulleted lists is the absence of parallel construction. If the first bullet point is a declarative sentence in the present tense, the rest should also be declarative sentences in the present tense.	Effective bulleted items: *Are introduced with a colon. *Begin with a capital letter and end with a period (not a semicolon), even if they aren't complete sentences. *Do not use "and" after the next to the last item.
Capitalization	Avoid arbitrary capitalization. Don't capitalize the first letter of words just because they're considered important; reserve capital letters for proper nouns. Do not use all caps for emphasis.	In headings and links: Use sentence case capitalization for all headings and links. Living and learning at Georgia State <i>not</i> Living and Learning at Georgia State
Colons	Don't break up a sentence with a colon just because a number of items are about to be listed. Lists should be preceded with colons only when they are introduced with "the following" or "as	Here are the categories that will be evaluated: communication, leadership, congeniality, and talent. The categories that will be

	follows," or if the introductory clause is incomplete without the items. Don't use the colon after "include," "including," or "such as," or when introducing a list that is an object of a verb or preposition. If the first word that comes after the colon begins a complete sentence or is an acronym or proper name, you may start it with a capital letter; otherwise, use lowercasing.	evaluated include communication, leadership, congeniality, and talent.
Commas	Do not use the serial comma. When a conjunction joins the last two items in a series, do not place a comma before the conjunction. Use a comma to link two conjunctions only when each has a distinct, stated subject. If they have the same subject, which is not restated in the second clause, do not use a comma.	You have a choice of wireless, Internet or long-distance phone service. Bob didn't mean to do it, but he did it anyway. John took the tools from the box and gave them to Jane.
Comparatives and superlatives	Words like <i>perfect</i> , <i>ultimate</i> , and <i>unique</i> should not be used with comparatives or superlatives such as <i>more</i> , <i>very</i> , <i>most</i> , etc. These words already indicate a condition that has no equal.	Emulate: This product is unique. Avoid: This product is the most unique on the market.
Dates	Do not use ordinal numbers (such as 4th) to express dates	Orders are not picked up or delivered on: *Labor Day – Mon., Sept. 4, 2000 *Thanksgiving – Thurs., Nov. 23, 2000 *Christmas – Mon., Dec. 25, 2000
e.g./i.e.	Use "for example" and "that is" instead of these Latin abbreviations. e.g. is short for the Latin <i>exempli gratia</i> , which means "for example." i.e. is short for the Latin <i>id est</i> meaning "that is."	
e-mail	Hyphenate; capitalize only at the beginning of a sentence.	
fax	Lower case, with initial caps at the beginning of a sentence	
Fewer versus less	Fewer refers to number; use it for things that can be counted. Less refers to quantity; use it for things in bulk.	We have fewer than 10 employees. He spent less than \$150 on the carpet cleaning service.
homepage	One word; capitalize only at the beginning of a sentence	
Internet	Capitalize in all uses. Refers to the Internet as an entity.	We enjoy surfing the Internet.
Italics	Use sparingly to bring emphasis to words. Try to limit its use to specific functions, such as indicating non-English words, musical compositions, or the titles of books, newspapers, magazines, plays, and movies. Do not use italics and quotation marks together.	
less than (versus under)	Less than refers to quantity; under refers to location.	Less than half of the people surveyed said they hid under their beds as children.

more than (versus over)	More than refers to quantity; over refers to location.	More than 20 airplanes fly over our house each day.
Numbers	Spell out numbers one through nine. Use numerals for 10 and higher. Spell out numbers that begin a sentence. Spell out number rankings (i.e., first, second, third, etc.), rather than using 1st, 2nd, 3rd. Use the same style to express related numbers above and below nine. If you must use numerals for one of the numbers in a given category, use numerals for them all.	Nine cars and 14 trucks.
on campus/off campus	Two words when used as a prepositional phrase, but hyphenated when used as an adjective.	I live off campus, but my most of my friends live in on-campus housing.
online/offline	Each are one word; capitalize only at the beginning of a sentence.	
Percent	Use the word rather than the % sign. Use numerals, even if the percentage is below 10.	9 percent
Quotation marks	In addition to direct quotes, use for potentially unfamiliar terms on first reference. Periods or commas should be inside the closing quotation mark. Colons and semicolons go outside of a closing quotation mark. Do not use italics and quotation marks together.	Last year, we began the site's visual redesign, or "graphical refresh."
Semicolon	Use a semicolon to link full sentences or to link items in a series that contains other punctuation.	Most singers gain fame through hard work and dedication; Sara, however, found other means. Classic science fiction sagas are <i>Star Trek</i> , with Mr. Spock and his large pointy ears; <i>Battlestar Galactica</i> with its Cylon Raiders; and <i>Star Wars</i> , with Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader.
sign in/sign-in	Verb form is two words with no hyphen. Noun and adjective forms are two words hyphenated. Capitalize only at the beginning of a sentence.	The sign-in page is where you sign in. Please use the sign-in below.
Space between sentences	Put one space between sentences, not two.	
Telephone numbers	Use parentheses for area codes. Do not refer to toll-free numbers as 1-800 numbers, as other prefixes are now used.	
that versus which	That singles out the item being described, while which adds nonessential information about the item.	We will explore Mammoth Cave, which has twelve miles of underground passageways. We will explore a cave that has twelve miles of underground passageways.

web	Lowercase; capitalized at the beginning of a sentence and in the construction "World Wide Web."	
web site	Two words, not capitalized except at the beginning of a sentence.	
who versus that	Use who for people and that for companies.	People who need people shouldn't work at companies that are mostly automated.
World Wide Web	Three words, all capitalized.	