# [ORGANIZATON] Content style guide TEMPLATE

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## Overview

A style guide documents the conventions that everyone in an organization should adhere to. This includes conventions about how to address your audience, grammar, word choice, and branding. This style guide covers [ORGANIZATION’s] conventions, ensuring that all our communications are consistent and center our audience.

[ORGANIZATION]’s style is an extension of the statewide style. It doesn’t replace style guidance from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The [Mass.gov style guide](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Table-Of-Contents.aspx#mass.gov-brand%2C-content-style) uses [AP style](https://www.ap.org/solutions/platforms/ap-stylebook/) for punctuation and formatting, differing in only a few meaningful ways. AP is the same style used by journalists and some academic disciplines. Refer to the Mass.gov style guide or AP guidelines directly for punctuation and formatting.

## Plain language

We publish content in plain language. Plain language means making it as easy as possible for everyone, experienced or new, to understand and use our content. In addition, plain language builds trust, reduces the number of people who want to contact us for additional help, and makes business processes more efficient.

Plain language does not mean “dumbing down” content. It means writing sentences that are clear and easy to read. It’s equally important for technical audiences as for general audiences. The real test of if something is written in plain language is how easily your audience can use it to do what they came to do.

To improve plain language:

* Use the [Hemmingway Editor](https://hemingwayapp.com/) to identify sentences that are too long and complicated
* Aim for 8th grade reading level. To check your writing’s grade level, use [Microsoft Word’s readability level tool](https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2)

Here are some best practices that you can follow to write in plain language:

* Short sentences (20 words or fewer)
* Short paragraphs – 250 words max in 5 sentences or fewer
* Paragraphs contain only 1 idea
* Avoid padding with adjectives and adverbs
* Include only essential information. Do not distract with unnecessary details
* Use short, simple, concrete words the audience knows e.g. “get” instead of “obtain”
* Define acronyms on first reference, e.g. Executive Office of Technology Services and Security (EOTSS)
* Define jargon and technical terms or leave them out
* Use active voice e.g., “You should file the application” not “The application should be filed”
* Avoid strings of nouns, 3 or more in a row
* Avoid long introductory clauses – verbs are close to the beginning of the sentences
* Avoid hidden verbs (nouns turned into verbs), e.g. “The law applies” not “The applicability of the law”
* Use inclusive language e.g., avoid terms such as disabled, elderly, citizen
* Content should be scannable. Make frequent use of headings and bullet lists.
* Address the person reading the page when possible. Use “you.” Example: “Renew your driver’s license…” instead of “Renewing a driver’s license.”

## [ORGANIZATION]-specific conventions

[ORGANIZATION] content should use the following conventions so that it is consistent throughout.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **What** | **How** | **Notes/examples** |
|  |  |  |
| Download | Use only as verb, not a noun | *Example*: Documents available for download |
| Log in | Use as a verb | *Example:* Log in to your account |
| Login | Use as a noun or adjective | *Example:* Use your login and password |

### Files, forms, letters, and other communication

Many of our communications rely on Word documents, PDFs, PPTs, forms, emails, and so on. The guidelines in this section cover those.

[List conventions everyone should follow for each medium, including fonts, logos, seals, resolution, ways of naming documents, where documents should be stored (with Sharepoint links), how to check accessibility, etc. If you have an image repository, list that here, too.]

[If you have templates, e.g. PowerPoint, letterhead, email signatures, you can also include them or links to them here]

### Social Media

Social media posts should follow the [Mass.gov style guide,](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Table-Of-Contents.aspx#mass.gov-brand%2C-content-style) the [state’s social media policy,](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgov-social-media-policy) and [ADA accessibility guidelines](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/:w:/s/MassIT/DigitalServices/EVEh9Juq59FCrh7CIHtdkVcBJkxF0xQzU6WJzpZtFCCP1Q?e=4hCwyl). In particular:

1. Graphics should use accessible colors.
2. Videos and graphics should have alt text and captions.
3. Posts should use inclusive language and avoid idioms, which do not translate well.
4. Posts should be written in plain language, aiming for grade 8 reading level.

[INCLUDE ANY OTHER GUIDANCE YOU HAVE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGERS.]

# [ORGANIZATION] Center your audience

This section is about what people sometimes call “voice,” “tone,” or “how to address your audience.”

You should create content that anticipates your audience’s needs. This means writing in language they can understand, including all the information they need, answering the questions they are likely to have, and breaking complex processes into actionable steps.

Lots of features of writing contribute to centering your audience: word choice, point of view, how you address (or don’t) your reader, how formal you are, etc. If it is helpful, you can adopt the Commonwealth-wide voice and tone:

* **Dignified** but not boring
* **Helpful** but not overbearing
* **Human** but not casual

If this is too abstract, then you can return as often as possible to the question, How do I say this so that my audience can more easily understand or act?

See [Writing for mass.gov](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Style-guide--How-to-write-for-Mass.gov.aspx) for more.

### Audience-centered examples

1. Give examples to help clarify jargon or domain-specific terms.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Write like this | Not like this | Because |
| You can take paid medical leave for pregnancy, delivery, and recovery. You can also take paid family leave to bond with the child after your medical leave ends. Enter how much time you expect to take for each, and we’ll create your application for both types of leave. | Enter your expected medical leave and your expected family leave separately. These are two separate types of leave. We will create an application for each one. | In this example, our audience might not understand the difference between “medical” and “family” leave. Giving examples helps clarify them. |

1. When explaining a step in a process, don’t expect users to bring prior knowledge.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Write like this | Not like this | Because |
| You’ll need to verify your identity. You can use:   * A driver’s license * Massachusetts state ID * Passport | You’ll need appropriate identification. | Don’t expect people to know what form of ID we accept. This makes our content more self-service and tells the reader that you don’t expect them to already know. |

1. [What to do]

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Write like this | Not like this | Because |
|  |  |  |

1. [What to do]

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Write like this | Not like this | Because |
|  |  |  |

# [ORGANIZATION] Glossary

We’ll use this glossary to make sure we’re using the same language across all public facing content. These terms have been vetted by [CONTENT WORKING GROUP OR EQUIVALENT BODY/PERSON].

## Glossary changes/additions

To request a change or addition to the glossary, please send the following to [CONTENT WORKING GROUP OR EQUIVALENT BODY/PERSON] for review:

* The term
* Rationale for adding/deleting/changing it
* Definition
* Example use/s

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Approved term | Definition | Term not to use | Example |
| active duty | Someone who is in full-time service in the armed forces. | In the line of duty | You can apply for military-related family leave to:     * Manage family affairs when a family member is on or has been called to **active duty** while in the armed forces, including the National Guard or Reserves. |
| application | The request to take leave that a person submits. | claim | If you work in Massachusetts and need to take Paid Family and Medical Leave, here's how you can begin your application. |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

## Follow up to glossary changes

When terms in the glossary have been added, changed or deleted... [INCLUDE YOUR PROCEDURE FOR UPDATING EXISTING CONTENT]

# [ORGANIZATION] Branding requirements

Your brand is your image. It communicates your values, ensures consistent communication, and builds trust.

## Goals

* [ORGANIZATION] agencies should follow Mayflower brand guidelines (or extend them when they don’t cover your use case)
* [ORGANIZATION] agencies may also develop their own, separate brands for use when launching a new program, campaign, or initiative, for example:
  + [EXAMPLE 1]
  + [EXAMPLE 2]
* All digital brand choices must meet [WCAG 2 compliance.](https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/)
* [LIST OTHE BRANDING GOALS]

## Guidelines

Reference materials:

* [Mayflower Guidelines](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/home/)
* [Style guide: How to write for Mass.gov | Mass.gov Knowledge Base](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Style-guide--How-to-write-for-Mass.gov.aspx)

## Brand Identity

Brand identity is more than just a logo and some colors. It conveys shared values – how you want your constituents to think about you. Mayflower has [[4 brand pillars](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/core/index.html?path=/docs/principles-brand-pillars--page):](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/core/index.html?path=/docs/principles-brand-pillars--page)

* Helpful
* Human
* Dignified
* Modern

[ORGANIZATION] branding should not contradict Mass.gov’s brand goals visually or through content style choices.

* Style example: Mass.gov’s goal to “avoid slang and jargon” includes guidance around plain language and avoiding acronyms. Core artifacts like logos, taglines, etc. should identify the program in plain language and avoid specialized acronyms or technical terms.
* Brand example: Mass.gov is designed to have contrast ratios that meet WCAG 2 standards. The primary look and colors for [ORGANIZATION] should meet accessibility guidelines.

### Logo and Seals

Mayflower has [guidelines on use of the Great Seal of Massachusetts](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/core/index.html?path=/docs/foundation-logo--seal-example) as well as samples you can download and best practices for its use. The seal should not be altered or changed in any way.

[ORGANIZATION] seals should comply with Mayflower guidelines.

[How: Would be helpful to have downloadable versions of ORGANIZATION seals in this document]

Any logos created for [ORGANIZATION] programs or campaigns should adhere to Mayflower guidelines.

### Color palette

[ORGANIZATION] content should use the [Mayflower color palette](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/core/index.html?path=/docs/foundation-color--page), which meets accessibility standards. Using Mayflower colors creates consistency across all Massachusetts government experiences. The brand colors also convey semantic meaning – for example in warnings and alerts – and differentiate categories of information.

[ORGANIZATION] may extend this color palette with its unique brand colors. However, you should make an effort to harmonize your color palette with Mayflower as much as possible.

### Typography

The [Mayflower typeface](https://mayflower.digital.mass.gov/core/index.html?path=/docs/foundation-typography--page) is Noto Sans. It’s an open source typeface that can be directly downloaded from Google fonts. The Noto Sans font family should be used for print and digital assets.

### Photography

Recommended file types for photography are jpgs and pngs. Avoid tifs and gifs.

* Don’t add imagery unless it’s relevant and it improves the content. It should help to convey information or add context or emotional impact.
* Don’t use clip art
* Don’t include text on images
* Only use full color images

The Mass.gov Knowledge base includes some [general guidance on images](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Images.aspx). You can [request access to the Mass.gov image library](https://massgov.sharepoint.com/sites/TSS-MassGov-Knowledge-Base/SitePages/Images.aspx#image-library), which has free, properly sized and edited images.

### Agency-specific branding

[THIS SECTION COVERS ANY ‘CHILD’ AGENCIES THAT YOUR STYLE GUIDE MIGHT GOVERN. REMOVE IF THIS IS IRRELEVANT]

Any branding [ORGANIZATON] agencies adopts should complement the Mayflower brand and personalize it to [ORGANIZATON]’S mission and values.

[UPDATE WITH EXAMPLE(S) FROM YOUR AGENCY: The [MassHire JobQuest landing page](https://jobquest.dcs.eol.mass.gov/JobQuest/LandingPage.aspx) is an example of an EOLWD brand that follows Mayflower guidance. It uses Mayflower colors, typography, and elements like buttons. Even the logo reflects the Mayflower brand. This creates consistency for constituents as they move from a Mass.gov page to the JobQuest landing page.]