

Writing and editing for the website and intranet

Introduction

This guide should be used as a reference document for people who are writing content for or editing pages on the Rushcliffe Borough Council website and intranet.

Topics covered include:

- ❖ The differences between writing for the web and writing for traditional printed media, such as leaflets.
- ❖ How to format your documents so that readers can easily scan them to find the information they need.
- ❖ How to convert existing documents so that they can be used on a web page.
- ❖ How to handle links to other pages and websites.

Preparing information – writing and editing

Preparing content to go on to a website

While there are similarities, the web is not the same as printed media. If you need to publish information on a website, do not assume that you can simply cut and paste text from your existing printed materials.

Most likely, you will need to spend time editing and in most cases rewriting the information. The main reason for this has nothing to do with technology: it is the writing itself. Successful writing on the web has different requirements to successful text offline:

- It is concise, using around 50% less words than its printed counterpart.
- It is written with the knowledge that it will be scanned, not read, by the reader.
- It includes a summary (and conclusion, where applicable) at the *top*.
- It is written with an awareness of *context* – the understanding that the web user has not necessarily read preceding pages.
- It is objective.
- It makes use of language that the user will be familiar with, rather than jargon: this makes for more successful search results.

Consider your audience

Before publishing any information, consider the audience you are trying to reach. If your audience has an advanced knowledge of the subject, use the appropriate language and vocabulary. For example, an explanation of a new recycling procedure will use different language if it is aimed at recycling staff than if it is aimed at the general public. In this scenario, two versions of the same content may need to be prepared: a brief, jargon-free version for the public, and a detailed and technically-minded version for the staff who need to follow the procedure.

Write concisely

When people read from a screen, they read much more slowly than when they are reading something printed on a piece of paper. Wherever possible, reduce the word count of online versions of documents – ideally to about 50% of their original size. Information should be both concise and factual. Keep sentences short, and avoid using jargon.

Reading versus scanning

People read differently from a screen than they do from a book or piece of paper:

- They read more slowly.
- They tend to scan, rather than read, so headings and subheadings are very important.
- They rarely read things in order.

The structure of a document is very important. Many readers of web pages have no intention of reading the whole thing. Rather, they are there because they are looking for something and so they will scan through a page looking for some text that may answer their question. With this in mind, it is easy to see why a structured document containing meaningful headings and subheadings is more usable than paragraph after paragraph of unbroken text. Web pages are seldom read in order: unlike with a book, where people start at the beginning and continue to the end, website readers may have arrived at a page from any number of other places. To this end, when converting existing documents for use on the web, remove all references to specific pages and to the order of sections within a document. These should instead be replaced with direct links to named sections or pages wherever necessary.

Summarising a page

Let the reader know in the first paragraph of every page what the page contains so that they can determine quickly whether it is what they are looking for. The summary should contain brief details and any applicable conclusions, which may be explained in more detail elsewhere in the document.

Writing objectively

Readers prefer text that is objective. The best example of this is in the case of frequently asked questions: don't waste time with *infrequently* asked questions. If a reader is viewing an FAQ page, they need to rely on it containing helpful answers to questions that are genuinely asked frequently.

Example of good practice:

Question: Where can I take my glass bottles for recycling?

Answer: There are bottle banks at the following locations in Rushcliffe: [followed by a list of all locations]

Result: The reader knows where to take their glass bottles for recycling.

Example of bad practice:

Question: Where can I take my glass bottles for recycling?

Answer: Rushcliffe Borough Council's award-winning glass recycling service offers numerous bottle banks where you can take your bottles to be recycled. We have recently won an award for...

Result: The reader has to wade through several sentences that do not address their question.

Example of very bad practice:

Question: How do you manage to provide such excellent value for money?

Answer: Rushcliffe Borough Council's award-winning glass recycling service is funded by your Council Tax. We work to...

Result: This is clearly not a question that would be asked frequently, and it has not been written objectively.

Don't bombard the reader with marketing hype. If they are asking how often their bin gets emptied, the answer should *never* start with "Rushcliffe Borough Council's award-winning refuse collection service delivers excellent value for money..." but rather something along the lines of "Bins are emptied on a weekly basis, and should be left at the kerbside on collection day. If you don't know when your collection day is, find out here."

Source information

Make it easy for the reader to find out more information if they require it: provide references to source documents where applicable. Include a link to where the full text of a source document appears on the web, or if it is not currently available online, link to the website of the author or organisation responsible for creating the information.

Updating content

Web content needs to be updated constantly in order for it to remain useful: when a user visits a site, they expect the information there to be the most current information available. Whenever new content is added to a website, a review date should be scheduled (perhaps by setting a reminder note in an electronic diary), and consideration should be given to whether the information needs revising at this time, archiving, or removing from the site altogether. By keeping a careful eye on wording when creating content, time can be saved when it comes to reviewing it. In the first of the two examples shown below, the information will be outdated within 24 hours – and will then need revising again once the meeting has taken place. In the second example, the information will only need revising once, after the committee meeting has taken place.

- ✗ "At its meeting tomorrow, the committee will consider..."
- ✓ "At its meeting on 24 September 2003, the committee will consider..."

It may sometimes be possible to amend wording to such an extent that the need for further revisions can be avoided. The second of the two examples below illustrates how this could be done:

- ✗ "The Council will begin sweeping streets to clear them of leaves on Monday November 1st 2003."
- ✓ "Every November, the Council sweeps the streets of the Borough to clear them of fallen leaves."

Structuring information—page layout

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The first example above illustrates a page where no formatting has been done to the text. In the second example, the same text has been broken up using headings, subheadings, bold text, bullet points and white space. This makes it easier for the reader to pick out important points, and to find the information they are looking for without having to read the entire page.

Making text more readable

Simple formatting can make a huge difference to the readability of a document:

Headings and subheadings

As illustrated above, breaking up text with headings and subheadings allows a reader to scan a document to get an idea of its content. The headings need to be meaningful, however: make sure they contain keywords related to the topic being written about.

Consistency is important here: pick a structure or hierarchy for headings and stick with it. Ideally there should be no more than four heading types in a document – in web language, these are often referred to as H1, H2, H3, and H4, because this is the way they appear in the HTML of a page. H4 might be the same size text as the page content, but in italic; H3 the same size text as the page content but bold; H2 a size up and bold, and H1 another size up and bold. Leave a blank line on either side of a heading for emphasis (this is done automatically on web pages), as the resulting white space gives them greater contrast in relation to the text.

Write headings in mixed case: capitalise the first letter of the first word in a heading, and also the first letter of any proper nouns used. If in doubt about whether a word needs a capital letter, consult a dictionary.

Break up large paragraphs

Break up large sections of text into smaller paragraphs wherever appropriate, but don't simply break up content arbitrarily. An even better solution is to edit the text to make it more concise.

Bullet points

If a section of text contains a long list, it may be better presented as a list rather than within a paragraph.

Alignment

Always align body content to the left.

Whilst it is possible to justify text using word processing software, the results from doing so will frequently be poor – with large spaces, stretched words, and too many hyphens – and will slow down the reader.

Make use of contrast

Give consideration to the reader's eyesight: text should always be presented on a background that is in high contrast to the text colour. Black on white or white on black are good options. Avoid using a background that is too similar to the text colour, or that may be hard to read by people who are colourblind.

Providing access to related information

It is often helpful to the reader if links to related articles and websites are repeated at the end of a page.

Typography, punctuation and spelling

Bold text

You can help draw the reader's eye to pertinent pieces of information by using bold text. Make sure you use this sparingly, though: if too much of the text is highlighted in this way, then the effect is lost.

Capital letters

Read the text in the two illustrations below, and consider which one you are able to read the fastest. Use capital letters only in their proper place: there is a reason why the world's books are not written in ALL CAPS!

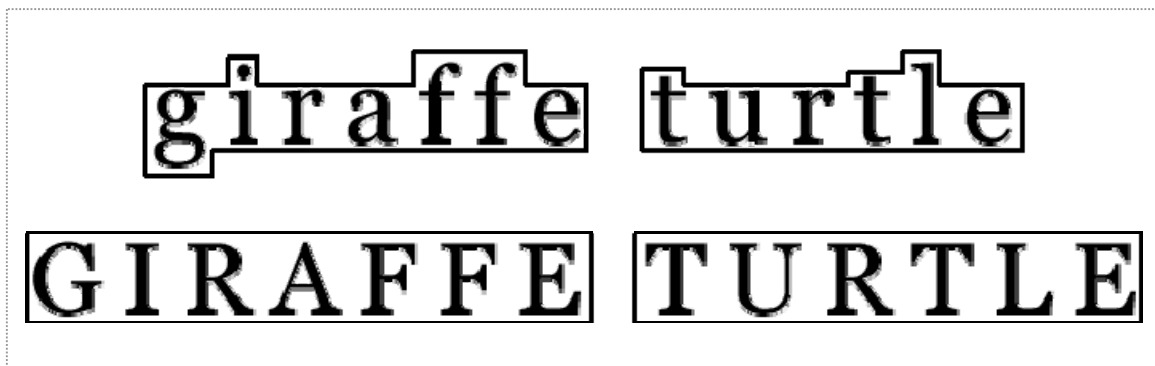
RUSHCLIFFE PRACTICES GREEN MANAGEMENT

RUSHCLIFFE BOROUGH COUNCIL HAS JUST RECEIVED NOTIFICATION THAT IT HAS OBTAINED AN INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS ORGANISATION CERTIFICATE FOR ISO 14001 - OFFICIAL RECOGNITION THAT IT MANAGES ITS ACTIVITIES IN THE BEST MANNER POSSIBLE TO REDUCE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS. WE ARE DETERMINED TO CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE RESIDENTS TO BE ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE AT HOME AND AT WORK.

Rushcliffe practices green management

Rushcliffe Borough Council has just received notification that it has obtained an International Standards Organisation certificate for ISO 14001 - official recognition that it manages its activities in the best manner possible to reduce environmental impacts. We are determined to continue to encourage residents to be environmentally aware at home and at work.

Capitalisation is one of the most commonly used – and least effective – ways of drawing attention to text. When reading, our eye recognises the shape of letters, and so is able to quickly identify a word without reading each letter in detail. When letters are all in block capitals, the words they form all take the same basic shape: a rectangle. This slows the eye down, and makes the reader's job hard work.



As you can see in the example above, the two words form distinctive shapes when they are set in lower case, but when written in all capital letters, the shape is the same.

This doesn't mean capital letters shouldn't be used at all:

"A capital is used for the first word in every sentence. It follows a full stop, question and exclamation marks, is used at the opening of a quote if it begins a sentence, and also for months and days of the week. Capitals should be used for proper nouns or names (words referring to a particular person or place), for formal titles, names of companies and organisations, political parties, titles of newspapers and magazines, titles of newspaper and periodical articles, books, films, trade names, names of ships and aircraft types. They are usually used for abbreviations, although some organisations adopt a lower case style in order to reflect advertising or product branding."

John Foster, "Effective Writing Skills for Public Relations," 2002.

If you are unsure about whether a word needs an initial capital letter, check in the dictionary and consult colleagues to see if there is a consensus view. If this fails to provide an answer, make a decision and stick with it, using the word in the same way throughout your writing.

Colour

Avoid using coloured text, as it can make it difficult (or even impossible) for those with colour blindness or visual impairments to read. One of the World Wide Web Consortium's primary accessibility checkpoints is:

"Ensure that all information conveyed with colour is also available without colour, for example from context or markup."

Before changing the colour of some text, consider whether it is absolutely necessary. To comply with the checkpoint, make sure that if text absolutely must be in a particular colour, it is also highlighted in some secondary way. For example, the text could also be bold or italic.

Apostrophes

Pay attention to apostrophes within your writing. Common errors include:

1. Confusion between it is/it's and its.

"It's" is a shortened form of "it is," and should only be used where it would also be correct to write "it is." "Its" is a possessive pronoun, implying ownership.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ The dog wagged its tail. | ✗ The dog wagged it's tail. |
| ✓ It's starting to rain. | ✗ Its starting to rain |

2. Unnecessary apostrophes.

Apostrophes are not needed in abbreviated expressions such as: the 1960s; CDs; over-50s. To test whether an apostrophe is needed, consider how the expression would look if the full non-abbreviated version were to be used: the nineteen-sixties; compact discs; over-fifties. If an apostrophe is not needed in the full version of a phrase, it will not be needed in the contraction.

Telephone numbers

Take care over the formatting of telephone numbers: they need to be consistently and clearly presented. Always include the area code, and break the number up with spaces so that it is easy to read. The format used should be as follows: 0115 981 9911 or 01234 567 890.

Links to websites and email addresses

Presenting links to other pages and websites

Choose the words of a link carefully: make sure that the words that form the link carry some clues to its destination. Never use just the words “click here” as a link (see box below for more information on this), but instead use keywords (or even a whole phrase or sentence) from the text as the link. This may sometimes involve making changes to the text itself.

Examples:

- ✗ [Click here](#) for information on our leisure centres.
- ✓ [Read more about our leisure centres.](#)

Click where?

Many blind or partially-sighted people use special software that reads websites aloud to them. One of the main functions of this software is to read out a list of all the links on a page. It's easy to appreciate that if the list of links they here consists of the words “click here” repeated twenty times, it will cause them much frustration and will prevent them from being able to use the website at all.

The software can also be used to read out all the headings on a page, which is why it is important to use headings that carry some clues as to the content of the text that follows.

Website and email addresses

Website and email addresses should be in lower case unless specifically directed otherwise. Before issuing any document that contains website or email addresses, ensure that each of them has been tested and is correct: a small typing error here could result in email from customers not arriving at its destination, or customers finding themselves on the wrong website altogether.