

Writing for the Web

Principles & Guidelines

Making websites accessible ensures that all potential users have a decent user experience and are able to easily access the content we publish. Implementing accessibility best practices also improves the usability of the site for all users. While accessibility and usability are different, they can be used together to create digital experiences that meet the needs of all users.

Web Accessibility

- Content must be well-structured and clearly written
- Use the simplest language appropriate for your content.
- Organize your content using true headings (e.g., <h1>) and lists.
- Use empty (white) space to improve readability.
- Use illustrations, icons, etc. to supplement text.
- Check spelling, grammar, and readability.

READABILITY

Readability is just as important for making websites accessible and user-friendly. It is about making content clear and easy to understand. By writing readable content, you increase the chance you're your visitors will actually read and interact with your content. Here are a few simple steps that can help you improve readability:

- **Ensure sentences are 20 words or less.** Sentences longer than 20 words are harder to read and understand. If you need to use a long sentence, try to limit it to one long sentence per paragraph.
- **Use shorter words when possible.** Words with four or more syllables are considered difficult to read. If you need to use long or difficult words, try to keep the overall sentence short.
- **Avoid using jargon.** Unless you're writing something for a specific industry, you should avoid using jargon in your writing. Be certain that jargon is only used when it's appropriate for the target audience.
- **Use personal pronouns when appropriate.** Use "we," "our," "you," and "your" in place of your organization's name or when referring to your reader. This helps shorten your writing and will make your writing flow better.
- **Add transitions.** Using transition words and phrases, such as "overall," "in fact," "ultimately," etc., will help guide readers through your content. Transitions can also help break up more difficult text.
- **Use headings to split up content.** This is especially important for web content. Headings provide structure and meaning to your content and give readers an easy way to scan. Headings also increase overall accessibility; they're great for people using assistive technologies and screen readers who navigate online by heading.

Usability

- **Use the words your users use.** By using keywords that your users use, you will help them understand the copy and will help optimize it for search engines.
- **Chunk your content.** Chunking makes your content more scannable by breaking it into manageable sections.
- **Front-load the important information.** Use the journalism model of the “inverted pyramid.” Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.
- **Use pronouns.** The user is “you.” The organization or government agency is “we.” This creates cleaner sentence structure and more approachable content.
- **Use active voice.** “The board proposed the legislation” not “The regulation was proposed by the board.”
- **Use short sentences and paragraphs.** The ideal standard is no more than 20 words per sentence, five sentences per paragraph. Use dashes instead of semi-colons or, better yet, break the sentence into two. It is ok to start a sentence with “and,” “but,” or “or” if it makes things clear and brief.
- **Use bullets and numbered lists.** Don’t limit yourself to using this for long lists—one sentence and two bullets is easier to read than three sentences.
- **Use clear headlines and subheads.** Questions, especially those with pronouns, are particularly effective.
- **Use images, diagrams, or multimedia** to visually represent ideas in the content. Videos and images should reinforce the text on your page.
- **Use white space.** Using white space allows you to reduce noise by visually separate information.

AP Style Guidelines for Web Writing

Style refers to the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation and usage adopted by organizations. The Associated Press Style is the used for most web writing because of it promotes clear and concise copy that is easy to read and understand. Below are some style rules relevant for schools and school districts.

ABCs—But single-letter grades get apostrophes: an A, two B's and three C's.

academic degrees—Spell out and capitalize with no apostrophe formal degrees Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, and Master of Science. But bachelor's and master's should appear with an apostrophe. An associate degree should not have an apostrophe.

acronyms—Should be fully spelled out on first reference. The acronym should appear in parentheses on first reference and appear without parentheses thereafter. *Ex. Students will participate in multiple Advanced Placement (AP) courses.*

back-to-school (adj.)—He bought back-to-school supplies. But she went back to school.

Board Meetings—Always capitalize formal meetings of the Board of Trustees, including Business Meeting, Work Session, Special Called Business Meeting and all committee meetings.

Board Members—Each elected member of the SCBE is referred to as a Board Member. Board is always capitalized, and Member should only be capitalized when it is used as a formal title. *Ex. Board Member Johnson introduced the resolution.; Johnson is one of three new Board members this year.*

Boardroom—Usually one word. School Board Meeting Room is used in announcements followed by the address.

book titles—Capitalize and enclose in quotes the names of books, poems, plays, films and songs. Capitalize without quotes books that are primarily references, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias and almanacs.

bus, buses—The vehicles carrying kids to and from school. Not busses.

classroom—One word.

courses—Capitalize proper noun elements or numbered courses: American history, English, Algebra 1, world history.

courtesy titles—Do not use courtesy titles, such as Mr., Mrs., Miss or Ms., unless they are part of a direct quotation. do not use courtesy titles except in direct quotations. When it is necessary to distinguish between two people who use the same last name, as in married couples or brothers and sisters, use the first and last name.

days, months, years—Capitalize them. Spell out. Use the days of the week, not *today* or *tonight*, in print copy. Do not abbreviate, except when needed in a tabular format: *Sun, Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat* (three letters, without periods, to facilitate tabular composition).

Use figures, without commas with years: *2017*. When a phrase refers to a month, day and year, set off the year with a comma: *February 14, 2025, is the target date.*

District—Capitalize District when it is used as a formal replacement for Jackson Public Schools. It should not be capitalized otherwise unless it is part of a formal title. *Ex. The District is committed to teacher and leader effectiveness.; All district-level staff should attend the meeting.*

dropout (n.), **drop out** (v.)

e-book—electronic version of a book or publication.

e-reader—Also e-book reader. Device used to display electronic books or other digital publications.

email—Electronic mail

enroll, enrolled, enrolling

events—Titles of special events, such as school fundraisers, are capitalized and enclosed in quotes.

GPA—Acceptable in all references for grade-point average.

grade, grader— Use figures for grades 10 and above. Spell out one through nine, such as ninth grade. Exceptions apply for data in tables. Use figures for all grades in tables.

Hyphenate first-grader, seventh-grader, 10th-grader; also, first-grade student, 11th-grade classes are hyphenated as combining forms. But: She is in the fifth grade.

graduate (v.)—Graduate is correctly used in the active voice: She graduated from high school. It is correct, but unnecessary, to use the passive voice: He was graduated from high school. Do not, however, drop from: John Adams graduated from Harvard. Not: John Adams graduated Harvard.

half day, half-day (adj.)—Friday is a half day of school. The half-day tests were challenging.

hashtag —A term starting with a number or hash sign (#) in a social network post. A hashtag needs to be an uninterrupted string of characters, with no spaces. #JPSProud.

high school—No hyphen in high school student, high school teacher, etc.

holidays—Capitalize. Except for Veterans Day, there is usually no school on these holidays:

- New Year's Eve/New Year's Day (Dec. 31 & Jan. 1)
- Martin Luther King Jr. Day (third Monday in January)
- Easter (Dates vary based on March equinox.)
- Good Friday (Dates vary based on Easter.)
- Memorial Day (last Monday in May)
- Independence Day (July 4)
- Labor Day (first Monday in September.)
- Veterans Day (Nov. 11)
- Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November)
- Christmas (Dec. 25)

job titles—Only Superintendent and executive-level positions should be capitalized when referring to a specific person. Principal is capitalized when used as a formal title for a specific individual. Do not capitalize any job titles in general references. *Ex. Superintendent John Smith; John Smith was the superintendent.*

K-12—The years of schooling from kindergarten through 12th grade graduation. But pre-K through grade 12.

kindergarten, kindergartners

No.—Use as the abbreviation for *number* in conjunction with a figure to indicate position or rank: *No. 1 man*, *No. 3 choice*.

parent-teacher conferences—Hyphenate.

possessives

- PLURAL NOUNS NOT ENDING IN S: Add 's: *the alumni's contributions*, *women's rights*.
- PLURAL NOUNS ENDING IN S: Add only an apostrophe: *the churches' needs*, *states' rights*.
- NOUNS PLURAL IN FORM, SINGULAR IN MEANING: Add an apostrophe: *mathematics' rules*, *measles' effects*.
- Formal name of a singular entity: *General Motors' profits*, *the United States' wealth*.
- NOUNS THE SAME IN SINGULAR AND PLURAL: Treat them the same as plurals, even if the meaning is singular: *one corps' location*, *the two deer's tracks*, *the lone moose's antlers*.
- SINGULAR NOUNS NOT ENDING IN S: Add 's: *the church's needs*, *the ship's route*, *the VIP's seat*.
- SINGULAR NOUNS ENDING IN S SOUNDS SUCH AS CE, X, AND Z: Add 's if the word does not end in the letter s: *Butz's policies*, *the fox's den*, *the justice's verdict*, *Marx's theories*, *the prince's life*, *Xerox's profits*.
- SINGULAR COMMON NOUNS ENDING IN S: Add 's: *the hostess's invitation*, *the hostess's seat*; *the witness's answer*, *the witness's story*.
- SINGULAR PROPER NAMES ENDING IN S: Use only an apostrophe: *Achilles' heel*, *Dickens' novels*, *Euripides' dramas*, *Hercules' labors*, *Kansas' schools*, *Moses' law*, *Socrates' life*.

PTA—Acceptable in all references for Parent Teacher Association

public schools—Use a figure and capitalize when numbered: Public School 3. If a school has a commemorative name, capitalize it: Benjamin Franklin School.

phone numbers—We use parentheses around area codes on the website for consistency. *Ex. (601) 960-8700*. AP now uses the hyphenated format.

room numbers—Use figures and capitalize room when used with a figure: Room 2, Room 211.

school—Elementary school, middle school, but preschool is one word.

school-age (adj.)—They have three school-age children.

schoolboy, **schoolgirl**—One word for each.

school day—Two words for any day that school is in session.

school year—The 2017-18 school year begins soon. 2017-2018 is also acceptable.

schoolwork—One word.

spring break—Lowercase unless used as a title.

teacher—One word for schoolteacher; others are three words without hyphens: grade school teacher, high school teacher

times—Do not use PM, pm, or :00 when writing times on the hour. Use a colon to separate hours from minutes: *11 a.m.*, *1 p.m.*, *3:30 p.m.*, *9-11 a.m.*, *9 a.m. to 5 p.m.* Use figures. (Note: Noon and midnight are preferred for 12 p.m. and 12 a.m., respectively. Since most web and electronic calendars do not use noon and midnight, we accept the use of 12 p.m. and 12 a.m.)

voicemail—one word

web—Short for World Wide Web. Also **website**, webcam, webcast, webfeed, webmaster, **webpage**.

Note: web address and web browser.

OTHER AP STYLE RESOURCES

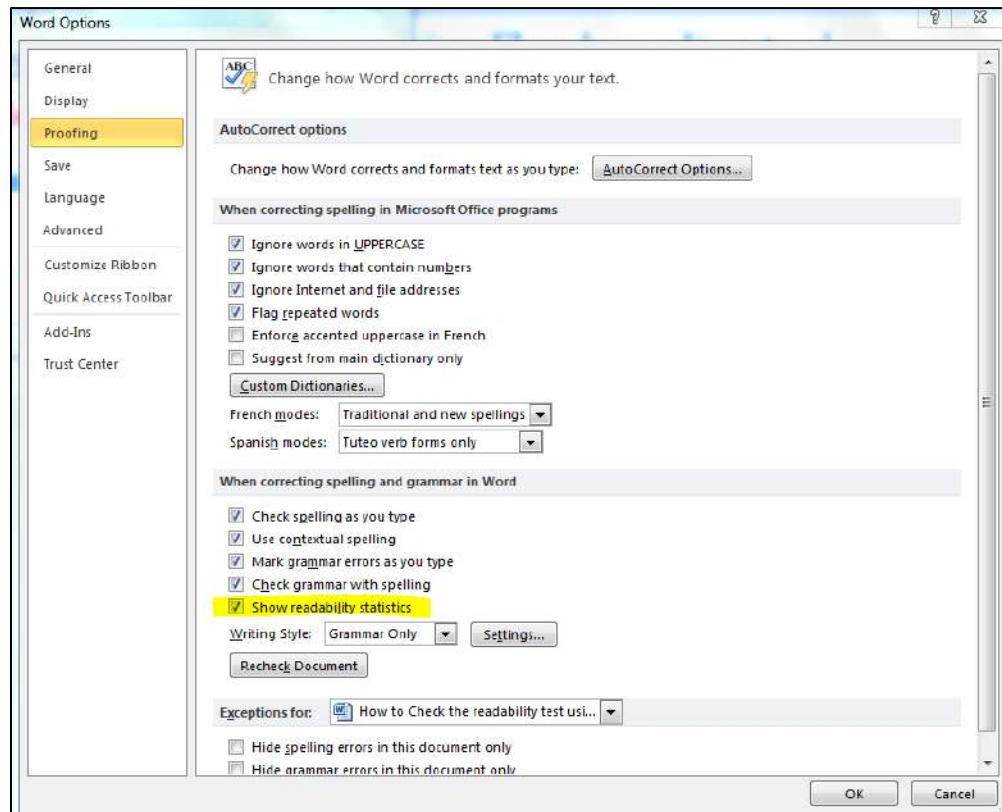
- [Capitalize My Title](#) – Helps you make sure your headline is formatted properly for Associated Press style.
- [Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary & Thesaurus](#) – AP Style recommends the Webster's New World Dictionary for reference, but its publisher's online dictionary is free.

Writing Tools

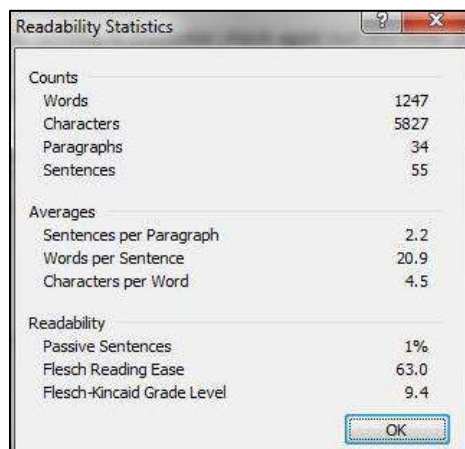
DRAFTING

Spell Check & Readability in Microsoft Word

1. To enable Readability Statistics, 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.



After you enable this feature, you will activate it with the Spelling & Grammar command on the Review ribbon. Aim for a Reading Ease score of 60 or higher and Grade Level score of 9 or lower.



DRAFTING

Hemingway App

1. Access the [Hemingway App online style checker \(http://www.hemingwayapp.com\)](http://www.hemingwayapp.com). You do not need to create an account to use the tool.
2. The program has two modes: Write and Edit.
 - a. You can draft your document in Write mode. This will fade out the editing tools, transferring Hemingway into distraction-free writing mode. You can also copy and paste from another source directly into Edit mode.
 - b. Switch to Edit mode. Hemingway provides feedback in the form of color-coded highlighting that indicates hard-to-read sentences, unnecessary words and passive voice. Tighten up your prose, clear the highlights, and then share your work with the masses.

The screenshot displays the Hemingway Editor interface. At the top, there is a toolbar with options: Bold, Italic, H1, H2, H3, Quote, Bullets, Numbers, and Link. Below the toolbar, the main text area contains a sample paragraph: "Hemingway App makes your writing bold and clear. The app highlights lengthy, complex sentences and common errors; if you see a yellow sentence, shorten or split it. If you see a red highlight, your sentence is so dense and complicated that your readers will get lost trying to follow its meandering, splitting logic — try editing this sentence to remove the red. You can utilize a shorter word in place of a purple one. Mouse over them for hints. Adverbs and weakening phrases are helpfully shown in blue. Get rid of them and pick words with force, perhaps. Phrases in green have been marked to show passive voice. You can format your text with the toolbar. Paste in something you're working on and edit away. Or, click the Write button and compose something new."

On the right side, there is a sidebar with the following content:

- Hemingway Editor**
- Readability**
- Grade 6**
- Good**
- Reading time: 00:00:31
- Letters: 610
- Characters: 757
- Words: 133
- Sentences: 11
- Paragraphs: 7
- Show Less ▲

Below the statistics, there are several feedback boxes:

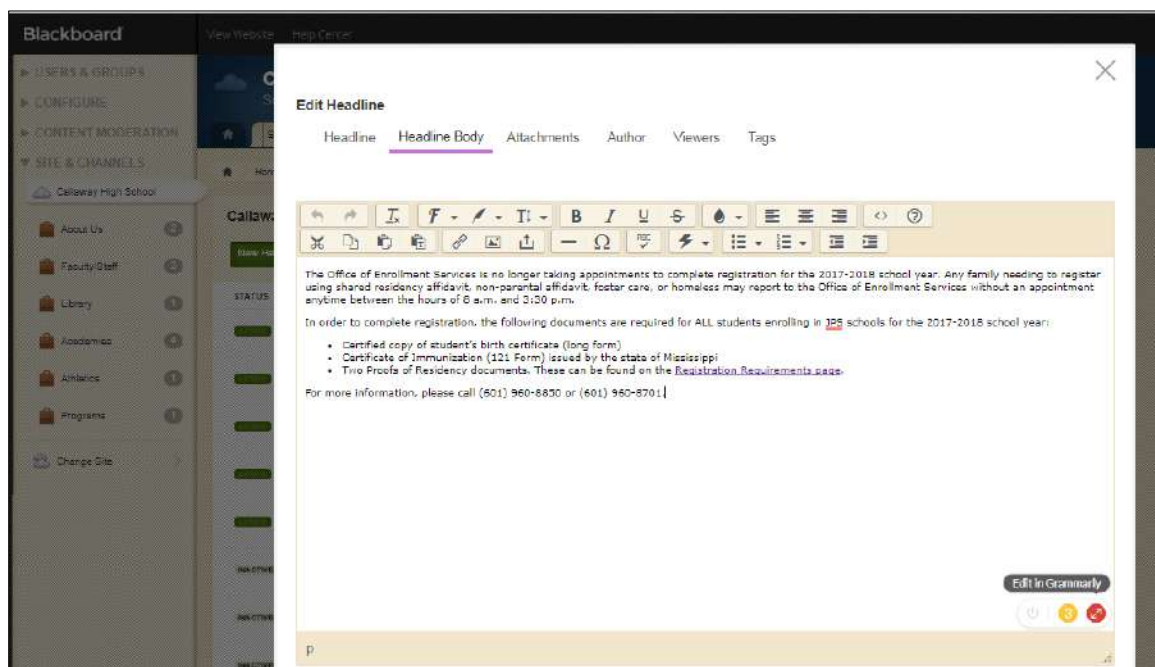
- 2 adverbs, meeting the goal of 2 or fewer.
- 1 use of passive voice, meeting the goal of 2 or fewer.
- 1 phrase has a simpler alternative.
- 1 of 11 sentences is hard to read.
- 1 of 11 sentences is very hard to read.

POSTING

Grammarly.com

1. Open Google Chrome
2. Click the Customize and Control Google Chrome command at the right end of the browser's address bar.
3. Click More Tools and then click Extensions.
4. Scroll to the bottom of the tab and click Get More Extensions.
5. Search for Grammarly.
6. Click Add extension to grant the extension access to your data and install the extension.
7. To use the extension, click the icon to the right of the address bar in Chrome.

You may have to create an account. It's free. Once this is set up, Grammarly will prompt you for corrections while you are posting in any online editor, including the website.



References for more information

- [AP Stylebook Online](#)
- [Enabling Readability Statistics in Microsoft Word](#)
- [Hemingway App Help](#)
- [PlainLanguage.gov](#)
- [Shelby County Schools District Style Guide](#)
- [Site Improve – Readability Checklist](#)
- [Usability.gov — Writing for the Web](#)
- [WebAIM Quick Reference: Web Accessibility Principles](#)