

UHB website

Writing style guide

V1, 25/01/21

1. **Intro**
2. **Content templates**
 - 2.1. Services section
3. **Principles of writing for the web**
 - 3.1. Keep it simple
 - 3.2. Search engine optimisation
4. **Writing style**
 - 4.1. Plain English
 - 4.2. References to timescales
 - 4.3. The passive voice vs. the active voice
 - 4.4. Double quotes vs. single quotes
 - 4.5. Use of case
 - 4.6. Times and dates
 - 4.7. Numbers
 - 4.8. Lists
 - 4.9. Hyphenation
 - 4.10. Initialisms and acronyms
 - 4.11. Among vs. amongst
 - 4.12. Data vs. datum
 - 4.13. Referring to collectives
5. **Measuring readability**
 - 5.1. The Flesch reading ease score
 - 5.2. Using the Flesch reading ease score
6. **Editing examples**
7. **Commonly used terms - preferred spelling**

1. Introduction

Writing for the web is different to more traditional writing styles, as the needs, demands and circumstances of the audience are generally not the same.

However, there is common ground, such as the need for accuracy, quality and consistency.

This guide aims to help writers and editors understand what is required in order to write or prepare consistent, high-quality copy for UHB's websites.

2. Content templates

2.1 Services section

Basic content

Many of the sub-sections within the services section of the UHB website share common types of content. Therefore, it's easy to identify a pattern and recommend a basic content template, i.e. the type of content which should feature in the majority of the sub-sections.

For most clinical service sub-sections, we recommend the following basic set of content:

- Meet the team
 - This may differ, depending on the team
 - The details could include any combination of the following:
 - Staff member photos
 - Staff member names
 - Job titles
 - Staff biographies
 - Individual contact details
 - In some instances, the team page may simply be an outline of the team and the services they offer
- Get in touch
 - We'd usually expect a phone number and perhaps an email address
 - The department's address may also be included
 - We can create an online form if required – some teams may prefer this to having an email address on the page, which may lead to an increase in spam
- How to find us
 - It may not be appropriate for all specialties to have this information on their pages, depending on how they deliver their services

Other content

Many services will need some different information to others.

The best way to approach structuring this content is thinking in terms of the audience. We will assume that content at the highest level will be appropriate for patients and/or all audiences.

Any information for healthcare professionals, e.g. peers at other trusts should usually be placed into an "information for healthcare professionals" section.

Consider the structure of the content. Think of a structure as a series of nested folders or as branches of a tree – whichever analogy works best for you.

This structure shows an example of how a services sub-section could be structured:

- Services
 - Service X
 - Meet the team
 - How to find us [directions to ward/dept – may need to be split by site]
 - Get in touch
 - Heartlands Hospital [may be necessary if there is site-specific information]

- Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham [may be necessary if there is site-specific information]
- Conditions treated
 - Condition 1
 - Condition 2
 - Condition 3
- Our procedures
 - Operation A
 - Operation B
 - Operation C
- Information for healthcare professionals
 - How to refer to Service X
 - Our publications
 - How to become a Service X surgeon

Cross-site content

Where a service only operates at one site, it's fine to refer to that site only in the copy.

If a service is run across multiple sites, it's best to break this down as logically as possible.

The example structure above shows the preferred approach to this, but the best way to tackle it for any given service may depend on the specifics of that information.

Hints and tips

- Try to think about what would make sense to the end user
- Cut out waffle and bloat – every word counts
- Try to break down content into meaningful, logical chunks
- Use headings to make it clear how content breaks down. Consider saving pages as separate Word files or pages with Word files to separate it out when preparing content

3. Principles of writing for the web

Most people don't read website copy in the same way they would read printed information. A visit to a website is usually goal-driven: "I want to find the information I need [or complete a certain task] as quickly and easily as possible".

People tend not to read online content as much as scan it to look for keywords. Once they've found a keyword which captures their attention, they will then read the surrounding copy for further information.

This is a generalisation, but it's a useful assumption to help us remember to keep our content simple.

A user will usually read basic text without much formatting using the "F pattern", reading across the top line of a page, then scan down the left edge before reading across again. We can help to encourage other patterns with formatting, but any approach requires best practice techniques to be effective.

For more on reading patterns, please see

<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/>.

Our writing style reflects these principles. (See "4. Writing style".)

3.1 Keep it simple

One badly written, poorly placed paragraph can ruin a whole page by making the user think the information is irrelevant, confusing and/or hard to understand.

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short
- If it's not useful to the reader or it's not strictly relevant, cut it out
- Try to focus on relevant keywords, and don't use unnecessary copy to over-explain things
- The inverted pyramid style of writing is a useful model, as it advocates "frontloading" copy with the key information. Website users are more likely to read the first one or two of paragraphs of copy, so placing the most important information here is good practice
- Use bullet points to provide bite-sized pieces of information, instead of long paragraphs and sentences
- Use meaningful headings and sub-headings to break up content, grab attention and highlight key words
- Use plain English where possible

Useful links

- <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/blah-blah-text-keep-cut-or-kill/>
- <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web>
- <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/>
- <https://writingcooperative.com/how-to-structure-an-article-the-inverted-pyramid-8fa0c165fcae>

3.2 Search engine optimisation

In terms of how you need to write copy, search engine optimisation (SEO) is fairly simple.

Think of a search engine's software (known as bots, crawlers or spiders) as another user. All this software wants to know is what your web page is about, and how easy it is to use.

Many of the principles which make content easy to read for the end user also make copy search engine-friendly. The same principles also tend to make content more accessible (easier to use for everyone, regardless of physical or mental capacity, or means of access).

- Keep content simple
- Use keywords well:
 - Make sure you include as many relevant keywords as possible (without sacrificing readability or sense)
 - Excessive use of keywords without context is known as keyword stuffing, which is considered poor practice and is likely to result in being penalised by search engines
 - Irrelevant use of keywords will also make your copy harder to read - find the right balance
 - Use them early in your copy – near to the start of sentences in the first couple of paragraphs, if it makes sense to do so
 - Include them in your headings
- Search engines like pages with at least 300 words (that's not actually that many when you see them on the page – but, if possible, avoid going too far above this so things stay easy to read for our human users)

4. Writing style

4.1 Plain English

Many content owners tend to use flowery or overly verbose language in their copy in an attempt to impress, rather than using plain English to communicate their message simply and quickly. It's also easy to assume that others know what clinical or managerial terms mean (or that they even care), when in fact they just want things stated clearly and simply.

It's usually OK to change or remove words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs, as long as this doesn't alter the meaning or accuracy of the content. This must be approached in the right way and for the right reasons – usually improving the user experience.

Try to focus on what would work best for the majority of readers or your specific audience. Remember, this might not be the same as your personal preference.

Don't	Do
<i>Prior to [...].</i>	<i>Before [...].</i>
Avoid language which is unlikely to mean anything to the audience. For the layperson, this would usually include jargon and corporate language	Use simple words and phrases which make sense to the target audience

4.2 References to timescales

Avoid relative references to times, where possible.

Ask yourself ...

- How do I know when somebody will be reading this?
- What if my reference only makes sense at the time of writing?
- What if the time referred to has already passed for the reader?
- What if it's already "next year"?

Don't	Do
<i>Over the next few months.</i>	<i>In early 2021.</i>
<i>We have just [...]</i>	<i>In December 2020, we [...]</i>
<i>[...] will be rolled out soon</i>	<i>We will roll out [...] in June 2021</i>

<i>[...] next year.</i>	<i>[...] in 2022.</i>
-------------------------	-----------------------

4.3 The passive voice vs. the active voice

The passive voice

People often use the passive voice because they think it looks more impressive.

The action is completed by the subject

It has a place, e.g. when you need to place the stress on the subject, but keep it to a minimum and only use it when really needed.

The active voice

Text written in the active voice tends to be shorter, more readable and easier to understand.

The subject completes the action

Don't	Do
<i>[...] will be given to you by our team.</i>	<i>Our team will give you [...].</i>
<i>[...] will be hosted by UHB.</i>	<i>UHB will be hosting [...].</i>
<i>[...] has been analysed by the Chief Executive.</i>	<i>The Chief Executive has analysed [...].</i>
<i>Extensive research was carried out by a team of senior clinicians.</i>	<i>Senior clinicians have carried out extensive research.</i>
<i>The team can be contacted on [...]</i>	<i>Please contact the team on [...]</i>

4.4 Double quotes vs. single quotes

A double quote is easier to read on-screen than a single quote. Therefore, our preference is for double quotes for quotations and references. Embedded quotes or references – e.g. somebody quoting somebody else in their speech – can then use single quotes.

Don't	Do
-------	----

<i>Dr Rosser said: ‘We have been liaising with the CQC, who have assured us that we are “in good shape”.’</i>	<i>Dr Rosser said: “We have been liaising with the CQC, who have assured us that we are ‘in good shape’.”</i>
---	---

4.5 Use of case

Heading case

Even in headings, we use sentence case (lower case initial letters), except for “proper names” (proper nouns).

Proper nouns include:

- somebody’s name
- somebody’s job title, when used in conjunction with their name
- the official name of a hospital, trust or department
- formal document or publication titles
- job titles where we refer to a single role using the definite article (i.e. “the [Title]”)
- **the** Trust (i.e. referring to UHB)
- brand names

Proper nouns do **not** include:

- a staff group
- an informal or unofficial team or group name
- an area of specialty, rather than a formal department name
- trusts (plural)
- established global communication networks, e.g. the internet, web, social media

Don’t	Do
<i>[...] specialises in Liver Medicine.</i>	<i>[...] is a member of the Liver Medicine department.</i>
<i>A number of Chief Executives from across the NHS [...].</i>	<i>Dr Dave Rosser, Chief Executive.</i>
<i>All NHS Trusts have been asked to [...].</i>	<i>The Trust has been asked to [...].</i>

4.6 Times and dates

Times

Use the 24-hour format, using numbers only, for times.

Use a colon as a separator between hours and minutes.

Don't	Do
<i>08:20hrs</i>	<i>08:20</i>
<i>18:00pm</i>	<i>18:00</i>
<i>10:00am</i>	<i>10:00</i>
<i>11.30</i>	<i>11:30</i>
<i>16-15</i>	<i>16:15</i>
<i>9pm</i>	<i>21:00</i>

The first minute of the day is 00:00, with the last being 23:59.

Dates

We write dates out in full, in the format **[Day(no.)] [Month (word)] [Year (no.)]**, without “st” or “th” suffixes for the day.

Don't	Do
<i>January 1 2021</i>	<i>1 January 2021</i>
<i>03/03/22</i>	<i>3 March 2022</i>
<i>2 Sept 21</i>	<i>2 September 2021</i>
<i>5th November 2020</i>	<i>5 November 2020</i>

4.7 Numbers

As a general rule, numbers one to nine should be spelled out as words. Numbers from 10 onwards should be written using numerals.

To maintain consistency, the same method of writing any numbers on a page should be used to express quantities of matching items, which would overrule the above style.

This rule would apply on a page-by-page basis. (Treat each page as a new document.)

Numbers at the start of a sentence should be spelled out.

Don't	Do
<i>The committee, made up of 9 members of staff [...].</i>	<i>The committee, made up of nine members of staff [...].</i>
<i>The menu features a choice of 10 main meals and 6 desserts.</i>	<i>The menu features a choice of 10 main meals and six desserts.</i>
<i>Patients may choose three of the main courses [...].</i>	<i>Patients may choose 3 of the main courses [...].</i>

Relative quantities

When referring to quantities we favour “more than” and “fewer than”, as opposed to “over” and “less than”/“under”.

It's fine to use “over” or “less than”/“under” when referring to units of measurement.

Don't	Do
<i>Over 2,000 members of staff [...].</i>	<i>More than 2,000 members of staff [...]</i>
<i>Less than five patients [...].</i>	<i>Fewer than five patients [...].</i>

4.8 Lists

There may be instances where it's appropriate to write a list in a sentence, but this approach should usually be reserved for short lists of short items, where commas are used to separate items.

It may occasionally be appropriate to write more complex lists within a sentence. For these lists, consider the use of semi-colons to separate items.

In general, longer lists are better written in bulleted or numbered lists. These are easier to scan, and break the content up, making it easier to read. This approach is therefore ideal for online publishing.

Bulleted and numbered lists

- If each item in a bulleted or numbered list continues the sentence which precedes the list, each item should begin with a lower case letter (unless the item begins with a proper noun)
- If there is no preceding sentence, or each item forms a sentence in its own right, the items in the list should begin with an upper case letter
- Items in bulleted or numbered lists should not end with commas or full stops
- It may be appropriate to use the words “and” or “or” on the end of the penultimate item of the list, to help make it clear whether every item in the list applies, or only one of them is relevant

Don't	Do
<i>Bulleted lists are:</i> • <i>Easy to read,</i> • <i>Useful for online copy.</i>	<i>Bulleted lists are:</i> • <i>easy to read</i> • <i>useful for online copy</i>
1. <i>use complicated words and phrases</i> 2. <i>use long sentences</i>	1. <i>Use plain English</i> 2. <i>Use short sentences</i>
<i>To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, please:</i> • <i>Wash your hands, and</i> • <i>Maintain social distancing, and</i> • <i>Wear a face covering.</i>	<i>To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, please:</i> • <i>wash your hands</i> • <i>maintain social distancing, and</i> • <i>wear a face covering</i>

4.9 Hyphenation

Generally speaking, we hyphenate compound (multi-word) adjectives which describe a following noun, except where the earlier word in a pairing is an adverb ending in a “y”.

More detailed cases of where various compound adjectives should and shouldn't be hyphenated are effectively explained in this article:

<https://www.editorgroup.com/blog/to-hyphenate-or-not-to-hyphenate/>

Don't	Do
<i>[...] is a highly-efficient system.</i>	<i>[...] is a highly efficient system.</i>

<i>Please report the results shown by your self testing kit [...].</i>	<i>Please report the results shown by your self-testing kit [...].</i>
<i>[...] is a full time position.</i>	<i>[...] is a full-time position.</i>
<i>Avoid badly-written compound adverbs.</i>	<i>Avoid badly written compound adverbs.</i>

4.10 Initialisms and acronyms

An initialism is an abbreviation formed of the initial letters of the words in a name or phrase, e.g. “BBC”.

An acronym is a type of initialism where the abbreviation can be pronounced as a word, e.g. “NASA”.

The first time we use an initialism or acronym on a page, we usually write the unabbreviated version of the name or phrase, followed by the abbreviation in brackets. This approach applies on a page-by-page basis. (A user may have arrived on a page via a search engine, or other direct referral, and therefore may not see the full name or phrase the first time it’s explained on another page.)

Explaining a term in full the first time it’s used on each page also has a benefit in terms of search engine optimisation, as each word essentially forms a keyword on that page.

There are exceptions, e.g. where such an abbreviation is recognised or established in its own right and does not need to be explained. This often applies to brand or organisation names where the abbreviation is more widely recognised than the full name, e.g. “ITV”, “NHS” etc.

- Each letter in the abbreviation should usually appear in upper case letters
- We usually exclude minor prepositions (“small” connecting words such as “of”, “an” etc), unless required, e.g. by an abbreviated brand name, in which case the initial letter often appears in lower case
- The words in the full name should not start with upper case letters unless they’re proper nouns, or part of a proper noun
- Don’t use full stops in initialisms and acronyms
- Add an “s” in lower case to the end of an initialism to pluralise it

Don’t	Do
<i>[...] was introduced at QEHB (Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham) [...].</i>	<i>[...] was introduced at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham (QEHB) [...].</i> <i>Since then, many members of staff at QEHB have gone on to [...].</i>
<i>Clinical Commissioning Groups (C.C.G.s) [...].</i>	<i>Clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) [...].</i>

Please see the B.B.C. website for details.

Please see the BBC website for details.

4.11 Among vs amongst ...

Certain words have older/more archaic, and more modern/common variants. For the following words, we prefer the latter.

Don't	Do
<i>Amongst</i>	<i>Among</i>
<i>Whilst</i>	<i>While</i>
<i>Amidst</i>	<i>Amid</i>

4.12 Data vs datum

While technically “datum” is singular and “data” is plural, it is commonly accepted that “data” may now be used as both singular and plural.

Furthermore, “datum” is often considered archaic, and is likely to be misunderstood by many readers.

Therefore our preferred style is to always use “data”, whether referring to plural or singular forms of “datum”.

Don't	Do
<i>Datum is</i>	<i>Data is</i>
<i>Data are</i>	

4.13 Referring to collectives

Refer to an organisation, department, team or other group as a singular entity in most instances.

Where the subjects of the copy are the members of the collective, refer to them accordingly.

Don't	Do
<i>University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust are pleased to announce [...].</i>	<i>University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust is pleased to announce [...].</i>
<i>The Clinical Support Group provide [...].</i>	<i>The Clinical Support Group provides [...].</i>
<i>Members of the Theatres team is [...].</i>	<i>Members of the Theatres team are [...].</i>

5. Measuring readability

5.1 The Flesch reading ease score

To measure readability, we use the Flesch reading ease score.

Put simply, the Flesch reading ease test looks at two key factors to assess a document's readability:

- The number of syllables
- The length of sentences

This gives a score on a scale of 0 – 100. The closer to 100 your document scores, the more readable it is considered to be.

When writing about complex, often technical topics, it's not always easy to achieve a high score, but a good target score is 60 – 70. This assumes a reading age of around 14, which may seem low, but remember:

- people read differently on a screen to how they read on the printed page
- you won't always know the reading age of the end user
- English may not be the end user's first language

Remember ...

The score gives a good indication of readability and is a good benchmark, but a good score is not definitive proof that copy is of a high standard.

- As well as testing the score, try reading your copy out loud. Does it still make sense?
- Are any words duplicated?
- Just because a word is short doesn't mean it will make sense to more people. Sometimes it's better to weaken the score to introduce simpler language, which isn't necessarily shorter
- A long document using shorter words and shorter sentences may have a better reading ease score than a shorter document. There are other ways to improve readability
 - Can any paragraphs be trimmed or split?
 - Is it appropriate to add any headings to break up the content
 - Can any sentences or paragraphs be replaced with bulleted or numbered lists?
 - Can any unnecessary words be edited out, or replaced with something better?

Useful links

- <https://contentwriters.com/blog/flesch-reading-ease-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/>

5.2 Using the Flesch reading ease score

Luckily, Word has readability statistics built in. When switched on, Word will show statistics after running a spell check.

Instructions on how to enable readability statistics are available on the Microsoft website:

- <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2>

Once enabled, reading statistics should appear as follows after running a spell check.

The Flesch reading ease score of this document is around 60.

6. Editing examples

The following basic examples show how some simple edits can improve readability, which will in turn improve engagement with the content and user experience.

The difference between scores may not be great in all instances, but hopefully it's clear that the edited examples also employ the active voice more, and use shorter paragraphs and simpler language.

Original

We know that the quality of the services we deliver is defined by our people, which is why investing at leaders across our Trust remains a key priority for us. The prospectus below has been developed to provide a summary of our management and leadership development offer.

To find out about our upcoming Leadership lectures, webinars and courses, please join our mailing list, by contacting us leadership@uhb.nhs.uk.

Flesch reading ease score: 38.9

Edited

At UHB, the quality of our services is defined by our people, so we are investing in leaders.

We have developed a prospectus to provide a summary of our management and leadership development offer.

Email the Leadership team to join the mailing list, and find out about lectures, webinars and courses.

Email: leadership@uhb.nhs.uk

Flesch reading ease score: 50.2

Original

Due to COVID-19, all routine audiology and cochlear implant appointments at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham, including our walk in repair clinic, have been suspended until further notice.

During this time we request that you do not attend the Audiology department unless advised to do so by a member of our team.

In response to COVID-19 we are constantly adapting services to ensure you, our patients, are provided with the best possible service whilst maintaining a focus on your safety and the safety of our team at UHB.

We are now able to offer a range of services without the need for face-to-face contact with patients.

These include:

- postal repairs
- repairs drop off service
- telephone consultations
- VIDYO (online Internet based) consultations

Flesch reading ease score: 40.8

Edited

To keep everyone safe, we have suspended all routine audiology and cochlear implant appointments at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham. This includes our walk-in repair clinic.

Please do not visit the Audiology department unless a member of our team tells you that it is safe to do so.

We are offering the following remote services:

- Postal repairs
- Repairs drop-off service
- Telephone consultations
- Video consultations

Flesch reading ease score: 46.9

Original

Due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic and the urgent demands on our clinical and operational colleagues, our capacity to respond to complaints quickly is being severely affected.

If you have an open complaint with us we will write to you directly about any delays you may experience. If you have a new complaint, we will continue to receive these and will attempt to resolve these for you as soon as we are able.

If you need to make contact about an existing complaint please email complaints@uhb.nhs.uk. If you have an urgent issue which you need help with please call us on 0121 424 0808 or email pals@uhb.nhs.uk. In the meantime, thank you for your patience and understanding.

Flesch reading ease score: 54.7

Edited

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent demands on our teams, we are experiencing severe delays in responding to complaints.

If you have an open complaint with us we will write to you directly about any delays. If you need to contact us **about an existing complaint** please email Complaints@uhb.nhs.uk.

If you have a new complaint, we will attempt to resolve this as soon as we can.

If you have **an urgent issue which you need help with**, please call us on 0121 424 0808 or email pals@uhb.nhs.uk.

Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Flesch reading ease score: 62.2

7. Commonly used terms - preferred spelling/style

Don't	Do
• <i>health care</i> • <i>health-care</i>	<i>healthcare</i>
• <i>in-vitro</i> • <i>invitro</i>	<i>in vitro</i>
• <i>post-graduate</i> • <i>post graduate</i>	<i>postgraduate</i>
<i>program</i>	<i>programme</i>
• <i>the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham</i> • <i>Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham</i>	<i>Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham</i>
<i>speciality</i>	<i>specialty</i>