

WRITING FOR THE WEB

THE SLEEP SHEET

- Write for the reader.
- Use a casual style – speak to the user as though one-on-one.
- Be concise and clear. If the typical user of an site sees more confusion than useful information, no one will benefit.
- Minimize scrolling on navigation pages. Provide users an easy way to go back to sections and jump back to indexes.
- Update information on a regular basis. Keep it fresh, keep people coming back for more.
- As the Internet is directed primarily to individuals, it should address the audience in the first person. This personable approach is found by most marketers to be a more effective way to get customers to identify with a company and have increased confidence in its products and services.

Examples:

At Canada Life, we pride ourselves in providing excellent customer service.

We have a great cafeteria.

LESS IS MORE

The average web user has a very short attention span and wants to gather information as quickly and as easily as possible.

By keeping text to a bare minimum, you are doing both yourselves and users a favor. If you can find a shorter word that has the same meaning as a longer one, go short. Minimize use of cliches, superlatives.

ACTIVE VOICE

Using the active voice when writing for the Internet not only helps eliminate unnecessary words in a sentence, but also strengthens the impact of what you are communicating.

An active voice:

- emphasizes the subject;
- shortens the message;
- clarifies meaning;
- conveys a sense of action.

An easy way to detect if you are using passive language is to look for how many times your writing includes “has been” or “have been” in front of a verb, e.g. our service has been improved should read we improved our service or we are improving our service.

TONE

The best way to talk to web users is the same way you would talk to a friend – in a simple conversational manner. When you write for the Web, try to avoid lecturing or listing information.

A Web user wants to know one thing: “What’s in it for me?” It’s great to list all your products and services, but if you don’t relate these things to a real life situation, your message is liable to get lost or lose some of its effectiveness.

To convey a customer service message, ensure the tone is:

- positive,
- enthusiastic,
- believable,
- appropriate,
- human,
- customer-centric.

Minimize use of lingo and jargon. If you can find any other way to describe an insurance/financial term, do it. If you must include an acronym, please reference what it stands for.

LISTS

Lists are an effective way to:

- unite unrelated information,
- draw attention to key information,
- move the reader through the material efficiently,
- excite with strong verbs,
- improve the appearance of dense text.

When creating lists,

- keep them relatively short;
- use ordered lists when sequential order is important (e.g. to indicate steps in a plan);
- use unordered lists to present items of equal status or value. Bullet points make the contents of an unordered list easily scannable.

LAYOUT

Keep text line length to about 40—60 characters per line.

- Do not use indentations.

SPACING

- Use one full line space between paragraphs or between heading and body text.
- Use one space after periods.

PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph contains a single idea. This idea must be clear in the opening sentence – the rest of the paragraph supports or illustrates this idea. Paragraphs should be

kept reasonably short; break long paragraphs if possible. Vary sentence structure (long-short-long sentences).

In addition, when creating text:

- keep bolding to a minimum and do not italicize.
- avoid using all uppercase headlines.

SPELLING

Use Canadian Press (CP) Stylebook and Canadian Press (CP) Caps & Spelling Guide [416-364-0321 to order] (authority Canadian Oxford Dictionary).

For French, use Le Petit Robert and Le Petit Larousse). Note that spell check can be defaulted to Canadian spelling. To do so, go to 'Tools', 'Set Language' 'Canadian' Spelling – 'u' in colour, favour etc. In some forms of these words, however, take note that the 'u' might be dropped, especially when an -ous ending is added: e.g. laborious, rancorous, odorous, honorary. The use of 'z' rather than 's' in words such as recognize, italicize is acceptable.

COMMON TERMS

- Internet always capitalized.
- web not capitalized when used in reference to the Internet.
- web page (two words).
- website (one word).
- webmaster (one word).
- e-mail (hyphen)
- online (no hyphen).
- Policyowner (one word).
- A phone extension: ext. 5555 [not x5555].
- E-business (hyphen).
- E-commerce (hyphen).
- For words in common use, CP style is simple 'e' rather than the diphthongs 'ae' and 'oe'.

For example, CP style is archeologist, encyclopedia rather than archaeologist, encyclopaedia etc. Proper names (Caesar), manoeuvre, subpoena and hors d'oeuvre, aerial retains the diphthong.

ABBREVIATIONS

Unless specified, defer to CP Stylebook – Caps and Spelling.

Examples:

- All capital abbreviations are written without periods (YMCA, CN, MP, UN, CRM) unless the abbreviation is geographical (U.S., P.E.I.), refers to a person (J.R. Ewing) or is a single letter (N. for north) Most lowercase and mixed abbreviations take periods: f.o.b., Jr., Ont., No., B.Comm.
- Mixed abbreviations that begin and end with a capital letter do not take periods (e.g. PhD, PoW, U of T).
- Acronyms: forms from only the first letter of each principal word are all capitals (e.g. AIDS, NATO). However, acronyms formed from initial and other letters are upper and lowercase (e.g. Norad (North American Aerospace Defence Command). Acronyms that have become common words are not capitalized (laser, radar etc.) Metric symbols are not abbreviations and are written with periods only at the end of a sentence: Plurals are MPs and PoWs; possessives MPs' and MP's.
- Most abbreviations are written without spaces: U.K., W.Va, P.Eng. But those written without periods are spaced: R and D, U of T.
- Avoid use of any 'internal' acronyms (e.g. GRS)

CAPITALIZATION

Unless specified in this styleguide, defer to CP Stylebook – Caps and Spelling.

- Basic rule: capitalize all proper names, the names of departments and agencies of national and provincial governments, trade names, names of associations, companies, clubs, religions, languages, nations, races, places, addresses. Otherwise lowercase is favoured where a reasonable option exists.
- Names of national and provincial government departments and agencies are capitalized.
- Names of national legislative bodies, including some short forms, are capitalized: House of Commons.

- Upper courts are capitalized.
- Specific geographical regions and features are capitalized: Western Canada, Far North,
- Lake Superior, but northern, southern, eastern and western in terms derived from regions
- are in lower case: a western Canadian, a southerner, northern customs.
- Historical periods, historic events, holy days and other special times are capitalized (e.g. First World War, Education Week).
- Regions not generally known as specific regions are lowercase: southern Ontario, eastern Alberta, northern Newfoundland.
- The principal words of titles of books, plays, movies, paintings and the like are capitalized: (e.g. A Dictionary of Usage and Style).
- Awards and decorations are capitalized.
- Proper nouns and adjectives now regarded as common nouns are in lower case (French fries, scotch).

FRENCH CAPITALIZATION

Unless specified in this styleguide, defer to CP Stylebook – Caps and Spelling.

- For the names of organizations, the first word is capitalized unless it is an article; other words except proper nouns are lowercase: (e.g.) Service de perception, Emballages St- Laurent Ltée.
- For book titles and the like, the first word is capitalized – the second too when the first is an article – and proper nouns: De la terre a la lune, Sur le pont d’Avignon, Les Liaisons dangereuses.
- For the names of newspapers, the definite article, the first noun and proper nouns are capitalized: Le Journal de Montreal, Le Courrier du peuple.