02. Style guide

Acronyms

In most cases, write out the long form the first time it is used on the page, followed by the acronym in brackets. After that, use the acronym.

In some cases it can be acceptable to use the short form only, if it is:

- more common than the long form (hint: if you have to stop to think what the long form actually stands for, it's probably okay to use the short form.)
- very widely known to – and entered into search engines by – the general public (NATO, for example)

When in doubt, write it out.

Active and passive voice

In most cases, use the active voice so that the reader knows who is taking the action.

Instead of …	… you could write
Complaints can be submitted to the Commission in writing.	You can submit a complaint to the Commission in writing. or You can complain to the Commission in writing.

On the other hand, the passive voice can be useful to avoid mentioning the actor, for example if this information is politically sensitive or irrelevant.

Addresses

General

In most cases, write out postal addresses as follows:

Name of building

Street name and number

Town (with post code, if known)

Country

Example

Tabaka Kulturfabrik

Gorkého 2

Košice

Slovakia

Bilingual addresses

For addresses in Brussels, Belgium, provide the street name in French and Dutch, separated by a forward slash.

Example

Berlaymont Building

Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat 200

1049 Brussels

Belgium

Exceptions

On the European Commission website, ec.europa.eu/info, postal addresses of Commission departments must never include a street name and use the generic postal address of the Commission.

Example

Infrastructure and Logistics in Brussels

European Commission

1049 Brussels

Belgium

If applicable, you may include the street name in postal addresses of Commission executive agencies

Example

Research Executive Agency

Place Rogier 16

1049 Brussels

Belgium

British English

Follow British English spelling conventions, but avoid colloquial terms and expressions that will be familiar only to native English speakers.

Contractions

Use contractions: *don't, can't, they've, we'll* – unless you want to emphasise the contracted word (*not, have, will*).

Conversational tone

Writing on the web is more conversational than the administrative style used in typical Commission writing - it makes your content more accessible and easier to understand.

Use language that your audience uses, rather than what your colleagues in the European Commission probably use.

If your audience is....	use terms like....	instead of....
people looking for jobs in other EU countries	*jobs abroad, live and work in another EU country*	*free movement/circulation of labour*
companies wanting to do business with the Commission	*tenders* or *contracts*	*public procurement*

Duplication

Make sure that the user need(s) your writing is meant to meet is not already covered somewhere else on the Commission's web presence. Search for the subject on the site or ask a policy expert. If relevant content exists elsewhere, link to it, don't duplicate.

FAQs – frequently asked questions

FAQs are poor web writing practice because

- they make information harder to find, by bringing together unrelated points - content is easier to understand in context
- they're hard to scan quickly, because the term(s) users are looking for usually appears at the end of the question
- FAQs are generally not questions that users actually ask, but information that the organisation imagines that people want to know about its work
- they often duplicate other content on the site

If you take the time to understand your users' needs, and plan and write your content accordingly, it will answer their questions that are genuinely frequently asked.

Files

Make sure to follow the rules for naming a file (EU login required).

Gender-neutral

Use gender-inclusive language that does not refer to the gender of the person where this is not relevant.

Don't say...	do say...
Policeman	Police officer
Air steward/ess	Flight attendant

Do not use the male pronoun to refer to a generic individual, but also avoid *he or she* and *(s)he*. You can do this by

- addressing the user directly as *you*
- using plural nouns
- using *they*, *them, their* to refer to an individual. This is perfectly acceptable in standard English today

Don't say...	do say...
If a customer wishes to complain, **he** must first contact the national authorities in the country where **he** made the purchase	If **customers** wish to complain, they must first contact the national authorities in the country where they made the purchase. If **you** wish to complain, you must first contact the national authorities in the country where you made the purchase. If a customer wishes to complain, **they** must first contact the national authorities in the country where they made the purchase
These rules also apply to your business partner, even if **he** is based outside the EU	These rules also apply to your business partner, even if **they** are based outside the EU

Images: alt text and captions

Always use the alternative text description field. This is important because

- the alt text will be displayed if the image fails to load
- the alt text is read aloud to users of text-to-speech software

Captions usually appear below the image in the page. If using image captions, make them meaningful. Captions draw the reader's eye, so use them to highlight a point from the main text, or add more information. Simply stating what the picture shows is a wasted opportunity.

Jargon-free

See Jargon and clear writing alternatives for more information.

Names and titles

Write the person's full name (including their role or position, if relevant) and title the first time you refer to them on the page

- *Eddy Izzard*
- *European Commission President Miriam Dupont*
- *King Rollo of Belgium*
- *Sir Pavel McCartley*
- *Chairperson of the committee on fruit and veg Jeremia Cobbitt*

In subsequent uses, use Mr or Ms (or other title) followed by the surname (or, for some titles, the first name)

- *Mr Izzard*
- *Ms Dupont*
- *King Rollo*
- *Sir Pavel*
- *Ms Cobbit*

Don't repeat the person's role as a title in the same piece of content (*President X, Vice-President Y, Commissioner Z*) unless it is not otherwise clear from the context and the role is significant.

Consider using a short version of the title depending on context and target audience. For example, write *Pierre Dubois, the Commissioner for Taxation* if the text only talks about the taxation part of his remit.

Negatives

Negatives can make a sentence difficult to understand.

Instead of …	… write
not less than a year	at least a year / a year or more.
does not comply with	violates / infringes

Plain language

Plain language is easier to understand. It will not make you seem less educated or elegant. It will make you more credible.

It's not just a question of style.

- web users are busy and need to understand quickly
- to be found, web pages need to use the words your target readers are likely to enter into search engines (*the way most web users find web pages*)
- professional image – text on the web has a high profile
- up to 20% of people have problems reading generally (older people, visually impaired, those with learning disabilities, the "functionally illiterate") and will otherwise find pages inaccessible

"Clear and simple language" is a requirement of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards. The European Commission has committed itself to these internationally-recognised standards in accessibility of public websites and content - COM(2001) 529. To this end, the Commission runs its own Clear writing programme (EU Login required) and offers a writer's toolbox (EU Login required), which provides practical tips on writing clearly both in print and for the web.

Quotes

Avoid them except on news pages, in press releases and in blog posts.

They rarely contain actionable information. People come to websites to *do something.*

If you use quotes, then

- if a person is quoted, include their full name
- if a person is quoted whose contact information is available on the European Commission website (https://ec.europa.eu/info/), point users to their contact page
- if available, provide a clearly labelled hyperlink to the quoted content

Short and to-the-point

Why keep it short?

- information overload – readers are in a hurry, looking for something specific (not reading for pleasure)
- ever-more people are viewing web pages on mobile devices, with much smaller screens than desktop computers
- easier and quicker translation

Streamline your writing to help them find information by

- asking yourself if each section and each word is **truly necessary**.
- leaving out introductory phrases such as *It is often the case that…*, *The first thing to keep in mind is that…*, *Please be aware that…*, *Remember that…*
- keeping sentences simple. Complicated sentences force users to slow down and work harder to understand what they're reading.

If your sentence is longer than 25 words, break it down into smaller units of meaning. Research shows that more than 90% of readers understand what they are reading if the average sentence length is 14 words. At 43 words, comprehension drops to less than 10% *(Source: Gov.UK)*.

Short titles for legislation

Please refer to GoPro's guidelines on how to write short titles for legal acts.

How to be as concise as possible

- the substance – write only about what the reader really needs to know - and nothing more
- the words – in every sentence, use only the words you need to convey the key message

Avoid the easy, running style used for print documents – instead aim for spare and functional prose that makes every word count.

Tips on how to cut words

Official names

No need to always spell out the full official titles of people, bodies, laws, agreements and other documents, etc.

Use only the key words/concepts readers need to understand. Make the name into a link, and this will take people to the full official title if they need it.

Don't	Do
Titles	
UNESCO Convention on the Promotion and Protection of Cultural Expression	UNESCO convention on cultural expression We know that UNESCO isn't trying to stamp out cultural expression
Minister for Financial Affairs	Finance minister
Ministry for Social Security, Generations and Consumer Protection	Social security ministry (in texts mainly about social security - just use the relevant part of the title)
Laws, official documents, programmes, etc.	
Regulation (EC) No 689/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 March 2007 establishing and amending the rules on data protection	EU regulation 689/2007 on data protection (Note – if there are several instances of the same regulation, be sure to differentiate between them)
White paper on environmental protection	environment white paper
In 2002 the Council and the European Parliament adopted a Regulation establishing the European solidarity fund.	In 2002 the EU decided to set up a European solidarity fund
Events	
The Copenhagen summit on 12 June 2005 that addressed the issue of Climate Change	The 2005 Copenhagen summit on climate change

Wordiness

Don't	Do
EU initiatives aimed at protecting human health from the risks which may be caused by dangerous chemical substances	EU initiatives to protect people from dangerous chemicals [50% shorter than the original text]

Where the Commission's services make representations to the authorities of the Member State against which the complaint has been made, they will abide by the choice you have made regarding disclosure of your identity. Where you have not indicated your choice, the Commission's services will presume that you have opted for confidential treatment	If we have to contact the authorities you complained about, we will keep your identity confidential unless you state otherwise *[64% shorter than the original text]*

Empty phrases

Don't	Do
It is often the case that a complaint is sent…	Complaints are often sent…
The first thing to keep in mind is that you must update your pages regularly …	You must update your pages regularly …
quantities - in the majority/number of cases, a large proportion of, low level/amount/volume/extent of, a total of	many, some, few or most
time phrases - at (the) present (time) / at an early date / in the near future /	now

Repetition

Don't	Do
The participants have recognised that […] dialogue between these cultures […] is an essential factor in bringing their peoples closer, promoting understanding between them and improving their perception of each other. Dialogue and respect between cultures and religions are a necessary pre-condition for bringing the people closer. The mass media can play an important role in the reciprocal recognition and understanding of cultures as a source of mutual enrichment.	It's enough to simply say, "*Dialogue between cultures brings people closer*". The original passage says essentially the same thing about 7 times!

Irrelevant information

Don't	Do
When the "European Economic Area Treaty" (EEA Treaty) came into force on 1st January 1994, and Austria joined the European Union (EU) on 1st January 1995, secondary EC law also took effect in the area of social security (included in this are, in particular, Regulations 1408/71 and 574/72 relative to social security provision for migrant workers).	Social security in Austria is now also covered by EU law (in particular regulations 1408/71 and 574/72 on social security provision for migrant workers). *"Now" is what interests readers - not intricate historical details.*

Upper or lower case

See Upper or lower case

Verbs, not nouns

Many nouns ending in *-ion* are simply verbs in disguise. Ask yourself if there is a verb that could replace your noun phrase.

Instead of …	… write
carry out an evaluation of	evaluate
give consideration to	consider
since the accession of Poland to the EU	since Poland joined the EU

Writing good titles

Guidelines

It is important to keep the title tag under 60-65 characters. This recommendation is based on user experience and SEO.

Examples

Here are a few examples (based on true stories) that could help you to understand how improvements can be made.

Title / URL	Improvements
EUROPEAN COMMISSION | POLICIES, INFORMATION AND SERVICES https://ec.europa.eu/info/index_en	POLICIES, INFORMATION AND SERVICES | EUROPEAN COMMISSION
ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION | EUROPEAN COMMISSION https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-union_en	Technically fine, but it fails to show that you are in the Information part of the website, for example: About the European Union - Policies, Information and Services | European Commission That's too long (83 chars). Given that the context is clear, consider deleting the references to European: ABOUT THE UNION - INFORMATION SERVICES | EUROPEAN COMMISSION
STRATEGY | EUROPEAN COMMISSION http://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy	It is not clear from the title which strategy is being talked about STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN OF THE EUROPEAN UNION | EUROPEAN COMMISSION
BETTER REGULATION: WHY AND HOW | EUROPEAN COMMISSION http://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/better-regulation-why-and-how_en	"why", "and" and "how" are stopwords, their use should be avoided in titles BETTER REGULATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION | EUROPEAN COMMISSION
FIND A PARTNER | EUROPEAN COMMISSION http://ec.europa.eu/info/how-eu-funding-works/find-partner_en	Search results for "Find a Partner in Europe" show dating sites as ads but EU/EC-related pages as indexed pages. Unfortunately we haven't made it to the first page yet, but wait for Valentine's Day. FIND A PROJECT OR FINANCIAL PARTNER | EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT | EUROPEAN COMMISSION https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/directorate-general-agriculture-and-rural-development_en	With this as the h1 heading, the page *should* be a page about DG AGRI itself. It's not. It's a page of Planning and Management documents related to DG AGRI. These are not the same thing. The h1 heading should summarise precisely what the page contains. Better titles would be: • Management Plans and Activity reports for DG AGRI • Management Plans and Activity reports for Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development • DG AGRI Documents • Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development Documents

Writing good meta descriptions

Guidelines

Simulating a search result

You can use SEOmofo to see how your page will appear in search engines. Just insert the title and meta description to check if the length is ok.

- **Describe actions**
  Identify the kind of actions that the visitor might want to achieve by visiting your page and find the closest verb that expresses that action (e.g. "learn", "consult", "discover").
- **Provide a solution or benefit that the page offers**
  Tell the searchers what they can expect by visiting the page. Make it clear that there is a real benefit to clicking through and reading your page and that they will be served with clear, informative and valuable content.

- **Keep the description under 155 characters**
  Search engines don't usually trim by characters but by pixel length. This means that a description made of iiiii will be allowed more characters than one made of ooooo. Use SEOmofo to test the appearance of the meta description.
- **Don't deceive searchers**
  If your meta description deceives the reader with content not relevant to what they expect, they will hit the back button as soon as they reach the page. This will increase the bounce rate and give Google a signal that your page is not relevant for the search terms.
- **Make it specific and relevant**
  Humans are good at recognising a predictable, generic meta description when they see it in the SERPs. That's why it is important to connect with your target audience and let them know they'll find specific information they couldn't get anywhere else.

Contact and support

If you require further assistance, please contact:

Comm Europa Management

European Commission
DG Communication
Unit B.3
Europa Web Communication