Humboldt County

Web Standards and Style Guide

The Web Standards & Design Group (aka "group") created this style guide as a tool to improve the user experience of both the County Internet (humboldtgov.org) and Intranet (employees.humboldtgov.org) websites. The style guide describes what needs to be done to maintain and grow both of these sites according to its vision. The vision was created during the development of the sites using feedback, where appropriate, from the public and employees, and changes over time. Any changes to the vision are approved by the group.

The group's vision is to maintain a website that:
- Contains correct, current information
- Is user-friendly, both for the public and internal users. The group will accomplish this by:
    o Maintaining site consistency
    o Using sourced documents to guide decisions
    o Ensure that need drives technology on the website
- Contains accessible content by:
    o Meeting ADA accessibility standards, specifically WCAG 2.0, Level AA
        ▪ For more detailed information, see the ADA Compliance section of this document
    o Addressing the digital divide, making our website accessible regardless of the equipment being used
- Has a modern look, feel and functionality
- Promotes Humboldt County
- Is responsive to the public's needs

The group's vision for the Intranet is as follows:
- It is easy to use
- Is well-organized
- Has a modern look, feel and functionality

- Promotes increased use by departments
- Increases communication and connectivity among employees
- Effectively stores and organizes documents

Changing the way we do the web

Previously, the county hosted both sites on its own servers with one webmaster maintaining the majority of its content. In 2014 the county contracted with CivicPlus to redesign the sites, which improved the overall look and feel, and now CivicPlus hosts the site on its own servers, which improved redundancy.

For county staff, the responsibility to create and maintain content on the website is now decentralized. This means each department has designated several staff members to maintain their own online content, as opposed to referring these issues to the webmaster. At any one time there could be more than 100 staff members contributing content. This is a significant change in the way the county operates, and it provides both benefits and challenges.

On the plus side, county staff is now able to update information more quickly. In addition, it can use a variety of tools to better engage with their audience. However, because so many people are posting content to these sites, online content can look and be organized in dramatically different ways from page to page. Without a consistent look and feel, the user will have difficulty finding the information they need. This style guide will help you present your content in a way that ensures consistency throughout the sites.

When should I use this guide?

You should use this guide whenever you are creating new pages or making significant changes to content. Many of your decisions will not require you to address this guide (i.e., updating staff names, changing meeting dates)

Guiding principles

Audience

Internet vs. Intranet

The County has a website, humboldtgov.org, which is available to the public. The website is on the Internet. For this site the audience is the citizens of Humboldt County looking to do business with us. The information should be presented in a way that makes it as easy as possible for the public to conduct their business with us.

The Intranet is different from the website in that the Intranet is an internal website and not accessible by the general public. Therefore, the audience for the Intranet is all county employees. However, simply because it is not accessible by the public does not mean this is

a confidential site. If your content is not suitable to be viewed by all county employees it does not belong on the Intranet. Finally, other county employees are not experts in your field so remember to use plain language whenever possible.

Organization of pages and documents
Think of the county's Intranet as our database of record. If we have an official, county-generated document that employees rely on and reference, it should be stored here. Think: policies and procedures, forms, and reports. To ensure that these documents are easily accessed, we try to limit file sizes and use organization schemes when grouping similar documents.

Organization schemes have to do with how you are going to categorize your content and the various ways you'll create relationships between each piece. Most content can be categorized in the following ways:

- Alphabetical
- Chronological
- Geographical
- Topic
- Task
- Audience, or
- Metaphor (trash,

The default organization scheme will be by department > division > topic or task and then displayed alphabetically.

Specific Elements to Consider

In order to achieve the group's vision for the county's sites we must deliver clear, concise, well-formatted content. Therefore, the county has adopted the following best practices to help users develop and maintain content. This guide was created using some of the foremost authorities in website usability as references, as well as expertise from county employees. It is intended to be consistent with the county's Agenda Item Style Guide, which is based on the writing standards in the Associated Press Style Guide.

Capitalization

- The words *"city,"* "county," or "town" (also borough, village, district, etc.) are never capitalized unless they are stated in that entity's proper name (ex: the "County of Humboldt" vs. the city). The same rule applies to "state."

- Do not use all caps to emphasize an important point. Capitalizing all the letters in a word has actually been found to decrease a reader's ability to quickly discern what the word is. If you need to emphasize a piece of content, use bolding instead.

Numerals and percentages

- Write all numbers as figures so that users scanning for measurements, limits, data, etc., can easily find them. For example: "Please submit 3 copies of the form," not "please submit three copies of the form."
- The percent symbol (%) should be used instead of the word "percent" in all content for easy readability.
- Numbers in a table should be right aligned unless the right alignment makes it difficult for users to read other data within the table (see also: Tables)

Grammar & Tone

- Content copy should be grammatically correct and written in clear, concise sentences.
- The average U.S. citizen reads best at an 8th or 9th grade level, so consider simplifying your content. You can use the Flesch-Kinkaid reader in Microsoft Word to determine the current level of difficulty of any piece of content.
- Avoid using multiple punctuation marks in a row such as "wow!" instead of "wow!!!!" or "what?" instead of "what???" Exclamation points should be used sparingly.
- Know your audience. Some content is meant to engage. Some content is meant to inform or educate. Some content has to simply direct users to contact a real person. Not all content is intended to do everything, and that is ok. Make sure that you are keeping your audience and the purpose of the content in mind when either writing or formatting content for the website.
- It is okay to write in a more conversational tone when writing for the web. However, slang and jargon should still be avoided.
- Avoid writing in the passive voice. The active voice is more engaging and direct.
- Example: "Action on the bill is being considered by the Board" is passive voice. "The Board is considering taking action on the bill" is active voice.
- Do not use run-on or fragment sentences.
- Be consistent with your sentence tense throughout the entire page.

Contact Information Standards

- The home page for each department and division should have contact information on the right-hand side of the page. This information should allow a person to get in contact with a main desk where their specific request can be routed.

- Formatting for contact information:
  - 8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
  - Ph: xxx-xxx-xxxx
  - Fx: xxx-xxx-xxxx
  - Street Modifiers -Abbreviate St., Ave., and Blvd. Spell out all other identifiers.
  - Street Numbers - Use figures for 1st St., 2nd St., etc.

Staff Directory

Humboldt County users should display contact information using the Staff Directory module. This allows for department and staff information to be maintained and updated from a single location. An example for the suggested format is included to the right.

Info Advanced

The Info Advanced module is used to display the same content on multiple pages. If it is necessary to post the same information on multiple pages, this module should be used since the content can be updated from a single location.

Addresses within Text

- There is no break between a lead-in sentence or subhead and the address block below it. Use an address block when an address is listed within page content.
- If the address has a P.O. Box but the same zip code as the physical address, the P.O. Box info can be listed on the second line of the address.
- If you have a separate physical and mailing address, list the physical address nm in a separate block from the mailing address to enable users to easily highlight and search for directions. (See sample)
- Room, floor, suite, etc. is listed out on the second line of an address block. If there is also a P.O. Box in the address, the floor; suite, etc., - would still be listed above the P.O. Box.
- Use figures for numbered streets such as 1st Street.

Headings & Page Titles

- Page titles should be clear and concise and accurately describe the content found on the page. Ex: "Content Policy Documents" is much clearer than just "Documents."

Staff Directory Example

Jane Doe
Department Director
Email
Ph: 555-555-5555

Physical Address
12345 ABC Lane
Suite 1
CivicCity, KS 66502
View Map

Mailing Address
P.O. Box 123
Fake, KS 66502

Ph: 555-555-5555
Fx: 555-555-5556
Emergency: 911

Hours
(Excluding Holidays)
Monday - Thursday
8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

Friday
8 a.m. - Noon

Staff Directory

- Headings should be used to break up content and provide the user guidance as to what information is in the text below it
- Headings should be dear and concise - describing what information can be found in the text beneath it.
- Headings and page titles should utilize the ampersand (&) to save space.
- Headings should be created with title case.
- When formatting a heading, the CSS styles Subhead 1 and Subhead 2 are used to show the hierarchy of information on the page - they are not just decorative elements. You should only use Subhead 2 to separate information that is related to the Subhead 1 topic. Subhead 2 should always follow a Subhead 1 when used.

Links

- Don't replicate content, use links instead. You can link to content within the site on the same topic to avoid having to duplicate any content.
- Be the authority when you can, but don't create content you are not the authority on.
    - Want to educate citizens on disaster relief and emergency management using the same tools that FEMA uses? Great! Link to the FEMA website, don't replicate their information. This will allow our citizens to easily access information directly from the authority on the topic and keep you from having to update content.
- **ADA TIP:** Avoid using terms like "click here" as they don't indicate to the user where the link is going to take them. They also hinder the usability of the site for someone utilizing a screen reader. Instead, link to words that indicate what is found at the link. (Ex: Instead of "to view the training document, click here" try "View the training document.")

Tables

- Do not use tables to space content or pictures on the page.
- If the information you are displaying in a table doesn't consistently fit under the headers for that table, that information should not be displayed in a table.
- Tables should display using the "Alternate Rows" color setting (auto-table class setting).
- Figures should be right aligned in tables unless right aligning causes other information in the table to be difficult to read.
- **ADA TIP:** All columns must have headings.

Images

- Images inside the content area should be no wider than 300 px
- Image resolution should be 300 dpi (dots per inch)(Kirkpatrick)

- Use an approved photo release form whenever using a photo that displays a person's face.
- In general, avoid posting pictures of minors. The county has approved photo release forms you can use for these cases, but it is often more difficult to get these forms filled out and signed properly.
- Be aware of copyright laws when posting pictures (see: "Copyrighted Materials" in this guide)
- Images used on the site should enhance the content on the page.
- For more than two images per page, consider utilizing a slideshow instead of stagnant images.
- If there are a large number of photos for a page, or if users would benefit from being able to slowly look at them, place pictures in the Photo Gallery instead of on the page or in a slideshow
- **ADA TIP:** Images require a descriptive alt text for users with screen readers. File names and single words do not make usable alt text entries. Try "black and white police cruiser with lights on" instead of "cop car," or "young girl participates in recreation program" instead of "little girl.")

Menus & Navigation

- Mega menus should be used instead of drop-down menus as mega menus are easier to physically navigate than the typical "tree branch" structure of drop-down menus.
- Two-tier mega menus should be used to allow the user to see deeper into the navigation without having to click into something that may or may not take them where they want to go.
- Mega menus should be built out as evenly and thoroughly as possible. A mega menu with only two items in it is not highly usable.
- Menu items and navigation throughout the site should be listed in alphabetical order to make information easier to find.

Bulleted Lists

- Long lists within text should be broken out into bulleted lists so that they can be easily scanned.
- Alphabetize list items with fewer than three words.
- Avoid over-bulleting.
- The first letter of each item in a bulleted list should be capitalized.
- There should be no space above bulleted lists.
- There should be a break between the bottom of a bulleted list and the next text
- Bullets should go, at the most, two levels deep.

- Do not mix sentence fragments and full sentences in one bulleted list. For consistency, all bullets in each bulleted list should contain the same format (and verb tense).

Breaking up Content

- Content should be broken up into small, easily readable chunks. As a general rule, the text beneath each header should not contain more than 2 or 3 short paragraphs and each short paragraph should not contain more than 2 or 3 sentences.
- Subheads encourage users to keep scrolling to find information, so make sure that each new topic has a header. (See also: Headers and Page Titles)
- Completely separate topics should be housed on separate pages. While users will scroll longer pages to scan similar information, it can be very frustrating to scroll through information of completely unrelated topics, so that information should be housed separately.

When to Use PDFs

- Convert any Word or Excel files to PDF so that any user can access the information. Adobe Acrobat is a free download that any user can obtain to read documents, while other file types, such as Microsoft: Word, require expensive software to access.
- Open all PDF files in a new window.
- Indicate links that go to PDF files by including (PDF) behind the file name as a part of the link.
- Create PDF copies of the content that we recommend should also be available to print and provide it in addition to the page content
- Provide recommendations in the Navigation Spreadsheet regarding PDF content that should be provided in page format and why we recommend that.
- **ADA TIP:** There are some documents on our website and Intranet that citizens must use in order to access county services. These documents, especially PDF documents, need to be machine readable and comply with WCAG 2.0, Level AA standards.

Boards & Commissions

Boards & Commissions pages should be linked from the Boards, Commissions, and Committees page. Please work with the Clerk of the Board's Office to make changes to the listing on this page.

When creating or updating a board page, be as consistent as possible when displaying its information by:
- Organizing content in the same order from board to board
- Including all pertinent information about how to join or who to contact

Pages Widget

The Pages Widget is used to create menu pages that display a listing of the subpages for a parent page and their page descriptions. These pages help provide structure and organization to the navigation. They should be used in conjunction with other content to make a more robust landing page. However, it is not recommended this be the **only** content on a main department landing page. Instead, feature relevant and actionable content whenever possible.

Font Styles

- Underlining should only be used for hyperlinks. Underlining for emphasis can confuse users who might think they can click on that area of the screen.
- Avoid using all caps for anything but acronyms. If you need to emphasize something, use bold instead. Using all caps can make the words more difficult to read.
- Only use Subhead1 and Subhead2 font on subheads
- If moving information from another source to our website, make sure to paste all items in plain text by using the tool in the Editor widget. This will clear any formatting or text class information from the previous source that may be left on the text.
- Avoid using strikethrough (e.g. Closed roads: ~~Broadway St~~, Clark St.). Many screen readers do not acknowledge that the text is crossed out.

Page Descriptions

- Page descriptions should be completed for every page. This will help search engines to better determine what pages to bring up as the results for a search. They also help guide users to the correct information by providing better details on what can be found on any page.
- Page descriptions should accurately describe the content on the page, including any major topics that are covered.
- Page descriptions are displayed below page titles when using the Pages Widget.

Documents

File size: In general, try to break up large files in to smaller files and rely on sound organization when displaying files. If you must store a large document, let the user know the file size and type so they can consider whether they want to spend the time to download (Response Times: The Three Important Limits, Nielsen).

Organization: It is vital that the documents are organized, and displayed in ways that makes sense to the user. All documents should be named with the document title or other name that clearly states what the document is. To ensure users can find similar documents, use an *organization scheme* when saving and displaying files ([Classification schemes, and when to use them, Spencer 2010](#)).

Agenda Center: The Agenda Center should be used to house agendas and complimenting minutes and packets. They should be in order by the document date, starting with the most recent.

Archive Center: The Archive Center should house: Items such as newsletters, police reports, press releases, etc. that are frequently published and should be sorted by date, documents that are updated frequently such as budgets, financial reports, etc.

Document Center: The Document Center should house all other supporting documents. All documents in the Document Center should be named with the document title or other name that clearly states what the document is.

Form Center

The following types of forms work best in the Form Center:
- Contact Us forms or other simple requests
- Forms consisting of mostly short answer, multiple choice, or long answer questions
- Forms that can be emailed to a particular person or accessed by a particular person for processing
- Forms that don't require an official signature or notary

The following types of forms don't work as well in the Form Center:
- Forms containing a lot of text based instructions or introductions
- Forms that require attachments that the client has indicated cannot be copied
- Forms that require an official signature or notary

The Form Center is not a secured way of collecting information, meaning that CivicPlus cannot guarantee the security of the information after being collected through the Form Center. As such, CivicPlus does not develop forms that contain specific kinds of identifying information and does not recommend you create such forms via the Form Center. CivicPlus recommends any form with potentially identifying information remain as is or be turned into a PDF that must be printed and mailed or brought in for submission Identifying information includes:
- Social Security numbers
- Driver's license numbers

- Tax ID numbers
- W2 or other tax documentation or information
- Birth certificate copies
- Account numbers

File Structure

- The organization of the Document Center and Forms Center should reflect the department organizational structure.
- File names within the document center and forms center should clearly identify the document. For example: Instead of "Form 1293" use "Social Media Request Form." File names should be concise but our content management system allows for longer file names.
- Include a description of documents and forms you store. This will allow users to more easily identify documents when navigating through the document and forms center.

Facilities

The Facilities module best houses the following types of information:

- Parks
- Rentable city/county facilities
- Trails
- Pools
- Community centers and meeting places

- All facility amenities should be populated as "features" within the Facilities module If the amenities are not populated within the features section in the Facilities module, citizens will be unable to correctly utilize reservations and will be unable to search or filter for facilities by amenity.
- Use a specific address and the map location feature whenever possible.
- Format information in the editor box within the Facilities module just as you would with page content.
- CivicPlus does not recommend use of the Facilities module to house business information. The Resource Directory is designed to display information about local businesses.

FAQs

- All FAQs should be housed within the FAQ module to best utilize the CivicPlus GCMS™.
- Each department is encouraged to provide citizens with answers to a useful set of FAQs.
- If there are more FAQs than can practically be displayed within the module widget on a page, link a subpage directly to that FAQs category so 1hat all the FAQs can be quickly and easily found.
- FAQs should be formatted in a way 1hat makes the answer immediately clear, but is not too abrupt. For example:

> ### FAQ Example
>
> **Q: Can I pay my bill online?**
>
> Poor answer: Yes.
>
> Poor answer: The system allows you to pay your bill online.
>
> **Best answer:** Yes, please visit our Online Payments page to make a payment

Quick Links

Category titles should be intuitively named using titles that make sense on their own and out of the context of any surrounding text, because 1hey may be viewed from the main Quick Link module landing page and will need to make sense standing on their own.

- Quick links should be intuitively named. Ask these questions:
  - Does the name of the link make sense out of context?
  - Is it dear where this link is going to take a citizen?
- Link titles should be in title case.

Third-Party Content

- When linking to places outside the county Intranet, try to link only to other government agencies, non-profits, community organizations and businesses with whom the county contracts. Commercial organizations often solicit the county to include their link or information on the county's website. In general, this should be avoided.
- Avoid duplicating content. See: Links.

Copyrighted Materials/Fair Use/Intellectual Property

- All employees are prohibited from copying materials not specifically allowed by copyright law, "Fair Use" guidelines, licenses or contractual agreements or the permission of the copyright proprietor. Web pages must include a statement of copyright when appropriate and indicate that permission has been secured when including copyrighted materials and that such publication is in accordance with the "Fair Use" provisions of the copyright law.
- Fair use provisions allow for copyrighted material to be used for the purpose of criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship or research. However,

information on a website may not be covered by these provisions because they could be widely disseminated because of the fact that they are available on the Internet. Therefore, you should get permission of the copyright holder before posting copyrighted information.

- Unless otherwise noted, always assume that work (including photographs, text, music and graphics) on the Internet is copyrighted. It is NOT necessary that the copyright symbol (©) be displayed for the work to be protected by copyright laws.
- Proper attribution must always be given per the organization or the individual.
- Obtaining permission from the copyright holder should occur during the developmental process of the project, rather than waiting to seek permission upon completion of the project.
- Unauthorized electronic transmission of copyrighted materials is illegal.
- Any permission obtained from a copyright holder for text, pictures, graphics, music or other copyrighted material should be given to your department's content owner.

ADA Compliance

Humboldt County is committed to closely working with our vendor – CivicPlus – to provide and maintain accessibility to our websites for all citizens. We use site scanning technology from other vendors – AudioEye and Siteimprove – to ensure compliance with WCAG 2.0 AA. AudioEye also provides accessibility tools and services directly on the public site.

The Intranet holds a collection of web content accessibility information and resources for county employees on the Accessible Web Content page. The Web Standards and Style Guide and other resources such as the page linked above were created to assist County employees who provide content updates to stay in compliance.

From CivicPlus: "As local governments strive to meet the needs of all citizens, accessibility compliance is a topic that can't be ignored. Disabilities can affect any age group limiting their ability to get information, learn, work, and communicate online. As an industry leader with more than 2,000 local government clients, accessibility compliance is a topic we take seriously. We provide highly compliant sites based on Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 A and AA, which encompass and surpass Section 508."

For more specific details on WCAG 2.0, please refer to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Recommendations or World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) How to Meet WCAG 2.0 Quick Reference.

For an explanation and breakdown of the WCAG 2.0 A & AA Structure, see the CivicPlus document: CivicAccessibility - Website Accessibility Overview and Guidelines.

1) **Users need to know where they're going**.   When naming items (pages, documents, categories, etc.) on your website remember that naming is essential to understanding. You should name items in a way that describe their topic or purpose. Aim for specific instead of broad naming conventions.

2) **Break up page sections/topics with headings.**   When a user arrives on a page, they scan for the information they need. Use Subhead1 and Subhead2 class headings to break up your content and show hierarchy so it is easily scanned.

3) **The purpose of links can be determined in context.**   Links are how users get from place to place on your site. It is important that they be able to determine where a link goes without reading all of the text near the link. This concept applies to both the average user and users with assistive technologies.

4) **Only use tables when the information fits under the header cells appropriately (do not use for layout purposes).**   Screen readers are particular about tables. In order to provide your users with screen readers the correct information, you must make sure that the content within every cell is directly related to the heading for that cell and that each column does have a heading.

5) **Do not depend on only color to relay information.**   Color should never be the sole indicator for a user as to what text is important. Color is problematic for both screen readers and users with color blindness.

6) **Do not use symbols or abbreviations as they will not translate well (symbols such as " for inches).**   Screen readers have limitations regarding what they can read or how the symbols or abbreviations are translated.

7) **Know your audience.   Do not use jargon and think of the average reading level of the user.**   The internet is the ultimate source of information. Users from all backgrounds and levels of education need to be able to find information on your site.

8) **Use descriptive alt text for images or provide a link to a text description adjacent to an image or other non-text content.**   Screen readers rely on alternative text in order to give your visually impaired users the same experience as your users that do not require assistive technology.

9) **Use consistent navigation techniques and placement of other important items, such as contact information.**   When users find a piece of information in an area of your site, they are going to look in that same location the next time they need to find similar information. Using consistent navigation and placement of important information will help your users find what they need faster.

10) **Do not use flashing elements, such as images, text, or banners.**   Flashing lights can be a huge medical problem for those with seizure disorders and can inhibit the ability of light sensitive individuals to see other page content. Flashing elements should always be completely avoided.

Humboldt County Web Style Guide

Quick Reference Sheet

Visuals

- Avoid clipart
- Use Alt Text. Always.
    - Try "Softball player holding red glove" instead of "Girl."
- Choose fonts for readability in context
- Consider size, sequence
- Emphasize effectively
- Use contrast, not just color

Photographs

- Take photos
- Phone photos are fine, but take several
- Come in tight on subjects
- Pose groups creatively
- Go outside
- Send releases when submitting photos
    - Get releases – every time.
    - No minors, no clients, no foster—never ever, ever
- Beware copyright violations.

AP Style

Consult the AP Style Guide.

- Dates: Jan. 25, Dec. 3., December 2015
- Times: 1 to 4 p.m., 1:25 p.m., noon
- Addresses: 123 First St.
- Phone numbers: 707-123-4567

Digital standards

- Keep it relevant to the people we serve; don't use web pages as a storage repository.
- Put it on a page, not a PDF
- Minimize clicks: Least amount of clicks, small files sizes
- Break it up: Use headings, bullets and white space
- Strive for compliance: Screen reader compliant
- Offer media alternatives: Provide transcripts for any audio or video content
- Link, don't repeat: Don't duplicate content, link to sources
- Call it what it is: Name links intuitively.
- Organization: Follow department structure