



Humboldt County

Digital Standards and Style Guide

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Table of Contents

Humboldt County Digital Standards and Style Guide	1
Introduction.....	3
Guiding Principles	3
Digital Content	4
File Storage.....	5
File size	5
Organization.....	5
Document Structure.....	6
Titles & Headings	6
Tables	7
Text Boxes	7
Lists	7
Links	8
Images.....	8
Formatting & Grammar.....	9
Capitalization	9
Fonts.....	9
Grammar & Tone.....	9
Numbers, Dates & Percentages	10

Addresses, Phone Numbers & Times	10
Website Modules	11
Agenda Center	11
Archive Center	11
Boards & Commissions	11
Document Center.....	11
FAQs	12
Form Center	13
Info Advanced	13
Menus & Navigation	13
Page Descriptions & Keywords	14
Pages Widget	14
Parks & Facilities	14
Quick Links	15
Staff Directory.....	15
Copyrighted Materials/Fair Use/Intellectual Property	16
ADA Compliance.....	16
Word Documents.....	17
PDFs.....	17
Websites	17
Humboldt County Digital Style Guide Quick Reference Sheet	19
Visuals.....	19
Photographs	19
AP Style.....	19
Digital standards.....	19

Introduction

Guiding Principles

The Digital Standards & Style Guide is a tool to help improve user experience with the county's digital media, including our public website (humboldtgov.org), employee website (employees.humboldtgov.org) and all other shared digital content. Additionally, the Digital Standards & Style Guide is an implementation tool for the Digital Accessibility Policy, which includes the following.

This guide was initially created during the development of county websites, with feedback from the public and employees. It has been created to change over time.

Goals for all digital media:

- Well organized
- Easy to understand
- User-friendly
- Accessible (see [ADA Compliance](#) section)

Goals specific to the websites:

- Correct, current information
- Modern look, feel and functionality
- Maintains site consistency
- Stores appropriate and organized documents
- Sources documents to guide decisions
- Responsive to the needs of the public and employees
- Promotes Humboldt County

We must deliver clear, concise, well-formatted content to meet the goals stated in this document. Therefore, the county has adopted 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.

Use this guide when creating new content, or when reviewing and making significant changes to existing content. The main types of digital content produced by the county are outlined below.

Digital Content

Documents

Most documents start in Microsoft Word and then are exported as a PDF for distribution (usually to the website).

PDFs should be viewed as a “snapshot” of your source document. Directly editing PDFs should be avoided. Instead, always keep your source documents to make future changes. The standards and styles provided in this guide are easiest to apply directly to source documents.

Whenever possible, avoid PDFs entirely and create content directly as a web page instead.

Websites

The county has two main websites that host many pages, documents and media:

- [Public website](http://humboldtgov.org) (humboldtgov.org) – This website provides information about our services to the public and allows residents to do business with us.
- [Employee website](http://employees.humboldtgov.org), HumNet (employees.humboldtgov.org) – This is our internal website for employees, and it cannot be accessed by the public.

Departments designate staff to edit web content and use a variety of tools to help engage users. Currently, there are over 100 employees who work on the website.

With so many web editors, we must ensure a consistent look and feel so that users can easily find what they need. This style guide will help with presenting web content in a way that ensures consistency throughout the sites. The general guidance in this document also applies to our websites. Additional information more specific to the website is also included throughout this guide and will be clearly labeled.

Media

Additional media shared by the county includes videos, maps, diagrams, social media and more. Since media can vary so greatly, the guidance provided here will focus on websites and documents. However, the principles described in this document should be applied to all digital media whenever possible.

File Storage

Official county documents that others reference and rely on should be stored within the county's internal file system and then added to county websites as appropriate.

Some common documents we want to easily be able to reference are policies, procedures, forms and reports. To ensure that these documents can be easily accessed, try to limit file sizes and use organization schemes when grouping similar documents.

File size

In general, try to break up large files into smaller files and rely on an organization scheme to keep them grouped together. If you must share a large document, let the user know the file size and type ([Response Times: The Three Important Limits, Nielsen](#)).

Organization

Documents need to be organized and displayed in ways that makes sense to relevant users (both readers and collaborators).

- All documents should be named in a way that clearly states what it is.
- Use an *organization scheme* to ensure users can find similar documents ([Classification Schemes—and When to Use Them, Spencer 2010](#)).

Organization schemes have to do with how you are going to categorize and relate your content. Most content can be categorized in the following ways:

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

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

Websites

The websites use the [Document Center](#) for file storage.

Document Structure

Titles & Headings

Titles & headings are used to clearly label the content that follows them. The title should apply to the entire document or page, and headings should apply to specific subsections of that content.

- Titles and headings should be in title case with clear and concise names.
- Use headings to break up content in a logical, organized way.
- Utilize the ampersand (&) to save space.
- Break up content into small, easily readable chunks.

Many text editing applications allow you to set titles and headings in a similar way. Titles are often set under document “Properties” and headings are often set under “Styles”.

Below are instructions specific to the website, Word and PDFs.

Websites

- **Headings:** In the Editor widget, use the dropdown to select “Subhead1” or “Subhead2” based on the hierarchy of information on the page. Make a choice based on structure, not on color. Only use “Subhead2” when nesting information that is related to the Subhead1 topic before it.
- **Page Titles:** Click the page title to edit it. Alternatively, use Versions > Actions > Options.

Word Documents

- **Headings:**
 - Set headings using the “Home” tab > “Styles” section > Select appropriate heading level
 - Review heading using the “View” tab > “Show section > Check box for “Navigation Pane”
- **Document Title:** Set the title under “File” tab > Info > Title (on the right)
- See [Document Accessibility Basics](#) for additional guidance.

PDFs

- **Headings:** Review and set headings using the “Accessibility” tool > “Reading Order”
 - **Note:** This should not be necessary if the document was created and exported properly from Word (and most other applications).
- **Document Title:** Set the title under “File” > “Properties”

Tables

- Do not use tables for formatting.
 - Instead of using a table to place content side by side, use a column.
 - Instead of using a table to list out items in a single column, use a [list](#) instead.
- The information in the table must relate to the heading prior to it.
- Numbers should be right aligned in tables unless it causes other information to be difficult to read.
- Tables need to be simple.
 - Do not merge or split cells.
 - Include labels and summaries of tables outside of the table itself.
 - Include data in every cell and be consistent when leaving cells empty on purpose, such as “N/A” or “-”.
 - If it seems impossible to make a table simple, it is a sign it should be broken up into multiple tables.

Text Boxes

- Do not use text boxes. Many screen readers are unable to access their content.
- Instead, place the text directly within the document.
 - Borders can be used to make a section stand out in a similar way to a text box.
 - Columns can be used to format it next to text.
 - For example: See [FAQs](#).

Lists

- Long lists within text should be turned into bulleted or numbered lists so that they can easily be scanned.
- Use bulleted lists when order **does not** matter and numbered lists when order **does** matter.
- The first letter of each list item should be capitalized.
- Use alphabetical order whenever it would help with navigation.
- For consistency, each list item should contain the same format (such as using sentences vs. phrases) and verb tense.
- Avoid going more than 2 levels deep.
- Lists cannot contain complex structures such as tables or headings within them. Keep lists simple. Replace them with numbered headings if they need to be more complex.

Links

- Use links to avoid duplicating information.
- When linking to a PDF, indicate it at the end of the linked text using “(PDF)”.
- Don’t create vague links, like “click here”, since it’s not clear where they go.
 - For example: use “View the [training document](#).”, **not** “[click here](#) to view the training document”)
- Be the authority when you can, but don’t create content you are not the authority on.
 - For example: To educate citizens on disaster relief and emergency management using the same tools as FEMA: link to the FEMA website, don’t replicate their information. This allows easier access to current information for our residents.
 - When linking to external sites, 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, which should generally be avoided.

Images

- Images should only be used when they enhance the content on the page. All images that provide information require alternative(“alt”) text that fully describe the image in case it is not possible to view it.
- Avoid images with a lot of text. Convert it into actual text instead.
 - When text is included in an image, it must all be fully described. Either in alt text, next to the image, or in a supplemental document.
- Image resolution should be 300 dpi (dots per inch)([Image Resolution, Kilpatrick](#)).
- Use a [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, 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](#))
- Images should be sized to fit within their content area and must be in-line.
 - Do not use text wrapping, instead use columns (Word) or a separate widget(website) to place images and text side by side.
- Image file sizes should be minimized while still providing a quality image.

Websites

The website uses the [Document Center](#) to store images.

Formatting & Grammar

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 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 bold instead.

Fonts

- Preferred font families for county documents are Calibri, Arial and Montserrat. When editing the website, use the default fonts.
- A minimum font size of 12 pt. is required, though a larger size, such as 13 pt., is suggested.
- There must be strong color contrast between the text and its background for readability.
- Underlining should only be used for hyperlinks.
- Avoid using all caps, especially within a block of text, for anything but acronyms. If you need to emphasize something, use bold instead. Using all caps can make the words more difficult to read.
- If copying from another source, make sure to paste all items in plain text or merge to the source. This will clear any formatting or text class information from the previous source that may be left on the text.
- Do not use strikethrough. Some devices, such as screen readers, are unable to determine that the text is crossed out.
 - For example: Use “Closed roads: Broadway St, Clark St.” instead of implying it is closed with strikethrough: “~~Broadway St, Clark St.~~”

Grammar & Tone

- Content should be grammatically correct and written in clear, concise sentences.
- Do not use run-on or fragment sentences.
- Be consistent with your sentence tense.
- The average U.S. citizen reads best at an 8th or 9th grade level, so it's important to keep your content simple. You can use the [Flesch-Kinkaid reader in Microsoft Word](#) to determine the current reading level of any piece of content.
- Avoid using multiple punctuation marks in a row. For example, use “wow!”

instead of "wow!!!!" or "what?" instead of "what??". Exclamation points should be used sparingly.

- Know your audience. Is the content meant to engage, inform, educate or simply direct the user to a specific resource? Most content is not meant to do everything. Make sure you keep your audience and the purpose of the content in mind.
- It is okay to write in a more conversational tone for a lot of our digital content, such as web pages or social media posts. However, slang and jargon should still be avoided.
- Avoid writing in the passive voice. The active voice is more engaging and direct.
 - For 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.

Numbers, Dates & Percentages

- Numbers: Use numbers as figures(not spelled out) so it's easy to find/scan them.
- For example: "Please submit 3 copies of the form."
- In tables, right-align numbers unless it makes it hard to read (see also: [Tables](#)).
- Percentages: Use percent symbol (%) instead of word "percent" for readability.
- Date Examples: "March 1, 2023", "Feb. 10", "The event is scheduled for June 1."

Addresses, Phone Numbers & Times

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.

Addresses within Text:

- Use an address block when an address is listed within page content.
- If you have a separate physical and mailing address, list the physical address in a separate block from the mailing address to enable users to easily highlight and search for directions. (See "Staff Directory" example)
- 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.
- 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.

Websites

The website uses the Staff Directory module to share contact information & business hours relating to our departments, divisions, programs and staff. Within the “Website Modules” section, see [Staff Directory](#) for more information.

Website Modules

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.

See [Web Editing Best Practices](#) for more information.

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.

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
- Linking to any applicable documents such as agendas and minutes on the board page

Document Center

Use the Document Center module to store documents on county websites.

- Only upload necessary documents.
- All documents should be named in a way that clearly states what it is, using as

few words as possible.

- If additional details would be helpful, include a document description.
- General organization should reflect department structure (see [Organization](#) within the “File Storage” section).
- When a document has been updated, locate the previous version and replace it. This will help avoid links from breaking and make it easier to locate current information.

Public Images

“Public Images” (formerly called “Image Repository”) is a section of the Document Center meant to store images such as site banners, background images and graphic link icons. Please be aware that any images published here can be accessed by anyone who has a link to them (even on HumNet, the employee website).

Remember to add alt text for all images. If alt text needs to change for a specific page, it can be overwritten there. But having good alt text with the source image will usually prevent duplicate work.

FAQs

- All FAQs should be housed within the FAQ module to best utilize the CivicPlus platform.
- 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 that all FAQs can be quickly and easily found.
- FAQs should be formatted in a way that makes the answer immediately clear but is not too abrupt (see example to the right).

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.

Form Center

The following types of forms work best in the Form Center:

- “Contact Us” forms, surveys or other simple requests.
- Forms consisting of mostly text fields (short and long answers) or multiple choice.
- Forms to be emailed to or accessed by a particular person or team to process.
- 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.

Do not use the Form Center to collect sensitive information(see [CivicPlus' Disclaimer](#)).

Sensitive information includes:

- Bank Account Information
- Birth Certificate Copy
- Business ID Numbers
- Driver's License Numbers
- Medical Information
- Passport Numbers
- Passwords
- Routing Numbers
- Social Security Numbers (even the last 4)
- Tax ID Numbers
- W2 or Other Tax Information

Info Advanced

The Info Advanced module is used to display the same content on multiple pages. It allows us to update content from a single location.

In the past this was often used to display our contact information and business hours, however that should now be done through the [Staff Directory](#) instead.

Menus & Navigation

The websites have two navigation menus: The main menu across the top of our pages, and the menu on the left side of subpages. The websites can also be navigated using the

site map (see [Site Map \(Public\)](#) and [Site Map \(HumNet\)](#)).

- Navigation menus should provide a good overview of relevant pages and services.
- Navigation menus should be listed in alphabetical order unless another order would be expected (e.g. putting an “About Us” page first).

Page Descriptions & Keywords

Page descriptions & keywords should be completed for every page. This helps with search results and can guide users to the correct information.

- Page descriptions should accurately describe the content on the page, including any major topics covered. These are displayed when pages come up in search or when using the Pages Widget.
- Keywords should include common words and phrases that people would search for to locate your page’s content. These keywords are never directly displayed but are used to improve search functionality.

Set page descriptions and keywords through Versions > Actions > Options > Description/Keywords.

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.

Parks & Facilities

This is also referred to as the “Facilities” module. It is best used to hold information about the following:

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

When adding or editing items to this module, keep these in mind:

- All facility amenities should be populated as “features”. 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.
- CivicPlus does not recommend use of the Facilities module to house business information. The Resource Directory is designed to display information about local businesses.

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 they 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 clear where this link is going to take a citizen?
- Link titles should be in title case.

Staff Directory

Website editors 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.

The “about 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 that can route their request.

This same format should be used on any additional pages where contact information would be helpful to have for the user.

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

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 since 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.
- CivicPlus has [guidance on finding free to use images](#).

ADA Compliance

Humboldt County is committed to provide and maintain accessible information for all residents and employees, and this includes digital content.

The Americans with Disabilities Act(ADA) includes [digital accessibility requirements](#) and references a technical standard we must meet through the [Web Content Accessibly Guidelines](#) (WCAG) Version 2.1, Level AA. The county's Digital Accessibility Policy also requires that "Individuals responsible for maintaining and updating the county's

website, digital services, internal and external communications and mobile applications, including social media platforms, shall have a working knowledge of accessibility requirements. To that end, identified staff, including all web editors, are required to annually participate in a minimum of two hours continuing education and training related to digital accessibility as approved by the county Webmaster. Related training requirements are listed on the county's internal [Annual Accessibility Training](#) page"

HumNet's [Digital Accessibility Guidance](#) page holds a collection of digital accessibility information and resources for county employees. That page and this guide have been created to assist county content creators to stay in compliance with the ADA and our Digital Accessibility Policy.

In the event that these supplemental resources conflict with the Board adopted Digital Accessibility Policy, the Digital Accessibility Policy shall govern.

Some additional tips & tricks that are specific to Word, PDFs, and our websites are below.

Word Documents

By using the guidance in this document, you will be on the right track for creating accessible Word documents.

Be sure to also use the built-in accessibility checker available in the "Review" tab > "Accessibility" section > "Check Accessibility".

Additionally, if creating a PDF from the Word document, it must be saved properly.

See [Document Accessibility Basics](#) for instructions.

PDFs

If your document was originally created in Word, start with the previous section since that is the easiest way to create an accessible PDF.

Otherwise, remediation is likely required to make the PDF accessible. See: [Create and verify PDF accessibility, Acrobat Pro](#).

Websites

The websites have a [built-in accessibility checker](#) within the editor widget, which should be utilized whenever changes are made.

We also use site scanning technology with our vendor Siteimprove to ensure compliance with the ADA. See HumNet's [Siteimprove Reports](#) page for more information.

Our website vendor, CivicPlus, has also identified [practical accessibility tips for local governments](#) as stated below:

1. **Ensure Content has Appropriate Headings and Titles:** Users may struggle to navigate your website if headers aren't used or if they're used decoratively.
2. **Use Text and Font to Benefit Users:** Color should not be the only thing used to differentiate information as it will not be readable for people with low vision or blindness. Also, avoid dense paragraphs of text for readability.
3. **Don't Use Tables for Page Layouts:** Tables are meant to serve a specific purpose: to showcase data. Using them to create page layouts can be confusing for residents who use assistive technology to interpret online content.
4. **Identify Visuals with Alternate Text:** If there is no text accompanying an image, a visually impaired person's screen reader cannot identify it.
5. **Use Color Contrast:** Some people may have trouble reading text that does not contrast with its background. All text should have a color contrast ratio of 4.5:1 so that all residents can view information online.
6. **Ensure Navigability:** People who use assistive technology must be able to navigate a website using a keyboard and keyboard equivalents. Keep information in a consistent location and bear in mind that screen readers move top to bottom to create an intuitive user experience.
7. **Avoid Using PDFs:** Image-based formats are not easily read by screen readers, making them difficult to access for people with visual impairments.
8. **Enhance Your Multimedia:** Don't forget to add audio descriptions to images and text captions for users with hearing impairments.
9. **Include "Skip Navigation" at the Top of Your Pages:** Screen readers dictate to people what a website says. By allowing them to skip the navigation menu, they're able to go directly to the content they need.

For more specific details on WCAG 2.1, please refer to the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1](#).



Humboldt County

Digital Style Guide Quick Reference Sheet

Visuals

- Avoid clipart
- Always use descriptive alt text.
 - 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, 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 and keep files small
- Break it up: Use headings, bullets and white space
- Strive for screen reader compliance
- 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