Cardinal *at* Work

This guide brought to you by University Human Resources, Stanford University
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Why Use a Style Guide?

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide principles and standards for creating and publishing content in a single voice and style for the new Cardinal at Work employee website at Stanford.

It's easy for that voice to become fragmented, adopting unique characteristics of whoever is authoring content. With multiple people authoring content, more than 300 expected webpages, and a large primary target audience of 16,000-plus faculty and staff, consistency and cohesiveness in voice and style can crumble quickly.

Written by HR Communications, this guide is intended to provide content authors and editors in University Human Resources (UHR) specific parameters, principles and standards to ensure the Cardinal at Work website voice and style are consistently upheld and preserved.

The Importance of a Unified Voice & Style

Writing with a unified voice and style is important for all forms of communication. It's especially important on the web because research indicates people scan web content.

- 1/2 second or less--time for a reader to form a first impression of your content
- 15 seconds or less--average time spent on our web page
- 20%--amount of our content that someone will actually read on a page
- 80%--people who will not scroll "below the fold"

AP Style

Other than the specific principles outlined in this house guide, follow the AP Stylebook for fundamental guidelines on spelling, language, punctuation and word usage.

The Stanford New Service Style Guide is also a resource for university exceptions to the AP Stylebook.

View Stanford News Service Style Guide

Voice & Style Guide: Overview

For quick reference, an at-a-glance version of the full Cardinal at Work Editorial Style Guide follows.

These style and voice principles aim to ensure that the Cardinal at Work website:

- Is a friendly, approachable website that connects with our employees
- Seems as if it's speaking to one person in one voice
- Creates a conversational interface with a personality

Learn more about why "content is king!"

Style & Voice Principles

Click deeper into the guide for side-by-side examples of good vs. bad content choices.

Style & Voice Principle	Description
Be friendly and conversational	Think about what you want to say and how we would say it to a person standing in front of you. Write in that same conversational style.
Be personal and direct	Use first person plural "we" or "us". Speak personally to employees in a single, informal voice with an approachable tone. Do not refer to our organization(s) in the third person. Use second person "you" and "your" to speak to employees directly. Speak personally and directly to individual employees in a conversational, casual and friendly tone. Do not refer to employees in the third person – "they", "them", or "their".
Avoid jargon and keep language simple	Avoid jargons, clichés, slang and formality. Use words that make sense to employees, not HR.
Use the active voice and action verbs	Engage employees with the active voice and avoid all forms of the passive verb "to be" – is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has been.
Engage employeess with clear calls to action & feedback opportunities	Accessibility standards require CTAs with context about where the "click" will take employees. (E.g. Learn how to X" or "Learn more about Y.") It is also acceptable to embed hyperlinks within text if text links are descriptive. Keep employees on our site and reading our best content by providing links to recommended or related topics.

	Also, use polls and surveys, provide email addresses and forms for submitting comments, and provide options to share content by email and social channels.
Follow the Employee Communications Manifesto	Remember: Stanford employees are intelligent, influential, knowledgeable, and experience information overload.

Content Structure & Length

Structure & Length Principle	Description
Structure content with HTML formatting options.	Use headlines, subheads, further subdivisions, and bulleted or numbered lists.
Chunk content for scanners and grazers. Each chunk should contain one idea, make sense on it's own, and be no more than about 100 words.	Layer content to provide easy access to content. Give employees a bite (headline & summary digest), snack (first couple paragraphs & subheads) and meal (the rest).
Use compelling page titles, headlines and subheads and make sure they indicate the content in each area	Keep titles short and catchy, and use words that will help employees find the content when searching
Keep content brief & snappy. Keep webpages to 500 words or less with one main idea per page.	Brevity rules on the web. The shorter our content, the more likely employees will read it. Eliminate words & sentences that don't contribute to the main focus.
Embrace line breaks and white space. Write short sentences with one idea per sentence and no more than three sentences per paragraph.	If a sentence is hard to read aloud, it's too long. Separate quotes into distinct paragraphs for better readability. Embrace one-sentence paragraphs for added emphasis.
Front load content. Put the most important content first with details later.	Use the inverted pyramid structure. Think journalism not academic journal. Use visibly bigger introductory sentences/digests for added attention of the main point.
Use large images and deep 2-3 sentence captions.	Visual elements are more effective than text. Add photos, videos, graphics, charts and tables liberally. Capitalize on images by including deep captions, which is some of the most read copy on webpages.

Be Friendly & Conversational

As a primary touch point, our website serves the same type of role as our customer support team does. It's an interactive service with a personality. An unpleasant experience online can be just as detrimental to our brand and reputation as a negative interpersonal experience.

To create a well mannered, courteous and friendly website that best serves our employees, we want the Cardinal at Work website to:

- Be a friendly, approachable website that connects with our employees
- Seem as if it's speaking to one person in one voice
- Create a conversational interface with a personality

As content writers and editors of the site, our responsibility is to think about what we want to say and how we would say it to a person standing in front of us. Then, we write in that same conversational style following these voice and style website principles.

Tone	Stronger	Weaker
Friendly	We're happy to help you find the solution you need for your maternity leave. Check out leave options	Employees have many options for developing a maternity leave plan. Review disability options for maternity leave
Conversational	We know that choosing medical plans can be challenging. If you're having a hard time, try using the Comparison Tool. Compare health plans	The Comparison Tool has been developed as a way to look at Health Plan options side by side. Health Plan Comparison Tool

Be Personal & Direct

Write with a Single-Voice Persona, Speak Personally and Directly to Our Audiences

The web is a place for informality. It's casual, conversational and it can be very personal.
To achieve this style, organizations must write with a single-voice persona and speak personally to target audiences. Adopting this approach allows us to write with a point of view, establish a unified identity and set a tone of approachability. The end goal is better connecting with our target audiences.

While our website represents an organization of many different groups and people, we are diligent in ensuring it not sound like a distant organization. To that end, we:

- Limit the frequency with which we refer to ourselves and our organization in the third person.
- Use first person plural "we" or "our" instead of third person.
- Avoid referring to faculty and staff in the third person – "they", "them" or "their".
- Write as if we're speaking to faculty and staff, using second person "you" and "your" liberally.

Principle	Stronger	Weaker
Refer to ourselves in the first person	At Stanford, we offer you a place to enrich all aspects of your life.	Stanford offers employees a place to enrich all aspects of their lives.
Refer to our audience in the second person	Your financial information is safe with us.	Employee financial information is safe with us.
Create calls to action using second person	Find a course for you	Explore courses for Stanford staff and faculty

Pitfall Alert

Do not mix and match first and second pronouns.

It's acceptable and encouraged to speak directly to our audiences with second person pronouns (you, your or yours). But it's unacceptable (yet easy to do) to mix and match first and second person pronouns.

Principle	Stronger	Weaker
Do not mix and match first and second person pronouns	Manage your account from anywhere Manage your account	Manage your account from anywhere Manage my account

Avoid Jargon & Keep Language Simple

We always know the details behind our content better than anyone else, which means we need to be careful to not confuse them with jargon or overly complex language.

- Avoid jargon, clichés, slang and acronyms unless commonly known
- Avoid referring to employee programs and services by our internal UHR organizational structure (e.g. department names such as Operations & Systems)
- Keep our language simple, conversational and informal
- Know our target audiences and use words that make sense to them, not to our internal organization

Principle	Stronger	Weaker
Avoid jargon, clichés, slang and acronyms	If you're a full time staff or faculty member, tuition assistance is available to you.	STRP is available to FTEs.
Keep language simple	Interested in learning outside the classroom? Learn on your own time using the resources below organized by topic.	In support of your efforts to develop yourself, or a staff member who reports to you if you are supervisor or manager, the list below includes Suggested Readings and websites organized by skill set.
Use words that make sense to your audience	Stanford offers Long Term Care insurance at lower cost to you through an outside vendor.	Stanford offers LTC insurance at group rates through CNA.

Use the Active Voice & Action Words

The active voice will engage employees and keep their attention longer.

As much as possible, avoid all forms of the “to be” verb: is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has been. Passive verbs clutter sentences by complicating grammatical structures. Often you can find a better verb to use.

Tone	Stronger	Weaker
Active vs. Passive	We unveiled a new program …	The program was unveiled by us …
The "To Be" verb	You can connect with us at any time. CONTACT US	You are able to connect with us at any time. CONTACT US

Engage Employees with Clear Calls to Action & Feedback Opportunities

Use clear & direct calls to action

Our audience like to be guided through your website. Help people find their way using great Calls to Action.

Principle	Stronger	Weaker
Use verbs to guide employees through the site	View Benefits Options	All Benefits Options
Accessibility standards require context with calls to action to provide employees information about where the “click” will take them	Learn how to Apply Read more about Manager's Academy Download Application	Learn more Read more Download now
A more passive, but also acceptable call to action is to hyperlink relevant words with text	The Stanford website is the central source of university information.	The Stanford website is the central source of university information. Click here to view the website.

Keep employees on our site with recommendations for related content

Provide internal links to our own related content.

It’s also acceptable to provide our audience ways to navigate to outside content by linking to external experts, programs, and resources. This is a way to demonstrate our credibility as a source of information.

Solicit feedback from our audiences

The web is interactive. It’s not just a push communication vehicle; it’s also a channel that allows us to pull feedback from our audiences.

Invite Feedback

- Use polls & surveys

Encourage Commenting

- Sending an email
- Submitting a form
- Or commenting publicly on our content (via social media)

Encourage Sharing
- Social channels
- Email

Structure Content for Scanners & Grazers

Effective web writing starts with how we organize, present and optimize content for the web, using formatting options provided in our web editing tool (WYSIWYG).

Text that is structured allows our audienceto easily navigate through your content, scan for key information, and find consistent methods of organization throughout your site – predictable hierarchies of content will help employees understand content and depend on it – and that will motivate them to come back for more.

Structured content also lends itself to a much better user experience on the mobile devices, such as smart phones and tablets. We know an increasing number of employees are reading content on mobile devices and not on desktop computers.

Elements of well-structured content

- Large, short headlines (your page title)
- Subheads to break the page into sections (heading 2 elements)
- Further subdivisions of content within sub-sections (heading 3 elements)
- Use of bulleted or numbered lists

Remember: All of these elements should be executed using the formatting options in the WYSIWYG.

How to create well structured content

Chunk Content for Scanners & Grazers

Create information hierarchies by layering content into chunks to provide easy access to our content. This strategy is called giving your audience a bite, snack, and meal.
- Bite = the headline, summary digest and link
- Snack = the key message (first paragraph or two) and subheads
- Meal = more details (the rest of the story)

It’s an effective way of growing our audience’s appetite with clear landmarks that they can easily digest, helping them move on to the next course.

Each chunk should:

- Contain one idea
- Make sense on its own
- Be no more than ~100 words

Format Content with Bulleted & Numbered Lists

Content that can be presented in a list helps:

- Employees scan easier
- Consume information faster
- Understand key points more clearly

Examine your content for these three things and convert where appropriate to lists:

1. A description of characteristics or attributes
2. Instructions, directions, processes or procedures
3. Any content that uses serial commas, which could be replaced by a list

Write Compelling & Brief Content with the Most Important Points First

Use compelling page titles, headlines and subheads.

- Attract our audience using catchy, but clear page titles
- Keep titles short and use words that will help our audience find the content when searching
- Keep our audience moving through your content with just as engaging subheads
- Make sure page titles, headlines and subheads indicate the content in each area
- Consider using numbers for page titles: “Five Reasons to …” and “Ten Steps to …”
- For articles, consider pull quotes as subheads: ‘An incredible experience’

Keep content brief & snappy. Brevity rules on the web.

One study finds that reading from computer screens is 25% slower than reading from print. That coupled with the fact that people scan on the web, rather than read, make it even more important to catch our employees’ attention with fewer words, tighter and pithier language.

- Eliminate words and sentences that don’t contribute to the main goal and focus
- Keep webpages to 500 words or less with one main idea per page.
- A webpage should be no more than half the length of a printed piece. Keep this in mind if you are translating from one medium (like print) to the web.

Embrace line breaks. Keep sentences & paragraphs short.

There are different paragraph styles in print vs. the web. Our audienceemp will thank us for generous white space on our pages.

- Write short sentences

- Avoid run-on sentences with numerous clauses
- One idea per sentence, no more than three sentences per paragraph
- If a sentence is hard to read aloud in one breath, it's too long
- Separate quotes into their own paragraphs for easier readability
- One sentence paragraphs are completely acceptable
- White space is your friend on the web

Front load content.

- Put the most important content and key points first, and details later
- Use the inverted pyramid structure – think newspaper article, not academic journal
- Use visibly bigger introductory sentences or summaries for improved attention (formatting option in the WYSIWYG)

Use Large Images & Deep Captions

Don’t just tell, show. Visual elements are more effective than text at conveying information and delivering clear messages. This is especially important in online communications.

- Add relevant photos, videos, graphics, charts, and tables whenever possible.
- Use large images. The bigger the better is the trend on the web today.
- Capitalize on images by including deep captions – two or three sentences in length. This is especially relevant in news articles, where imagery is tightly linked to the content. Captions are consistently some of the most read copy on a webpage.

Employee Communications Manifesto

Ensure all writing adheres to the HR Communications' Employee Communications Manifesto, created in the Fall 2014.

Employee Communications Manifesto

Stanford employees are intelligent, influential, knowledgeable. They may also be overloaded with a seemingly endless flow of information.

Our employee communication strategy needs to be exceptionally focused on employees, and evolve in the following ways.

Because our employees are intelligent:

- We will be transparent
- We will be honest
- We will do our research and be prepared
- We will anticipate their questions
- When we don't know or can't say, we will explain why
- We will consistently answer "what's in it for employees" and "why does it matter to them?"

Because our employees are influential:

- We will be deliberate
- We will be relevant
- We will explain where we are headed
- We will sweat the small stuff and get the details right
- We will respond quickly and thoughtfully to feedback

Because our employees are knowledgeable:

- We will respect them
- We will ask regularly for input, listen, acknowledge, and act on it
- We will spend more time face to face to learn from them
- We will regularly evaluate their needs & preferences
- We will adjust our style and strategies with evolving technologies
- We will execute with best practices
- We will make every effort to support sustainable practices

Because our employees experience information overload:

- We will be brief and concise
- We will identify impacted/target audiences early
- We will have clear calls to action and key messages
- We will avoid HR jargon and acronyms
- We will explain what's expected of them, and help them navigate the path
- We will be creative and engaging
- We will keep our tone fresh to break through the noise

- We will create energy by trying new things
- We won’t be distracted by ulterior motives
- We will connect the dots and eliminate guesswork
- We will make sure our initiatives link to each other and the organization’s overall mission, values and goals