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Guide Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide contributors of feinberg.northwestern.edu with tools and tips to build strong, user-friendly content. Using information from this guide, site owners can improve the structure of their content, align the presentation of their content with the broader Feinberg site, and focus their information for greatest impact to web readers.

The document also includes guidelines for content style and search engine optimization.

Content Structure

What We Know About Web Users
Eyetracking studies have uncovered consistent reading patterns for users of Web content. We review the various types of patterns below, but what they all teach us is that users don’t read so much as scan.

The F-shaped pattern has three components:
- First, a horizontal movement, usually across the upper part of the page
- A second horizontal movement a bit further down the page that covers a shorter area than the first
- A final vertical movement down the remainder of the page

When the ever-important headings and subheadings are used, a reader will use the layer cake pattern, moving down the page and focusing on the headings for information they need, mostly skipping over the copy between headings. They might also scan the first words of each paragraph, so put important words in that first line.

Spotted pattern scanning occurs often when headings or bullets are not available, and readers look to make sense of the page’s purpose by looking for main ideas via bolded text or descriptive links. Too much differentiated text within a

Commitment pattern readers are highly motivated and read much of the section or page. They are interested in the topic and find the information valuable.

Using this Knowledge
No matter the layout of your page, look to simplify the language on your site. You might only get a few seconds of the reader’s time, so get to the point with less
words. This approach expresses that you value your reader’s time and that you want to be a useful source of information.

**Note on Page Length**
While being succinct is important, there is correct maximum word count for a page. The nature of some content and the goals of its intended audience may allow for a lengthier page (e.g., a prospective resident probably want a great deal of information on a residency program, and they will stay engaged on the longer page), so long as the most important information is prioritized and the formatting is easy to scan with descriptive subheads and bullets.

**Content Components**

**Headings and Subheadings**
Headings and subheadings let the reader know at a glance what the content immediately following will cover and are visually unique (using the H2 and H3 style in Cascade) to paragraph text.

Make them valuable with keywords and phrases that get to the essence of the subsequent content. Here is an example of a weak heading being strengthened.

**Weak:** How do I know if I have a gait disorder? (long, hard to scan)
**Strong:** Causes of Gait Disorders (short, to the point)

Aim for a **limit of five words** in headings and subheadings. This will require you to strip the idea down to the most essential elements of the information that follows.

**Bulleted/Numbered Lists**
Bulleted and numbered lists allow a writer to condense a good deal of related information into a small amount of page real estate.

**Causes of Gait Disorders**
- **Neurological:** nervous system and brain impairment
- **Orthopedic:** muscular and skeletal system impairment
- **Physiologic:** post-infection problems
- **Nutritional:** lacking essential nutrients and vitamins in diet

Bolding key words catches the eye as users scan the content, but all such text differentiators sparingly. Too much bold text on a page, or using a heading style for a whole sentence or paragraph, will take away from the value of the differentiation in style and can have a negative effect on search.

**Links**
Using links to additional information related to your content provides the user with the information that they need without having it all on one page.
Linked content should be *descriptive* (educating the reader about the information they are pursuing) and *active* (using words like read, explore, learn, find).

**Weak:** For more information about the event, [click here](#). (Include information about the link’s destination. *Click* is a verb, but isn’t related to the content on the destination page.)

**Strong:** Learn more about the 2015 [Harvest Day Event](#).

**Stronger:** View photos from the 2015 [Harvest Day Event on Flickr](#).

**Search Engine Optimization**

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) refers to the efforts you take to make your website to get a higher ranking in search engine (e.g., Google, Bing, and Yahoo) results. As search engines become smarter in their indexing of web content (e.g., more like a human reader), it is even more important that you focus content development efforts according to these best practices. Use of keywords, subheadings, and meaningful links has a positive impact on SEO.

For more detailed information on developing content for SEO, review Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine’s Search Engine Optimization Guide via the [Web Content Guidelines](#) page on the [Office of Communications site](#).

**Content Development**

Now that you know a little more about successful web content structure, you can apply it to your content. Before you start writing (or if you are assessing your existing content), however, spend some time defining your site goals and successful content using the questions below.

**Audience**

You can have multiple audiences, but you should be able to prioritize which are most important. When developing content, ask yourself if this is information that your audience needs to know (or information you need the audience to have).

**Important Note – Patient Information**

The Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine website is primarily focused on education and research. The student, faculty, and researcher audiences should be of primary importance for your Feinberg site. However, addressing the patient and providing information and links to Feinberg-affiliated hospitals is important for those patient users who find themselves on your site through a web search. See a sample Patient Care page in Appendix A.

**Messages – What are you saying?**

*Messages* are bites of information that you want the user to know.

- A **Primary Message** is the single most important point about your organization that every audience must know.
• **Secondary Messages** are key points that support and contextualize the primary message and may be audience specific.

• **Message hierarchy** is comprised of the primary and secondary messages, and any supporting details related to them.

**Example**
You are department chair creating content for your public-facing website where prospective interns are your primary audience. Your message hierarchy might be as follows.

**Primary Message**
Our department offers students access to experienced faculty physicians, exceptional research facilities, and unique patient care educational experiences.

**Secondary Messages**
• Our faculty members have ties to national and international research communities.
• Our faculty members have extensive experience in the academic medical centers environment.
• Our diverse and high-volume patient care facilities offer students real-world experience that is unique to any other academic medical center in the country.
• Research facilities have cutting-edge technology.

**Please note:** these primary and secondary messages do not necessarily become content that you will see on your finished site, but they guide the subject matter and voice of the content that you generate.

When you clarify and develop your message hierarchy, a clear understanding of **content goals** emerges. When goals are in place, you can better focus writing efforts and organize your site.

**Qualitative Assessment of Content**
Your personal content goals and best practice quality standards can help you develop and improve content to make it meaningful to your users. When writing or editing your content, ask these important questions.

• **Is the content accurate?**
  Information should be complete and up to date. You can have a beautiful, easy-to-navigate site, but if the information is incorrect, the user experience is ruined.

• **What is the content’s purpose?**
  Does it serve one or more of the following purposes:
  o **Persuade:** get the user to make a decision in your favor (e.g., attend an event or apply for a program)
- **Inform**: give information on a specific topic (e.g., recent discoveries in pediatric rheumatology research)
- **Validate**: provide facts (e.g., dates, definitions)
- **Instruct**: teach the user how to perform a task (e.g., submit a form)
- **Entertain**: help a user pass time

**Does this content support the messaging goals that I have for the site?**
Look back at what you want your audience to know; if this information doesn’t fit those goals, it probably doesn’t need to be there.

**Is this information that my audience needs?**
Avoid including “nice to have” content that adds to the volume of information that users have to navigate to get the information they need.

**Does it have the right voice and tone?**

*Voice*: Defined and constant viewpoint; unique to the organization or individual. Feinberg’s voice is defined as:

- Sophisticated
- Distinguished
- Progressive
- Smart
- Research-oriented
- Professional
- Bold
- Clean
- Refined

*Tone*: Attitude about the topic; can vary by subject matter or audience. Do the voice and tone of the content align with other communications you have with your audience?

**Who owns it?**
Do you control the content? Might it change without you knowing? This can impact your user's experience.

**What is its priority?**
Is the content required for legal purposes? Is it revenue/participation generating? Which audiences will it reach (how big is the audience)? Will the audience find it interesting (now and in the future)? Is it unique to this site?
Using Cascade

Cascade is the content management system through which the Feinberg site is built. When entering content in Cascade to be promoted to feinberg.northwestern.edu, it is important to follow style guidelines for optimum usability and site cohesion – having your site “match” the Feinberg environment of which it is part. Use these definitions to ensure that you use formatting styles correctly.

**Heading 1**
This style is used as the page-level heading. Cascade applies this style to the content in the “Title” section of the page.
**Note:** This style should not be used in the main body or right column.

**Heading 2**
This style is used as the first subheading for the main body content of the page.
**Note:** This style should not be used in the right column.

**Heading 3**
This style can be used for a second subheading in main body content or as a heading in the right column.
**Note:** This style should only be used as a heading; it should not be used *instead of* bold.

**arrowPurple**
This style is the alternative bullet; the purple arrow is preferred when there is only a small amount of copy in your bullets (under 10 words per bullet) or you want to condense the amount of screen real estate used.
Sources

- *Content Strategy for the Web*, Halvorson/Rach
- Northwestern University A to Z Style Guide
- *How People Read on the Web: The Eyetracking Evidence*, Nielsen Norman Group
- Cascade User Manual for Site Owners