Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
Web Content Style Guide

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Contents
Guide Purpose ........................................................................................................................................... 3
Content Structure ...................................................................................................................................... 3
  What We Know About Web Users ........................................................................................................ 3
  Using this Knowledge .......................................................................................................................... 3
  Note on Page Length ........................................................................................................................ 4
Content Components .......................................................................................................................... 4
  Headings and Subheadings .................................................................................................................. 4
  Bulleted/Numbered Lists .................................................................................................................... 4
  Links ..................................................................................................................................................... 4
Content Development .......................................................................................................................... 5
  Audience – Who are you trying to reach? ............................................................................................ 5
    Important Note .................................................................................................................................. 5
  Messages – What are you saying? ......................................................................................................... 5
    Example ............................................................................................................................................ 6
  Qualitative Assessment of Content .................................................................................................... 6
Style Guidelines ....................................................................................................................................... 8
Using Cascade .......................................................................................................................................... 9
Sources .................................................................................................................................................. 10
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 a consistent reading pattern for users of Web content. This 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

For more information about this approach, go to Jakob Neilsen’s article. This pattern reveals a lot about how users approach web content:

- Users don’t read so much as scan: some users will read word for word, but exhaustive reading is rare; break content into easily digestible “chunks”
- The first two paragraphs must state the most important information: users read more of the first paragraph than the second
- Start subheads, paragraphs and bullet points with key phrases and information-carrying words: users are more likely to scan those initial phrases to find the information he or she desires

Using this Knowledge
When building content, try to follow these tips for maximum user impact.

- Put the most important information in the first two paragraphs
- Break up content with headings, subheadings and bulleted lists with key words and phrases
- If content goes over 250 words, consider breaking out into subpage
Note on Page Length
These rules are a starting point. 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). That said, clear organization, assisted by scan-friendly subheads and bullets, and a prioritization of most important information should still be used on longer pages.

Content Components

Headings and Subheadings
Headings and subheadings let the reader know at a glance what the content immediately following will cover. This is especially valuable in a Web environment when the users are scanning the page for the information they want.

Make your headings impactful by using 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 it scans the content and lets the user know more about the information immediately following.

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, also known as anchor text, 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 2012 Harvest Day Event.
Strong: View photos from the 2012 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 – Who are you trying to reach?
You can have multiple audiences, but you should be able to prioritize. 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
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. That said, 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 residents 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:
  - **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:
  o Sophisticated
  o Distinguished
  o Progressive
  o Smart
  o Research-oriented
  o Professional
  o Bold
  o Clean
  o 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?
Style Guidelines

Content for feinberg.northwestern.edu should follow the Northwestern University A to Z Style Guide and the Chicago Manual of Style. Guidelines specific to Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine are as follows.

- **Departments/Divisions/Institutes/Programs:** On first reference, include a hyperlink to all department, division, institute, and program web pages.

- **Feinberg Faculty:** On first reference, include the degree(s) of all faculty members after their name (MD, PhD, DO, etc.). Also, include a hyperlink to the faculty member’s profile page on first reference.

- **Northwestern Medicine:** Include the registered trademark symbol ® on first reference.

- **Says v. said:** Use “said” for all news articles, such as those for the website and My Northwestern Medicine. Use “says” for magazine feature articles, such as those for the FSM Researcher and Ward Rounds.

- **School Name:** Use Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine on first reference, and Feinberg or the medical school on second reference. Never use Feinberg School of Medicine or FSM.

- **Degrees:** Use the NU style guidelines (http://www.northwestern.edu/univ-relations/publications/resources/styleguide.html#D); for proper program and degree names, see the Education>Prospective Student page.

- **And v. &:** Default to and in titles, subheadings, and running text, unless formal naming or trademarked names dictates use of &. Use & in navigation of when space limitations require.
**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](http://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
- Cascade User Manual for Site Owners