

HSA Content Style Guide (7/9/2018)

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1. Introduction

1.1 How to use this guide

This guide outlines HSA's internal content style for all information products across all media -- print, online, and otherwise.

Use it when you have a question about how to structure a paragraph, which writing tone you should use, or whether or not to use a contraction -- plus many other topics to help make sure our content is consistent and clear across our entire Agency.

1.2 Acknowledgements

This guide is based largely on the [18F Content Guide](#) and also draws on material adapted from the [GOV.UK Content Design Guide](#) and the [WHO Style Guide, Second Edition](#). We would like to thank each of these organizations for providing excellent precedents and making our work that much easier.

2. Our approach

2.1 Content principles

Start with user needs

- Write in a way that suits the situation. Ask yourself: Who is going to read this? What do they need to know? How might they be feeling?
- Help people find the information they need quickly and easily. Guide them through the process.

Do the hard work to make it simple

- Use plain language and simple sentences.
- Choose clarity over cleverness.

Write for everyone

- Respect the complexity of our users' experiences.
- Be willing to be surprised about who's reading your work.

Build trust

- Speak without pretense.
- Use positive language and concrete examples.

Start small and iterate

- Make sure your content makes sense to your users. Don't be afraid to scrap what's there and start over.
- Write a draft, test it out, gather feedback, and keep refining.

2.2 Speak to Your Audiences

The best way to communicate simply and honestly is by using common words and working with natural reading behavior.

Address the user

- Address the user in the second-person whenever possible.
 - Ex: "You can email us at hsawebfeedback@sfgov.org."
- For multiple users, such as patients and caregivers, address the primary user as *you* and refer to secondary users by their roles or titles.
 - Ex: You can sign up online for IHSS. Caregivers can register in person at our 2 Gough location.

2.3 Be concise

Content should always be to-the-point, richly informative, and concise.

- Use contractions (such as *can't* and *won't*).
- Avoid caveats. Ex: *You can* rather than *You may be able to*
- Use [Google Trends](#) to check for common search terms
- Use short sentences (25 words max.) If a sentence has **fewer than 14 words**, readers will understand 90 percent of content.
- Check sentences with more than 25 words to see if you can split them for clarity.

2.4 Use plain language

When we use words that most people understand, information becomes more accessible and inclusive.

- Write in plain language.
- Avoid jargon.
- Avoid figurative language, words, or expressions that suggest meaning different than their literal interpretation:
 - *Driving to the finish line.* (You can only drive vehicles, not schemes or people).
 - *We're going forward with this plan.* (Going forward refers to active motion).
 - *It's a one-stop shop.* (We're the government, not a big box store).
- Be literal. Clearly explain what you want to say.
- Write conversationally as if you were addressing your audience one-on-one.
- Default to easy, short words. Ex: *buy* instead of *purchase*, *help* instead of *assist*

See the [words to avoid](#) section in Appendix 2 for more detailed information.

Legal and technical terms

- Present complicated information clearly.
- If you need to include legal terms or technical language, include a short, plain-language summary or otherwise define your terms up front.

Additional resources

- [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)
- [Avoiding legal, foreign, and technical jargon](#)
- King County: [Shorter, simpler words](#)

2.5 Structuring and writing content

These tips are applicable to any format -- print, digital, or otherwise -- but are particularly helpful for the web.

Put the most important information first

- Put the most important information in the first two paragraphs. That's the section users are most likely to read.

Break up text

- Use subheads and bullet points to break up large chunks of text.
- Put information-carrying words at the beginning of the phrase and use the active voice. Ex: Instead of: *The regulation of campaign finances law was explained by the lawyer*, use: *The lawyer explained campaign finance law regulation*
- Use tables to help visualize data-intensive content.

Meet the user need

- Only publish what is necessary. Ask yourself, "what does the user need to know?"

Consider a typical reader's information-seeking journey

1. I have a question
2. I can easily find the page with an answer to my question
3. I understand the information
4. I have my answer
5. I trust the information
6. I know what to do next/my fears are allayed/I don't need anything else

Don't use FAQs

- We [strongly discourage writing FAQs](#), or Frequently Asked Questions.
- FAQs are hard to read and find answers to specific questions
- They duplicate other content on your site
- They are usually not questions asked by the public

- They mean that content is not found, as expected, in context
- If you're thinking about posting FAQs, review the related content on your site and look for ways to improve it.
 - Is it organized in a logical way?
 - Can you group similar topics together?
 - Is it easy to find?
 - Is it clear and up-to-date?
- If people are asking similar questions, the existing content isn't meeting their needs. Perhaps you need to rewrite it or combine several pieces of content.

2.6 Avoid duplication

If something is written once and linked to relevant information, people are more likely to trust the content. Before you publish something, check that this information has not already been covered elsewhere.

- Search for content using a popular search engine like Google or Bing, as well as using the search bar on sfhsa.org. If content is easy to find, duplicating it can lead to confusing search results.
- Often, HSA staff will write about a government service, tool, or program. When looking for material already published about this topic, consider the department or agency-written assets that address the topic you're writing about.
- If you found what you were looking for, rather than starting from scratch you can edit and adapt the existing material so that it meets the standards and practices of this Guide.

3. Voice and tone

The difference between voice and tone

Our voice is our unique personality. It can be helpful to think of voice as analogous to a person's voice. Just as you can identify your best friend in a crowd as soon as you hear her distinctive laugh, you can use an author's or organization's voice to identify a piece of writing even if you haven't seen the byline. A well-crafted voice communicates personality and values — it's a distilled representation of an author or organization.

Tone is more like attitude — the emotional context of a piece. It can be helpful to think of authorial tone as analogous to a person's tone of voice. Just as a person would use a somber, sympathetic tone of voice to console a friend about the loss of a pet, an author writing a story about a natural disaster would most likely use a somber, serious tone. Conversely, an author writing a blog post about the launch of a new product might use an enthusiastic, upbeat tone.

3.1 Our voice

At HSA, we consider our voice to be:

- Welcoming
- Helpful
- Accessible
- Actionable

We use straightforward speech whenever we can. We present all of our programs with a unified, approachable voice that drives action.

Example

We help individuals, families, and communities access services and public benefits that make a difference in their lives.

In San Francisco, CalFresh benefits are distributed via the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) debit cards, also known as the Golden State Advantage card. The EBT card is used like any other debit card with a four-digit PIN, and it offers you privacy when making purchases. To find out where you can use your EBT card, read below.

3.2 Our tones

Choosing a tone

- Your voice is a constant, but your tone is a variable.
- Different types of writing correspond to audiences in highly different emotional states. Try reframing the situation: How would you talk to a friend who's in the same situation as your target user?

For all HSA content, we use one of three main tones:

1. Conversational + Informative
2. Formal + Resourceful
3. Influential + Forward Thinking

The table below shows some circumstances and examples where each of these tones might be used:

Audience	Audience Goal	Example
Tone 1: Conversational + Informative		
Existing HSA client	Looking for details about CalFresh benefits	CalFresh EBT cards can be used to purchase food at most San Francisco grocery stores and farmers' markets. Check out ebtnearme.org to search for locations that accept the CalFresh EBT card.

Potential HSA partner	Interested in learning how to become an HSA vendor	We rely on strong partnerships with hundreds of community organizations to achieve our mission. Whether we already have a relationship or not, you can learn more below about how to work with us and respond to any upcoming opportunities we have.
Tone 2: Formal + Resourceful		
Interested member of the public	Seeking information on HSA's Commissions	The Human Services Commission consists of five members appointed by the Mayor for overlapping four-year terms. The Commission members formulate, evaluate, and approve goals, objectives, and plans. The Commission also sets policies consistent with the overall objectives of the City.
Concerned member of the public	Looking for details on FCS child abuse processes	Once information about suspected abuse is gathered via the hotline above, FCS uses assessment tools to determine a response to the report. If further investigation is warranted, FCS responds and conducts a comprehensive safety and risk assessment, and intervenes to protect the safety of children.
Tone 3: Influential + Forward-Thinking		
Member of the media	Looking for information on HSA's scale and impact	Every day, we help thousands of San Franciscans find and retain jobs, remain safe from abuse, build healthy families, stay supported late in life, and much more. Offering over 60 services provided by more than 2,200 employees and hundreds of dedicated community partners, we are committed to the health, safety, and success of all San Franciscans.
Academic researcher	Looking for specific data about an HSA program	We are thought leaders in human services, services for older adults, and early care and education. We produce research, analysis, and reports to inform our programs, our partners, and the people we serve. These include needs assessments, trend reports, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), manuals, and more.

4. Writing for Human Services

4.1 HSA's Services

Human services work is about providing resources to meet human needs for all. This includes talking about and working with issues that are often sensitive, personal aspects of people's lives, like food, health, and safety.

Writing for and about human services work is an emerging and evolving field. Below are a few resources that provide guidance on how to write about this work with clarity and compassion.

[Building a New Narrative on Human Services: A Communications Toolkit](#)

[Gaining Momentum: Aging Frameworks Communications Toolkit](#)

[Framing Strategies to Advance Ageism as Policy Issues](#)

[Framing Child and Youth Development](#)

4.2 Conscious style

HSA is committed to working towards equality between all people. HSA should address all people equally and fairly; it should not discriminate against, stereotype, or demean people on the basis of their age, physical or intellectual impairments, ethnicity, sex, or sexual orientation.

Age, disability status, racial, or cultural background, sex, and sexual orientation are characteristics, not identities. Refer to them only when directly relevant to the subject, preferably by using adjectives rather than nouns. HSA's work is about people, so HSA writers should use the word "people" as often as possible.

Nationality

- Avoid using *citizen* as a generic term for people who live in the United States.
- Choose from any of the following words:
 - People
 - The public
 - Users
- Use *citizens* for information related to U.S. citizenship.
- Be careful with *Americans* or *the American public*. These terms are ambiguous and often used as synonyms for *citizens*. In most cases, *the public* is equally clear and more inclusive. That said, referring to *Americans* or *the American people* can be useful if you want to inspire readers to take a more patriotic tone.

Gender

- Use non-sexist language – sometimes called sex-neutral, inclusive, or gender-neutral language – which treats women and men equally.

- If the name and/or sex of a correspondent is unknown, do not assume that the person is male. Include both sexes in the salutation, or use a gender-neutral term. Ex: *Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Manager*
- When listing names, use alphabetical order by last name, except where order by seniority or some other characteristic is required.
- Avoid patronizing or demeaning terms or expressions.
- When referring to a position, quality, or action that might apply to either sex, use a non-sexist term. Ex: *Supervisor*, not *foreman*; *fire-fighter*, not *fireman*
- Make sure text is gender-neutral wherever possible. Use *they*, *them*, and *their*.

Disability

- Avoid depersonalizing people with disabilities. Collective terms such as “the disabled,” “the handicapped,” “the blind and the deaf,” equate people with their disabilities.
- Instead, use “people with physical disabilities” or “people with epilepsy.”
- Do not call a person with an illness or disability a victim or sufferer. People involved in instances of poisoning or natural disasters, however, can be called victims.
- Avoid terms that define disability as a limitation. A person in a wheelchair uses a wheelchair or is a wheelchair user, not confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair-bound.

Ethnicity

- Refer to the racial or cultural background of a person or group only when the subject demands it. Racial and cultural stereotypes are offensive.
- Acknowledge the diversity within racial and ethnic groups. For example, some authors lump the various Asian ethnicities together under the single term “Asian,” despite their many differences.

Sexual Orientation

- Refer to the sexual orientation of a person or group only when the subject demands it. Be careful not to make assumptions about people’s personal circumstances. WHO uses the following terms: *men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women*
- Use adjectives such as “bisexual,” “gay,” “homosexual,” and “lesbian” only for people who use these terms to identify themselves.
- For transgender people, use pronouns describing them according to their gender identity, not their sex at birth.
- Use “partner” (so as to not discriminate between married, unmarried or same-sex partners), rather than “husband,” “wife,” “spouse,” and “girlfriend” or “boyfriend.”

Age

- Use *older person, older adult, or senior* rather than *elderly*.
- Avoid stereotyping older people as frail, incapable of independence, a burden on society or no longer active or productive.
- Avoid stereotyping young people as inexperienced, rebellious, immature or always vibrant.

- Except for infants and children, for whom age is a defining characteristic, use adjectives, rather than nouns, when referring to age groups.
- Avoid words such as geriatrics, the elderly, youth.

4.3 Language and translation

Language policy

HSA is committed to ensuring equal access to City services for all San Franciscans, including those with limited proficiency in English. Across all channels of service delivery and communications, we adhere to best practices and compliance with the [San Francisco Language Access Ordinance](#).

Languages on the web

The website offers full functionality in English. For five other languages -- [Chinese](#), [Spanish](#), [Vietnamese](#), [Russian](#), and [Filipino](#) -- the site offers human-translated summary pages of key information, including details about our main services.

While this means that the full website is not available in these languages for the time being, it prevents inaccuracies that could arise from automated translation services that could provide our users with critical mistakes in information. We will revisit this policy and aim to improve our language offerings over time.

5. Our style

5.1 Abbreviations and acronyms

- Avoid acronyms whenever possible.
- If an acronym is necessary, make sure it is defined the first time it is used by spelling the full term or name followed by the acronym in parentheses.
 - Ex: *The General Services Administration (GSA)*

5.2 Active voice

- Use the active voice because it supports brevity and makes written content more engaging. The active voice helps the reader identify the subject of the sentence.
- Avoid the passive voice. Ex: *The request form must be submitted to the approving official.* Instead, use the active voice. Ex: *Please submit the request form to the approving official.*
- When in doubt, cut directly to the verb and give the reader clear directions.

5.3 Contractions

- Use contractions in your writing as it creates a more personalized connection with our users.

5.4 Capitalization

- Capitalize proper nouns, including names of individuals, places, and agencies.
- Don't capitalize common-usage business terminology, such as *agile*, unless it is the first word of a sentence.
- Don't capitalize *federal* or *government*.
- When you're deciding whether to capitalize noun phrases, keep in mind that in English, title case is often a marker of formality. Use this rule judiciously.
- It makes sense to capitalize the phrase "Form 1040, U.S. Individual Income Tax Return" because you want users to know the exact, official title of that specific form.
- See additional capitalization rules in the [Specific words and phrases](#) section.

Personal titles

- Don't capitalize personal titles unless they precede a name. Ex: *Director Lopez got approval.*
- Keep titles gender neutral. Ex: We prefer *firefighter* instead of *fireman*
- See also: information about [optimizing headings](#).

5.5 Numbers and percentages

Numbers

- Spell out numbers *one* through *nine*, and use numerals for **numbers 10 and greater**. Spell out *first* to *ninth*, and capture *10th* or greater with numerals.

- Express very large numbers as a combination of a numeral and a word. Ex: *1.6 million people*. And cents and large amounts of money similarly. Ex.: *5 cents* or *\$2.7 million*.
- For amounts of dollars less than \$1 million, we use the dollar sign: *\$17*.
- In titles, subheadings, and interface labels, we use numerals instead of spelling out numbers. Ex.: *6 ways to incorporate plain-language strategies*.

Dates and Times

- Use the full, four-digit year.
- Don't use the "st," "nd," "rd," or "th" after a number, just the number itself.
 - Ex: November 14, 2018
 - NOT: November 14th, 2018
- For fiscal years, list the full name of the year with a space after the "FY."
- Ex: FY 2017-18
- NOT: FY17-18, FY 17/18
- Use periods when using a.m. and p.m.
 - Ex: 10:30 a.m. or 4:45 p.m.

Percentages

- Spell out *percent* in most cases, with a few exceptions. We use the percent sign (%) in these following circumstances:
 - Tables and in technical or scientific writing. Ex: *60% of participants reported experiencing side effects*.
 - Headings and subheadings. Ex: *Candidate Woof takes 7% lead in the election for best dog*.
 - Interface labels
 - Captions and infographics

5.6 Punctuation

Bulleted lists

- Capitalize the first word of every bullet.
- Don't use semicolons after points in a bulleted list.
- Include a period at the end of the bullet only if that point is a complete sentence.

Colons

- Capitalize the first word after a colon, only if what follows is a complete sentence. Ex: *I have several favorite foods: apples, bananas, and naan chips*. Or...*I have several favorite foods: Apples were my first favorite snack, but naan chips are a rising star in my life*.

Commas

- In a list of three or more, include a comma before the conjunction. Ex: *Please buy apples, bananas, and naan chips*.

Dashes

- When offsetting a phrase with dashes you should use the longer “em dash” (—), which is Option + Shift + - on Macs, with a space on either side of the dash. Ex: *We emphasize open, digital record keeping, and — whenever possible — we illuminate our processes.*
- In some contexts you may use an “en dash” (–), which is Option + - on Macs, to convey a range of numbers. Ex: *Both 10–20 students and 10 to 20 students* are acceptable options.

Quotes

- In general, commas and periods always go inside of quotation marks. Question marks and other punctuation goes on the outside of the quotations if they are not part of the quoted text.
- These quotations are correctly punctuated:
 - “Would you like a banana?” he asked.
 - “I hate bananas,” she said. “You know I hate bananas.”
- For more information, visit [this link](#).

Spaces

- Sentences should always be separated by a single space. Never use two spaces.

Ampersands or plus signs

- Use *and* instead of an ampersand or plus sign, unless they’re part of an official title or company name. Ex: *D.C. Tech Lady Hackathon + Training Day*

Slashes

- Avoid using the slash / symbol. Replace it with words or commas as appropriate.

Appendix 0: Style Guide Cheat Sheet

This is a 1-2 page summary of the most critical components of the Content Style Guide. It can be printed out and kept visible on your desk, or used in PDF form for quick reference.

[Link to current version \(07.03.2018\)](#)

Appendix 1: HSA Programs and Departments

This appendix shares specific details on how to reference programs and departments within HSA, including proper names and staff. **This list is a work in progress and will be continually updated over time.**

If a program or department is not listed in this table, its full name should **always** be spelled out and **never** shortened to an acronym. For example, the Public Guardian program should **never** be shortened to PG.

Program/Department Name	Correct (Alternative)	Incorrect
Adult Protective Services	APS	
CalFresh	<i>Can include:</i> Formerly known as food stamps	CalFRESH
California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids	CalWORKs	CALWORKS, CalWorks
Department of Aging and Adult Services	DAAS	DA&AS
Family and Children's Services	FCS	F&CS
Human Services Agency	HSA	SFHSA or SF-HSA
In-Home Supportive Services	IHSS	
JobsNOW!	JobsNOW!	JOBSNOW, JOBSNOW!, JobsNow!, Jobs NOW!
Medi-Cal		Medical, MediCal, MEDI-CAL
Office of Early Care and Education	OECE	
Workforce Development Division	WDD	

Appendix 2: Specific Words and Phrases

Specific Terms to Use and Avoid <i>Words and phrases that HSA prefers to use or not use</i>		
	Terms to Use	Terms to Avoid
People	Older adult(s)	Senior, Elderly, Frail, Aged
	Adult(s) with disabilities	Disabled
	Clients, program participants	Recipients, consumers, customers

	Immigrant, Legal Permanent Resident	Illegal and/or Alien
	Our staff, social workers, eligibility workers, employment specialist	HSA employees, protective service worker
Ideas and Descriptions	Self-sufficiency, economic security	Able bodied
	Vulnerable, at-risk	Frail, indigent, deprivation
	Low-income	Low income, indigent, poor, deprivation
	Mission, plan, goals	Agenda (unless talking about a meeting)
Services and Processes	Cash assistance	Cash grant, cash aid
	CalFresh benefits	Food stamp(s)
	Employment, job training, education support services	Welfare-to-work
	Income Guidelines	Income Requirements
	Workforce Development Center	Career Link Centers
	Client Service Center	Lobby, Enrollment Center

Form and Usage of Common Terms <i>Punctuation, hyphenation, capitalization, and any special guidelines</i>		
Term	Correct (Alternative)	Incorrect
San Francisco		SF, S.F., Frisco, San Fran
Our Agency		our agency
Our Departments		our departments
City Departments, the City, City leaders		city

Mississippi (or any U.S. state - spell out full name)		MS, Miss.
United States government	U.S. government	U.S. Government
Child Care		Childcare
Health Care		Healthcare