Furman University Web Editorial Style Guide

This document is a prescriptive editorial style guide designed to help you develop and aggregate appropriate, relevant content for the Furman University web presence. Its primary focus per the scope of this initiative is the main public-facing website. It comprises relevant guidelines from a variety of resources and recommendations:

- *Wired Style*, Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon
- *AP Stylebook*, 2012 edition
- *Letting Go of the Words*, 1st edition, Ginny Redish
- *Content Rules*, Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman
- Webster’s *New World Dictionary*

Apply these guidelines to ensure all content upholds the promise of your message architecture and that of a professional brand: it should be consistent, clear, and appropriate for your target audience. This document will help you develop a more relevant and functional user experience for prospective students, faculty, and members of the Furman community—and the broader community in which it thrives.

This document has four parts:

- Message architecture .................................................................................................................. 2
- Style ........................................................................................................................................ 2
- Tone ........................................................................................................................................ 5
- Web writing 101 ......................................................................................................................... 8
Message architecture

Consider these communication goals as you determine the overall voice, focus, and structure of new content. These themes are aspirational, cumulative, and capture the key messages new content should support through your many channels and audience touchpoints.

• **Rigorous educational experience**
  • Innovative with regard to attracting applicants *and* delivering a high-quality experience
  • Premium, leading edge

• **Gracious and discerning**
  • Selective but accessible
  • Approachable, welcoming, hospitable
  • Community-minded and community-building in an inspiring environment

• **Holistic but practical liberal arts education**
  • Value-oriented
  • Fun

Style

Style refers to the mechanics of construction. It includes grammar and usage.

**Acronyms**

The first time you use an acronym on a page or in a section, if it’s new or unfamiliar, spell out the phrase and follow it with the acronym in parentheses. In subsequent uses, just use the acronym. Don’t put periods between the letters in an acronym. It’s always “USA,” no periods or spaces required.

As you evaluate whether an acronym may be new or unfamiliar, always consider the target audience of the content—or the multiple audiences that may see it. Applicants may be on a first-letter basis with FAN, the Furman Admission Network, while current students may have forgotten the term. At the same time, AKA may be a familiar reference for the Greek community, while the community beyond Furman might be left wondering what “AKA” is also known as.
Bulleted lists

Bulleted lists are a great way to display web content with a few constraints:

- Use a colon except after verbs and prepositions such as “of”, “to”, “including”;
- Punctuate items as shown if they’re in a sentence, or not at all; and
- Follow parallel construction, starting each item with the same part of speech.

When you’re introducing a list or series, don’t put a colon after a verb; between a verb and its object or series; or after phrases like “such as”, “including”, or “for example.”

**Example:**

**On-brand:**

- The Modern Languages department offers many programs:

**Off-brand:**

- Programs offered by the Modern Languages department are in:  
  (Passive voice, colon after verb)

End punctuation is appropriate if the bullet ends a sentence, as in the introductory text under “Bulleted lists.”

Capitalization

Favor sentence case in page titles, headlines, and section headlines: capitalize the first letter of the first word and any proper nouns only, and omit end punctuation. Sentence case looks more modern, streamlined, and friendly; to underscore the approachable, welcoming nature of Furman, use sentence case for calls to action as well: capitalize just the first word and any proper nouns, and write the call to action as a sentence.

**Example:**

**On-brand:**

- Financial Aid office (section title)
- Apply for financial aid (link)
- Furman University, the university
- The Furman Biology department
- Furman president Rod Smolla

**Off-brand:**

- Financial aid, Financial Aid Office
- Apply for Financial Aid
- Furman university
- The Biology Department
- Smolla, President of the University
Contractions
Don’t waste time and space with more formal, extended forms of verbs (e.g., use “can’t” instead of “cannot” or “can not”). The contraction is more contemporary and concise.

Numbers
Unless you’re describing quantities in a list, spell out numbers zero through nine. Use numerals for 10 and above. Format phone numbers as 312-394-2876; if an extension is required, abbreviate as “ext.” followed by the number.

Example:
2,700 undergraduates call Furman home. Of that number, many participate in the four media organizations on campus.

Punctuation
In general, omit end punctuation in page titles, headlines, subheads, bullets, and calls to action.

Spaces: Use a single space after end punctuation.

Hyphens: An em dash (—) indicates a break in thought; an en dash (–) indicates a range of time or quantities.

Example:
Anticipate taking 35% – 65% of your classes within the music department—and prepare yourself for a more well-rounded education than you could ever imagine!

Usage and terminology
In general, choose modern forms to underscore that Furman is a modern, world-class educational institution with modern business practices—but don’t embrace such trendy, cutting-edge jargon that you distance yourself from the school’s target audience and community.
Example: “email” has evolved from “e-mail” which is the newer, concatenated form of “electronic mail.” Use “email” as it’s the most advanced yet acceptable form of the term.

- email, not e-mail
- homepage, not home page
- http://
- https://
- internet
- sign in/sign out (verbs)
  - Example:
    Sign in with your username.
- offline
- pop up (verb)
- pop-up (adjective)
  - Example:
    See the pop-up window for more ideas.
- reuse, not re-use
- URL
- web-based
- webpage, not web page
- website, not web site
- the web

Tone
Tone refers to the overall manner of expression, comprising messaging, voice, tense, and diction.

Diction, or word choice
Prefer modern usage and spelling. As language evolves over time, words concatenate. “Electronic mail” became “e-mail”, and “e-mail” became “email”.

In addition, choose short, simple words when they’ll do the same job as long, overblown terms. This helps drive home the engaging, conversational nature of the brand, though it can be rare in the university setting, particularly among
faculty more comfortable with the more verbose language of publishing. Set an example for the clear communication Furman strives to teach and encourage. Use… don’t “utilize.”

Beyond favoring clear, simple diction, also aim for a concise, upbeat tone. How?

- Adopt active voice and use precise, assertive verbs, in the present tense wherever possible.
- Find the perfect word to convey meaning. Use the one perfect word rather than a few that can only approximate your meaning.

**Directional language**

In the virtual space of a webpage, your audience doesn’t need additional directions to know that in Western culture, they’ll typically navigate left to right, top to bottom. Avoid using “following” or “below” to refer to elements on the page, when the layout of the page itself provides those indications. In addition, when calling the user to action, avoid unnecessary words that will just get in the way of acting.

**Example:**

**On-brand**
- Check our list of upcoming events
- Students’ favorite coffee shops
- Read alumni news

**Off-brand**
- Check the list below
- The following coffee shops
- Click here to read alumni news

**Perspective**

Perspective refers to the author’s relationship with the reader. In content that advocates or persuades, we recommend speaking from the first-person plural: Furman University, or the department you represent, is “we.” As you write in the first person, you’ll naturally indicate the owner, agent, or actor in an action; in doing this, you’ll automatically write in active rather than passive voice and trim nominalizations.
Example:

On-brand

- In the Biology department, we encourage you to explore…

Off-brand

- The Biology department encourages exploration
- Exploration is encouraged by the Biology department

Sentence length and cohesion

As the target audience delves into the Furman brand and web presence, let them unwrap the present: at the highest level, they need concrete but minimal detail. Word choice must be accurate and precise, whether you’re writing a 140 character Tweet or department landing page. As they dig deeper, content can become more specific, substantial, and longer; in many ways, your reader has given you permission to offer content in this manner in exchange for their time.

In page copy, remember your reader as you create content that breaks the stereotype that “people don’t read online.” They do, when you offer them content that “pulls” them through it. First, your sentences shouldn’t ramble; aim to be clear and concise. Then to keep sentences from running wild, don’t overwhelm your readers with too many ideas at once, and don’t go on longer than necessary. But don’t use monotonous, short sentences just to avoid longer ones. This makes the rhythm choppy. Amid rhythm and sentence length, where does that leave you? Consciously vary your sentence length. Then aim for concision and cohesion: let old or known ideas introduce new thinking, then let one thought flow to the next by starting a new sentence with the concepts or terms that ended the previous one. One by one, your sentence will pull eager readers through messages of advocacy or ideas about adopting new processes into their lives.

(Yes, that was a lot of copy—but it follows the rules it espouses: it aims for cohesion, consistency, and variety in sentence length to get you to this point.)

Why does this matter? For your busy audience, content that demands their attention for more than a couple seconds must be readable and should “pull” them through the message. A little variety in how you form those messages adds energy, and gives your reader the energy to get through the text. In the time-pressured world of conflicting responsibilities, homework, and busy social lives, your good content can give your audience a reason to dig in and learn.
Tense
Tense is the form of the verb that indicates time. In general, use the present tense. Like the active voice, the present tense is assertive, concise, and confident—all qualities that support the Furman brand and voice. The present tense is also more contemporary, making events or activities seem ongoing instead of finite—key for evergreen content on the internet. This also jibes with the general, “it’s always now” tone of social media.

Voice
Voice is the relationship between the subject of the action and the verb itself. In general, phrases that use active voice are a bit shorter than similar phrases that use passive voice. They can also be more informal, though passive voice creates a false sense of formality and grace with nominalizations and wordiness. Use the active voice instead of passive voice to make content more clear and confident, in keeping with the straightforward tone dictated by the message. It’s a way of demonstrating respect for your audience.

Web writing 101
Support subhead scanners
In most online contexts, people scan and deep dive to find the information that meets their needs, then read about it. Consider a bird of prey scanning for its next meal, then swooping in on its conquest: no eagle ever flies without a purpose, and few visitors to the Furman website will read without a goal. How can you offer content that supports this behavior?

• Favor subheads that actually introduce or summarize content, rather than merely allude to it or repeat internal terms or acronyms that may confuse your audience.
• Maintain internal consistency: all subheads on a page should start with the same part of speech and ideally be about the same length.
• Use the words or jargon a member of the specific audience might use when scanning the page—especially if you’re addressing FAQs.
• When you can, use short, strong verbs before the main noun of the subhead.
Solve or share, don’t shill
In *Content Rules*, Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman make that recommendation for creating valuable content that bolsters your authority without undermining credibility or trust. Just as good content meets specific needs, it positions recommendations only when they meet a need a visitor expresses through implicit or explicit action.

- Where possible, bring other voices into the conversation by quoting members of the Furman community.
- Only offer recommendations where they are relevant. Don’t push applicants to download a planning checklist if they’re beyond that point in the process.
- Maintain a human perspective by communicating your passion and using first-person pronouns.

Create a conversation
If people read content to meet a functional need, they’re usually trying to answer a question: How do I contact a professor? How do other people do this? What classes do I need to graduate? If they come to the Furman site with specific needs, uphold the message architecture: be a gracious, welcoming host and make them feel comfortable with content that’s conversational and in the tone this guide describes.

- Don’t hide content behind labels, buttons, or calls to action they may not understand just yet.
- Favor active voice and direct, informal statements and sentence structures. Passive voice only hides the action in false formality, nominalizations, and verbal excess.
- Don’t confuse informality with sloppiness. Take care to maintain consistent structures, steps, and directions if the reader is trying to learn how to do something, follow your guidance for an activity, or improve their process. Remember, a good host doesn’t welcome someone into a party but then disappear before introducing them to a few people or conversation topics.

Limit page length
A website is not a book, and a webpage serves a different purpose than a page in a book; despite the impact of IMDB.com, there’s no “getting lost” in it if the
majority of your users want to resolve needs and questions. Focused pages help them do this.

So what’s a focused page versus a page of a specific length? Remember how the “Sentence length” section in this guide advocates writing cohesive, consistent sentences and paragraphs that fall from a single topic, describe it, then finish. Pages can do that too. Each page should serve a single purpose: describe a department, introduce department faculty, describe a faculty member with full biographical information, etc. Focus on the goal of that page, follow the guidance for cohesive sentences, and stop when you complete the goal.

Content consultant and author Ginny Redish acknowledges users will scroll to read more editorial content. “But they won’t scroll forever. Think of three or four scrolls’ worth as the maximum length,” and cohesive writing should cut that down even more.

**Write in the inverted pyramid**
Longer-form copy in blog posts and emails still needs to meet the informational needs of scanners. Much like the “Sentence length” section describes, you’ll maintain their attention if you focus and write in a cohesive, consistent manner. The inverted pyramid, a favorite of news journalists, favors this:

- Start with your lede, or the key message or point of advocacy, grounded in a personal message.
- Offer supporting points—even in bullet form under equally scannable subheads—to draw in readers that “self-qualify” with their interest.
- Close with less necessary information, history, and *final* call to action.

Consider how this plays out in an email: you should make the call to action evident from subject and headline. By the time readers who choose to keep reading reach the end, a button or link can merely reiterate the point.