Web Content Best Practices

Our website is one of the most important tools we have in communicating about UMKC. Staff, faculty and students across multiple campuses share responsibility for maintaining our site, which reflects the diversity and depth of experiences UMKC is proud to provide.

We serve many different audiences, and we strive to create positive experiences and opportunities to get involved for everyone visiting our site. Following best practices for web content can prevent confusion and make information as clear as possible for all who use the UMKC site.

This information is designed to guide members of our community in the creation and presentation of content on the UMKC website.

Writing for the Web

People interact with content on the web differently than printed material. Because of this, we should edit our writing specifically for the web, and pay close attention to content formatting to make messaging and calls-to-action as clear as possible for our web visitors.

Here are some guidelines to bear in mind while working on the web:

1. **Use simple, warm language.**
   Try reading your website out loud. Does it sound conversational and upbeat? Web writing tends to be more casual than other forms. Contractions are okay. So are short sentences and fragments. Our main priority should be providing clear, correct information in the most helpful way possible. When writing new content, picture a single individual who represents your audience and write to that person. Your writing should be conversational and confident, yet very approachable.

   Give people a sense of what UMKC is like and what sets us apart, but don’t assume visitors know your acronyms and insider terms. A substantial amount of our visitors come directly to a UMKC web page through a search engine, rather than navigating through our site. In this way, any page on our site could be considered as important, in terms of content, as a “home page.” In other words, we should make every page as clear and complete as possible.
Quick tip: We all come to our work on the web with different backgrounds and experiences, so “clear and simple language” may seem subjective. Hemingwayapp will give you straightforward feedback on what words or sentences might confuse your readers.

2. **Keep content brief.**

   People read, on average, 25 percent more slowly on screens than on paper. Websites full of long blocks of text will overwhelm visitors, particularly when they are scanning pages to find their way deeper into the site.

   Your readers should be able to scan your content, especially high-traffic pages. Landing pages or top-level pages should be shorter and easier to skim than informational pages located much deeper in the site. Don’t try to do too much on each page. If you think a page may be getting too complex, think about splitting out some detail onto another page that you can link to.

   Quick tip: Best practices suggest your top-level pages should be 100-300 words and internal pages 400-500 words.

3. **Summarize each page with an intro.**

   Below your page title, write a sentence or two about what the page is about. Don’t try to describe every single thing that appears on the page. You want to quickly help visitors verify that they’re in the right spot and encourage them to dig deeper into your content.

   If you’re creating a new site or a new section within an existing site, writing page intros can be a helpful first step in getting your new content organized.

   Quick tip: The intro is the most-read part of your page. It can either tell people the page isn’t for them, or it can hook them. Use it to your advantage!

4. **Break up long pages with subheads.**

   Short, descriptive subheadings can make a huge difference on your site. Subheads help visitors scan the page and find the info they need. Depending on how much information you’re presenting on a page, you may need a few subheads.

   “Chunking” up content on your pages will make it easier to digest. Each section can have a subhead and multiple short paragraphs (2-4 sentences per paragraph). If you’re
using content that originally appeared in printed material, pay special attention to the length of paragraphs.

    Quick tip: People almost always scan pages vertically. Eyetracking studies call it an F-shape or an upside-down L. This means that the first word or two of your subheads are the most important. Front-load your subheads with meaningful words to describe each section.

5. **Formatting makes your content easier to read. Or harder.**
   Help your visitors dig into your content by breaking up blocks of text with bulleted lists and pull quotes. Studies show that bulleted lists are particularly successful in drawing viewers down your content.

   Be careful not to over-do it on font styles and formatting, like bold and italics. You do not need to manually underline links, and you should not underline for emphasis—people may think that text is a hyperlink.

    Quick tip: Too much formatting can actually work against you. See the “Styles and Formatting” section below for guidelines.

**Support for web writing**
Writing for the web is not any more difficult than other styles of writing. But it does require special care and attention. Staff in UMKC’s Division of Strategic Marketing and Communications may be able to provide additional training or copywriting services. If you feel like you need additional help developing or editing the content on your site, please reach out to us.

**Styles and Formatting**
How our content *looks* is just as important as how it *sounds*. We’ve all experienced websites where the colors and fonts distract or even repel us, forcing us to hit the back button or search for a different information source. The most helpful, engaging writing can be overwhelmed by the wrong formatting.

Here’s what to look out for:
Text alignment
Do not center text on your website. In almost all cases, people scan a page vertically along the left margin. Centered text slows web readers down and gives eyes fewer places to rest.

Text colors
To make the entire UMKC site accessible to all web visitors, we strongly recommend you avoid adding color for emphasis in your text. Headers, links and design elements are appropriate places to use color, but the primary body copy should always be dark gray or black font over a light or white background. A high level of contrast between text and backgrounds makes content accessible for low-vision and colorblind visitors.

Headers and how to use them
Whether your site was developed by staff in the Division of Strategic Marketing and Communications or an outside vendor, your template will offer several header settings. Headers are named according to a hierarchy, with Heading 1 being the largest and most prominent.

In the header bar across the top of your site, the site name should be in H1. If you need a subhead in your website header, that would be in H2.

Just like the website header bar, your webpages should be following a header hierarchy. Your page names should be in H1 or H2. Subsections later in your page should use H3, H4 and so on. Don’t use H1 or H2 at the bottom of a page for emphasis.

Just like setting up an outline in a Word document, you want the headers to convey the hierarchy of information on your webpages. Explore the options built into your template and find the settings that work best in your site.

Page intros
New sites developed by staff in the Division of Strategic Marketing and Communications include an area for you to enter an intro for each page. (See page 2 for more information about writing intros.)

When you add an intro to this special area of each page, you do not need to apply any styles or formatting. Your template will automatically apply special font styles to this text, designed to make your intro as easy to read as possible.

Bold, italic, underline
- Do not underline text. On the web, readers may confuse underlined text with links.
• Italic text is hard to read on screens. Use it sparingly, just a few words at a time.
• Do not write page content in ALL CAPS. It quickly loses impact and doesn’t help readers understand your information. It also slows down reading.
• Headers can use all caps sparingly, but readability is key. Avoid using all caps for any headers smaller than H3.
• Bold can be an effective tool for emphasis in text. Avoid applying it to entire sections.

Support for web design and development
Our website is one of the most important tools we have for communicating about UMKC. The Division of Strategic Marketing and Communication (MCOM) works to ensure consistent, positive experiences for our web visitors. From design and development to branding and maintenance, MCOM staff support the web efforts of offices and departments throughout the university.

MCOM has created a framework for websites using WordPress, our preferred content management system. The framework offers visitors consistent experiences across our site and meets standards for everything from accessibility to branding. For those who choose to develop their sites independently, the UMKC web policy outlines requirements and permissions.

If you’d like to collaborate on a new site or need help maintaining your existing site, please get in touch with us.

Links
Links within your content are a great way to help readers explore your site. If content already exists elsewhere, link to it rather than duplicating it on your site. Duplicated content quickly become dated and differences in key information will confuse visitors.

Here are some guidelines for adding links:

Link nouns, not verbs
This helps visitors understand a link’s destination.

Instead of: Review our admission requirements.
Try this: Review our admission requirements.
Hyperlink text

Don’t display a link’s URL.

Instead of: Read the story on UMKC Today: http://info.umkc.edu/news/
Try this: Read the story on UMKC Today.

Avoid saying “click here” or “link.”

Mobile devices don’t have a mouse to click.

Instead of: Click here to register.
Try this: Register now.

Indicate if your link is actually a download.

Let visitors know what to expect by labeling the file. To ensure the download is accessible for all visitors, share PDFs, not Word documents.

Example: Review the major requirements (PDF).

Images and Graphics

The images on your site may have a more immediate impact on visitors than the text. Vibrant, compelling images will help tell our story and draw visitors deeper into your site. In contrast, out-of-date images, poor quality graphics or features that don’t display correctly on mobile devices will all alienate visitors.

Keep the following in mind as you launch or update your site:

1. **Avoid generic/stock photography:** Gone are the days when your site could sit with just a few stock photos. Today, visitors expect more and better photography, and many will disregard content if it looks generic or dated.

2. **Your phone can’t do everything:** Most of us working on the UMKC website probably have a pretty great mobile phone camera in our pocket. While it may be tempting to rely on your phone for snapshots, these images usually aren’t appropriate for prime real estate on your website. Professional photographers are better equipped to handle lighting variations, movement and many other challenges to composing compelling images. The cost of quality photography should be included in budgeting for any website project.
3. **Tell a story with your photos:** Use images that represent the unique experiences UMKC offers. Whenever possible, feature the real people and places that make up your program or department.
   - If you don’t have these kinds of images or need new photos taken, the [Division of Strategic Communication and Marketing](#) can help with portraits, events or other photography needs. We offer below-market rates for university clients.
   - MCOM also maintains—and constantly adds to—an archive of UMKC images that may fit your website needs. These images are available for a nominal fee, and don’t require the time and energy of planning new photoshoots. [Contact us](#) to learn more about browsing and accessing images in the UMKC image archive.

4. **Set a schedule.** You should regularly refresh the images on your site, whether they’re in the slider, banner or other areas. We suggest that you update your homepage photo(s) at least quarterly, regardless of whether they are in a slider or another format.

5. **Resize images before loading them into your website.** We recommend [ResizImage](#), a free and straightforward web-based tool. This will reduce file size and ensure the best display of images. Uploading photos that are too large can make your site slow to load. Uploading photos that are too small can make them distorted or blurry.

6. **Upload an image double the display size.** To help maintain clarity in high-definition display, follow this rule of thumb. If the display size on your site will be 200 pixels wide by 100 pixels tall, the image you upload should be 400 pixels wide by 200 pixels tall.

7. **Make sure images are accessible.** To help make our site more accessible to all visitors, including those who use screen readers and text browsers, always use descriptive alt text.
   
   Also, images should have little to no text on them. Screen readers cannot read text on images. If your images have text, be sure to include that in the alt tag.

8. **Use descriptive words in image title.** When you save the file or upload into your site, rename the image with descriptive words that reflect the content of the image and page. Instead of DSC10038.jpg, title it students_at_orientation.jpg. This will help with SEO and keyword searches.

**File formats**

When deciding what type of images or file to upload, consider the following:
o **Is it just a standard visual element?** For most photos and graphics on your site, JPG is fine. This isn’t the highest-resolution option, but it’s sufficient in most cases. Upload an image double the display size (as described above) to make sure it will look good on all screens.

o **Is it a logo?** PNG is the preferred file type for image elements, like logos, that should not have a background. Make sure you are following logo guidelines when using them on the web.

o **Does it need to be in high resolution?** If you’re featuring photography, art or other material that needs to retain fine detail, use a PNG. These tend to produce the largest file sizes, so choose this file type carefully.

o **Is it an animation?** GIF is the only universal choice. Use animation sparingly, with assistance from MCOM or another designer.

o **Does your imagery use geometric shapes?** Consider converting it to a vector (SVG) format.

**Slider**

Some websites use a slider tool to highlight a slideshow of images or a rotating set of featured stories. Sliders present some challenges:

- Research has shown that sliders are not an effective tool for sharing news. Visitors are likely to only interact with the first slide.
- Also, for a slider to be effective, excellent photography is crucial. Low-quality or dated images will greatly diminish your site.

We recommend that new websites project pursue other options for displaying content, rather than relying on sliders.

For sites that are already using sliders, we recommend you update images and/or stories in your slider regularly. The prominence and size of your site will influence how often you need to change your slides:

- At a bare minimum, expect to update all of the images in your slider quarterly.
- On high-traffic sites, weekly updates may be more appropriate.

If you are not sure whether you can sustain that level of upkeep, a slider may not be your best option.

**Video**

- **Decide whether it enhances your content.** Video can be a huge asset for your site if it is done well. Every department and program will have different opportunities for creating and sharing videos, so we offer the following questions to guide your work.
1. Does this support and expand existing content on my site? Video can’t be offered instead of other content as many visitors won’t play the video.
2. Does it fit the UMKC brand? If you want to share a video from another organization, please use caution and periodically check to make sure the link hasn’t disappeared or moved.
3. What’s your maintenance schedule for video? Don’t expect a video to live forever, especially if you’re placing it prominently on your site.

- **Host your video on YouTube.** YouTube is our preferred platform for posting videos. From YouTube, you can embed the video on your site at many different sizes to suit the needs of your template. [Get in touch with us](#) if you’d like to discuss your content being posted in an official UMKC account.

- **Use captions to make your content accessible to a bigger audience.** YouTube offers many [options for subtitles and closed captions](#) to make videos accessible for visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing, or those who speak other languages.

- **Embed carefully.** Depending on how your website was built, videos may be difficult to display. If you choose to embed a video on your site, be sure to test it on different browsers and devices (ask friends and colleagues to help). When you are getting the embed code for your YouTube video, uncheck the “show suggested videos” option. This will help you avoid displaying unrelated content when the video ends.

- **Don’t force the video to play.** Avoid using “autoplay” on embedded videos on your site. It may seem like a good idea to trigger a video to start when visitors arrive on your site, particularly given the rise of autoplay videos in social media feeds. However, you are more likely to annoy your visitors, drain batteries in mobile devices and make your site altogether inaccessible to a portion of your audience.

**UMKC Brand**

To keep the UMKC brand strong, we ask for your help in upholding standards for our brand and visual identity. The Division of Strategic Marketing and Communications offers the following resources for all website managers:

- [UMKC standards manual (logo guidelines)](#)
- [Branding section of UMKC Web Policy](#)

If you’re unsure about how to brand your site or have questions about using the UMKC logo, please [get in touch with us](#).