

EDITORIAL STYLE GUIDELINES

Grammar and Language Use for the FSU Division of Student Affairs



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Each year the Florida State University Division of Student Affairs (FSU DSA) communicates with stakeholders through hundreds of print and digital promotional and marketing materials and messages. Although the division's primary audience is current FSU students, our communications also reach families, employees, the community, alumni and prospective donors. Considering the wide reach of our communications, it is important that staff members and students who write for DSA publications use consistent and clear language and uphold high standards for accuracy. Our goal is to achieve a high degree of consistency among all the messages that students and other audiences receive from DSA so we can better build familiarity, engagement and trust.

All materials produced by the DSA should uphold the FSU brand and convey the university's brand promise, which is a simple, powerful statement that declares our commitment to constituents. University Communications has defined our brand promise for future and current students as:

"An extraordinary and diverse educational experience that inspires creativity, self-discovery and leadership to empower you throughout your life."

This promise to our students also aligns with the DSA's mission to empower and support all students to achieve their full potential. Our written communication should embody this promise and mission.

This guide is for use by FSU DSA staff members who develop content for publications, newsletters, web content, social media, e-mails to students and other public information materials. This style guide is not relevant to academic work.

STYLE GUIDELINES

The office of Florida State University Communications and the Division of Student Affairs follow the guidelines of the Associated Press (AP) Stylebook with a few exceptions. As AP Style does not address every situation, the university has created some house style guidelines. The information below highlights some notable writing style guidelines that we should adhere to when possible:

FSU House Style Guidelines

building and location names

- Use full names on first reference. Avoid capitalizing "The" in running text.
- The second reference can be a shortened version or building acronym.

class

- Freshman, sophomore, junior and senior are lowercase unless at the start of a sentence.

Florida State University

- Always use Florida State University on first reference in formal communications. Referring to the university as Florida State and/or FSU is acceptable on all subsequent references.
- Refer to FSU as the university not the University or The University.

Noles

- Not 'Noles.

phone numbers

- AP style is: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

semesters

- The first letter of the term can be capitalized if it is followed by the year.

AP Style Guidelines

abbreviations and acronyms

- Where acronyms are necessary, spell out the full term on first reference, followed by the acronym in parentheses, and use the acronym thereafter.
- To view common FSU acronyms, reference the [FSU Lingo document](#).

academic and administrative titles

- It's appropriate to use the academic title on second reference, but note it's lowercase when following the name: Jane Doe, an associate professor in the College of Education, received a grant...
- Acting, adjunct, interim, courtesy, emerita, emeritus, emerit, or visiting may also be part of the official academic title.
- Capitalize before the name, lowercase otherwise.

Elizabeth Jones, vice president for student life, studied biology.

Before the lecture, Vice President Michael Thomas will address the group.

academic degrees

- Don't capitalize general references to degrees: I have bachelor of arts and master of fine arts degrees. FSU offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (and use an apostrophe in bachelor's, master's...).
- Capitalize when referring to the complete name of the degree: She is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Literature.
- Use an apostrophe in bachelor's degree, a master's, etc.
- The word degree should not follow an abbreviation: She has a B.A. in English literature.
- Use periods when abbreviating, except for degrees with three or more capital letters: B.A., B.S., MBA, EMBA, M.Ed., Ph.D., Psy.D.

academic year

- Use all four numerals of the first year and only the last two of the second year, separating with a hyphen: The 2022-23 school year will be a great one. Academic years begin with the fall semester.

adviser

- Not advisor.

alumna, alumnus, alumni

- Singular female: alumna.
- Singular male: alumnus.
- Use alumni when referring to a group no matter the gender.
- The abbreviated versions (alum/alums) may be substituted for singular/plural.
- Use graduate or graduates for a non-gendered term that may be used in place of alumnus, alumni, alumna and alumnae.
- Only use gendered terms if that information is needed and confirmed.
- For students who attended but did not graduate (except in cases of those who hold honorary degrees), use: attended FSU University rather than is an alumnus/a.

ampersand (&)

- Do not use; spell out and in all cases. (Exception: ampersands that appear as part of official department names: Center for Leadership & Service).

capitalization

- Capitalize the first letter of a full-sentence quote. When a full-sentence quotation is introduced or followed by attribution, place a comma between them, unless the quote is a question.

class years

- Include degree received, year of graduation (use an apostrophe (')), not a single quote mark ('), before the degree year), and major (lowercase, in parentheses): Alexis Thompson, PhD '77 (psychology).

commas

- Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases or clauses written in a series.
- Do not use an oxford comma before the "and" or the "or" that precedes the final item in the series, unless one of the items in the series has an "and" or "or" within it: She is in the Student Government Association, Lady Spirithunters and FSU Ad Club.

course/class titles

- Capitalize and do not italicize or use quotation marks: Contemporary Art and Historical Issues will be taught next fall.

courtesy title

- Do not precede a name with a courtesy title for an academic degree and follow it with the abbreviation for the degree in the same reference.

AP Style Guidelines

dates

- For dates, always use numeral figures without st, nd, rd or th.
- Capitalize the names of months in all uses.
- When a month is used with a specific date, abbreviate only Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec. Spell out when using alone, or with a year alone.
- When a phrase lists only a month and a year, do not separate the year with commas.
- When a phrase refers to a month, day and year, set off the year with commas.

decades

- Decades should be stated as 1990s, '90s.

departments / divisions

- For academic departments, use lowercase except for words that are proper nouns or adjectives, or when the word department is part of the official and formal name. (Exceptions include the Chemistry Department and English Department).
- Capitalize academic divisions.

email

- not e-mail or E-mail.

GPA

- Spell out grade point average upon first use in materials for external audiences and then use GPA thereafter. GPA can be used anytime in internal materials. Note there are no periods in GPA.

internet

- not Internet.

kick off vs kickoff

- Use kick off as a verb and kickoff as a noun or adjective.

login vs log in

- Use one word, no space or hyphen, for login, logon or logoff as a noun.
- Use as two words in verb form: I log in to my computer.

names

- Use a person's full name on first reference. On second reference, use only the last name. If two people with the same last name are quoted in a story, use first and last names.

nationalities (compound)

- As both nouns and adjectives, compound nationalities are not hyphenated.
African American, African American history;
Italian American, Italian American history;
but Indo-European (first word is a prefix and cannot stand alone).

numbers

- Spell out numbers one through nine.
- Use figures for 10 and up.
- Use commas in all dollar amounts of \$1,000 or more, however, \$1,000,000 can be written as \$1 million.
- Spell out percent as one word or use %.
- If a number must start the sentence, spell out the number, capitalizing its first letter.
- When referencing fractions, spell out amounts less than one, using hyphens between the words: two-thirds, four-fifths, seven-sixteenths, etc.
- Use figures for precise amounts larger than one, converting to decimals whenever practical.
- In tabular material, use figures exclusively, converting to decimals if the amounts involve extensive use of fractions that cannot be expressed as a single character.

on campus vs on-campus

- Hyphenate off campus and on campus when used as adjectives preceding a noun (The off-campus students held a gathering.) Do not hyphenate when used as a preposition and noun (The event was held on campus).

online

- One word, no hyphen.

AP Style Guidelines

quotation marks

- Use quotation marks for: books, games (video, computer, board), movies, operas, plays, poems, albums, songs, radio programs, TV programs, lectures, speeches or works of art.
- Do not use quotation marks for: mobile apps, social media platforms, courses/ classes, The Bible, newspapers, magazines, catalogs of reference material, almanacs, directories, dictionaries, encyclopedias, gazetteers, handbooks or computer software.

seasons/semesters

- Lowercase seasons when they stand alone (winter, spring, summer, fall), but capitalize when they refer to semesters (Spring 2011, Fall 2011, etc.).

spacing

- Use one space after a period, semicolon and colon. Follow an ellipsis (three dots) with a space: Like... this.

states

- Spell out the names of the 50 U.S. states when used in the body of a story, whether standing alone or in conjunction with a city, town, village or military base. No state name is necessary if it is the same as the headline.
- In text, spell out states when they stand alone or if they appear after a city. Postal ZIP code abbreviations (AL, AZ, CA, CO, FL, MA, NY, etc.) should be used only in addresses and headlines.

times

- Use figures except for noon and midnight. Use a colon to separate hours from minutes: 11 a.m., 1 p.m., 3:30 p.m., 9-11 a.m., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Do not use :00.
- Avoid using such redundancies as 10 a.m. this morning, 10 p.m. tonight or 10 p.m. Monday night. Use 10 a.m. or 10 p.m. Monday, etc., as required by the norms in time element.
- Use hyphen to indicate time range, not an en dash.

titles

- Use Dr. in first reference as a formal title before the name of an individual who holds a doctor of: Dental surgery, Medicine, Optometry, Osteopathic medicine, Podiatry, Veterinary medicine.
- Include terminal degrees after people's names: William Smith, MFA. Karyl Leggio, Ph.D. (Do not use "Dr. Leggio" on second reference.).

toward

- not towards.

web addresses

- Do not tell someone to "find info on the web", instead give the reader the web address to easily find the info so they do not have to hunt for it. Keep the web address as short as possible. If the URL is too long to fit on one line, insert a line break after a forward slash or period or use the [FSU URL link shortener](#).
- Request a shorter (vanity) URL for longer web addresses.
- Including "https://" is not necessary: fsu.edu/admission.
- Omission of "www" is acceptable when clear that it is a web link.

website

- not web site or Website.

who vs whom

- Use who and whom for references to people.
 - Who is a subject.
 - Whom is an object.
- Generally, a sentence will still make sense if you can replace who with he or she. *Who handles homecoming? She does.*
- Whom can be replaced by him or her. *To whom should I ask about homecoming? To her.*

"wide" words

- Do not use a hyphen with the suffix *wide*.
 - campuswide, collegewide, statewide, worldwide

Inclusive Language

The DSA is committed to an inclusive environment that respects the differences and diversity in our university and community. We recognize that the words we use matter. Intentionally using inclusive language in our written (and verbal) communication helps members of our campus community feel more valued, recognized and invited to contribute.

Below are a few considerations for inclusive language:

- To avoid the "student-he/she" dilemma, use plural references: students, they.
- Check with sources on their preferred pronouns.
- Always emphasize the person, not specific traits. Avoid referring to someone's race, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age unless it is relevant to the story.
- Use asset-based language that focuses on strengths not perceived weaknesses.

Replace the following terms with suggested alternatives:

- chairman department chair, chair
- ombudsman ombuds, ombudsperson
- best man best candidate for the job
- manmade synthetic, manufactured
- foreman supervisor
- businessmen businessperson
- manpower personnel, employee
- mankind humankind
- craftsman artisan

- Language is changing and will continue to evolve to be more inclusive. A thorough Inclusive Language Guide from the [Oregon Health & Science University Center for Diversity and Inclusion](#) shares that:

"The goal of using inclusive language is not transactional – it is not about getting it right or wrong as much as it is about a paradigm shift."

This guide has a glossary of terms and definitions and is an excellent resource for anyone searching for inclusive language regarding:

- Race and ethnicity
- Immigration status and language proficiency
- Sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation
- Ability (physical, mental and chronological attributes)

Tips for Clear and Concise Writing

Keep it simple and write in a way that your target audience will easily understand. Effective messages are student-centered and student-friendly, so don't use insider information such as acronyms or jargon. Write in the active voice whenever possible. The message's call to action is critical to capturing attention and action. Think of how to best organize content in a way that will be easy to digest.

Additional tips:

- More than and over are acceptable in all uses to indicate greater numerical value.
- Startup is one word when used to describe a new business venture (noun and adjective).
- Groundbreaking is one word.
- Under can also mean less than.
- Exclamation points can be a nice way to show enthusiasm, however, an overuse of exclamation points can take away from the intended message. Use them sparingly!

Some commonly misused words

affect vs effect

Affect is usually a verb meaning to influence.
Effect is usually a noun meaning result.

The drug did not *affect* the disease, and it had several adverse side *effects*.

Effect can also be a verb meaning to bring about.

Only the president can *effect* such a dramatic change.

assure vs ensure vs insure

Assure means to remove doubt, make certain, give confidence, reassure, promise.

Ensure means to make certain, guarantee.

Insure should be used only for references to insurance.

capital vs capitol

Capital refers to a city. Capital also refers to wealth or resources,

The residents of the state *capital* protested the development plans.

Capitol refers to a building where lawmakers meet.

The *capitol* has undergone extensive renovations.

complement vs compliment

Complement refers to completing a set/making up a whole.

It is also used to describe a number of people making up a group.

This ship has a *complement* of 50.

The wine *complements* the meal.

Compliment has two meanings: a noun or verb that denotes praise or something that is free of charge or done as a courtesy.

The chef was flattered by the *compliments* on his dinner.

They received *complimentary* tickets to the show.

compose vs comprise vs constitute

Compose means to create or put together. It may be active or passive.

She *composed* a song.

The United States is *composed* of 50 states.

Comprise means to contain or to embrace. It is used in the active voice.

As such, the construction "is comprised of" is never correct.

The United States *comprises* 50 states.

The zoo *comprises* many animals.

Constitute, in the sense of make up, may be the best word to use if neither compose nor comprise fits.

Fifty states *constitute* the United States.

continually vs continuously

Continual means repeated again and again.

Continuous means uninterrupted.

I was *continually* interrupted by the telephone.

It rained *continuously* for 48 hours.

disinterested vs uninterested

Disinterested means impartial.

Uninterested means not interested.

differ from vs differ with

One thing differs from another, although you may differ with a colleague.

Never use different than.

emigrate from vs immigrate to

Emigrate means to leave one country or region to settle in another.

Immigrate means to enter another country and reside there.

In 1905, my grandfather *emigrated* from Italy.

Many Europeans *immigrated* to America to start new lives.

farther vs further

Farther refers to physical distance that can be measured.

Further means to a greater degree or more.

Boston is *farther* north than New York.

According to my timetable, this project should be *further* along.

fewer vs less

Fewer is used for things that can be counted as individual units (i.e., books, courses, credits)

Less is used for things that cannot be counted as individual units (i.e., water, coffee, sugar)

Exceptions:

Traditionally, time, money and distance take the adjective less.

it's vs its

It's is a contraction for it is or it has.

Its is the possessive form of it.

It's starting to rain. *It's* been a long day.

The school launched *its* business program last fall.

It's clear the dog misses *its* owner.

lie vs lay

Lie is an intransitive verb meaning to recline or rest on a surface. Its principal parts are lie, lay, lain.

Lay is a transitive verb meaning to put or place. Its principal parts are lay, laid.

Chickens *lay* eggs.

I *lie* down when I am tired.

most important vs importantly

The phrase most important is an elliptical form of what is most important. The word importantly is an adverb and means in an important way.

Most important, her record as a fundraiser is unmatched.

He contributed *importantly* to his field.

over vs more than

Use over, under, above, below, higher and lower to describe physical relationships in space.

Use more than or less than when dealing with numerals.

The plane flew *over* the city.

Their salaries went up *more than* \$20 a week.

principal vs principle

Principal is a noun or adjective meaning someone or something first in rank, authority, importance or degree.

Principle is a noun that means rule, law or general truth.

She was the *principal* partner in the firm.

The *principles* of physics dictate that you cannot travel faster than the speed of light.

premier vs premiere

Premier is principally an adjective meaning prime or leading. It also can be used as a noun when referring to an individual who is the first minister in a national government that has a council of ministers.

Premiere is a first performance or show.

FSU is a *premier* research university.

The *premier* was in Brussels this week discussing European economic policy.

Many celebrities attended the film's *premiere*.

stationary vs stationery

Stationary is an adjective that means not moving. Stationery is a noun that refers to writing paper and envelopes.

who vs whose

- Who's is the contraction of who is. Whose is possessive.

Who's going to the game?

Whose turn is it to buy tickets?



Division of Student Affairs

This document is a product of a collaboration between the FSU Division of Student Affairs Marketing and Communications Office and the FSU Office of University Communications.