Utah Department of Government Operations

writing style guide

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Reviewed October 2024

Goal: why am I here?

Our department strives to be reliable, helpful, transparent, and efficient. This guide outlines standards that help our communication align with these values.

Language is fluid and subject to change, as is the department itself, so this style guide is reviewed and updated regularly.

We expect both internal and external communication to be consistent and helpful. Use this guide and the visual style guide when creating policy, training or educational materials, newsletters, website content, emails, and more. **The principles in this document extend to all forms of written communication created within the department.**

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Tone: how should I sound?

We use a consistent tone in all our communication to build trust with those we serve. Our tone is:

Friendly – We use positive language that feels open and approachable.

Empathetic – We're sensitive to the needs of those we serve.

Helpful – We offer our knowledge and expertise freely to those we serve.

Transparent – Our information is easy to find and easy to understand.

We don't use sarcastic, discouraging, or insensitive language.

Style: what guidelines should I follow?

Our style guide generally follows Associated Press (AP) and plain language guidelines. If you have a question about something that isn't covered in this guide, search the AP Stylebook for more guidance.

Use plain language

Plain language is a writing style that uses simple, organized sentences without jargon or other unnecessary words. Plain language communication is also visually inviting.

Plain language helps readers understand information clearly, quickly, and with fewer questions. Using plain language increases efficiency and creates consistency, which fosters trust with those we serve.

In general, follow these guidelines:

Write for your reader, not for yourself – Think about who will read your communication. What information do they need? Will they understand the words you're using? Always write with your reader in mind.

Write warmly and informally – Imagine you're speaking to the reader in person. Use second person pronouns (you, your, we, our). Use contractions like *don't*, *you're*, *aren't* instead of *do not* or *you are*.

Write in order of importance – Write more important information before less important, and write general information before specific. For instructions, use chronological order. Put exceptions to rules at the end of a sentence.

> – *Register for a new account unless you're a state finance worker.*

Use simple, everyday words – Avoid unnecessary jargon. Use the word *improve* instead of *streamline*. Use *revisit* or *speak later* instead of *circle back*. Use *support* instead of *buy-in*.

Explain technical terms your readers may not understand.

Limit use of acronyms. If you must use one, spell it out on first use followed by the acronym in parentheses. For more about acronyms, see page 23.

> – *The latest Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) will be available on Monday. Everyone must review the ACFR before our meeting.*

Use short and medium-length sentences – Eliminate unnecessary words like *that, just,* and *actually*. Shorten phrases when possible, for example use *to* instead of *in order to*. Use *because* instead of *due to the fact that*. Use *if* instead of *in the event that*.

> – **Write this**: *Because the team is responsible for processing transactions, they need access to the software.*
>
> – **Not this**: *Due to the fact that it is the responsibility of the team to be sure that all financial transactions are processed, the team must actually have access to the software.*

Use gender neutral language – Use gender neutral nouns such as *spouse* or *partner* instead of *husband or wife, chair* instead of *chairman or chairwoman*, or *member of Congress* instead of *congressman* or *congresswoman*.

Use the pronoun *their* instead of *his/her* when referring to a gender-neutral noun.

– *The traveler may use their personal vehicle*.
– *The member of Congress represents the people of their district.*

Prefer active instead of passive sentences – The person should come first and the action should come right after. Active sentences help readers understand information quickly and accurately. For more about active sentences, see page 24.

– **Active sentence**: *New employees must fill out an I-9 form.*

– **Passive sentence**: *An I-9 form must be filled out.*

Notice the passive voice is less clear: we don't know who should fill out the form.

To learn more about plain language, visit https://www.plainlanguage.gov/

Capitalization: what's capitalized and what's lowercase?

All text should be in sentence case: the first word in the sentence is capitalized with the rest lowercase. In this style guide, most words are lowercase. So if the specific word you're looking for isn't listed in the section below, use lowercase. Our writing is more consistent, easier to read, and feels approachable when we use more lowercase.

Follow these general guidelines

Titles, headings, subheadings – Use sentence case. Even if the first word is hyphenated, the first word is capitalized and the second is not. Words that are always capitalized stay capitalized, for example FINET, Concur, or U.S. Congress.

– *Recording cash receipts in FINET*
– *Long-term record keeping*
– *Booking airfare in Concur*

Departments and divisions – Capitalize the full proper names of governmental agencies, departments, and divisions: *Department of Government Operations, Office of State Debt Collection, GovOps Division of Finance*.

You can lowercase divisions in internal communication that won't be read by other departments or state agencies.

- *The division of finance handles all state accounting operations.*
- *Our division should receive style guide training next week.*

Job titles – Use lowercase unless the title precedes a name, such as *Governor Cox* or *Senator Romney*. President is always capitalized when referring to the President of the United States.

- *The governor will hold a town hall meeting.*
- *Governor Cox and his chief of staff will be in attendance.*
- *Van Christensen, the division director, must sign the document.*
- *Executive Director Marvin Dodge must approve the change in policy.*

Directions and regions – Lowercase compass points like *north, northern* when they indicate a general direction. Capitalize compass points when they indicate a region or are in the title of a governmental body.

- *Contact the Southeastern Power Administration*.
- *Visit the Southwest Utah Public Health Department.*
- *Park on the north end of the building.*
- *St. George is south of Provo.*

Seasons – Lowercase spring, summer, fall, and winter, unless part of a formal title like *the Winter Olympics*.

Days of the week – Capitalize days of the week and spell them out fully.

Months of the year – Capitalize months of the year and spell them out fully. Write dates in this format: [Month] [number], [year].

- **Write this**: *January 1, 2024*

– **Not this**: *Jan 1st, 2024* or *the 5th of January 2024*.

Forms – Capitalize letters in the form number and use sentence case for the form title. Separate the number from the title with a colon. If there is no form number, place the colon after the word *form* instead.

– If you need to book a trip, fill out form FI 5: Request for out-of-state travel authorization.
– To request access, fill out the form: Request for document review.

Reports – For well-known public reports, use title case: all words in the report title are capitalized, except prepositions (of, for, with) or articles (the, a, an). For generic internal reports, use lowercase.

– Annual Comprehensive Financial Report
– AM31 and AM65
– I need to run a finance query.
– I'll send the month-end expenditure report.

Capitalization for specific words

Concur – first letter capitalized

county – lowercase unless part of a proper name like *Utah County*. Lowercase when writing two counties: *Salt Lake and Utah counties*.

email – lowercase, one word, no hyphen

FINET – all caps

p-card – lowercase with hyphen

per diem – lowercase, no hyphen

state – lowercase, unless in a proper name of a government agency or division.

– *Welcome to the state of Utah!*
– *She works in the state finance division.*
– *Fill out the correct form and submit it to the Office of State Debt Collection.*

Punctuation: what are the standards?

Follow these general guidelines

Ampersand (&) – Use the word *and* instead of *&* in writing.

Apostrophes – Use apostrophes in contractions like *she's* or *can't*. No apostrophes in plural numbers.

– *We need to update the policies from the 1990s.*
– *She's in her 30s.*

Bullet points – Use bullet points or en dashes for lists.

– *The following information must be filled in:*

- *Name*
- *Date of birth*
- *Job title*

– *The following information must be filled in:*
– *Name*
– *Date of birth*
– *Job title*

Commas with lists – Include a comma after the last item in a list, before the word *and* or *or*.

– *Travelers must fill out the correct form, read the policy, and speak to a supervisor before leaving on their business trip.*
– *Employees are compensated for overtime with money, administrative leave, or gift cards.*

En dash (–) – Use en dashes as an alternative for bullet points or to set off definitions or explanations like you see in this guide. Add a space after the en dash when used like a bullet point. Use a space on either side of the en dash when used to set off definitions or explanations.

Note: En dash on Mac: option+hyphen
En dash on PC: Alt+0150

Hyphen (-) – Use a hyphen to join words and number ranges. For a list of hyphenated words, see page 20.

– *She published a well-written report.*
– *Choose the applicable PDF from the drop-down menu.*
– *The data was stored on servers from 1999-2007.*
– *Read pages 33-80.*

Slash (/) – Avoid using a slash (/) to connect 2 words. Instead connect words with *and* or *or*.

Write this: *The budget officer must review and approve the travel request.*
Not this: *The budget officer must review/approve the travel request.*

Periods – No period after a heading, subheading, or title.

Question marks – Use a question mark after any question including in a heading, subheading, or title.

Quotation marks – The period and comma always go within quotation marks. The dash, semicolon, question mark, and exclamation point go within quotation marks when they apply to the quoted matter only. They go outside when they apply to the whole sentence.

– What does “good internal controls” mean?
– They asked, “Where do I find form F15?”

Semicolons (;) – Use a semicolon to clarify a list that already includes commas.

– Employees will travel to Reno, Nevada; Redding, California; or Seattle, Washington for the conference.

Spaces after punctuation – One space after everything: periods, commas, colons, semicolons, exclamation points, question marks, parenthesis, and any other punctuation. Make sure spaces are deleted after periods at the end of a paragraph.

Use these formats for numbers

Numbers – Use figures instead of words for all numbers, unless the number begins a sentence.

– Employees who need to travel will need 4 documents.
– The report has 60 lines.
– Forty participants attended the event.
– Over 40 participants attended the event.

Time – Use the following format for time: [number] [am or pm]. Drop the :00 if there's no minute value.

– Clock in at 7 am and clock out at 5:30 pm.

Use the words *noon* and *midnight*.

– All forms must be submitted by midnight on November 12, 2024.
– We could meet from noon-1:30 pm.

When writing a range, use a hyphen without spaces if both times are *am* or both times are *pm*. Use a hyphen with spaces if one time is *am* and the other is *pm*.

– Employees must work between 6 am - 6 pm.
– You can message me from 7-9:30 am.

Percentages – Use the percent symbol (%) with a number instead of writing the word *percent*, for example *3%*.

Dollar amounts – Write the cents only if there is a cent value. For millions, billions, and trillions, use a number in front of the word.

– *The standard lodging rate will increase from $98 to $107.*
– *Their monthly housing expenses increased by $317.58.*
– *More than $2.5 million was spent on services related to homelessness.*

Common phrases and words

agency – Generic term for state units outside of the Department of Government Operations, including the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) and the Utah School and Institutional Trust Funds Office (SITFO).

department – Acceptable informal reference to the Department of Government Operations. Do not use *division* or *agency*.

– *The department wants all employees to use the writing style guide.*

division – Generic term for all units within the Department of Government Operations, for example the division of finance or the division of technology services. Do not use *agency*.

GovOps – Use to abbreviate the formal title Department of Government Operations. Use the abbreviation after the first mention. First mention includes titles.

GovOps Division of Finance – Formal title of the division of finance.

login, log into – *Login* is a noun that means *username*. *Log into* is a verb that means to enter your username and password.

– *What's your login?*
– *Log into FINET*.

team – Use to refer to the different groups within divisions, for example the accounting operations team or financial information systems team.

U.S. – Capital letters, periods used except when written in a title, heading, or subheading.

Utahn, Utahns – Not Utahan

website – One word

Format your document

Use descriptive headings and subheadings – Write descriptive headings and subheadings. Use a different font, larger size, or bold text to make headings stand out from the body text.

Align left – All text should be left aligned including titles, headings, subheadings, and image captions.

Use bold for emphasis – Avoid italics, underline, and all caps. Use bold if you need to emphasize a word or phrase.

– **Write this**: *Park in the employee lot,* ***not*** *the customer lot.*

– **Not this**: *Park in the employee lot, NOT the customer lot.*

Create white space – Break up long blocks of text by adding headings and subheadings, spaces in between paragraphs, and bulleted lists.

– **Write this:**

Give the third party reimbursement to the state
Ask your supervisor how to pay the money to your agency. Next, submit a reimbursement request.

Keep the third party reimbursement
You can keep the money paid by the third party, but only up to the amount allowed by travel policy. In this case, don't submit a reimbursement request. Instead, attach any needed documents to the travel request you submitted for the trip.

Attach the following to your travel request:

- *Your travel receipts*
- *Documentation showing you received the reimbursement*
- *Your travel itinerary*
- *Any reimbursement forms required by the third party*

– Not this:

Ask your supervisor how to pay the money to your agency. Next, submit a reimbursement request just like you normally would. You can keep the money paid by the third party, but only up to the amount allowed by travel policy. In this case, don't submit a reimbursement request. Instead, attach any needed documents to the travel request you submitted for the trip. Attach the following to your travel request: your travel receipts, documentation showing you received the reimbursement, your travel itinerary, any reimbursement forms required by the third party.

Best practices: how do I write?

Email

Consider your reader – Think about what your reader needs to know, not what you want to say. Considering your reader builds empathy and helps your reader understand quickly and easily. Before you write, ask yourself the following questions:

– What information does my reader need? Remove anything unnecessary.
– How do they feel? Are they likely stressed or busy? Adjust your tone accordingly.
– Will they understand acronyms or jargon? **Remember to limit your use of acronyms and jargon in all forms of communication, even email.**

Adjust your tone – Your tone should always be friendly, empathetic, helpful, and transparent, but you may need to adjust a little depending on your reader. If your reader is very busy and likes to get straight to the point, skip the friendly small talk and be more direct. If your reader appreciates small talk and values relationships, include a friendly greeting and ask about their family or interests.

Write a descriptive subject line – Always include a subject line, about 6-8 words works well. Use short, clear words. Use an action word if you need someone to take action.

– **Write this:** *Please edit this policy by January 15*
– **Not this:** *Policy*

– **Write this:** *Urgent! Approve travel request for Jack*
– **Not this:** *Travel request*

Write important information first – Start with the 2 most important sentences your reader needs. Use bold to set apart very important information like due dates.

– **Write this:**
*This is the new reimbursements policy for all state employees. The information is all updated, but can you edit for organization, punctuation, and formatting problems? I'll need it back by **January 15**.*

– **Not this:**
Edit this, thanks!

Add white space and bullet points – If your reader needs a lot of information, break it up using spaces between some sentences or bullet points. Big blocks of text make reading more difficult. Short sentences, white space, and bullet points make reading easier and faster.

– **Write this:**
15 people need to be reimbursed for travel.

The reimbursement site is down, can you write an email to explain the situation to everyone? Include:

- *We know this is frustrating.*
- *The site should be back up tomorrow.*
- *They can reply to this email with their reimbursement form and we'll upload it for them when the system is back up.*
- *We're sorry for the trouble and we'll do anything we can to help.*

– **Not this:**
There are several people who need their travel reimbursed, I think like 15 or something. But the system is down so we have to send them all emails saying that

they'll have to come back later to submit the reimbursement form. Maybe we could just have them email us their forms and we can upload to the system tomorrow? Can you write an email with all that?

Read through your email – When you finish writing your email, read through it one last time. Remove any unnecessary information. Make sure it's concise, clear, and readable.

Policy

Keep our department goals in mind – We strive to be reliable, helpful, transparent, and efficient. Our policies should be easy to read fully or scan quickly. If readers understand a policy, they're more likely to follow it and share it with others.

Write a descriptive title – The title should briefly and clearly state what the policy is about. If the policy has a number, include it in the title.

– *State finance policy 10-5*
  Cash advances for business travel

– *Travel policy 10-5: Cash advances for business travel*

Write in third person – Use third person nouns such as *applicants, employees, travelers* instead of second person pronouns like *you*, *your*.

– Write this: *Employees must fill out form FI 5.*
– Not this: *You must fill out form FI 5.*

Use *must*, *may*, or *should* – Use *must* to express an obligation, Use *may* to express an option, and use *should* to express a recommendation. Avoid the word *shall*.

– *Employees must fill out the form FI 5.*
– *An applicant may be denied employment if the background check provides adverse information.*
– *For reconciliation purposes, CR transactions should be entered in FINET within the same fiscal month of deposits.*

Limit use of acronyms – Spell out acronyms in policy titles. Spell out acronyms on first use followed by the acronym in parentheses. If an acronym is used less than 3 times, don't use it at all. If an acronym is defined in the definition section, it doesn't need to be spelled out in the document. For more information, see page 23.

– Background checks may be reviewed by the director of the Division of Human Resource Management (DHRM). The DHRM director must view the results on a private computer.

Include a policy label – The label should contain the following fields:

Effective: [Date when first published]
Revised: [Date when most recently revised]
Approved by: [Person who approved the policy]
References: [Utah code or admin code that was referenced to write the policy]

If the policy is new, remove **Revised:**
Add it in when the policy is revised for the first time.

Policy sections – Policies should have 3 sections: Purpose, Definitions, and Policy.

Purpose – Write a few sentences describing why the policy was written and what information is in the policy.

This policy outlines the conditions for receiving a cash advance for state business travel and when travelers would need to repay a cash advance.

Definitions – Include any definitions the reader will need to understand the policy. The defined word should be in bold followed by an en dash.

***Traveler** – Any person traveling on official state business for an agency or political subdivision. This definition includes employees, non-employees, board members, elected officials, vendors, volunteers, grant recipients, and award beneficiaries.*

***P-card** – A state-issued purchasing card used for approved business purchases.*

Policy – Write the rules. Use descriptive subheadings and numbering to separate each rule.

A – Cash advances must be requested in Concur

1 *– Cash advances are not available to all travelers. Agencies must contact the GovOps Division of Finance to request a traveler have access to the cash advance module in Concur.*

2 *– Travelers must submit a travel request in Concur to request a cash advance, including for in-state travel.*

B – Travelers may have only one cash advance at a time

1 *– Travelers are allowed to have only 1 outstanding cash advance at a time. Once a traveler applies their cash advance to a reimbursement request and the reimbursement request is approved, the traveler may be approved for a new cash advance.*

C – Travelers must submit a reimbursement request in Concur

1 *– Travelers who received a cash advance must add all travel expenses to a reimbursement request in Concur and apply the cash advance to the reimbursement request.*

a *– Reimbursement requests must be submitted within 60 days from the date the traveler paid for expenses.*

Numbering – Bold the letter or figure used for numbering. Use an en-dash with a space on either side after the letter or figure. Use the following order:

A – Capital letters: *A, B, C, D, E…*

1 – Figures: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5…* Figures start over with *1* under any capital letter.

a – Lowercase letters: *a, b, c, d, e…*

a.1 – Period with figure after the lowercase letter: *a.1, a.2, a.3…*

a.1-1 – Hyphen with figure added on: *a.1-1, a.1-2, a.1-3…* This level should be used rarely. You may need to reorganize your policy to avoid using this level.

Instruction guides

Write a descriptive title – The title should briefly and clearly state what the instruction guide will show.

List steps in chronological order – Steps can be numbered or unnumbered but must always be in chronological order.

> *1. Open FINET*
> *2. Click **New > Transaction***
> *Note: FINET Transaction types are always abbreviated; see the FINET glossary for help.*
> *3. Type **CR** in the **Transaction** field*

Use second person pronouns – Use the pronouns *you, your, yours*.

Use the > symbol for a series of actions – Write the action word, like *click*, and then use the **>** symbol after each word to show a series of actions.

> *– Click **File > New > Document**.*
> *– Choose from the drop-down menu **Online Queries > Online Travel**.*

Use bold text for direct references – Use bold to show that a word or phrase is a direct reference from the website or application. Avoid underline and italics.

> *– Click **Vendor > Vendor/Customer**.*
> *– Fill in the fields **Vendor Name:** and **Tin Number:***

Limit use of acronyms – Spell out acronyms in document titles. Spell out acronyms on first use with the acronym in parentheses. If an acronym is used less than 3 times, don't use it at all; spell out the term.

The accounting system FINET uses a lot of acronyms. Instruction guides about FINET may have more acronyms than usual, for example:

> *– With the feature set upgrade in FINET, the inventory process has changed. The best way to create Pick and Issue **(PI)** transactions now is to use the Issue Queue*

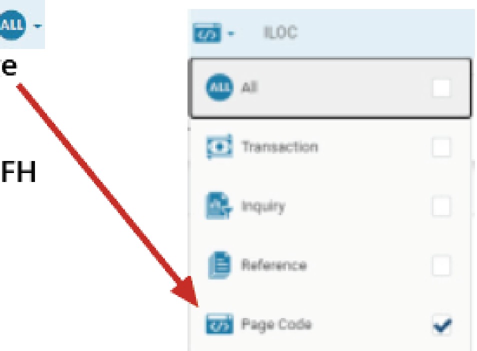
***(ISSQ)**.*

*This will allow you to create a PI using multiple Stock Requests **(SRQs)**. Once the PI is created, you can also use the ISSQ to create the Confirmation Issue **(CI)** transaction to complete the process.*

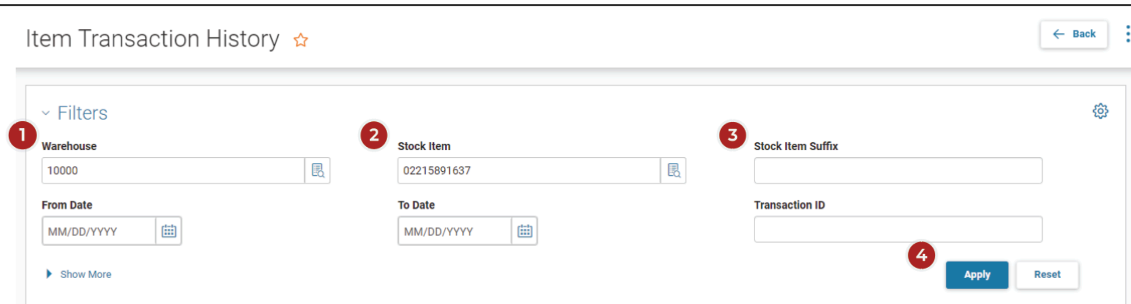
Use images – Include screen grabs or helpful images in your instruction guide to give readers visual help. Use a red circle, square, or arrow to highlight the relevant part of the image.

From the FINET search, in the **ALL** search button, click the drop-down and change the search to **Page Code**.

In your updated search bar, you can now type **INVFH** to locate the Inventory Freeze History screen.

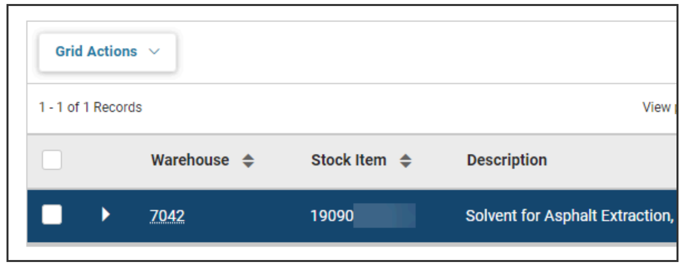


If multiple steps are shown in one image, label each part.



To perform a search:
1. Enter the **Warehouse**
2. Enter the **Stock Item**
3. Optional-enter other information as desired
4. Click **Apply**

Blur images that show personal information – To show that we value customer privacy, blur any field containing personal information, even if the information is made up.



Hyphenate these words – Hyphenate the following words:

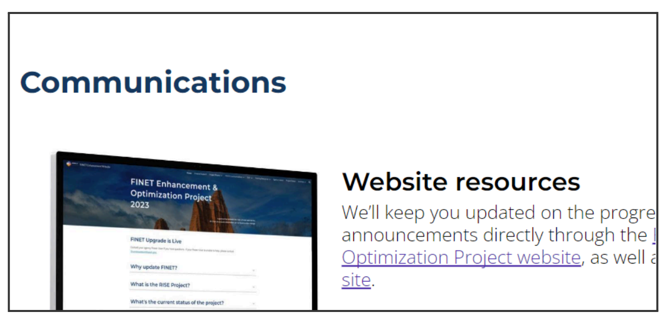
– upper-right corner
– lower-left corner or bottom-left corner
– three-dot (use to refer to this symbol: )
– drop-down menu.

Powerpoint presentations

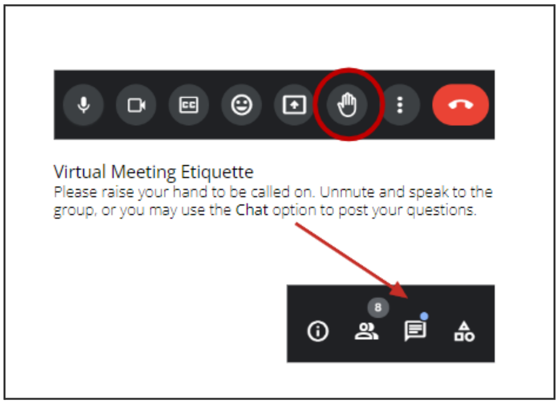
Use a logo on the cover slide – Use the GovOps logo or your division logo on the cover slide. No need to repeat it multiple times throughout the presentation. See the visual style guide for approved logos.

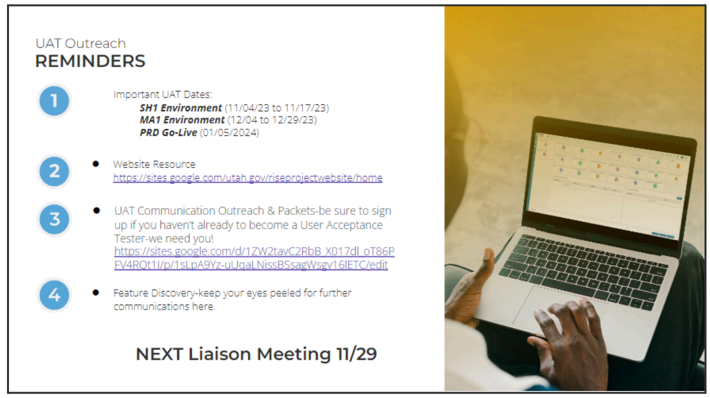
Use approved fonts – See the visual style guide for more information about fonts.

Use consistent headers – Consistent headers help your audience follow your presentation easily. Use a colored block with white text for slides that introduce a new topic. Use no block and colored text for slides still about the current topic.



Use approved colors – Use approved colors for all presentations. See the visual style guide for approved colors. We suggest red for arrows or circles used to draw attention to important information. We suggest a gradient overlay for images to unify all the images in the presentation.





Use helpful images or animations – Use images or animations that add value and are relevant to the text on your slide. Images aren't needed on every slide and shouldn't be added just to fill space.

Web content

Use simple, everyday words – Use easy words and avoid jargon, acronyms, and technical language. If you need to use a technical term, define it first using simple, easy words.

Use a warm, conversational tone – Write warmly and conversationally. Use 1st and 2nd person pronouns like we, us, our, you, and your. Use contractions like aren't, won't, don't, can't.

Make your content easy to scan – Most online readers scan web pages for the information they need. Use headings, subheadings, short sentences, and bulleted lists to make your content easy to scan.

Use the right format for contact information – Use this format for contact information:

Phone	[xxx-xxx-xxxx]
Fax	[xxx-xxx-xxxx]

Email [lowercase]

Building name [Title Case]
Street address [Abbreviations: Capital letters, no periods]
City, State ZIP code [City, UT xxxxx-xxxx]

To reach a specific team, please visit our [Page name] page.

Phone: 801-957-7780
Fax: 385-465-6012
financesupport@utah.gov

Taylorsville State Office Building
4315 S 2700 W FL 3
Taylorsville, UT 84129-2128

To reach a specific team, please visit our Meet us page.

Don't hyperlink email addresses on web pages unless sending an email is part of a process, for example, *Fill out the form and email financesupport@utah.gov*.

If your division has a fax number, write *Phone:* and *Fax:* to clearly identify each number. If your division doesn't have a fax number, include the phone number without the *Phone*: label.

My division has a fax number:
Phone: 801-957-7780
Fax: 385-465-6012
financesupport@utah.gov

My division doesn't have a fax number:
801-957-7780
financesupport@utah.gov

If your division has a mailing address, write *Physical address:* and *Mailing address:* to clearly identify each address.

Acronyms: when should I use them?

Limit your use of acronyms

Acronyms make reading hard. When using acronyms, always consider your audience first. Will your reader understand what the acronym means? If you're not sure, don't use it. Instead, spell out the acronym or use another familiar term. For example, spell out *Division of Human Resource Management* or use the term *human resources* instead of the acronym *DHRM*.

If you must use an acronym, spell it out on first use followed by the acronym in parentheses, for example *Division of Human Resource Management (DHRM)*. If an acronym is used less than 3 times in your document, don't use it at all; spell it out each time.

Limit your document to 1-3 different acronyms total. Documents with a lot of acronyms are hard for readers to follow and understand.

Widely recognized acronyms are okay

Acronyms that are widely recognized don't need to be spelled out or defined, for example: *IRS*, *FBI*, *NASA*, *ATM*, *U.S.*, *COVID*.

If you don't know what an acronym stands for, use the acronym guide below.

Acronym guide

DB – Database

DBA – Database administrator

DFCM – Division of Facilities and Construction Management

DGO – Department of Government Operations (Use *GovOps* instead of *DGO*)

DHRM – Division of Human Resource Management

DOF – Division of Finance (Don’t use this acronym at all. Use *GovOps Division of Finance* as the full, proper title or *division of finance* for internal communication that won’t be seen by other agencies.)

DFCM – Division of Facilities Construction and Management

DTS – Division of Technology Services

FIS – Financial information systems

KB – Knowledge base

OSCD – Office of State Debt Collection

PCI – Payment card industry

Active and passive sentences: how do I choose?

Active sentences

What are they? Active sentences emphasize the subject and action. In an active sentence, the subject does the action.

> – *Employees eat lunch from 12:30-1 pm.*
> (The focus is on employees and the employees are doing the action: eating lunch)
>
> – *Visit human resources.*
> (The focus is on the action: visiting human resources. The subject in this sentence is invisible but implied: you)
>
> – *The division of finance serves over 100 agencies statewide*.
> (The focus is on the division of finance and the division is doing the action: serving)

When do I use them? Write active sentences most of the time. Active sentences are often shorter and more clear. Choose active sentences in the following circumstances:

1 – When you need to clarify who should do an action.

– **Active sentence**: *Travelers must fill out the travel request form and send it to their supervisor.* (This version is clear: travelers are the ones who should fill out the form and the form should go to the traveler's own supervisor)

– **Passive sentence**: *The travel request form must be filled out and sent to a supervisor*. (This version is less clear. Who is supposed to fill out the form? And which supervisor should it go to?)

2 – When the person is important and should be emphasized.

– **Active sentence**: *All 500 employees attended the event*. (This version emphasizes how many employees attended)

– **Passive sentence**: *The event was attended by all 500 employees*. (This version downplays the number of employees and instead emphasizes the event)

Passive sentences

What are they? Passive sentences emphasize an object more than a person. In passive sentences, the person is either moved to the end of the sentence or invisible.

– *Lunch must be eaten from 12:30-1 pm.* (The focus is on lunch. The person who should eat lunch is invisible: an unknown person)

– *Human resources must be visited*. (The focus is on human resources. The person who must visit is invisible: an unknown person)

– *Over 100 agencies statewide are served by the division of finance.* (The focus is on the number of agencies. The person who serves all the agencies is at the end of the sentence: the division of finance)

When do I use them? Use passive sentences sparingly. Too many passive sentences can be hard to read. Choose passive sentences in the following circumstances:

1 – When the person is unknown or unimportant and you want to emphasize the object instead.

– *The new building will be completed in February 2025*. (The building is more important than who built it)
– *The report was published yesterday, and the data is shocking*. (The focus is on the report and the shocking data, not who published the report)

2 – When you want to avoid placing blame. Active sentences can often come across harsh or rude when giving bad news or criticism. Passive sentences can soften your tone to prevent disharmony.

– **Active sentence**: *Jack didn't send me the reports.* (This version blames Jack and could feel like an attack)

– **Passive sentence**: *I didn't receive the reports.* (This version avoids blaming Jack and feels softer)

– **Active sentence**: *You didn't meet our expectations, so we're removing you from the project.* (This version feels harsh and discouraging)

– **Passive sentence**: *Expectations weren't met on this project, but we'd like to move you to a different project that will be a better fit.* (This version feels softer and more motivating)

Helpful resources: Where can I learn more?

Books

Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law by Joseph Kimball

Forms that Work: Designing Web Forms for Usability by Caroline Jarrett , Gerry Gaffney, et al.

Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works by Janice (Ginny) Redish

Smart Brevity: The Power of Saying More with Less, by Jim VandeHei, Mike Allen, and Roy Schwartz

Online resources

US government information on plain language

Article about designing for readability

Associated Press Stylebook