The Church of Scotland

ONLINE STYLE GUIDE

Guidance for writing content for the Church of Scotland website

VERSION: 1.0

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

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Online style guide

The Church of Scotland website is the first stop for many people looking for information about us and what we do. It is, therefore, important that the information on the site be clear, consistent, and accessible. This style guide will hopefully help you create content that fulfils these criteria. If you have any questions, please come and see the Comms team and we'll be happy to help you.

What the website is
- A widely accessible space to share vital, current information about the Church with external users
- A provider of up-to-date information about the Church, what we offer, and how people can take part. This includes:
  - The Church's beliefs, structure, and current areas of focus
  - How people can join the church, plan life events, or join the ministry
  - Current news stories and events
  - Job listings
  - Property for sale
  - Future plans

What the website is not
A depository of information about everything we've ever done. While a great deal of good work has been done by the Church over the years, the vast majority of visitors are not coming to the site to find out about it. They most likely have a specific, current task they need to accomplish. It's unhelpful for them to have to wade through a lot of historical information in order to find what they need.

A place to keep all print materials just in case someone feels like downloading and printing them out. Our statistics indicate that visitors do not do this, unless there's an extremely compelling reason for them to do so (for example: a form that someone needs to fill out).

Creating your content

Before you begin

Who is your audience?
Decide who your page is for and write specifically for them. Please do not say that your page is for "everyone"—that's too vague. Particular pages are going to be important or appeal to particular audiences. Some of the audiences we've identified for our website include:
- Ministers
- Church members
- Office bearers
- Young people
- Non-church members (curious members of the public)
- Property buyers

What is the purpose of this page?
Is this page fulfilling a known need for someone outside of our church offices? Remember, we are not a history vault—we must live in the here and now.

Writing your copy
Remember that, no matter who your audience is, they want to read interesting, well-written content. In addition, all the content on the site needs to be accessible, which means it should be as clear and concise as possible.

You only have a few seconds to grab someone's attention, so front-load your content. Make sure the most important ideas (the purpose for your page) are right at the start. Do you want volunteers? Are you describing a fund? What does that fund do? Don't hide this information.

Avoid using overly long words or jargon. Try to use the same sorts of words you'd use in everyday conversation with friends. For example, instead of saying "We resource" say "We offer".

Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Sentences should have 25 words, maximum, with 15-20 words being closer to ideal. Paragraphs should only be 3-4 sentences long, maximum. If you're ever in doubt about the readability of your copy, have someone outside your department look at it. Or send it to the web team and we'll help you.

People tend to scan web pages, so break things up to keep their interest. Use headers to guide people to the parts of the page that might be most useful to them. Make sure the headers (and the page name/headline) are descriptive and reflect the content. Use images, if you have them, to make it more visually interesting. Use bulleted lists when you can and keep the list items short (one sentence is best, two at a push, but best not to make a habit of this). Consider your tone. If your page is aimed at young people or church members, a friendly, more conversational tone would be appropriate and engaging. If your page is for ministers or deals with important matters such as legal obligations, a more serious tone may be called for.

Use gender-inclusive language, where appropriate. If you're talking about people in general, then try to use "they" or "them" instead of "man" or "woman" etc. Unless, of course, you're talking specifically about a man, or a woman, or a group that consists solely of one gender. Avoid making general references to elders, ministers, etc in the masculine if their gender is unknown.

Avoid passive voice. For example, instead of "the prayer was said by the minister," use "the minister said the prayer". It helps keep your writing punchy, and more interesting.

Use descriptive language in link text to communicate what will happen when people click it. Do not make a link "click here". Instead, a link should read "To learn more, visit **www.churchofscotand.org.uk**".

Images
Images must be:
- Good quality (not blurry, out of focus, featuring people who are blinking, etc.)
- At least 1200px wide
- In some way closely related to the content of the page

Images help draw the reader's interest, but they must be chosen carefully. Images that are poor quality make the page (and the site) look unprofessional. Also, images that have little to do with the content of the page are likely to be ignored by your reader.

Whenever possible, use images that show actual people engaging with the church. Good examples are the images we use in our news section. When possible, try to avoid using stock photos of lights in bell jars, hand-holding, candles, logos or any kind of clip art. Web users don't seem to love those types of photos, and they tend to be overused across the internet.

Images should be resized before they're uploaded and added to a page. If possible, please choose a landscape-oriented image to be your main image on the page, and size it to 1200 px wide. Please DO NOT take an image that is smaller than 1200px and blow it up. The image quality will be too low to be usable.

If you're looking for stock imagery, **Pixabay.com** and **Unsplash.com** have some excellent free options to suit nearly every need. If you're struggling to find an image or resize it, please let the web team know and we'll help you. The web editor is best placed to decide on appropriate image use for web pages.

PDF documents

We are now limiting the number of PDFs uploaded to the site. PDFs are not accessibility friendly, as they often can't be read by screen readers, and our search struggles to index them, making them hard to find on the site. They're also not SEO friendly, making it difficult for external search engines, such as Google, to index them as well.

In addition, our statistics show that very few of our PDFs are actually accessed or downloaded from the site, making most of these superfluous.

You should only be adding a PDF to the site if it is:
- Something that definitely needs to be printed out, such as a form
  - Please note that complex print materials, such as brochures and posters, do not fall under this category, as site visitors do not actually print them, most likely due to cost and complexity
- An important document that is far too long to be posted as a webpage

Most information currently presented as PDFs or Word documents could instead be web pages. In fact, they would likely benefit from becoming web pages, due to the reasons mentioned above. When creating content, please stop and consider whether this really needs to be a document, or if it would be better as a page. Feel free to come and discuss the best options with the web team—we're here to help.

House style

Capitalisation – Church-related words

- Church: 'Church of Scotland' should be written out in full in the first instance, to avoid ambiguity. 'Church' or 'Churches' refer to the universal Church. 'Church' would also be in uppercase when the full name is used, e.g. Murrayfield Parish Church, but lower case in 'the church seats 300 people'. When discussing different denominations or the world church use lower case church. e.g. The World Council of Churches is made up of 345 member churches.
- Bible: Uppercase when referring to the Scriptures (also upper case); lower case when the word is used generically, (e.g. 'the librarian's bible.'
  - o   Bible references are in the following style: Isaiah 12:2, written as follows: 'For God so loved the world' (John 3:16) or 'We learn in Isaiah 12:2 that...'
- Job titles are generally lower case ('head teacher', 'minister', 'elder'. 'Being a minister is challenging'. However, 'I am becoming a Minister of Word and Sacrament.'
- 'Moderator' should be capped if referencing the person: 'The Moderator said', but not when the role is referenced generally: 'we will ask a moderator to attend'. The Moderator is always the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland – never the Moderator of the Church of Scotland.
- Rev must only be used with a full name (i.e. Rev Tony Green, but never Rev Green.) If not using the first name, then drop the Rev for Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms. 'Rev Tony Green was at church. Mr Green was happy to conduct the service.'
- General Assembly: Always capped, as are the Church of Scotland departments. 'Presbytery' is capped when named but lower case in subsequent references (e.g. 'The matter was discussed at St Andrews Presbytery. The presbytery then decided...'). In general, Church job titles should be lower case (e.g. 'presbytery clerk.'
- Church legislation is capped when the full piece of legislation is named (the Declamatory Pupil Act of 1877) but lower case in subsequent references (the act said that the pulpit...)
- Clergy in other denominations should be given correct titles according to the rules of that denomination. Mass should be capitalised.
- God and Jesus: upper case. Wherever possible, try to avoid using personal pronouns relating to God. Where it's unavoidable, use 'he' or 'his' without capitals.
- Communion: uppercase
- The Word: upper case when used as a substitute for Jesus or the Bible

Capitalisation - General
Aside from the usual (first words in sentences, proper nouns, etc.), we capitalise:
- The first letter of the first word in a list
- The first letter of the first word in a headline, page name, or subheadline
  - o   Note that ONLY the first letter of the first word is capitalised. All other words, aside from proper nouns, are lowercase.

Numbers

The basics
- If you're writing about how many of something there are, write out the number ("Three ministers attended the meeting...")
- In all instances, one to nine should be written in full
- First, second and third places should also be written
- Use numerals for numbers 10 and above
- Express large and very large numbers in numerals followed by million, billion, etc.
- If expressing a number greater than 999 in numerals, use a comma
- Do not hyphenate numbers
- Avoid starting a sentence with a numeral
- If you can't avoid it, spell out the number

Ages
When referring to the age of a person, animal or object
- Spell out numbers one to nine
- Use numerals for 10 or more
- When making a decade reference to a person's age (for example, she is in her 30s), use numeral and an "s" without an apostrophe

Dates

Days of the week and months
- Do not abbreviate days of the week or months of the year—write them out in full

Years
- Years should be written in full: 2020

Ordering and punctuating the date
- Use the order day>date>month>year: Monday 17 June 2013 or 17 June 2013 or 17 June are all correct
- Write out the date in full
- Do not write June 17, June 17th, or 17th June
- Do not use 17/6/13
- Do not punctuate in-between

Decade and centuries
- To state a decade, add an "s" without an apostrophe: i.e. 1930s

Time
- Use numerals to state all times except noon and midnight
- Noon is 12 noon, not 12pm; midnight is 12 midnight, not 12am
- For on-the-hour times, you needn't include the minutes
   - So, 3pm instead of 3:00pm
- But do include the minutes when necessary for consistency with the text or a table
   - So, the event is on from 5:00 to 7:15pm
- Do not use periods in a.m. or p.m.
- Abbreviate time zones in capital letters without periods

Fractions and decimals
- Use decimal notation instead of fractions on the web
   - So, instead of 1-1/2 use 1.5
- If a fraction stands alone, without a whole number, spell out and hyphenate
   - So, instead of ¾ spell out three-quarters

Money and currency
For prices of a pound or more, use numerals and the £ symbol: a £6 coffee
It isn't necessary to include the decimal and two zeros for whole pound amounts appearing in a sentence or headline.
But do include the zeros if:
- They make sense in the context (a spreadsheet, table or shopping cart)
- The provide consistency within a series (for example, cost £2.75 small, £3.00 medium and £3.25 large)
- For prices under a pound, use the numeral and the words pence (for example 55 pence)

Grammar and punctuation
Single space after a period

Apostrophes (')
The apostrophe has two main functions:
- To indicate the omission of letters or numerals
- To form a possessive
- It is almost never used to make a plural

Colons (:)
The colon is most often used to introduce:
- A table, list or illustration
- An element in a series
- A long quotation
- The second part of a heading or title

Do not capitalise following a colon, excepting when quoting.

Exclamation points (!)
- Use them very sparingly for emphatic expression, as overuse means it loses its impact
- If the exclamation point ends a quotation, do not use a comma or period after the exclamation point

Question marks (?)
- Use a question mark for a direct question: How are you feeling today?
- Do not use a question mark for indirect questions (which are typically worded as statements): She asked how I was feeling today.

The ampersand (&)
Avoid using this unless it's the name of a company. Use the word "and" instead.

Quotation marks
Use single quotation marks for:
- Defining words
- Referring to words and letters
- Expressing irony
- Setting off long modifiers
- Setting off the titles of some works
- A quote within a direct quote

Use double quotation marks for:
- Direct quotations: the exact words of a writer or speaker
  - i.e. Right Reverend Lorna Hood, Moderator of the General Assembly of The Church of Scotland said: "It was a wonderful privilege to represent The Church of Scotland and be part of this spectacle of tradition and inspiring music."
  - End the punctuation inside the quotation mark.

Abbreviate, capitalise and treat titles consistently
Acronyms and other abbreviations
- An abbreviation is a shortened form of a word or phrase
- An acronym is a specific type of abbreviation, typically formed by the initial components of a longer name or phrase (UK, EU, SNP)

No matter how familiar an abbreviation may seem to you, some visitors may be unfamiliar with the term. If the shortened form of a word may be unfamiliar to your readers, spell it out the first time it's used. (i.e. World Council of Churches (WWC))
If the shortened form is better known than its spelled out form, then use the shortened form. (i.e. USB)

Email addresses
- Where possible use email Forename Surname as the link (i.e. RSVP by emailing Jane Doe)
- Avoid using forename.surname@churchofscotland.org.uk

Website names and addresses
- Try to refer to a website by its name as opposed to the URL
- Use the preferred capitalisation of the website itself
- Where you must use the URL don't include http:// at the beginning
- Don't include the trailing slash (/)

The Church of Scotland
Communications Department

www.churchofscotland.org.uk