

Commerce Style Guide

Updated August 15, 2022

This communications and style guide is a quick reference to ensure consistency and quality in the materials we share, internally and externally. Commerce materials should be mostly consistent with the [Associated Press Stylebook](#) and [OFM Style Guide](#). You can find additional style guidance through both those resources. (For legislative reports, refer to Commerce's [legislative report page on IntraCOM](#).)

Have questions? Please reach out to Publications Manager and Editor [Amelia Lamb](#) or Internal Communications Manager [Dawn Geluso](#).

Basic principles for communicating clearly

- Write for your audience, not for yourself. Respecting your audience means taking the time to ensure information is quick and easy for them to understand.
- Keep it simple and concise. Use fewer words, shorter sentences, brief paragraphs and leave plenty of white space.
- Use plain language, or plain talk. Plainly written content is easier for diverse audiences to understand and is more easily translated. Terms of art and technical language is easily misconstrued and can come across as arrogant and patronizing.
- Think about format and imagery. People tend to avoid large blocks of text. People's eyes are drawn to headers, images, image captions, and bullet points or lists. Use those spaces to deliver key messages. Is there adequate white space for easy scanning? Did you break content into easy-to-scan sections with descriptive headers? Instead of lengthy narrative, could you create a graphic? Do your images enhance the reader's ability to understand the information or simply take up space?
- Emphasize outcomes and focus on people. Your words put images in people's heads. Telling people we spent \$400 million on a new program lacks meaning and context, and probably evokes an image of bureaucrats spending money. Compare that to the image someone might see if you said we doubled the number of emergency shelter beds over the past four years and served an additional 3,000 individuals experiencing homelessness.

Quick style tips

Capitalization

- "State" is only capitalized when part of a formal title. It is not capitalized when referring to Washington state. (We live in the state of Washington. A new law went into effect today in Washington state. I work at the Washington State Department of Commerce.)
- "City" and "county" are only capitalized if those words are part of the municipality's proper name. (He visited Kansas City. The meeting with Kittitas County leaders went well. We're going to the city of Olympia.)
- Legislature is capitalized when referring to the institution of the Washington State Legislature. (The Legislature is still in session. The note came from legislative staff. Several legislators sponsored the bill.)
- Titles related to jobs are capitalized when they appear directly before a person's name. (Director Lisa Brown lives in Spokane. The organization invited President Biden to their event.) Titles are lowercased when they appear after the person's name or as a descriptor. (Lisa Brown, director of Commerce, visited the city today. The president is among today's guests.)
- Black is always capitalized, and is a singular term. Do not refer to a group of Black individuals as Blacks. White is lowercase.
- Unless referring to a specific tribe, don't capitalize "tribe" and "tribal" (Note: This is a style change based on recent guidance and brings us in line with AP style). Upon first mention of a specific tribe or nation, use the tribe or nation's full formal name, according to how they self-identify. You can then use "Tribe" (note the capitalization) or "Nation" in subsequent mentions. Example: "The Yakama Nation is an important partner. We consulted with the Tribe on this water project.")
- Only capitalize the first word in a title or subhead unless word is part of a proper noun, title, etc.

Punctuation

- No serial commas appear unless the statement includes an extra "and" or "or" in it. (He ate ham, eggs and toast. They ate mac and cheese, broccoli, and peas.)
- No ampersands (&) appear unless part of a proper noun.
- No double spaces appear between sentences.
- Punctuation is placed inside quotation marks unless it's a semicolon or question mark. Semicolons go outside the quotation mark and the question mark depends on whether it is part of the quoted material or something being asked about the quoted material. (The legislator called the project "incredibly valuable." Did the legislator call the project "incredibly valuable"?)

Dates

- Commas surround years in dates. (On Jan. 2, 2021, Commerce decided ...)
- Months with more than five letters that precede a date are abbreviated. (Commerce held the meeting Jan. 2, 2021. The meeting will be held in November 2021.)

Numbers

- Numbers one through nine are spelled out. Use numerals for 10 and higher except when using dollar amounts, percentages or street addresses. In those cases, numerals are always used.
- Dollar figures use the dollar sign and not “dollars.” Dollar-figure spreads are written accurately. (“\$10 to \$11 million” vs. “\$10 million to \$11 million” — the first example literally means between 10 dollars to 11 million dollars.)
- Avoid abbreviating “million” and “billion.” If necessary for space, use a capital M or B with no space after the number and be consistent in how many digits you round to. (The Legislature approved \$4.3B for construction and \$5.1M for maintenance.)
- A percent sign (%), not “percent,” follows numerals, when relevant.
- Any figures lower than 1 begin with “0.” (0.12%)

Sentence structure and grammar

- Sentences are kept short, generally meaning one subject and one verb, or one thought at a time. Long sentences should be broken into two or more sentences.
- Any loaded terms that carry opinion weight have either been attributed to a source, used in a quote, or removed. (“deserve,” “wrong,” “valuable,” “worthwhile,” “best,” “better,” “citizen” [use “resident” whenever possible], “unfortunately,” “sadly,” etc.)
- “Who” is used when referencing a person or named animal. Otherwise, “that” is used. (Bob is someone who enjoys sailing. We're recruiting a company that makes widgets.)
- The term “may” is only used if in a direct quote. Instead, use “might,” “could,” “can” or “permission,” when appropriate.
- Active voice ensures clarity about who is doing what. (Passive: The program was launched last fall. Active: The city launched the program last fall.)

Legal and online reminders

- No content has been plagiarized from other sources.

- All graphics and their text components are readable, accessible and properly sourced. Alt text is included for all images so people using screen readers can access the content. In the “Info” section under the “File” tab of a Word document, “Commerce” appears as the author name, and keywords specific to a report have been added to “tags” to ensure search engines can find the report.
- No images have been taken from the internet or other sources without first securing the owner’s permission to use the image. All such images are properly credited, and written permission for use has been retained.

Citing sources

Citing sources is important for many reasons, including:

- To ensure the audience can find the original material from the original source, bringing credibility to us by using legitimate sources
- To keep us safe legally

For all writing types other than technical or legislative, use in-text citations with hyperlinks whenever possible. Examples:

- "Stand-up paddleboarding, or SUP, has been increasing in popularity for several years now, but since the pandemic hit, the demand for the watersport has exploded," according to the Seattle Times article "[A guide to stand-up paddleboarding in the Seattle area.](#)"
- Stand-up paddleboarding is hugely popular in Western Washington, especially since the pandemic upended our lives, according to the [Seattle Times](#).
- In an [interview with the Seattle Times](#), Salmon Bay Paddle owner Rob Casey said, “Beginners wonder about being able to stand. If you can walk down the street, your balance is fine. A lot of people get intimidated and think they can’t paddle, but with practice, you’ll improve your balance and your fitness.”

For technical or legislative writing, use footnote citations in simple format with hyperlinks:

Author, and/or publishing entity, “title of report, book, article or webpage,” (year published or exact date accessed if to a webpage), hyperlink

Examples:

- Center for Evidenced-Based Solutions, “Homelessness Prevention,” (2019), <http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/topic/homelessness-prevention/>
- Washington State Department of Commerce, “Washington State Coordinated Entry Guidelines,” <https://deptofcommerce.app.box.com/s/3rwdm9w1wdquncuucfbnubt0aqhsd0wf>

List style

Using bulleted and numbered lists is a great thing for your audiences. Lists are far easier to spot and read quickly.

When you use a list, use ending punctuation only when sentences are complete. In addition, if you introduce your list with a number, use numerals instead of bullets.

For example:

The communications triangle is composed of three elements:

- Heart
- Data and facts
- Credible sourcing

Use parallel structure so each bullet begins consistently (with a verb, adjective, subject, etc.). For example, instead of --

This new grant program is:

- Easy to apply for
- Online customer service is available
- Applicants can find materials in multiple languages

Try --

This new grant program offers:

- Easy application process
- Online customer service
- Multiple language options

Here are four quick tips for pre-editing your document using the "search and replace" feature in Word:

- Search for the term "dollars." Delete any you find connected to a numeral and insert the dollar sign (\$).
- Search for the term "percent." Anytime it's connected to a numeral, replace it with the percent sign (%).
- Search for the term "may" and replace it (when not in a direct quote) with "might," "could," "can" or "permission" as appropriate.
- Search for "Legislature." It should be capitalized when referring to the Washington State Legislature. In contrast, "legislative" is lowercased.

Quality control checklist

- **It's clearly a Commerce document.** The document uses a Commerce template and/or adheres to [branding guidelines](#). It adheres to AP and OFM style guides.
- **It's dated.** If applicable, older versions are removed from the Commerce website.
- **It's accurate.** The appropriate subject matter experts have confirmed the accuracy of the content. All math elements have been double checked.
- **It's been reviewed by another person.** A person who is skilled at editing but has not been involved in drafting the document has reviewed the content to ensure readability, appropriate tone and sentence structure, etc.

