

SNH web content style guide

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Page brief

Find out how to structure your content most effectively for the web.

Title

Captures the content of the page concisely.

Headline

Captures the content of the page and whets the reader's appetite. Don't repeat body text, though it's OK to say essentially a similar thing in a different way. Include keywords. Absolute maximum 20 words.

Summary

This also captures the content of the page and is designed to get the reader's attention. It doesn't appear on the page but is used in used in navigation. Include keywords and use active verbs, e.g. 'Find out more ...', 'Watch the video ...'.

Body text

Think like a journalist and follow the 'inverted pyramid' principle:

- Start with the most important information. Readers should be able to find everything they need to know from the first few paragraphs – or paragraph on a short page.
- Next, fill in the key information.
- Finally, provide any background detail and links to further information.

Use meaningful headings with keywords to break up the text and to 'signpost' content for readers scanning the page.

Bullet points also break up the text and catch the attention of readers scanning the page. They are also a good way of breaking out and simplifying lists of long items.

Links allows readers to explore other relevant content on the site easily and make them aware of what's out there. They also help you to keep your content concise by linking to a page giving further explanation of a technical term or to a more detailed report on an important finding you want to mention.

Always link to internal web pages first. Link to pages on other authoritative websites when there is nothing relevant on the SNH site.

Find out more

Links to relevant related pages or publications on the SNH website. Hyperlink the title of the page or publication. No closing punctuation.

Related Links

Links to relevant related pages or publications on other authoritative websites. Hyperlink the title of the page or publication. No closing punctuation.

You may also be interested in

Suggest links to other relevant pages on the SNH website that haven't already been linked to on the page. This encourages the reader to explore the site further.

Content style guide: introduction

This guide will:

- help you to write good engaging content for the web
- ensure that our website is presented to a consistently high standard

More detailed guidance and examples are given in the following sections. But keep the key principles of writing 'killer content' in mind and you'll not go far wrong.

The 7Cs of killer content

- **Clear** – does it actually say (to everyone else) what you think it says? Read it back before submitting your content and ask for a second opinion if you're not sure.
- **Compelling** – Will it [keep your reader on the page](#) and inspire them to do whatever you want them to do: read the guidance, visit a reserve, stop using plastic bags?
- **Complete** – Have you included all the information the reader needs without overloading them with detail?
- **Concise** – Are there [unnecessary words](#) or empty phrases? Be ruthless!
- **Correct** – Check your facts and watch out for misplaced commas and missing or extra zeros (e.g. the Ice Age ended about 1,150 years ago).
- **Consistent** – This applies not just to style (e.g. well-being or wellbeing) but also to the message you're putting across. Watch out for mixed messages and potential contradictions.
- **User-focused** – Does it [speak to the person](#) you're trying to reach: the busy land manager looking for guidance on protected species, the teacher looking for ideas for outdoor learning, the dad looking for something fun and interesting to do with his kids at the weekend? Tell them what they need to know first – then fill in the detail.

Abbreviations, acronyms and contractions

General guidelines

Avoid overloading the page with abbreviations and acronyms – too many make the text difficult to read.

The first time you use an abbreviation or acronym on each page, write it out in full, e.g. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

If you think that an abbreviation or acronym is well known and people may search for it, include it in the headline as well.

In general, don't use an abbreviation if you're not going to use it again on the page.

An acronym is an abbreviation that can be pronounced as a word and should be written with an initial capital, e.g. Defra, Unesco.

'Dr' is a contraction of 'Doctor' and does not take a full point.

'Prof.' is an abbreviation of 'Professor' and does take a full point.

SNH

If Scottish Natural Heritage has been given in full before, either on the page or in the headline, you can use SNH thereafter.

However, you can use 'we', 'our' and 'us' if it's clear from the context that you're referring to SNH. Or, if you prefer, 'At SNH, we aim to ...'.

Punctuation

Ampersands (&)

'and' is always preferred, unless the ampersand is part of a proper name, e.g. of a company (& Co.).

Apostrophes

Used in the possessive form (SNH's mission) and in contractions (you're, don't).

'It' follows the reverse rule:

- 'Its' is the possessive, e.g. 'Each National Park has its own special attractions.'
- 'It's' is the contraction, meaning 'it is', e.g. 'It's within easy reach of both Glasgow and Edinburgh.'

Singular nouns have the apostrophe before the 's', e.g. 'the Cairngorms National Park's special attractions'.

Plural nouns have the apostrophe after the 's', e.g. 'Learn about red squirrels' relationship with people.'

Brackets

Avoid the use of brackets wherever possible and use spaced en dashes (-) instead. This is a more modern way of writing and makes content more readable.

Colons

Use a colon to introduce a displayed list or a short list in body text. For example, 'You'll find a wealth of wildflowers on the higher slopes: purple saxifrage, yellow mountain saxifrage and globeflower.'

Use a colon to introduce or explain an idea that follows on from the introductory text before the colon. For example, 'Use low-intensity cattle grazing: rotate areas grazed to increase diversity and provide places where plants can flower and set seed.'

Commas

Avoid the serial - or Oxford - comma, e.g. 'red, white and blue' - not 'red, white, and blue'. If you feel you need to add a serial comma to clarify items in a list in running text, it may be better to use a bullet list.

Otherwise, commas can be contentious, so keep them to the minimum necessary for clarity.

En dash or en rule

Use a closed-up en dash in number ranges, e.g. SNH Business Plan 2017-18.

Use spaced en dashes in place of brackets, e.g. 'Good management of all land uses - from farmland to forests - will secure these for the future.'

Use a spaced en dash to expand on or explain an idea at the end of a sentence, e.g. 'We support the sustainable growth of Scotland's marine aquaculture industry - otherwise known as fish farming.'

Use a closed-up en dash to indicate 'to', 'and' or 'versus', e.g. the urban-rural divide.

Exclamation marks

Use very sparingly and not when writing for a professional audience.

Question marks

Use at the end of a direct question, e.g. 'Why not join us as a volunteer?'

Do not use in indirect speech, e.g. 'We have to ask ourselves what we can do for nature in our everyday lives.'

Quotation marks

Use single quotation marks for 'scare quotes', e.g. 'The initiative involves a significant increase in woodland expansion - to further 'green up' the area.'

Use double quotation marks for reported speech, e.g. 'Mike Cantlay, SNH Chair, added: "Connecting people and nature is vital to the work of SNH ...".'

Semicolons

Avoid using semi-colons, as they are often misread. Divide long sentences into two short sentences.

Capitals, names and numbers

Capitals

Reserve block capitals for abbreviations (e.g. SSSI). Don't use them for large amounts of text, as they make it difficult to read.

As a rule, try to minimise capitalisation.

Use initial capitals for:

- proper names, e.g. Earth (the planet), the Gulf Stream
- the names of sites, e.g. Balmedie Country Park, Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve
- job titles, e.g. Planning Adviser, Project Coordinator
- days of the week and months of the year

Use lower case for:

- the seasons – spring, autumn, etc.
- points of the compass – north, south, etc.

Centuries

Follow the same guidance as for [numbers](#): ninth century, 19th century

Countries

UK (noun, adjective)

USA (noun), US (adjective)

Currencies

Use the symbols: £2 billion, €50,000.

Dates

Use the form 29 January 2018.

AD (before the number)

BC (after the number)

Fractions

Write out in full and hyphenate: two-thirds, three-quarters.

Geographical regions

Use lower case for north, south, east and west – also northern, north-east, etc. – except when they're part of a [proper name](#) or recognised region, e.g. the North Sea, North-west Highlands.

Government

Use lower case when referring to the UK government. The same applies to the governments of other countries.

Use a capital letter for Scottish Government.

Names

Capitalise titles – such as Dr or Professor – when they are part of the person's name. For example, 'Professor Robert Furness is Chair of SNH's Scientific Advisory Committee. Dr Aileen Mill is a board member.'

Capitalise titles when they are part of [job titles](#). For example, 'He is Professor of Behavioural Ecology at the University of Glasgow.'

Numbers

One to nine written out in full, then use numerals, e.g. nine, 11, 150, 5,000, 11,000, 2 million, 3.6 billion.
No comma in years: 2018.

First to ninth written out in full, then 10th, 11th, etc.

Use numerals for units of time: 4 weeks, 6 months, 3 years.

Begin decimal numbers less than one with 0: 0.76.

Percentages

Use the % symbol.

Species names

Use the common name unless writing for a scientific audience. Common names are lower case, unless they contain a proper name, e.g. red deer, wheatear, Atlantic salmon, Wilson's filmy fern.

The scientific (Latin) name should be used only when writing for a scientific audience or when there is no common name and the species is always referred to by its Latin name, e.g. some non-vascular plants such as the fungus *Pseudocyphellaria intricata*.

The common name should be used – if there is one – followed by the Latin name in brackets at first mention – all in italics, genus beginning with an initial capital, e.g. tufted saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*). Thereafter, use the common name.

If writing for a scientific audience and a species' Latin name is used on the same page more than once, it is usual to abbreviate the generic name after its first use, e.g. first time *Hydropsyche siltalia*, subsequent uses *H. siltalai*.

Headline or summary fields will not accept italics. So avoid using Latin names as far as possible. Otherwise, italic text will need to be enclosed in brackets.

Telephone numbers

Landline numbers: 01738 444177 or 0131 316 2600

Mobile numbers: 07700 300400

Times

Use the 12-hour clock, am and pm without full stops and closed up to the number, e.g. 10am, 4pm.

Units

Abbreviated units closed up to the number, e.g. 50cm, 600m, 3,000ha.

Units in full have a space after the number, e.g. 600 metres, 5 kilometres. Suggest using units in full on pages that will be read by a wide audience.

Highlighting and emphasising text

Bold

Don't use bold – use either headings or bullets to emphasise particular words or sections.

However, used sparingly, 'power bullets' can be effective when there isn't the option of another level of heading:

- **Mitigation** – Minimise the degree of climate change.
- **Adaptation** – Prepare Scotland for a changing climate.
- **Communication** – Raise widespread awareness of climate change issues.

Italics

Minimise the use of italics, as they make the text more difficult to read. Reserve for [scientific species names](#). Otherwise, avoid the use of Latin words or phrases and use plain English instead.

Choosing the correct words and spelling

Advice and advise

Advice is the noun, e.g. 'We provide advice for planners and developers.'

Advise is the verb, e.g. 'We can advise you if you think you have bats in your home.'

Adviser

Not advisor.

Affect and effect

Affect is a verb, meaning to have an influence on – including feelings.

Effect is usually used as a noun, meaning a result. It can also be used as a verb, meaning to cause or achieve. Use 'cause' or 'achieve' instead.

Alternate and alternative

Alternate can be used as a verb, meaning to do in turn repeatedly, or as an adjective, meaning every other.

Alternative can be used as an adjective or noun, meaning another option.

Compliment and complement

A compliment is a flattering remark.

Complement means to complete something or make it whole.

Fewer and less

Use fewer with countable nouns, e.g. fewer salmon.

Use less with uncountable nouns, e.g. less water.

Licence and license

Licence is the noun, e.g. 'You will need a licence before you can carry out any work that might affect bats or their roosts.'

License is the verb, e.g. 'We may also license muirburning out of season.'

Practice and practise

Practice is the noun, e.g. 'You'll find species-specific advice on best practice for watching marine wildlife.'

Practise is the verb, e.g. 'Practise this technique at home before you demonstrate it to a professional audience.'

Spelling

UK, -ise, e.g. organise

among, rather than amongst

benefited, benefiting

focused, focusing

while, rather than whilst

widgeon, rather than widgeon

Web writing style

Active voice

Use the active rather than the passive voice. This will help you to write clear, concise content. For example, 'We may also license out-of-season muirburn where necessary' (active) rather than 'Out-of-season muirburn may also be licensed where necessary' (passive).

Use active verbs: Explore ..., Find out more ..., Join us This will help you to write engaging and compelling content.

Use active verbs rather than the nouns derived from them. This will help to keep your writing lively and concise. For example, 'We will work closely with our partners to implement the new guidance' rather than 'We will work closely with our partners on the implementation of the new guidance'.

Address the user

Address the reader as '[You](#)' where possible. It's engaging and helps your content appeal directly to readers to get involved or take action, e.g. 'You can contact us by phone or email.'

Address layout



Audience

Identify your [audience](#) – who are they and what do they want?

Imagine a real person and write for him or her.

Bulleted and numbered lists

These break up the text, draw the reader's eye and make it easier to read lists of items.

Use bulleted lists as the default and reserve numbered lists for when the number of items is significant, e.g. 'This project had three main aims:'

Introduce the list with a colon.

A list in which each item is not a full sentence takes the format:

- start a dialogue about something that matters to their community
- have their voice heard in policy or service development
- participate in service provision
- challenge decisions and seek support for alternatives that improve outcomes

No initial capitals, no punctuation – including the last point.

A list in which each item is a full sentence takes the format:

- Goose counts are carried out roughly fortnightly from November to March. A total of 15 counts are completed per holding per season.
- Population counts (international) are completed four times per season: in November, December, January and March.
- We use the 7-year rolling average to calculate payments.

Each item starts with an initial capital and ends with a full point.

Concise writing

Focus on your main message and write in plain English.

Keep sentences short – aim for no more than 16–20 words. However, do vary sentence length to avoid your content becoming ‘choppy’ and insistent. It’s good to start and finish a page with short sentences if you can.

Keep paragraphs short. Aim for a maximum of three sentences.

Contractions

Using [contractions](#) such as ‘you’ll’ and ‘don’t’ helps to make your content approachable and engaging.

Headings

Headings help to break up the text and are useful signposts for the reader.

Keep them short and informative – aim for no more than eight words – and include keywords.

Headings should follow on directly from the main title heading of the page which is a heading 1 (H1).

The first heading in the body field should be an H2, followed by H3. Use the same formatting as you would in MS Word.

Headings should be title case – initial capital on only the first word and any proper names – e.g. Landscape variety in Scotland, Habitat Map of Scotland.

Don’t use abbreviations in headings if they would be the only word. It is OK to use an abbreviation if it’s not the only word and expanding it would make the heading unnecessarily long, e.g. Knockan Cliff SSSI.

Headline (strapline)

Captures the key content of the page. Don’t repeat body text – though it’s OK to say essentially the same thing in a different way.

Maximum 20 words.

Inclusive language

Avoid gender-specific words if you can. For example, ‘the reserve office is staffed ...’ rather than ‘the reserve office is manned ...’.

Jargon

Try to avoid public sector jargon, particularly in pages aimed at a wide audience. Use plain English and words that general readers will understand. For example, instead of ‘mainstreaming greenspace’, you might say something like ‘making greenspace part of everyday thinking/practice’. It’s more words, but everyone will know what you mean.

However, when writing for an expert audience, technical terms and jargon can be useful because you’re using the words that your readers use.

Keywords

For readers: keywords are the words that they have in their minds. They help readers find exactly what they’re looking for.

For search engines: identify one or two keywords per page and use them in headings and body text. But don’t overuse them.

Links

Links should have descriptive text assigned to them. If they were removed from the rest of the body text, readers should still be able to understand where that link will take them. For example, ‘Find out more about [Scotland’s landscapes](#).’

Avoid using link text: click here, follow, more information, see, etc.

Organisations

Treat them as singular. For example, 'SNH is working with Forestry Commission Scotland ...', but 'At SNH, we are working with Forestry Commission Scotland ...', which is more approachable and engaging.

Paragraph length

Aim for a maximum of [three sentences](#) per paragraph.

Use plain English

It makes your content clear, easy to read and accessible to all. Avoid using [these words](#) and use the alternatives suggested.

Plurals: Latin and Greek

Limit Latin and Greek plurals to the commonly known words, e.g. data, criteria.

Avoid using less familiar plural forms, e.g. use 'forums' rather than 'fora'.

Readers – it's all about them

You want readers to visit your page and find the information they need, learn something or be inspired to do something: volunteer at a reserve, get involved with a school project, look out for signs of a notifiable disease, or simply enjoy our natural heritage while walking the dog. Identify your key message(s).

Then identify your target audience and write for an imaginary person. Put yourself in their shoes. What will they want to know? What words would they use? Use the same words to draw them in and avoid 'agency speak' – or public sector [jargon](#).

Make use of contractions, such as 'You'll' and 'don't', to make your content approachable and engaging.

Make it easy for readers to find exactly what they're looking for. They will quickly lose interest if they can't. So, tell them what they need to know first and get their attention. Then you can give them more detail in a helpful order.

Repetition

Avoid repeating words in a sentence and overusing the same word in your content.

Sentence length

Aim for a maximum of [16-20 words](#).

Summaries (teasers)

These are used in navigation and do not appear on the page.

Focus on who, what, where and when.

Use 'you' and 'we' and active verbs, e.g. Explore ..., Discover

Maximum 30 words.

Tone of voice

Keep in mind SNH's values, and they will be reflected in your writing:

- Trust and Expertise
- Celebration and Passion
- Empowerment and Inspiration
- Responsive and Inclusive

Write in a style that is clear, direct, approachable and positive. And keep it authoritative, supportive or engaging, depending on your audience and subject. For example, if you're writing for the general reader, adopt a conversational, engaging tone. If you're writing advice for planners, keep it professional and authoritative but also approachable and supportive.

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Approach your content with conviction and passion and the values will shine through.

Hyphenation

General guidelines

Hyphenate points of the compass, e.g. north-east, north-eastern.

Hyphenate fractions, e.g. two-thirds.

Hyphenate numbers in adjectives, e.g. a 12-week general licensing consultation.

Specific points

well-being

Publications

Adopt a consistent style for the titles of publications: roman text, title case, hyperlinked. For example, 'Read the [Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code](#).'