



Digital content standard

TfL's Digital content standard outlines how to write and edit content for TfL's digital channels, including tfl.gov.uk. It discusses issues such as accessibility, tone of voice, use of plain English and formatting requirements.

Audience

- Writers and editors
- Designers
- Content owners
- Relationship managers
- Developers

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Why we do this

TfL's digital services cater to everyone, from confident commuters to hesitant holidaymakers, not to mention the numerous schools, suppliers, politicians and business partners who visit our site each day.

This means our online content should be friendly and easy to understand. It also needs to meet a range of strategic, legal and accessibility requirements, which means information should be clear, concise and quick to make its point.

Overarching principles

1. Writing for online is different from writing for offline

People go online to get something done or answer a question - they are task-oriented. They are also impatient and will leave a page quickly if they can't see at a glance what they're looking for or don't understand it.

This means you have to change how you write online. If you just cut and paste from a printed document, you'll end up with dense, text-heavy pages that are hard to scan and confusing to read.

You should include only essential information, using short paragraphs, clear headlines, bulleted lists and words and phrases people are likely to search for.

Longer pages should include an 'on this page menu' which will help readers scan the page, get an overview and find the content they're looking for quickly (or decide the page isn't what they are looking for).

2. Mobile first

Our website is designed to work on most devices, whatever their size.

An increasing number of people are visiting our site on a mobile device.

Our aim is to make key information visible on the first screen.

1. Requirements

You **must** follow all recommendations and requirements described in this standard when writing or editing digital content for TfL.

Requirements for new content

To make sure our digital content meets our strategic, legal and accessibility requirements, all new content must meet the following criteria:

1.1 It has a clear user benefit

- How will this content help your readers?
- Why will they be interested in it?
- How and when will you measure the success of your content?

1.2 It aligns with TfL objectives

- How does it align with TfL's Business Plan?
- How does it align with Mayoral objectives?
- How does it align with TfL's Digital Strategy?

1.3 It is cost-effective

- Is there a valid business case for it?
- Is there adequate funding for development and ongoing maintenance?
- Is there a defined audience type and size? If this is vague, it will be hard to demonstrate a valid business case or measure success

1.4 It fits within our existing information architecture (IA)

- Where does this live in the site? Read our [IA principles](#)

1.5 It does not duplicate information already available on TfL's digital services

- Can you link to an existing page?

1.6 It does not duplicate information that is better provided on an external website

- Will people expect to find the information on our website?
- If someone else is the expert, would it be better to link to their site?

1.7 **Online is the most effective means of communicating this information**

- Will the people you're targeting look for it online?
- Does everyone who needs it have it already?
- Would it be more effective to email, hand out leaflets or maildrop people directly?

1.8 **It has a defined content lifecycle**

- Does it refer to forthcoming projects or events? Completed projects or historical material will only remain on the website for legal reasons
- Who is the business owner responsible for updating content and ensuring accuracy?
- What is the review/archive date?
- What are the success measures?

2. **Structure**

2.1 Keep it brief. Remember, readers are impatient so write half as much (or even less) as you would for a printed document

2.2 Follow these guidelines for length:

- **Headings:** no more than six words or 35 characters including spaces
- **Introduction:** up to 50 words
- **Sentences:** 20-25 words
- **Paragraphs:** 40-60 words
- **Web pages:** If your page is longer than 500 words (3000 characters) include an 'on this page' menu

2.3 Front-load your content. This means putting your most important information first

2.4 Remember, key content usually answers a question or helps visitors complete a task. Think about what visitors are searching for and not what you think they should be looking at

- 2.5 Don't try to include every single detail. Only write what your reader needs to know
- 2.6 Use sub-headings to present information in a logical manner
- 2.7 Even if you are targeting users who are well-educated or knowledgeable in your subject, remember these people are often the busiest and most impatient
- 2.8 Break up your content into chunks. Present related information together in clearly labelled sections
- 2.9 Avoid writing long paragraphs with multiple links. It's better to write a short piece of text followed by a list of bulleted links
- 2.10 Include only one main idea per paragraph
- 2.11 Don't duplicate information, link to it instead
- 2.12 Write meaningful sub-headings. These should be no longer than one line and give a clear idea about what the content below is about
- 2.13 Make it scannable by using:
 - Sub-headings
 - Bulleted lists
 - Links
 - Short paragraphs

3. Tone of voice and language

- 3.1 We put customers at the heart of what we do and this informs our tone of voice which is:
 - Open and honest
 - Straightforward
 - Forward looking

- 3.2 Use plain English. This doesn't mean patronising your readers, it means using everyday words in place of jargon, acronyms or impersonal corporate language
- 3.3 Talk to readers: use 'you' and 'we'. This is more direct and helps people relate to what we're saying and doing
- 3.4 Even if you are targeting users who know your subject, write so that anyone could understand what you've written. Ask yourself, would it make sense to your family or friends?
- 3.5 It's ok to use contractions (eg isn't, don't, it's, wouldn't) as they make your text more natural and friendly. However, don't use them to such an extent that your text appears sloppy or rude
- 3.6 Avoid long, complex sentences. Include just one idea per sentence
- 3.7 Make sub-headings and link text meaningful and 'obvious'. They should make sense out of context
- 3.8 Make your page easy to find. If you want it to turn up in search results, you need to include words and phrases that people are likely to search for, or use, when talking about your subject
- 3.9 Remember, if people aren't familiar with the terms you use, they won't know to search for them
- 3.10 Don't be afraid to give clear instructions. 'Please send it to us' is more direct than 'We would be grateful if you could please send it to us'
- 3.11 Keep your readers in mind. Remember, if you're bored or confused by what you've written, they probably will be too
- 3.12 Use simple words rather than their longer equivalent ('try' not 'endeavour', 'more' not 'additional' etc)
- 3.13 Write in the active, not passive, voice. 'We will be renovating the station' is more direct than 'the station will be undergoing renovation'

3.14 Explain technical terms and acronyms or, better still, try not to use them

3.15 You **must** also read and refer to:

- [Editorial style guide](#)
An A-Z list of how we write for publication, including how we write brands
- [Style points and exceptions for online](#)
A list of exceptions to the editorial style guide for online content

4. Links

4.1 Don't repeat information that already exists elsewhere. Link to it instead

4.2 Descriptive links **must** be used in place of generic links like click here or more. Use Learn more about our Tube improvement plan **not** Learn more

4.3 Generic links are not accessible to visually impaired people using screen readers as they make no sense out of context and don't say where a link will take you. Descriptive links also help sighted people scan a page and work out if it's useful

4.4 When linking to an external website, you should generally link to the homepage. This is because pages on external sites might be moved, renamed or deleted, which means your links will no longer work

4.5 Links on web pages **should** include the full title of the organisation or company you are linking to, not the web address or URL, eg Croydon Council not www.croydon.gov.uk

4.6 If you are linking to a document, you should use the Document download module. This module automatically adds the size of the PDF

4.7 If a link appears at the end of a sentence, it **should** be followed by a full stop (which should not form part of the link)

5. PDFs and other attachments

5.1 In most cases it is better to put your information into a web page rather than using an attachment

5.2 We use attachments when:

- It is likely that people will want to print a version to use offline such as a poster that could be printed and put up
- They are formal documents such as publications and forms

5.3 We do not use attachments when:

- A document is likely to be read online. Instead, the text **should** be re-written for the web

5.4 Attachment responsibilities

5.4.1 You are responsible for the content of attachments and for ensuring that TfL has the right to publish them. If there is any doubt **you must** check with the Press Office and the Transparency team.

5.5 Attachment requirements

5.5.1 All attachments **must** be accessible. The [Government Digital Service guidelines](#) explain how to create accessible PDFs

5.5.2 Attachments **should** preferably be less than 2MB and **must not** be more than 5MB in size

5.5.3 Attachments **must** be formatted within a TfL template and feature TfL branding (search for 'document templates' on Source or contact Corporate Design for guidance)

5.5.4 Scans of printed documents are **not** acceptable – they are **not** accessible

5.5.5 You **must** use a minimum of 12pt for all documents. Where possible, use 14pt as this increases accessibility to visually impaired readers

5.5.6 All attachments **must** have meaningful metadata, which is crucial for making the search facility work well

5.5.7 **How to add PDF metadata to your document**

- Open the document properties
- The 'Author' **should** be Transport for London
- The 'Title' **should** be the full title of your document. Use the title that appears on your document, not the file name as this will be unintelligible to any search tool trying to find it. Sometimes the title field will be auto filled with the file name – check if it has and replace if necessary
- The 'Subject' **should** be a clear concise sentence that describes what's in the document
- Save the document to save these properties
- Use 'Save as' to save your document as a PDF. The PDF will retain the properties you have added to the original

Updating PDF properties

- Open the document in Adobe Acrobat (not Adobe Reader)
- Press CTRL D
- Click on the 'Description' option on the left
- Edit the required fields
- Save the document

Naming the file

- Use words that match the document title
- Use hyphens between words (not spaces or underscores)
- Use lowercase letters
- Don't use dates

Use: low-emission-zone-leaflet.pdf

Not: LEZleaf_May%20_2008.pdf

Replacing an existing PDF

- Give your PDF the same properties and file name as the original document

- To see the properties for the original document, open it on the website and press CTRL D
- To see the file name, open it on the website and look in the address bar at the top of the web page

6. Videos

6.1 All our videos are hosted on the TfL YouTube channel. In order to meet our accessibility requirements(or standards), videos:

- **Must** have subtitles or, as a basic minimum, a transcript
- **Must not** include speeded up footage

7. Accessibility, privacy and data protection

7.1 As a public body, we have a legal obligation to make sure people can access the information we produce. This includes people with visual, hearing, cognitive or motor impairments, as well as those with learning difficulties.

We also need to provide website visitors with information about what data we are collecting from them and how we intend to use it. We also have to give them control over how we use that information.

This standard is aimed at helping you meet these legal obligations and **must** be followed when proposing, developing or editing content.

7.2 You **should** also read and comply with TfL Online's:

- [Privacy and data protection standard](#)

This describes what you need to do when working with web forms, data collection notices, cookies, consent forms

- [Web accessibility standard](#)
This outlines requirements relating to images, functionality, interface and navigation elements

8. Publishing checklist

Headings (page title and sub-headings)

- Are meaningful and describe page content
- Contain keywords likely to be used by people when searching for subject
- Are a maximum of six words or 35 to 40 characters including spaces
- Are in sentence case (ie capital letter used for first word and proper nouns only)
- Do not contain acronyms, abbreviation or corporate jargon

Body text

- Follows our guidelines for length:
 - **Sentences:** 20-25 words
 - **Paragraphs:** 40-60 words
 - **Web pages:** If the page is longer than 500 words or 3000 characters, include an 'on this page menu'
 - **Introduction:** Up to 50 words or 300 characters; must describe page content and provide a meaningful summary that would make sense in search results
- The most important information is at the top of the page
- Includes one idea per paragraph
- Is concise and easy to scan
- Does not duplicate information that exists elsewhere on the site

Language and tone Is friendly and conversational

- Avoids jargon and dry, corporate terms
- Uses simple words heard in everyday conversation
- Speaks directly to the reader by using 'you' and 'we'
- Includes contractions, if appropriate

- Uses the active, not passive, voice
- Describes destination of link text and avoids use of 'click here'

Formatting

- Follows [TfL editorial style guide](#) and [Style points and exceptions for online](#)
- No italics
- No use of UPPERCASE in text or sub-headings
- No underlining (except for link text)
- Link text does not appear in the form of a URL. Use descriptive link instead
- Single space between sentences
- No ampersands (&) unless they form part of a proper name (Waterloo & City line) or are part of a title used in navigation
- Bullet points start with a capital letter and do not end in a semi-colon or full-stop (even the last point)
- Links should only be provided once in body text. If appropriate, they can also be referenced in links module in the right-hand column
- Number one-nine written in full, 10 and above in figures
- Use the 24-hour clock (unless legally required to use the 12-hour clock). Times written with the two sets of numerals separated by a colon (eg 15:00)
- Single quotations in all cases

PDFs and other attachments

- Include full, correct title in document properties
- Are linked using descriptive text or document title
- Are no bigger than 5MB
- Always refer to Transport for London as the author, unless PDF has been produced independently. In this case, consider 'Company name, on behalf of Transport for London'
- Regularly updated PDFs should always have the same title so they replace redundant versions automatically and prevent older versions being retained and found via search (eg 'Tube map' **not** 'Tube map 2014')

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Owner: TfL Online Compliance
Department: TfL Online

Version history

Version	Date	Summary of changes
1.0	14/11/2013	First issue
2.0	30/06/2014	Amendment to section 5.4.7
3.0	11/07/2014	Updated document metadata and filename
4.0	06/01/2015	Added new section 5.4: Attachment responsibilities

Review history

Name	Title	Date	Comments
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