

# Student communications writing and style guide

Access to consistent, accurate and clear information is central to student success. To help you communicate more effectively and confidently with ACU students, here are some simple guidelines.

## WRITING FOR THE WEB

Writing for the web is different from writing for print. You need to apply different skills and techniques to get your message across effectively and retain the reader's attention.

Key points to remember:

- Reading from screens is about 25 per cent slower than reading from paper.
- More users are accessing webpages on their mobile where the real estate is much smaller.
- Screen-reading is based on scanning. Users pay more attention to things like keywords in headings, keywords in the first 1–2 sentences of a paragraph, subheadings, bulleted and numbered lists, links, tables and images.
- Users are often multitasking.

## WRITING EFFECTIVE CONTENT

- Write with the student experience in mind.
- Focus on the information students want and need to know at that time.
- Use plain English and avoid jargon and academic/technical language.
- Aim for a friendly but professional tone of voice. Avoid overly familiar, colloquial, or cheesy language.
- Use an active rather than passive voice (eg instead of saying “Students are well supported by staff”, say “Our staff support you well..., or even better, “We support you all the way”).
- Be concise and to the point. Only include information that is relevant and necessary.
- Simplify content and shorten sentences to make it easier for skimming and reading on mobile phones.
- Break text into bite-sized chunks. Cover one topic per paragraph.
- Use subheadings and/or bullet points to break up longer content items.
- Speak directly to the student audience (eg “**You** will need an ACU card for **your** course” instead of “**Students** will need ACU cards for **their** courses”).
- Use a clear call to action (CTA) so students know what they need to do after reading an item.
- Make it easy for students to act by providing a clear point of contact (eg team/staff name plus a contact method).
- Avoid using phrases such as, “See the application form on the left-hand side of this page...” (Remember, on different screen sizes and devices, page elements appear in different positions.)
- Check your facts. Before publishing new information, see if it conflicts with other information online. And if so, update any out-of-date information or remove information that's no longer relevant.

## FORMATTING AND STYLE

- Left-align text in body content areas.
- Only use italics the formal titles of a document/publication (eg *The Wind in the Willows*).
- Minimise the capitalisation of words. Only use capital letters when absolutely necessary.
- Headings should be in sentence case instead of title case (eg “Content editing guide” instead of “Content Editing Guide”), unless the heading contains a formal name/title.

- Write dates in this format: Wednesday 31 May 2021.
- Write times in this format: 7pm or 7.15am.
- Write “the university” in lower-case text.
- Write “Brisbane Campus” rather than “Brisbane campus”.
- Write “Melbourne and Brisbane campuses”.
- Write discipline areas (eg “nursing”) with lower case unless referencing the full name of a course/degree.
- Write job titles in lower case unless referencing a specific person’s job title (eg “academic skills advisors work with students” vs “Academic Skills Advisor Jenny Smith”).
- Use bold for emphasis instead of underlining. Underlining should **only** ever be used to indicate a hyperlink.
- Use meaningful hyperlink text. Don’t use link text such as “[click here](#)”, but rather a direct reference to the link destination such as the “[ACU Games registration form](#)”.
- Embed hyperlinks rather than publishing full URLs.

### IMAGES

- Images must be on brand, so use ACU images where possible rather than stock images.
- Use images that relate to your content and represent genuine stories.
- Compress your images to reduce load time. You should aim to use original images that are between 1MB and 5MB in size, then compress them to <200KB. If you need to optimise large images, you can use tools such as TinyJPG to reduce the size of the image without compromising on quality.
- If you do need to use stock or commissioned images, ensure they comply with ACU’s photography guidelines, including:
  - Refrain (if possible) from using easily identifiable faces. Use side profiles, partially obscured faces, ‘above head’ or ‘over the shoulder’ angles, or any other interesting angles.
  - Keep clear of clichés and old-fashioned ‘stock’ images (businessmen shaking hands, scientist in white coats with multi-coloured vials, etc).
  - Choose images that haven’t been heavily colour-processed or retouched. Choose images that use natural lighting and natural colours.

### ALT TEXT

- Alternative text (alt text) describes an image on a website to people who can’t easily see it. It helps with web accessibility and provides better image context/descriptions to search engine crawlers, helping them to index an image properly.
- If you use images in your content, ensure alt text is always included with the images to explain what appears on the screen.

### COPYRIGHT

Images must meet copyright requirements. When you use images on any ACU digital platforms, it’s your responsibility to make sure they don’t infringe copyright.

### ACCESSIBILITY

It is essential that websites and online resources are accessible to everyone in order to provide equal access and equal opportunity. Accessibility also overlaps with other digital content best practices. For example:

- Reserve underlining for links.
- Ensure that links include information-bearing words (eg instead of hyperlinking generic words such as “[go](#)”, “[click here](#)” or “[more](#)”, use anchor text that reflects the link’s destination such as “[contact ACU counsellors](#)”).
- The best links start with the most important words. Frontloading the link name helps users scan the page more easily.
- Wherever possible, use alt text on your images. Alt text’s original and main purpose is to describe images to visitors who are unable to see them due to disability or technical fault (eg the image doesn’t load).