Writing for the Web

Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument
2025 Digital Media Training

Writing for Digital Audiences: Best Practices

Grammar and Language

- Active vs. Passive voice
    - Use active verbs and avoid was/were.
    - Use the "by zombies" test!
        - If you can add "by zombies" and it makes sense, then it's passive voice.
        - Example: "William Lloyd Garrison was attacked outside his office."
            - "By zombies" test: "William Lloyd Garrison was attacked by zombies outside his office."
    - Say this instead: "An angry mob attacked William Lloyd Garrison outside his office."
        - Make it clear WHO is doing the action.
- Correct Verb Tenses
    - Always use past tense if talking about the past.
    - No "woulds!" Again, make it clear who is doing the action.
        - Don't say: "Rioters would then attack William Smith's home."
        - Say: "Rioters then attacked William Smith's home."
- Use simple and concise language
    - Also known as "Plain Language"
    - Don't utilize "utilize" if you can use "use."
    - Don't say "In the 19th century," say "In the 1800s."
- No contractions – primarily a rule for formal writing.
    - Was not, could not...
- Proper Terms
    - Make sure you're spelling and referring to the proper names of places and people.
    - I.e. Georges Island, not George's Island.
    - Similarly, don't add gender to an object. "It," not "he" or "she."
- Avoid using unnecessary acronyms.
    - Spell them out in full the first time and then have the acronym in parentheses afterwards.
    - First say "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)," then afterwards say "NAACP."
- Don't use jargon.
    - "Jargon" is special words or phrases that are only understandable to a specific group of people (specialized terminology).

- In some cases, buzzwords or slang can also be considered jargon. It's best to avoid slang.
- Acronyms and jargon can be overwhelming and confusing to readers.

Accessibility

- **National Park Service media must comply with Section 508 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Text must be written at no more than a 9th Grade reading level.**

- Be mindful of readability!
    - Aim for a 9th grade or lower reading level. You can check the readability of your text by using the [Hemingway Editor App](#).
    - Less is more! Present written information in small chunks (two or three sentences per paragraph – no more!). This is a good tip for *any* readers!
- Be mindful of colorblindness. Green and red colorblindness is the most common. So, don't use different colors to emphasize certain words or separate information. Use bold font and different font sizes.
    - Limit the use of *italicized* font.
- Using images? You must include "alternative text."
    - Alternative text, also known as "alt text," is descriptive text that conveys the meaning of an image in digital content. It's designed to make visual content accessible to people with vision disabilities.
    - Find [alt text writing tips at Section508.gov](#)

Formatting

- Headings
    - Particularly when writing an article, have headings to break up the reading for the reader. Digital readers like to scroll to what they are looking for and may not be interested in reading all of the content.
- Short paragraphs
    - Digital readers do not like to see screens full of text.
    - The shorter the paragraph, the better – can be 2-3 sentences. Don't do more than 4-5 sentences.
- Images
    - When possible, there should be a balance of text and images
    - A 1,000-word article should have 3-4 images minimum.
    - Don't use filler images! Be deliberate in your choice. Make sure the image connects to or enhances what you are writing about.
- Footnotes and Citations
    - Always cite your sources!
        - Readers should be able to recreate your research.
        - We need to be able to back up claims.
        - Every quote needs a footnote.

o Use Chicago Style Citations.

Types of Web Content
The following goes over different types of web content that NPS staff and Volunteers can contribute to.

Person Assets
- We use "person assets" to tell stories of a person connected to the park.
  - It should be clear why we are writing or researching this person. How are they relevant to our park?
- These are short biographical portraits.
  - They are not meant to be an extensive biography – think of them as bite-sized biographies.
  - Person assets are no more than 600-800 words on average.
- They often contain one compelling image of the person.
  - Portrait size.
  - If there isn't an image of the person, we can try to find a work-around or not include one.
- The first paragraph is slightly larger than the rest, so it allows for us to create a sentence or two "so what" paragraph about the person.
  - This first paragraph does not use a heading since it's supposed to be short.
- Link rich!
  - Since these are meant to be short, try to link to other content on National Park Service websites that are related. This way, we do not have to spend too much time re-hashing explanations of other people or events.
- We must always include Footnotes and/or Sources.
- Examples:
  - Ida B. Wells-Barnett (U.S. National Park Service) (959 words – a little long, but close enough!)
  - Lewis Hayden (U.S. National Park Service) (564 words)
  - Florence Luscomb (U.S. National Park Service) (761 words)

Place Assets
- Connected to Park
  - It should be clear why we are writing about or researching this place. How is this place relevant to the park?
  - Place assets help us create many kinds of visitor experiences. They can be used to create audio tours, interactive maps, and self-guided tours on the NPS App. So, place assets help both online visitors and people physically at the park!
- These are short overviews of a place related to park stories. They can include houses, archeological sites, a particular location along a street, a monument – any physical location that connects us to something that happened there!
  - Not meant to be an extensive history of the place or site.
  - Think of it as a bite-sized overview.
  - 400-600 words on average – if you want to write more, maybe it should be an Article Asset (see below).

- Place Asset Essentials
  - Write with precision. Place assets may be used as audio tour stops, so we want to keep it to no more than 600 words. That equates to about 6 minutes of narration per stop.
  - For each place asset, we want to include the following:
    - Where it fits into the context or chronology of the 1908 race riot.
    - What happened there? How did it change or impact the event?
    - Think about connections!
      - Who was involved? We can include links to relevant Person Assets.
      - What subjects, topics, or other parks does it connect to? We can link to other NPS online content.
- One compelling image
  - The image MUST BE landscape orientation.
  - In some cases, a historical photo could be used... particularly if the location no longer exists today and we have access to a historical photo.
- Image Description of Site
  - A visual description of the site must be provided, particularly if the site is used for an audio tour.
  - Pretend you are describing the site to someone on the telephone – what are the characteristics you would need to share so they understand the space?
- Footnotes & Sources
  - Cite your sources! Use Chicago Style citations.
  - You could also provide a source list if there are other sources you referenced but did not directly cite.
- Geographical Coordinates (NPS Digital Media Lead will help with this)
  - Need to provide the coordinates/location so it can be located on a map.
  - Use historical maps and city directories to identify historical locations.
- Examples:
  - [Burnside Bridge](), Antietam National Battlefield.
  - [Elizabeth Eckford Bus Bench](), Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site.
  - [Abiel Smith School (U.S. National Park Service)](), Boston African American National Historic Site.
  - [Georges Island (U.S. National Park Service)](), Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area.

Article Assets

- Articles are used to explore subjects or topics connected to the park.
  - Again, it must be clear why we are writing an article about a topic. It should support interpretive goals and themes at the park.
  - Articles are often used to focus on specific stories within the park, or to connect park stories to the "bigger picture." Examples of potential Article topics include:
    - Springfield's African American community leading up to the 1908 riot.
    - Roots of the riot: what caused people to participate in the riot?
    - How the aftermath of the riot led to the formation of the NAACP.
    - How the 1908 riot fit into the bigger picture of extreme violence against African Americans after the Civil War.
    - Archeological investigation of the site.
- Keep it to 500-1200 words.
  - Articles can vary in length.
  - Describing a specific event could be on the shorter side, whereas more complex topics could be longer.

- o If it's more than 1200 words, there should be a very good reason.
        - o If you break it up strategically, it may help an article not "feel" long.
- Include Images
    - o Depending on length, articles can have anywhere from 3-4 or more images.
    - o Work with the NPS Digital Media Lead to determine the correct number of images.
    - o Images must be public domain, owned by the NPS, or the NPS has permission to use it. Talk to the NPS Digital Media Lead if you would like to use an image but are unsure if we have permission.
- Footnotes & Sources
    - o Cite your sources! Use Chicago Style footnotes.
    - o You could also provide a source list if there are other sources you referenced but did not directly cite.
- Examples:
    - o Shorter Article: Emancipation: A Boston Celebration (U.S. National Park Service)
    - o Longer Article: The Battle of Bunker Hill (U.S. National Park Service)
    - o Article that showcases a primary source document: Writ of Habeas Corpus for Betsey (U.S. National Park Service)

Web Writing Resources

National Park Service Editorial Style Guide
The National Park Service uses particular language in its writing. We do this to provide honest, accurate, and respectful information about people in the past. For example, we do not say "Blacks" when referring to people. We say "Black people," "African Americans," or "people of African descent." Likewise, we do not say "Whites." We say "White people," "European Americans," etc.

If you are ever uncertain about a language or word choice, check out the style guide!

The NPS also has a Spanish Language Style Guide (PDF).

Hemingway Editor App
The National Park Service must write at no more than a 9th grade reading level. You can use this free tool to help you check the readability of your content. If your content is above a 9th grade level, try breaking long sentences into shorter sentences. Also try replacing complex words with simpler alternatives.

Chicago Style Citations
Always use the Chicago Manual of Style when including footnotes or a bibliography.