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Government of Alberta

Voice, Tone and Style Guide

As approved by the Managing Director of Communications and
Public Engagement on January 24, 2019

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Communications and Public Engagement Office, Government of Alberta

March 2019

Voice, Tone and Style Guide

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Government of Alberta

Voice, Tone and Style Guide

Introduction

This guide sets a definitive standard to help all members of the Alberta Public Service communicate clearly and directly with the people of this province. While other general style guides have been used in the past, this is the primary guide. There is still plenty of freedom to be creative depending on the message you are delivering to a particular audience.

The goal is to bring consistency to our work.

This document is not intended to replace any specific direction from ministers.

People have a right to know where their money is going and what government services are being provided. Government has a duty to tell them.

The Government of Alberta has harmonized the look and feel of its products so people can better understand what's available to them.

This document complements the Government Identity Policy that gives all government communications, facilities, programs and services a unified and recognizable brand. It includes a logo (the Alberta signature), colours, typography and other design elements.

The government also has a distinctive voice, one that rings true in speeches, news releases, videos, social media posts, web pages and other forms of communication. It shows we're listening, we understand and we care.

The government's voice:

- Friendly and approachable
- Clear
- Direct
- Genuine

You can hear that voice in these:

News releases

[Alberta's message: We have to keep Canada working](#)

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Alberta's challenges are national challenges. It's a message nobody can ignore as the first ministers meeting gets underway in Montreal.

[New law protects teens from artificial tanning](#)

Wednesday, January 3, 2018

Young Albertans are at lower risk of developing deadly forms of skin cancer, thanks to new artificial tanning legislation that came into effect on Jan. 1.

[Making condos a better place to live](#)

Friday, December 14, 2018

New rules will increase transparency and improve condominium governance in Alberta.

Web examples

Service page:

<https://www.alberta.ca/designation-provincial-historic-resources.aspx>

The screenshot shows a web page with the Alberta logo at the top left and a search icon at the top right. Below the logo is a breadcrumb trail: Heritage conservation and protection. The main heading is 'Designation of provincial historic resources' in white text on a green background. Below the heading is a sub-heading: 'Search for provincially protected historic places and apply to designate a Provincial Historic Resource.' Underneath is a section titled 'On this page:' with links: Historic Resource designation, Submit application for designation, Search historic places, Contact, and Related. The main content area starts with the heading 'Historic Resource designation' followed by a paragraph: 'Designation is a form of legal protection that helps to recognize and protect historic places. The Historical Resources Act (PDF, 364 KB) empowers the Government of Alberta to designate a site as a Provincial Historic Resource.' Below this is another paragraph: 'To qualify, historic places must normally be associated with a significant aspect of Alberta's past and retain the physical site features necessary to convey this significance.' The section ends with the heading 'Eligible historic resources' and a bulleted list: structures, archaeological sites, palaeontological resources, and other immovable works of humans or nature that have historic, cultural, natural, scientific or aesthetic value.

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Web examples, *continued*

Service page, with a more human tone:

<https://www.alberta.ca/become-kinship-caregiver.aspx>

The screenshot shows a web page from the Government of Alberta. At the top left is the Alberta logo. At the top right are search and menu icons. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: Child guardianship, foster care and kinship care. The main content area has a green background with the title 'Become a kinship caregiver' in white. Below the title is a paragraph: 'Children can receive temporary placement with extended family such as a grandparent, or someone with whom they're significantly connected.' Below this is a section 'On this page:' with links: Overview, Eligibility, Support for caregivers, How to become a kinship caregiver, Ongoing support, Contact, and Related. Below this is a section 'Overview' with a paragraph: 'Kinship care is an extended family home that's approved to care for a child or youth in care. The caregiver must have a family relationship or significant connection to the child - for example, grandparent, aunt or close family friend. Supports for kinship care are similar to the supports provided to a child and caregivers in foster care.' Below this is a section 'Kinship caregivers provide:' followed by a bulleted list:

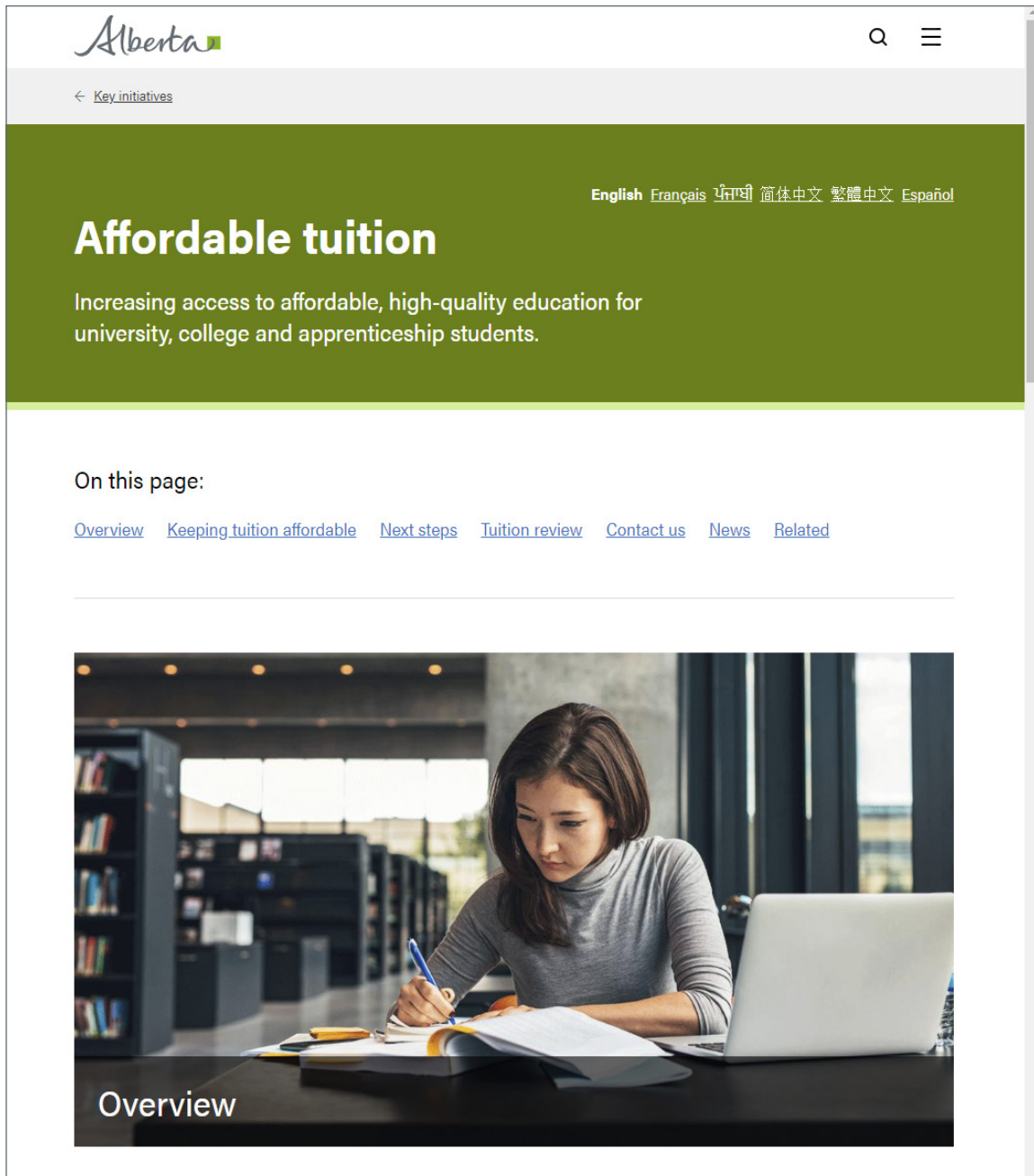
- a child with love and care in a familiar setting
- families with a sense of trust, stability and comfort
- an ability to support and maintain lifelong traditions and memories
- support to a child in building healthy relationships within the family
- guidance and reinforcement of a child's cultural identity and positive self-esteem

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Web examples, *continued*

Strategic web pages, designed to communicate complex topics in plain language:

Legislation: <https://www.alberta.ca/affordable-tuition.aspx>



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Web examples, *continued*

Consultation: <https://www.alberta.ca/condominium-consultation.aspx>

The screenshot shows the top of a web page for the 'Condominium rules consultation'. At the top left is the Alberta logo. To the right are search and menu icons. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: '< Consultations and engagements'. The main content area has a green background with the title 'Condominium rules consultation' in white. Below the title is a sub-header: 'Gathered input to help guide modern, fair laws to protect condo owners and support responsible governance of condo communities.' Below this is a section titled 'On this page:' with links for 'Overview', 'Engagement timeline', 'Outcomes', 'Contact', 'News', and 'Sign up for updates'. A grey box contains an information icon and text: 'Engagement status: Under review. Survey closed July 31, 2018' and 'Ministry responsible: Service Alberta'. Below this is the 'Overview' section, which starts with the text: 'Clear and modern legislation is needed to protect condominium owners and support the responsible self-governance of condo communities.' It then mentions that the 'Condominium Property Amendment Act' was passed in December 2014 and that 50 amendments are being developed. It concludes with: 'It's important to get these rules right for the hundreds of thousands of current and future condo owners in Alberta.' The 'Engagement timeline' section begins with the text: 'Regulations will be developed in three stages of public engagement.'

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Social media posts

Alberta Government @YourAlberta · 30 Nov 2018

Safety > Style. Starting January 1, 2019, employers will be explicitly prohibited from requiring employees to wear high heels (or any other footwear that may pose health and safety risks): alberta.ca/release.cfm?xl...



No more mandatory high heels

4 12 47

Alberta Government @YourAlberta · 8 Jun 2018

We've seen heartbreaking reminders this week that mental health struggles can affect anyone. You don't have to go it alone or suffer in silence. Free, confidential help is available 24/7 at 1-877-303-2642 - please reach out. We need you here.





You're not alone. Free, confidential mental health support is available 24/7.

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Social media posts, *continued*


 **Your Alberta (Government of Alberta)** October 4, 2018 · 

The Royal Alberta Museum is back in business and bigger and better than ever. This marks the start of a new era in the heart of downtown Edmonton. With 82,000 square feet of space, the new space offers many opportunities to keep visitors entertained for hours on end. After years of construction, moving millions of objects, creating new galleries, installing exhibits and putting on finishing touches, RAM welcomed visitors to its new location with a grand opening yesterday.

Vis... [See More](#)



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Reports

Remember to write for a large audience, not just a program area or one department. Start with direct language. Avoid unnecessary phrases. Chop one long sentence into two or more.

Instead of:

“By collaborating with Alberta Health Services, the health authority that manages health care delivery in the province, government is working to increase access to primary health care.”

Write:

“Alberta Health Services manages health-care delivery. Government is a partner in improving access to front-line care.”

Look at the difference here. Instead of:

“Long sentences can cause lots of problems for readers, even if they boast the correct punctuation. It can be difficult for readers to absorb a lot of information thrown at them in one long chunk, even if it is read aloud, because longer sentences often seem wordy to a reader because it can be hard to connect the details and understand properly.”

Write:

“Long sentences can be a problem. They can be hard to read even when punctuated properly.”

Engagement

This guide applies to all of the Alberta government’s public engagement activities, including products, online surveys and meeting materials.

Advertising

This guide applies to paid government advertising unless there is a specific reason for an exemption. In such cases, approval must be given by the managing director of Communications and Public Engagement.

In short

Whether giving presentations, crafting reports or letters, or writing content for use across channels (social media, newsroom, web, etc.), keep this guide handy. It should help us have one voice regardless of the audience. And it will help ensure that our message comes through loud and clear.

The government's tone

Like everyone's voice, the government's voice can have different tones. Think of them as different shades of colour. They allow for variety in speeches, news releases, social media posts, etc. Tone can make a message more human, more empathetic. While government's voice is the same all the time, the tone can give the voice personality as you tailor it for the audience using humour, more serious language, enthusiasm, etc.

Use a direct, no-nonsense tone to convey information about serious issues:

"Now that the fire season is over, Albertans no longer require a fire permit for burning within the Forest Protection Area. Even though fire season is over, safe burning practices are always in season. The risk of a wildfire doesn't end when wildfire season does – any time there is a fire on the land, there is a risk that it can spread."

Information about baby names provides an opportunity to be playful:

"Noah has unseated Liam to claim the top name among baby boys in Alberta, while Olivia claims the top spot on the girls' list for the fourth year in a row."

Or this: "Some parents went to great lengths to ensure their children got a unique name. One family named their little girl Unique, just to be sure."

Use a conversational tone to invite people to explore provincial parks:

Start your New Year off in the best way possible – connecting with nature in the beautiful outdoors. We've compiled a list of suggested hikes so you can get outside and conquer a #FirstDayHike on January 1.

News releases can adopt a similar light tone to match content:

"Royal Tyrrell Museum unveils new dinosaur: "Hellboy"

June 4, 2015

A new species of horned dinosaur – one of the most impressive discoveries since Triceratops – has been unveiled at the Royal Tyrrell Museum's newest exhibit, Fossils in Focus.

Writing style guide

In general, the government relies on The Canadian Press (CP) Stylebook and CP's Caps and Spelling and, when they are silent, on the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. Among many other things, the CP Stylebook:

- Deals with sensitive issues such as racism and sexism
- Contains tips on writing and editing
- Has advice on punctuation and capitalization
- Offers a revised section dealing with Indigenous issues
- Provides points on writing news releases
- Has a revised section on social media

The Stylebook and Caps and Spelling are available in bookstores or [can](https://www.thecanadianpress.com/writing-guide/stylebook) be ordered online: <https://www.thecanadianpress.com/writing-guide/stylebook>

In a world where people are subjected to a constant deluge of information and their time is fragmented, we must earn their attention. Tell them what they want and need to know. Inform them. Where appropriate, make them feel – or even laugh. Remove unnecessary details.

Plain language: It's the law

We're committed to using plain language across government. Our audience comes first. If a message is confusing or complicated, we have failed.

Since 1990, Alberta has had a law on the books (the *Financial Consumers Act*) that sets out the duty of public servants to use plain language. Among other things, it confirms that people have the right to information that is easy to understand.

Plain language: At a glance

- Use simple words and short sentences, without being condescending
- Avoid excessive punctuation
- Use active, direct voice (they paved the highway, not the highway was paved by them)
- Tailor the message to the audience, keeping in mind age, reading ability, vocabulary level and culture
- Be professional, respectful and straightforward
- Don't get bogged down in details
- Use you and we where appropriate
- Use the third person (department, students, doctors) in policies
- Use who for people, that for things
- Avoid acronyms and short forms unless familiar and absolutely necessary
- Inform, but don't sell
- Avoid jargon (use seatbelt, not occupant restraint)
- Use gender-neutral language (firefighter, not fireman)
- Avoid his or her and use their if you can't write around it
- Use contractions, but avoid uncommon or awkward contractions such as it'll and should've
- Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in 'ly' when used as adjectives
- Avoid slang
- Avoid exclamation marks
- Avoid emojis

First things first

Before starting to write, ask yourself: What do people want to know? How much information do they need? Understand how to connect with specific audiences and answer their questions. For a general audience, write as clearly and simply as possible.

Context is crucial. Don't assume your audience knows enough background to understand. Include an extra sentence or two to explain if necessary.

When you finish, read your work out loud. Imagine you are reading it to a variety of people. Aim for different ages, different cultures, etc. Does everyone understand it? Is the content fair and balanced?

Writing for specialists

You might think you have to write in a lofty manner for specialists, but that's simply not the case. The Government of the United Kingdom conducted extensive research that shows the more educated the person and the more specialized their knowledge, the more they prefer information written in a simple and direct fashion:

“People with the highest literacy levels and the greatest expertise tend to have the most to read. They do not have time to pore through reams of dry, complicated prose.”

It's OK to use technical or legal terms, but explain them or use them in a way so the context makes their meaning clear. Our job is to demystify government.

We follow these CP rules for capitalization

- act (capitalize only when using the formal name of the act)
- assembly
- cabinet
- first ministers meeting
- legislative assembly
- legislature
- minister (lower case when used as a stand-alone word, but Minister Smith)
- Opposition only when referring to the official Opposition
- question period
- spring session, fall session, etc.
- speech from the throne
- throne speech

Titles, when used after a name:

- Lois Hole, lieutenant-governor (but the short form is Lt.-Gov. Lois Hole)
- Naheed Nenshi, mayor (but Mayor Naheed Nenshi)
- Pierre Jolie, energy minister (but Energy Minister Pierre Jolie)

We make some exceptions to CP rules

The Government of Alberta has adopted some style modifications to suit our particular needs.

- Write Premier with a capital P in a stand-alone reference – out of deference
- Use Elder with a capital E in an Indigenous context – out of deference (but still use “chief” except when attached to a specific name)
- Do not use Honourable as part of a title, federally or provincially (although correspondence units may wish to make some exceptions)

Additional guidelines

Only use the honorific Dr. when it relates to medical professionals. In other words, if someone has a PhD in history or political science, they do not get the designation.

We use LGBTQ. It’s fine to use longer variations when quoting someone.

Use compared with, not compared to, when showing similarities and differences.

Use between for two, among for more than two.

Either/neither is followed by or/nor and involves two options.

Watch subject/verb agreement. If the subject is singular, follow with its, not their, etc.

Use fewer for things you can count (fewer grams) and less for things you can’t (less weight).

Use only one space after a period.

Avoid using the Oxford comma unless you must. Here’s what CP says about the Oxford comma:

“Put commas between the elements of a series but not before the final ‘and’, ‘or’ or ‘nor’ unless that avoids confusion.”

Examples:

- Men, women, children and pets.
- The major decided he must attack at once, await fresh troops or withdraw.
- Breakfast consisted of oatmeal, fried eggs, and bread and butter.

A few other points to keep top of mind

Always remember you are writing or speaking to, and about, human beings. For example:

- **Impersonal:** Government has heard the concerns of prospective adoptive parents.
- **Personal:** Thank you to everyone who wants to adopt and love a child for sharing your concerns with us.

Don't call someone disabled. Say they have a disability.

Use "people" instead of "persons" unless absolutely unavoidable.

Only refer to age if it is relevant. Don't opt for young, elderly, etc., which are not only vague but can be construed by some as offensive.

CP Caps and Spelling has a handy guide to plain words at the back. Read it. Use it.

Reading levels

While some program areas rely on certain age or grade-school reading levels, those measurements can be subjective. The Alberta government prefers to emphasize plain language. Can the audience understand it easily? Does the content make them care? Is the information effective? That is, does it tell them what they need to know?

Web, social media, newsroom, etc.

Some style sheets within government are tailored to fit specific platforms or departments, but all should adhere to the basic principles of plain language.

For example, online headlines for news releases should be limited to 50 characters maximum, including spaces. This keeps them from being truncated on smartphones or when bots are scanning content to post it elsewhere. The limit for web headlines is 70 characters, including spaces. The first four words of an online headline in news releases or web pages are key for online scanning, clicking and sharing. They are valuable real estate, so don't waste them on generic words and phrases. Instead of "Government to announce new schools in Calgary," write "New schools for Calgary."

People read differently online than they do on paper, so when writing for Alberta.ca keep in mind best web-writing practices (see below). As with the government's voice and tone generally, be specific, clear, direct, informative, friendly and genuine.

Don't waste people's time by saying something twice, unless it's needed for effect.

Social media writing departs from CP style on some fronts. For example, abbreviations for units of distance, money, well-known acronyms, etc., are often used for the sake of brevity (TMX instead of Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion).

Web products, including social media posts, present numbers below 10 as numerals unless they start a sentence and omit periods in many abbreviations (BC instead of B.C.)

Future editions

This guide will be updated periodically. Please send comments, suggestions and questions to GoAIdentity@gov.ab.ca

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