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# UNICEF web writing guidelines

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## Content

### Voice

Our voice determines the overall impression we wish to make with our audiences. Here is what the *Brand Tool Kit* says about UNICEF's voice:

"Our voice is simple, optimistic, bold and contemporary. It positions us for the future and guides how we communicate, both verbally and visually. In everything we do, from writing to designing, we should aim to inspire."

What this means for web writing:

- **Simplicity** works on the web, because reading is harder on screen than it is on paper, and because users spend little time on any given page and move around quickly. Simplicity helps ensure that your written message gets across more quickly and effectively.
- A **contemporary style** appeals to the kind of supporters that UNICEF seeks. It also speaks to children and youth.
- An **optimistic and bold approach** helps inspire others to act and believe they can make a difference. The web is at its most effective in conveying information needed for action.

### Length

**Try to keep text to 500 words or shorter per web-page.** Why write short texts? Because:

- The UNICEF brand calls for brevity in writing. According to the *Tool Kit*, "All text should be brief and to the point."
- Text on a computer screen is harder to read than text on paper.
- Very often, users want to find specific answers/content quickly and move on. If they don't find what they want, they will leave.
- Web content is surrounded (necessarily) by other stuff including logos, navigation links, etc, all of which take screen space—so the content has to work harder.
- Many users simply don't have time to read long texts.

**Refer to more specific guidance for particular types of writing:** e.g. human interest stories have their own guidelines.

### Story Structure

Using the 'issue, action, impact' structure is central to the way we communicate with all our audiences. It ensures we communicate the issue at hand, the actions UNICEF is taking to solve the issue, and the results of UNICEF's work. The *Tool Kit* states:

"All our writing should state the issue, discuss the action that UNICEF is taking and identify the impact of the action. "Issue, Action and Impact" can be reordered to best construct your piece."

On the web, the 'Issue, Action, Impact' structure appears at different levels:

- Each individual article should be organized according to the 'issue, action, impact' structure. This is particularly applicable to articles that must stand alone.
- The UNICEF website information architecture also incorporates the 'issue, action, impact' structure. Your story will be placed as appropriate within the architecture. As a web writer you should always be aware of the context in which your writing will appear, and ensure that every piece fits into the overall 'issue, action, impact' structure.

## **Principles for ethical reporting on children**

When writing about children, make certain that you always adhere to UNICEF's *Principles for ethical reporting on children*. Doing so will help ensure that children's rights are protected and that children are not placed at risk of retribution or stigmatization. This document is currently online at [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_tools\\_guidelines.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_tools_guidelines.html), or is available from the NYHQ web team on request.

## **Setting the scene**

If writing for a general audience, provide a brief description or definition of terms which general readers are unlikely to be familiar with. For example: Some readers will not recognize the term 'displacement camp'. In your writing, you might address this as follows:

"The displacement camps, which house refugees in makeshift tents, are located on the southern border of Afghanistan."

If describing an emergency situation where UNICEF is in action on the ground, for example after an earthquake, make sure to set the scene by describing the damage and the people affected by the disaster. Describe what is being done in the immediate aftermath to treat those affected by the disaster.

## **Primary versus secondary pages**

Primary pages are those that a reader encounters first when entering a website. Secondary pages are placed deeper in the structure, and take additional clicks to reach.

Put content of interest to most readers on primary pages. Relegate long, detailed background information and content of interest to fewer users to secondary pages.

## **Freestanding pages**

Users generally don't read websites in a linear fashion. Instead, they usually pick one or two pages about a particular topic to read, and then jump to another part of the site altogether. Therefore, web articles should make sense when read by themselves. Appropriate links for detailed information should be available.

## **Include illustrative examples and quotes**

Examples that illustrate key ideas improve readability and retention of content. Appropriate quotes, from people knowledgeable in or connected with a particular issue, help 'humanize' the content and add a personal dimension.

## Use links effectively

Well-chosen links make it easier to scan a web page and add additional content for interested readers. Links can either be 'inline' (placed directly in the main text of a story) or placed in link tables separate from the main text.

**A link should usually be about 2-5 words long** (longer if really necessary). **The wording of the link should give a reader a good idea of what to expect when s/he clicks the link.**

Typically, a well-worded link will either correspond closely with the main title/header of the linked page or will summarize effectively the content of the page. Readers will often ignore links that they do not understand, so make your links explicit.

Examples of good inline links:

"UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and international football star [George Weah](#) will be in attendance at the games." [Link goes to George Weah profile.]

"On 20 May 2004 [UNICEF commends its partner FIFA](#), football's international governing body, on its use of sports to change the lives of children." [Link goes to press release about UNICEF commending FIFA.]

Do not overuse links:

- A link will take a reader AWAY from your content. Use your judgement as to when and where you wish this to happen.
- Overuse of links makes text harder to read.
- All links to non-UNICEF websites must be reviewed and approved by the same procedures as are used to approve text content.

Some parts of the UNICEF site have particular rules for how links are presented; for example, dedicated 'Links' pages often have the link first, followed by a line break, then by a one-paragraph description.

## What links to add

As appropriate, add the following related links to your article:

- **Multimedia:** Video, audio files related to the story
- **Current UNICEF press release** or news note which is about the same event or story
- **Recent UNICEF web stories** about the same issue or event
- **Related modules on the UNICEF site** with long-term web content (i.e., not news stories or press releases) which is relevant to the article
- **Websites of key UNICEF partners** (partner links must be approved by the responsible UNICEF staff person; if a partner website is already linked from a dedicated links page on the UNICEF site, you can freely link to it).

## Have your text fact-checked

Every article should be fact-checked by at least one expert in the subject. Where possible, fact checking by two experts is preferable.

## Proofread and spell-check your work

In particular, make sure names, titles and organizations are correct and spelled correctly. Spell-checking software does not always do a good job of checking grammar; therefore, always read

your story through one last time before submitting it. Some writers find it helpful to print out their stories before doing the final check.

## **Style**

### **Write a clear headline, and add appropriate subheads**

Headlines, subheads and page <title>s should not merely be attention-grabbers; they should explain what the content they refer to is about.

On the web, many readers scan articles for content that stands out, instead of reading it line by line. Because headlines and subheads are easily scannable, you can use them to help your readers scan articles more effectively. Start headlines and subheads with a meaningful word or phrase that relates to the following content.

Some readers will skip over long blocks of text. By adding a few appropriately chosen subheads, you will encourage them to keep reading.

Subheads should be short—keep them to four or five words at most.

### **Add a dateline to all news stories**

All news or feature stories should carry a dateline in the following format: city name in ALL CAPS, date in UN format, en dash (not two short dashes, nor one longer [em] dash, nor a colon), followed by the beginning of the story.

1. If the story relates to a particular event, include an exact date.

Example:

RIO DE JANEIRO, 16 July 2004 – Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet....

2. If the story is a feature, focusing on issues in-depth or real lives rather than on a specific event, include only the month the story is posted.

Example:

BANGKOK, July 2004 – Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet....

3. If the story involves substantial reporting and writing done in different locations, include both of them in the dateline.

Example:

DHAKA/NEW YORK, 16 July 2004 – Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet....

### **Use one main idea per paragraph**

Web readers tend to skip over long, complex paragraphs.

### **Use short, declarative sentences in the active voice**

Example: NOT: "The reconstruction and rehabilitation of essential humanitarian infrastructure is being assisted by UNICEF." INSTEAD: "UNICEF is helping to rebuild essential humanitarian infrastructure."

## **Replace institutional jargon with understandable language**

Avoid using terms that your readers might not be familiar with. For articles directed at non-specialists—which includes most of the content of the UNICEF website—either limit yourself to terms that might appear in a quality newspaper or magazine, or explain/define each new term (including acronyms) when it first appears on a page or in a given section of a website.

Example: NOT: “F8 and F100 are used to bolster infants’ health.” INSTEAD: “Therapeutic milk (F-8 and F100) formula is helping bolster the children’s health in...”

## **Avoid exclamation marks**

## **Use bulleted or numbered lists**

A bulleted or numbered list helps break up text into scannable parts, and improves reading speed and retention.

Instead of listing a sequence of related items in a long paragraph, break them up into a bulleted list. Or use a numbered list for related items which follow each other in a specific order.

## **Use pull quotes and quotes**

A pull quote is a few words or a couple of sentences pulled out of the text and placed in a larger font on the side. A quote is a statement by someone who is cited within the text.

Use pull quotes to enliven your article and draw in readers, by highlighting particularly interesting facts or statements. Use quotes to add interest, bring out the human dimension of a story and tell the story directly through the words of participants, eyewitnesses, or experts.

Direct quotes can start a paragraph or sentence. Attribution does not necessarily have to come at the beginning of a quote. Example:

“There are still some 4,000 children on the Mexican border awaiting demobilization,” said the head of the Rock Institute in Mexico City, Christian Smythe. “We have to learn from this experience and begin working on getting those children home too.”

## **Where appropriate, use an imperative**

Imperatives are useful for making links or for providing instructions on how to carry out a task. They are valuable for web writing because they are brief and direct.

Examples: “Read recent press releases or browse publications about polio eradication.”

“To participate in the online discussion, first register a username; next, choose a topic, then log in to the appropriate board, and submit your message.”

## **Names**

Provide the first and last names for the first mention and then use “Mr.”, “Ms.”, “Dr.”, etc for all subsequent mentions. Example:

“...Early marriage often results in young girls dropping out of school,” said UNICEF’s Executive Director Carol Bellamy. Ms. Bellamy went on to address the importance of girls’ education in Ethiopia.

Provide the first name, then age and then country for those under 18 who are quoted. Example:  
"There is a water curfew in the community where I reside. Typhoid became a common occurrence when the rainy days came and we really feared it." – Marta, 17, from the Philippines, on Voices of Youth.

### **Attribute the organization first and the person second**

The attribution should specify the organization the person represents and the job title or role of the person concerned. Example: NOT: "....according to Dr. Stephen Taylor, the head of UNICEF operations in Malaysia." INSTEAD: "....according to the head of UNICEF operations in Malaysia, Dr. Stephen Taylor."

### **Spelling, grammar and terminology should conform to UNICEF house style**

Refer to the *UNICEF Style Book*, produced by the Editorial and Publications Section of DOC, and to the *UNICEF Thesaurus* for detailed guidance.

### **Acronyms**

Make sure all acronyms are written out in full, followed by the acronym in parenthesis, the first time they are mentioned in the text. Example: "One of UNICEF's partners in the immunization effort is the World Health Organization (WHO)."

### **Series**

If you name a number of countries or regions, please list them in alphabetical order.

### **Photo captions**

Add a caption for every photo included in the body of an article.

In each photo caption, include:

- The name(s) of the main subject(s)
- Country where the photo was taken, and city if available
- Year the photo was taken, if relevant (e.g. if older).
- For children or young people, include their ages

Also try to include more information than just what is evident in the photo; for example, add a sentence on why the content of the photo is relevant for the issue discussed in the associated story.

### **Photo credits**

Always include a credit for any photo you use.

For UNICEF photos, give credits as follows:

- Only those images held by HQ are credited just to UNICEF (that is, with no additional country reference), followed by the HQ catalogue number and the photographer (last name only, in sentence case).  
Example:



- **UNICEF/HQ02-0320/Pirozzi**
- Images held by country offices or National Committees are credited to both UNICEF and the country of origin (or its abbreviation), followed by a catalogue number (if any) and the photographer's name  
Examples:
  - **UNICEF Kenya/123456/Smith**
  - **UNICEF UK/789012/Cowznofski**
- Images held by regional offices are credited to both UNICEF and the regional office acronym, followed by a catalogue number (if any) and the photographer's name. NB: Please credit the Geneva Regional office (GRO) for all photos from Geneva and/or CEE, CIS & Baltics  
Examples:
  - **UNICEF ESARO/098765/Bol**
  - **UNICEF GRO/102938/Chang**
- If there is no reference number, use the year:  
Example:
  - **UNICEF Thailand/2003/Velez**

## ***Format and typography***

### **Ensure your article is properly formatted, as follows:**

- The sitewide navigation for the global website is in all-capitals. All other page headers, titles, link names, etc. should be in **sentence case**, i.e. use an initial upper-case letter with all other text in lower-case, except for acronyms and proper nouns. .
- Make sure there is only one space (not two) after a period ending a sentence.
- The text must be left-aligned, with no paragraph indent, and single-spaced lines.
- Text font should ideally be 10-11 point Verdana or Arial. Avoid applying other fonts. UNICEF web fonts will automatically be applied when the text is added to a web page; font formatting applied in Word documents will be lost.
- Text must have a title or headline.
- If necessary, note sources for facts in square brackets (example: ...[SOWC 2004 page 26], ...[Carol Bellamy speech at Session 21/09/01], ...[UNDG website, <http://www.undg.org/>...]
- Place all comments that will not be visible on the website between special parentheses. (Example: Children's opinions were gauged in a series of polls <link to opinion polls> held in various regions of the world.) Alternatively you can use Word's 'comment' feature for such text.
- It is helpful to document the edit chain, by noting who has written, edited, seen and/or approved the text and when at the top of each document. (Example: Written by Mickey Mouse 12 December; Edited by Minnie Mouse 14 December; Approved by Walt Disney 15 December.)