Style Guidelines

This style guide offers general information on writing, punctuation, word usage, and a number of other issues that have come up as we read and edit copy submitted to us for publication in *Virginia Lawyer* magazine. It is intended to assist the staff of the bar and our writers. It is also a work in progress. If you have any suggestions for additions, please send them to us at dnorman@vsb.org and we'll consider them for inclusion.

Manuscript Requirements:
Length: Articles must be no longer than 2,500 words, including endnotes.
Format: Articles must be formatted as double-spaced, 8 ½" x 11" pages.

All citations on full-length articles must be included in endnote form – not in the body of the manuscript and not as footnotes.

Endnotes: Although *Virginia Lawyer* is not a law review, it is peer reviewed; as such, statements of fact and law must be substantiated with endnotes. Use endnotes to cite authority only, and do not include extended side discussion.

Accurate quotations and complete citations are important. Please include complete citations (for example, include parallel citations) and, when citing material other than cases, statutes, or rules, give the reader enough information to locate that material.

Article Title/Subtitle: Compose a title – and subtitle, if appropriate – that conveys the essence of your article.

Biography: Provide a brief author biography – not to exceed 80 words – emphasizing credentials related to the subject of your article.

Photographs: You may submit a photograph with your manuscript. Photos should be 300 PPI (pixels per inch) and no smaller than 2 by 3 inches. We accept TIFF, JPEG, EPS, or PDF files, as well as photographic prints.

All rights to published articles will be held jointly between the author and the Virginia State Bar.

Sending Your Manuscript: Submit your article electronically to Dee Norman at dnorman@vsb.org. Please include your complete contact information with your manuscript.

Some writing guidelines

The 4 Cs: Review content for clarity, correctness, conciseness, and conformity

Review content as if you were reading it for the first time. If you question the clarity of your content, share it with a colleague, preferably someone who doesn't know your programs or products well. An uninvolved third party may offer a fresh perspective.

- **Is the information clear, accurate, and current?** If you're reading your work and something gives you pause, pause. Don't just move on. Double-check your facts.

- **Less is usually more.** Write your copy for the impatient reader. Get to the point, and] then stop. Here is some guidance:

  Headings: 8 words or less
  Sentences: 15 to 20 words
  Paragraphs: 40 to 70 words

  It is particularly important to keep your paragraphs short in articles written for the printed page. Paragraph indentations help readers keep track of where they are in the text.

  While editing your work, try to reduce the length by 10 percent.

- **Look for inconsistencies**. Don't allow inconsistencies in style or content. Here's a good example: Web site, Website, web site, or website? We use "The Chicago Manual of Style," and when that doesn't speak to the issue, the "Associated Press Stylebook." We also use the dictionary. We highly recommend "The Elements of Style," by Strunk and White.

- **Use active voice.** Active voice makes the meaning clear and more concise than passive voice. *Passive*: Action on the bill is being considered by the committee. *Active:* The committee is considering action on the bill.

- **Use simple sentences**. The sentence that has a subject, verb, and object (as in the active voice example above) gets the point across.

- **Proofread your copy.** Mistakes in online copy are easily fixed, but by the time you've noticed your errors so have thousands of other people. Mistakes in print copy last forever. Check for grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors.

Write to your target audience

- **Is your content written to serve multiple audiences?** Target your message to the right audience. Our website and most of our publications are aimed at lawyers. Some of our

publications, such as the Senior Citizens Handbook and So You're 18, are meant for broader audiences. Keep your audience in mind as you write.

- **Are you speaking to your audience using language and terms they understand?** Jargon and acronyms can impact readers' attention or slow comprehension.

- **What's in it for them?** Tell readers what they will gain. Focus your copy on what's in it for the reader.

- **Writing for online readers?** If you want your audience to find your information through internet search engines, use words your targeted readers use. Before you begin to write, think carefully about the keywords your audience uses. Then, weave those words into your copy.

Structure content for easy reading

Use the following tips to quickly draw viewers' attention to the key components of your page.

- **Write a meaningful title or page heading.** A headline may be the most important copy you write. It's the first thing they read, and if it doesn't grab their attention, they'll leave. Give the reader more than the title of a program or product. Communicate upfront an offer, value, benefit, or call to action.

- **Present the most important information first.** Tell readers how the service, program, or resource benefits them.

- **Use short paragraphs, use descriptive subheads.** Avoid long run-on sentences. Subheads make the page easier to scan, and they break up gray text.

- **Use bullet points.** This can improve the visual layout of the text. Use numbers or letters at the start of items in a list only if the list is in numerical order.

Consider message and voice

Message:

The overriding message in all our publications is this: The Virginia State Bar is a state agency that protects the public by educating and assisting lawyers to practice ethically and competently, and by disciplining those who violate the Supreme Court's Rules of Professional Conduct, all at no cost to Virginia taxpayers. Your message almost certainly will be more specific. Whatever it is, keep it in mind as you write.

Voice:

The Virginia State Bar is a professional organization. This means that being approachable is just as important as being polished. Our voice – the tone that we use in all communications – must strike a balance between conversational and straightforward. Chatty can be good; wordy is never good.

Speak plainly
Stay away from content that is overblown and needlessly complicated. Oftentimes, less is more.

Say it naturally
In an effort to impress, it's easy to start using overly formal and stilted phrases. Write like you talk but be professional. Stay away from slang, and don't become too familiar.

Read it out loud

If you can't read what you've written out loud without stumbling over words or getting lost in sentences, do it over.]

Common Style and Punctuation Issues

Here are some general guidelines for writing copy for state bar print and electronic communications. If you have a particular style question, contact the Publications Department.

State Bar and other legal terms:

board, board of directors, board of governors – always lowercase "board" and "board of directors" unless used as the first word in a sentence.

bylaw – one word, capitalized only as the first word in a sentence (*not* by-law, Bylaw, By-law)

case law, caseload

commas and periods -- always go inside the close quotation mark. There are no exceptions to this rule in written American English. Don't stick two sentences together with a comma.

Commonwealth of Virginia; the commonwealth. Office of the Governor; the governor. Office of the Attorney General; the attorney general.

exclamation point – It is a rare thing. Keep it that way. See "The Elements of Style."

Justices – on first use, refer to justices as Chief Justice Donald W. Lemons or Justice Elizabeth A. McClanahan. On second use, you can drop the first name and middle initial, but retain their title: Chief Justice Lemons or Justice McClanahan.

italicizing legal terms of art – Many of these terms, such as "pro bono," "guardian ad litem," and "pro se" should *not be* italicized; they are generally accepted in everyday use. Here's a rule of thumb: If the term appears in the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary, do not italicize it. (There will be exceptions. Some terms, like "pro se," don't appear in Webster but are not italicized anyway.)

pro bono, pro se – See "Italicizing legal terms of art" above.

section – always lowercase unless used as part of a proper name (e.g., Business Law Section). If referring to a State Bar section, use the section's full name for the first reference; use "section" thereafter.

Supreme Court of Virginia – Use this on first reference, not Virginia Supreme Court. Use Court on subsequent references for the Supreme Court. All other courts get a lower-case "c."

underlining and bold type – Avoid using either. If you want to emphasize a word, put it at the beginning of the sentence, or the end.

Virginia State Bar – also State Bar, and the bar.

Technology terms:

email – one word, lower case, no hyphen

email addresses – should be unformatted in print publications as in hickey@vsb.org (no underline, no bold, no italics, etc.). In electronic publications, hyperlink the name**.**

e-book, e-commerce, e-business, e-discovery, etc. – one word, lower case, with a hyphen, "e" is a shortening of "electronic." An exception would be when the e-term is part of a formal title, as in "the eDiscovery Section" of a law firm.

Facebook – proper noun, capitalize initial "F" (*not* facebook)

Google – proper noun, capitalize initial "G" (*not* google), also used informally as a verb for searching for information on the internet

home page – two words (*not* homepage)

HTML, URL, USB, JPEG, TIFF, etc. – capitalize, no periods

internet – lowercase (*not* Internet)

tweet, tweeted, retweet – lower case

Twitter – proper noun, capitalize initial "T" (*not* twitter)

web page, web feed -- two words, lowercase

webcam, webcast, webmaster, website – one word, lower case, nouns

Other common style issues:

Acronyms and Abbreviations:

Spell out the first time they are used in an article. A few acronyms are readily understood across all topic and geographic areas; they do not need to be spelled out on first use (e.g., IBM, IRS, FBI). Most acronyms and abbreviations, however, can be understood to mean different things; they must be spelled out (e.g., IRA can be Individual Retirement Account *or* Irish Republic Army). Do not make your reader gather your meaning from the context in which the acronym or abbreviation is used.

Don't use periods in USA or US Navy.

Capitalization:

In headlines and subheads, capitalize all but prepositions.

Dates:

January 2002; Jan. 1, 2002; and Jan. 1 are all correct usages. Spell out the month when it appears with no day.

Months:

Abbreviate months when used in text, but always spell out March, April, May, June, and July. (*See* the **Numbers/date** entry below.)

Numbers (and "numeric" relationships):

Numbers. Spell out all numbers from zero to nine; use digits from 10 and up. This applies to cardinal numbers (first, second, etc.) Use digits for ordinals (122nd, 10th.) (Exception: Always use digits to express ages.)

Less than/fewer than. Use *less than* when comparing/describing groups (e.g., He had less than 10 cents. He had less than $10). Use *fewer than* when comparing/describing individual items (e.g., He had fewer than 10 pennies. He had fewer than 10 dollars (individual bills)).

Over/more than. Use *more than* to describe a quantity (e.g., There were more than fifty people in attendance, *not* There were over fifty people in attendance.) Use *over* to describe spatial or time relationships (e.g., The seminar took place over three days).

Percentages:

Always use digits with percentages (e.g., 1 percent, 50 percent). Spell out "percent" when used in text. Use the % symbol when used in charts, graphs, and other illustrations.

Phone numbers:

Always place the area code in parentheses, even if it is a toll-free number. Always insert a space between the area code and the phone number. Never insert a space between the three-digit prefix and the hyphen and between the hyphen and the four-digit number that follows. Omit a "1" preceding the area code (*not* 1-123-456-7890, 123-456-7890, 123/456-7890, etc.)

(800) 555-1212 and (804) 555-1212 are correct.
1-800-555-1212 is incorrect.

Punctuation:

Parentheses. If a complete sentence is contained within parentheses, the ending punctuation goes inside the parentheses. If the parentheses contain a phrase at the end of a sentence, the ending punctuation goes outside the parentheses.

Quotation marks.

Periods and commas *always* go inside quotation marks.

• Other punctuation goes inside quotation marks *if* the punctuation is part of the material quoted.

• If a quote continues for more than one paragraph, use an ending quotation mark *only* at the end of the last paragraph in the quote. Use a starting quotation mark at the beginning of each paragraph within the quote.

Suffixes.

Do not add commas after names before Jr., Sr., and numerals like I, II, III, IV, etc.
John Smith Jr. and Catherine Jones IV is correct.

Spaces:

• **Use a single, not double, space following ending punctuation.**

• Insert a single space on either side of ellipses. Do not insert a space between each dot in the ellipses (e.g., "The plaintiff argued ... and the court held").

• Insert a single space before and after a dash – to separate thoughts in a sentence. Use a dash also called an em-dash, *not* a hyphen, to separate thoughts in a sentence.

State names:

• Spell out state names when they are used in text and not as part of an address (e.g., Attorneys from Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota attended the seminar.)

• Abbreviate state names in text when they are part of an address (e.g., He is from Big Stone Gap, Va.). Never abbreviate Texas, Iowa, Utah, Alaska, Ohio, Hawaii in text for any reason.

• Use the postal standard (two letter designation) for states when used in an address that also contains a zip code (e.g., Richmond, VA 23219).

Time:

Lower case a.m. and p.m. Do not add minutes if there are none.

10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. and 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. are correct.
10:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. and 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. are incorrect.
12 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. is correct.
Noon - 4:30 p.m. is correct.
12 noon - 4:30 p.m. is incorrect.

Titles:

Capitalize positions/titles only as a formal title before one or more names
Assistant District Attorney Joe Friday is correct.
Joe Friday, assistant district attorney, also is correct.

Guidelines for Web and email hyperlinks:

Email addresses:

1) **Preferred:** Contact Dee Norman at (804) 775-0594.

2) **No:** Contact Dee Norman at (804) 775-0594, or dnorman@vsb.org. *Exception: If you're producing material that is intended for print distribution, add the email address after the phone references and remove the hyperlink from the name.*

3) **No:** To contact Dee Norman click here.

Web links:

Avoid the use of "click here" when linking to additional information on the internet. In addition, avoid including URLs (long or short) in your copy. Instead, use hyperlinks.

How to embed a hyperlink:

To embed a hyperlink, highlight the word or words you want to create the link to and right mouse click to open the context menu. Left mouse click on "Hyperlink," which opens the "Insert Hyperlink" window. Then, type the person's email address in the Address box or copy the URL from your browser and paste it into the Address box.

Updated September 2018