

# The DHHS Open Window Writing Style Guide

## DHHS OPEN WINDOW

DHHS Open Window is the highly visible information and management tool of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). It is viewed and utilized by department, external governmental customers and the general public.

## PURPOSE OF THE WRITING STYLE GUIDE

DHHS engaged an independent editor and reviewer of the primary Open Window information initially migrated from our former application, the Program Management Database (PMD) from the last quarter of 2009 to the first quarter of 2010. The overarching goal of the independent review was to analyze and recommend how to best present our critical service, contract and other information to our various audiences.

Therefore, the DHHS Open Window Writing Style Guide exists so that there will be consistent writing approaches and standards that can be readily understood by all readers or audiences. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for all DHHS staff responsible for composing, entering or approving information in Open Window. Standardized and consistent writing can project the Department of Health and Human Services' commitment to openness and transparency by providing information regarding what we do, how and for whom in a clear, easily understood manner.

## CLEAR GUIDELINES-NOT STRICT RULES

This guide drew upon the expertise of an experienced editor using the Associated Press Stylebook as a primary "authority" because so much of this information is intended to be understood by external readers. It also incorporates standards set forth in Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style" among others.

The complexity of the English language does not dictate that there is only one best way to write. This guide will not answer all questions and a list of preferred resources is included. However, this guide will give DHHS staff a foundation upon which you are expected to follow in presenting DHHS information especially for diverse audiences---from the General Assembly to the general public.

We appreciate your cooperation in using these guidelines. Department-wide consistency in writing style and presentation of information builds the credibility of our information and greatly enhances our audiences' understanding of DHHS.

If you have questions about the guide, please contact the DHHS Open Window Administrator, [Marjorie.Donaldson@dhhs.nc.gov](mailto:Marjorie.Donaldson@dhhs.nc.gov).

## THREE TIERS OF INFORMATION

Open Window will be useful to a variety of audiences, from the general public to the General Assembly. Some readers need just basic information about a service, while others want more detail. Your service description can be useful to all of them if you use a three-tier approach:

1. The simple basics.
2. More elaboration.
3. Details and complex information, if needed.

This way, readers can stop when they've learned enough for their own purposes. Therefore, you are asked to address the "basics" which answers the questions of what is done, for whom, how and for what result in the first paragraph. More detail can be added in the second and third tiers.

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*Here is an example from the Division of Child Development:*

### **Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Core Services**

*[Title of service]*

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Core Services provide a link between child care providers, families who need care, and employers and community planners who address child care needs.

*[1. Clear, general description of what the service provides]*

Basic (core) activities of CCR&Rs statewide include:

- Helping parents make informed choices about child care.
- Providing professional development for child care workers.
- Supporting child care providers through technical assistance and training.
- Collecting and analyzing information about child care needs and supply.
- Educating and encouraging communities to address child care needs and issues.

*[2. More elaborate description, with bullet points for easy reading]*

Activities are contracted to a three-agency council that works with 18 regional lead agencies. CCR&R services are part of the Child Care Quality and Availability Program, which serves infants and children in child care. In addition, the network of CCR&R agencies addresses concerns about challenging behaviors of children in care.

*[3. Details about how the service operates; more than the average reader is likely to need]*

## HOW TO WRITE SERVICE DESCRIPTIONS

**Service Descriptions:** Services are the core organizational unit for Open Window. Services will be the main entry point for users, so the descriptions need to be complete enough to stand on their own. Describe the main functions or activities provided by writing a simple summary or abstract first, then the necessary details afterward. You don't need to tell everything you know; hit the main points. Use bullets when you have more than two or three related items to add visual clarity and readability.

- What the service does and how it administers or does it.
- Who is being served and what population benefits from it.
- The purpose or need the service addresses for the targeted population and intended beneficiaries.
- How the service is accessed by those who need it (for example, through departments of social services, local health departments, etc.).
- Who provides the service (staff members, contractors, providers—what type?).
- Eligibility requirements.

**Note:** If there seem to be multiple “services” under one service, the description should identify the components as “functions” or “activities,” not multiple “services”; otherwise the reader will be confused. Also, be careful not to call a service a “program.”

Remember to avoid describing your service in regards to how it is organized or managed in your respective division or office but from the perspective of what is actually being done for one or more target populations.

**Programs** are still a part of DHHS and Open Window, though they are no longer the main entry point for users. What we currently define as programs will be transitioned into a description of the goal /objective area that a particular service falls under and what that objective is trying to achieve. Until further notice, you will not add programs and will not be required to address this area.

## DHHS OPEN WINDOW REQUIREMENTS

- We will use Arial as the standard font as it is more readable for people with disabilities. If you use a font color other than black while you are entering or reviewing information in the production side of DHHS Open Window, you must not submit any service information for publication to the public site that is not in **Arial and that is in black font color**. This is not to be mistaken for Arial Black as the font choice.
- You must spell check all information prior to submitting for publication.

## EFFECTIVE CONTRACT DESCRIPTIONS

Users will be able to search contract information in Open Window, so consistent and informative descriptions are important.

### Contract Title and Description Basics

- **Do** be informative, relevant. Be brief but descriptive of what's being done (service, activity). Be careful of spelling.
- **Don't** use just an acronym; write it out. Don't use all capital letters. Don't use just a person's name or provider's name as a contract description.

### Contract purpose statement basics

- **Do** clearly state what the contract is for and what is being done. Include the services or activities to be performed under the contract.
- **Don't** be vague; don't leave out key words. Put yourself in the reader's shoes. If this was not your contract and you performed a search, would it be easy to find it?

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR CLEAR WRITING IN OPEN WINDOW

- **Be direct.** “*To help* people with disabilities *get jobs*” is easier to understand than “To provide advocacy, as needed, to individuals with disabilities who are seeking services for the purposes of achieving employment.”
- **Use active voice.** Say who is doing the action. Instead of “Advocacy services *are provided* to individuals...,” say “Staff members *provide* services...” or “Clients *receive* services...”
- **Shorter is better.** To explain, break your idea into smaller pieces. Use bulleted lists (like this one), not long sentences.
- **But avoid insider jargon.** Each specialty has its own. These are words you use every day with your co-workers; everybody understands. But they leave outsiders in the dark. (*Capacity building. Evidence-based practice. Medical home. Cost-based reimbursement. Continuity of care.* Can you say what these mean, in one sentence each? Think about explaining these terms to your sister or your next-door neighbor.) Sometimes you have to break the “shorter is better” guideline to stop and explain.
- **Limit the “process” words.** Words like *implement, coordinate, utilize, disseminate* and *establish* are useful—in small doses—but if you string too many of them

together, you will make your reader's mind fog over. Try shorter words: *use, create, tell, inform, set up*.

## STYLE POINTS

For consistency, please follow these:

- **No serial comma.** That's the comma that some writers use before the "and" in a list. Leave it out unless the sentence is confusing without it. Example:  
Administrators, faculty and staff attended the seminar.
- **Bulleted list format:** Each bullet point gets its own paragraph. Each bullet point starts with a capital letter and ends with a period, even if it's not a complete sentence.
- **Words starting with "non."** In general, don't hyphenate, but follow Webster's New World Dictionary. Common examples: nonprofit, nonresidential.
- **Numbers:** Generally, write out one through nine; use figures for 10 and higher. For more details, check The Associated Press Stylebook. For percentages, always use numbers, even for numbers less than 10.
- Spell out numerals that start a sentence; if the result is awkward, reword the sentence: *Twenty-seven detainees were released yesterday. Yesterday, 993 freshmen entered the college.* The one exception to this rule is in a sentence that begins with a calendar year: *1938 was a turbulent year for Leon.*
- The figures 1, 2, 10, 101, and so on and the corresponding words — one, two, ten, one hundred one and so on — are called cardinal numbers. The terms 1st, 2nd, 10th, 101st, first, second, tenth, one hundred first and so on are called ordinal numbers.
- For large numbers: use a hyphen to connect a word ending in y to another word: *twenty-one, one hundred forty-three, seventy-six thousand five hundred eighty-seven*
- **Ages:** Always use figures. Example: This program serves children from birth to age 5. (And by the way, there is no age "0." Just say "from birth.")
- **Acronyms.** Avoid use of acronyms, but when you use them, be sure to explain what they mean.
- **Names of diseases and conditions:** Usually lowercase except when named after a person or as an acronym. Examples: tuberculosis, diabetes; Alzheimer's, Down syndrome, AIDS.
- **Deaf and deaf.** Deaf people often capitalize the word Deaf to emphasize their cultural identity. If you are writing about *Deaf culture* or *the Deaf community*, you should capitalize it. But if you are writing about services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, with the emphasis on their hearing loss, you should lowercase it.

- **“Data” is a plural noun.** So technically, you should write “The data show...” and “The data are...” But many people think those sound stilted. You can’t go wrong with “Information is.”
- **Titles.** Lowercase a job title when it comes after the person’s name or without a name. (The governor signed the proclamation. Renee McCoy, director of public affairs, spoke to the media.) But capitalize a formal title when it’s used directly before a name: (DHHS Secretary Lanier Cansler; North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue).
- **Capitalization.** Avoid unnecessary capitals. Use capitals for the full formal name (Child and Adult Care Food Program), but in later references, “the program” is sufficient. The state of North Carolina; the state; state employees; county social services agencies.
- **People.** What to call the people who receive services? Remember, states do not grant citizenship; therefore, please refrain from using *citizens*, except under the Office of Citizen Services. Good terms to use: North Carolina residents. North Carolinians. Clients. Customers. Consumers (sometimes; if that’s the accepted term in your field). Individuals (but sparingly; this can sound stilted). People. Not *persons*.

## MORE HELP WITH CAPITALIZATION AND PUNCTUATION

- **Capitalize abbreviations of college degrees** (write without space between letters). But, if mention of academic degrees is necessary, the preferred form is to avoid abbreviation (see AP Style Guide)
- Capitalize common nouns and their distinguishing modifiers when the nouns is in names of associations, societies, companies, streets, etc.  
Example: Blythe Plumbing Co.  
Lake Chelan Parks Hall Associated Student Board
- **Capitalize the formal names of offices and departments**, but use the informal names whenever possible.  
Example: DHHS Public Affairs Office (but: public affairs)  
DHHS Human Resources (but: human resources office or division)
- **Capitalize holidays and special or historic events.**  
Example: Fourth of July, National Milk Week, World War II , New Year’s Eve, Christmas (not Xmas)
- **Do not capitalize a.m. and p.m.** Always use figures with them. Do not use spaces in the abbreviations.  
Examples: 9:35 a.m.                      11 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
                  9 a.m.                              3 to 5 p.m.
- **Do not capitalize the seasons.**  
summer, winter, fall, spring
- **For plural nouns ending in s**, add only an apostrophe: *the girls’ toys, states’ rights.*
- **For singular common nouns ending in s**, add 's: *the hostess's invitation, the witness's answer.*

- **For singular proper names ending in s**, use only an apostrophe: *Descartes' theories, Kansas' schools.*
- **For singular proper names ending in s sounds such as x, ce, and z**, use 's: *Marx's theories, the prince's life.*
- **For plurals of a single letter**, add 's: *Mind your p's and q's, the Red Sox defeated the Oakland A's.*
- **Do not use 's for plurals of numbers, or multiple letter combinations:** *the 1980s, RBIs*
- **Colon (:)** Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or the start of a complete sentence: *He promised this: The company will make good all the losses.* **But:** *There were three considerations: expense, time and feasibility.*
- **Colons go outside quotation marks** unless they are part of the quoted material.
- **Comma (,)** Do not put a comma before the conjunction in a simple series: *John, Paul, George and Ringo; red, white and blue.*
- **Use a comma to set off a person's address and age:** *Jane Doe, Framingham, was absent. Joe Blow, 34, was arrested yesterday.*
- **Dash (--)** Make a dash by striking the hyphen key twice. Put a space on either side of the dash: *Smith offered a plan — it was unprecedented — to raise revenues.*
- **Do not use a hyphen to denote an abrupt change in a sentence**—use a parentheses
- The perceived need for parentheses is an indication that your sentence is becoming contorted. Try to rewrite the sentence, putting the incidental information in commas, dashes or in another sentence. If you do use parentheses, follow these guidelines:
  - a. If the material is inside a sentence, place the period outside the parentheses.
  - b. If the parenthetical statement is a complete independent sentence, place the period inside the parentheses.
- **Use a single space after the period at the end of a sentence.**
- Do not put a space between initials: *C.S. Lewis; G.K. Chesterton.*
- **Quotation marks (“ ”)** Periods and commas always go within quotation marks.
- **Dashes, semicolons, question marks** and exclamation points go within the quotation marks when they apply to the quoted material. They go outside when they apply to the whole sentence.
- **Put the period inside brackets or parentheses** when a complete sentence is enclosed in the brackets or parentheses. When the parenthetical expression forms only a part of the sentence, put the period outside the bracket or parenthesis.  
(The day was too cold for football.)  
The day was too cold for football (or skiing).
- **Always put the period and comma inside quotation marks.** Put other punctuation marks inside when they are part of the quoted material.

- **Their, they're, there**

Their is a possessive pronoun: *They went to their cabin.*

There is an adverb indicating direction: *We went there for a movie.*

There is also used with the force of a pronoun for impersonal construction in which the real subject follows the verb: *There is food in the kitchen.*

There is a contraction for "they are": *They're all doing so well.*

## **GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Although people with disabilities may refer to themselves in many different ways, we as an agency must use terminology recommended by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA recommends person first language when referring to people with disabilities, and the term accessible when referring to wheelchair accessible elements such as parking or elevators.

**PUT PEOPLE FIRST--** not their disability. Write: *woman with arthritis, children who are deaf, people with disabilities, person with bi-polar.* This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation.

Most people with disabilities prefer being called "people with disabilities." It would be wrong to say "the disabled man." It is more appropriate to say "the man who has a disability." Person first terminology is used to put the focus on the person and not the disability.

**DO NOT USE GENERIC LABELS** for disability groups, such as *the retarded, the deaf, the disabled.* Emphasize people, not labels. Write: *people with mental retardation or people who are deaf.*

**DO NOT SENSATIONALIZE A DISABILITY** by writing: *afflicted with, crippled with, suffers from, victim of,* etc. Instead, write: *person who has multiple sclerosis or man who had polio.*

**Handicap: Not a synonym for disability.** Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or by one's own self. Some individuals prefer *inaccessible* or *not accessible* to describe social and environmental barriers. *Handicap* can be used when quoting or citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. **Do not refer to people with disabilities as *the handicapped* or *handicapped people.*** Instead: *the building is not wheelchair accessible or the stairs are a handicap for her.*

### **Grouping People with Disabilities**

Below are examples of words to use when writing about people with disabilities and words to not use when writing about people with disabilities:

**Don't Use:**

"disabled group"  
 "disabled transportation"  
 "the disabled" or "the handicapped"  
 "handicap parking"  
 "disabled, invalid or handicapped child"  
 "autistic"

**Instead Use:**

"a group of people with disabilities"  
 "transportation for people with disabilities"  
 "people with disabilities"  
 "accessible parking"  
 "child with a disability"  
 "child(ren) with autism"

**Avoid Catchy Phrases**

Many incorrect and disrespectful terms used to refer to people with disabilities today have been created and used. Many people with disabilities do not like these terms, and prefer to be called "people with disabilities."

Example: "Differently-abled" or "physically challenged" are catchy phrases that should be avoided.

**USE OF TECHNOLOGY TERMS IN WRITING**

Whereas the 2010 AP Stylebook retains a hyphen for *e-mail*, it appears that many other writing references support writing it without the hyphen (email). Although references to the Web itself use a cap W (Web page, Web feed), these web based words use a lower case w.

- webcam
- webcast
- webinar
- webmaster
- website

Some frequently used terms include:

cybersecurity, cyberspace -- One word, lowercase.

high tech (no hyphen)

Internet (capital "I")

log off (verb) logoff (noun)

log on (verb) logon (noun)

multimedia (one word, no hyphen)

offline (one word, no hyphen)

online (one word, no hyphen)

download -- One word. Also, upload.

database -- One word.

end user, end-user -- Two words as noun, hyphenate as adjective.

home page -- Lowercase, two words.

hyperlink -- One word, lowercase. Also, hypertext.

IT --Uppercase acronym. Generally spell out information technology in a sentence

listserv -- One word, lowercase.

## Style Resources and References

- The DHHS Public Affairs office uses The Associated Press Stylebook as a guide. Subscribers can view it online at <http://www.apstylebook.com/>.
- Webster’s New World Dictionary is a standard reference for spelling and hyphenation.
- For thoughts on clear writing and questions of grammar and usage, see *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Online highlights are available at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>.
- For technical terms, we refer to “Wired Style, Principles of English Usage in the Digital Age,” from the editors of Wired Magazine [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com) as a guide.
- For more information on People First writing, please see the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities website at <http://www.ncddc.org/home/peoplefirst.html> or the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council: “The Missing Page in your Stylebook: People First Language at <http://www.arcwa.org/pdf/RespectfulLanguage.pdf>.