

Government Web Strategy

April 2016

Online
Writing Guide V.2

Communications Nova Scotia

Overview

The Province of Nova Scotia launched its web strategy and beta website in April 2016. This guide is one of seven content-related tools designed to support that strategy:

- Content Criteria Guide
- French Translation Guide
- **Online Writing Guide**
- Visual Aids Guide
- Measurement Scorecard
- Google Analytics
- User testing and feedback tools

Government's new website will focus on three key content areas: convey what the Province of Nova Scotia is doing and why; provide clearer and easier access to government programs and services; and share information that visitors are seeking that can only be provided by our provincial government.

In keeping with the rollout of government's one-brand approach, the new website has moved away from the old department-by-department model.

Development of the new website is supported by a publishing model (roles and workflow), content criteria, content types, content templates, content lifecycles, and metadata (to improve search capabilities). Content, once posted, will be measured and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

Informed by government's web strategy, the new website is designed to work well for the variety of ways visitors want to access the site: by Google search, by department/office, by topic, by using global navigation, or by conducting an internal search. The new website will only contain relevant and accessible content that is both user-centered and sustainable over time. Lastly, the new website is entirely housed under government's one brand.

Content Readiness Process

The web strategy outlines a content review process with several preparation checkpoints to assess if content should be developed for novascotia.ca and to help prepare content to meet user needs and provide a consistent user experience on the new website.

Deciding if the content meets the web strategy's content criteria is the first step. The second step is to decide if the content should be simultaneously posted in English and French. The third step is to develop the content with this guide in mind.

About this guide

This guide applies to all content published on novascotia.ca.
Writing topics have been arranged alphabetically, for ease of use.

Abbreviations

The first time you use an abbreviation explain it in full on each page unless it's well known. Then refer to it by initials.

Active voice

Use the active rather than passive voice. This will help us write concise, clear content.

The active voice allows the reader to more easily identify who performs the action.

Examples:

Yes: You must submit the request form to the approving office.

No: The request form must be submitted to the approving office.

Yes: Save the case number in your records. You will need it for future steps.

No: The case number should be saved in your records. It will be required for future steps.

Acronyms (and initialisms)

Acronyms often confuse readers. Avoid them whenever possible.

If you think an acronym is well known, write out the words in full and follow with the acronym in brackets the first time you reference it. You may not need to use an acronym if you're not going to use it again later in the text.

Example: Emergency Health Services (EHS) provides emergency response across the province. When Nova Scotians need help in an emergency, EHS paramedics are there.

Some acronyms are more recognizable than their full spellings. In such instances, the acronym is always acceptable.

Example: MSI, NSBI, NSLC

Don't use periods in acronyms: MSI not M.S.I.

Address the user

Address the user as "you" when possible. Content on the site often makes a direct appeal to citizens and businesses to get involved or take action ("You can apply" or "Pay your car tax").

When referring to government in web content, take care if using "we." See when to use "we". Because readers skim and scan on the web, they may lose track of who "we" refers to.

Addresses

For mailing and civic address formatting, use the Canada Post addressing guidelines.

Alt text

Alt text is a way to label images, and it's especially important for people who can't see the images on our website. Alt text should describe the image in a brief sentence or two.

Try to go beyond making the alt text a literal description of the image: think about what point the image is making.

This is "behind-the-scenes" information that is important for search engines and screen readers to understand the information on web pages.

Ampersand

Use "and" rather than "&" except in logos, images or official names.

Body text

Keep your body copy as focused as possible.

Body text should:

- begin with what's most important to users (not to government)
- focus on user needs and tasks
- be concise and easy to scan (with sub-heads every 3-5 paragraphs)
- be written in jargon-free, easy-to-understand language
- use short sentences (around 20 words)
- use strong energetic verbs
- use short paragraphs (no more than 5 sentences)

- define acronyms and abbreviations the first time they're used
- explain technical terms
- include keywords to help search rankings
- be shorter than 500 words, if possible

Remember that you're likely to be competing for people's attention (with outside factors, their mood and situation). They might be looking on a phone while carpooling to work, trying to complete their task online in the middle of a stressful day, or any combination of multiple unknowns. If you want their attention, don't waste their time.

Brackets

Use (round brackets), not [square brackets].

Don't use round brackets to refer to something that could either be singular or plural. Use the plural instead to cover each possibility.

Example:

Yes: Check which documents you need to send to Registry of Motor Vehicles.

No: Check which document(s) you need to send to Registry of Motor Vehicles.

Call to action

A call to action should make clear what a link or button will lead to. Give users a reason to complete your call to action.

For starting a service, call-to-action button text should contain a clear call to action to "start" the service. It should be clear if the service is not hosted on novascotia.ca.

Be descriptive and include keywords (for screen readers). The call to action should make sense out of context.

Capitalization

Don't use BLOCK CAPITALS as they're hard to read.

Sentence case is preferable but use title case for:

- departments
- job titles, ministers' role titles
- buildings
- place names
- brand names
- faculties, departments, institutes and schools
- titles of specific acts or regulations
- header cells in tables (Annual Revenue)

Don't capitalize:

- **government** - never Government, even when referring to an elected administration
- **minister** - never Minister, unless part of a specific job title
- **department or ministry** - never Department or Ministry, unless referring to a specific one by name

Captions

When captioning an image, the goal is to add additional context and information. Don't simply state what the reader is able to see by looking at the photo itself. Captions should increase depth and understanding. For images, captions are optional. If you don't need one, don't include it.

Colons

Use a colon to offset a list.

Cultural references

Avoid them when possible. This includes colloquial expressions and clichés. They do not work well for a global audience. Even colours can be culturally specific.

Consistency

Use consistent wording on a page and throughout the website. Inconsistent wording forces users to figure out whether different words and actions mean the same thing, which leads to confusion.

Use consistent formatting to reduce ambiguity and increase a user's ability to scan our content quickly and with confidence.

Dates

- Use upper case for months (January, February)
- If only using month and year, don't use a comma
- When space is an issue (tables, publication titles, etc.) you can use truncated months (Jan, Feb, Mar)
- Use "to" in date ranges instead of a dash or hyphen (January to March 2016). "To" is quicker to read than a dash, and it's easier for screen readers
- Always explain what a date range represents
- Don't use "quarter" for dates; use the months ("Budget expenses, January to March 2016")
- When referring to "today" (only used in a news release) make sure you include the date as well ("The minister announced today (14 June 2012) that...")
- Don't use ordinal numbers (1st, 3rd, etc.)

Directional language

Avoid directional instructions and any language that requires the reader to see the layout of the page design. This helps those using screen readers or mobile devices (design changes based on screen size).

Example

Yes: Select from these options
(with the options listed directly beneath)

No: Select from the options in the right sidebar

e.g. and i.e.

Avoid using these notations. Try using the long form (“for example” instead of “e.g.” and “specifically” instead of “i.e.”). Another option is to introduce a list with a colon only. User testing shows that some people are not familiar with the Latin abbreviations, so consider your audience before abbreviating.

Email

Email not e-mail.

Email addresses

Write email addresses in full, in lowercase and as active links. Don’t include any other words as part of the link.

Don’t label email addresses with “Email:” or include any punctuation that’s not part of the address.

FAQs

If you write content by starting with user needs, you won’t need to use FAQs.

Frequently asked questions usually aren’t questions asked by the user, but rather are important information that we think the user needs to know. In most cases, FAQ content is not where users expect to find it, which makes their experience frustrating and less than informative.

FAQs are discouraged because they:

- duplicate other content on the site
- can’t be front-loaded (putting the most important words people will search for), which makes usability difficult
- are usually not frequently asked questions by the public, but important information we want people to know
- mean that content is not where people expect to find it; it needs to be in context
- can add to search results with duplicate, competing text

Gender-neutral text

Make sure text is gender neutral.

Government of Nova Scotia

Use Government of Nova Scotia, not the Province of Nova Scotia, when referring to ourselves.

Headings and sub-headings

Headings and sub-headings organize content for users, make content more scannable and can be used to break up the wall of words. They help the user to decide whether to stay or go.

Organize sub-headings in a hierarchy. The order should make sense to the user.

Include the most relevant keywords in your headings and sub-headings, and make sure you cover the main point of the content.

Make sure they are front-loaded with search terms, with the most important words first, and make them active.

Use sentence case for all headings and sub-headings (“Apply for a licence”).

Don't use:

- gerunds (use "Apply for a licence" not "Applying for a licence")
- questions
- technical terms unless you've already explained them
- "introduction" as your first section — users don't want an introduction, just give the most important information
- punctuation after a heading or sub-headings

How users read

People read differently on the web than on paper. This means that the best approach when writing for the web is different from writing for print.

Users read about 25% of a web page. When users want to complete a task as quickly as possible, they are less patient and tend to skim even more.

Web-user eye-tracking studies show that people tend to "read" a webpage in an F-shaped pattern. They look across the top, then down the side, reading further across when they find what they need. This means we need to put the most important information first.

Good content is easy to read and understand. It uses short sentences, sub-headed sections, and simple vocabulary. This helps people find what they need quickly and understand easily.

Knowing how people read means you'll write in a way they can find what they need quickly and understand easily so you don't waste their time.

Readers will navigate away if a quick glance suggests they will:

- not find the information they want or have to work too hard to get it
- have trouble understanding the information
- have reason to distrust the quality of the information (misspellings and typos)

To help people read easily, content should

- use common words
- use short words instead of long words
- explain unusual terms
- use short sentences

Inclusive language

Use inclusive language. Language is discriminatory if it:

- excludes people or makes them invisible to the reader
- focuses on a single characteristic to the exclusion of other more relevant ones
- stereotypes people
- insults or denigrates people
- treats some people differently from others

Italics

Don't use italics.

Example

Yes: Underground Hydrocarbons Storage Act

No: *Underground Hydrocarbons Storage Act*

Job titles

Specific job titles and ministers' role titles are uppercase (Finance and Treasury Board Minister).

Generic job titles and ministers' role titles are lowercase (director, minister).

Legal content

Legal content can still be written in plain language. It's important that users understand content and that we present complicated information simply.

For documents that include legal jargon, write a plain language summary for the document.

When there's a clear user need for including a legal term, always explain it in plain language.

Links

Front-load your link text with the relevant terms and make them active and specific. Always link to online services first. Offer offline alternatives afterwards (when possible).

Include a link whenever you're referring to something on an external website. Use links to point users to relevant content and trusted external resources.

Don't include preceding articles (a, an, the, our) when you link text.

Example

Yes: Read the [2015-16 Budget](#) for details.

No: Read [the 2015-16 Budget](#) for details.

If a link comes at the end of a sentence or before a comma, don't make the punctuation mark part of the link.

Don't say things like "Click here!" or "Click for more information" or "Read this." Write the sentence as you normally would, and place the link on the keyword or phrase that best describes the additional content you're linking to.

Example

Yes: For [universal usability](#), use link underlines to ensure that all users can identify links.

No: [Click here](#) for more information on link underlines.

A good way to test that link text accurately describes where they lead is to remove all the other text on the page and read just the link text — do we still know where we'll go?

Avoid "link splatter." Too many links on a page can be overwhelming and at least one of them is sure to be broken. However, do provide links that support the user's task.

Lists

Lists should be bulleted to make them easier to read. Long lists can be written as a paragraph with a lead-in sentence if it looks better.

List items start with a lowercase letter and have no period at the end.

Use lists to present steps, groups, or sets of information. Give context for the list with a brief introduction.

You can use bullet points to make text easier to read. Make sure that:

- you always use a lead-in line
- you always use a colon after the lead-in line
- the bullets make sense running on from the lead-in line
- you use lowercase at the start of the bullet

- you don't use more than one sentence per bullet point — use commas, dashes, or semicolons to expand on an item
- you don't put "or" or "and" after the bullets
- links appear within the text and not as the whole bullet
- there is no period after the last bullet point
- you try to use only 3 to 7 items in a list

Use numbered steps instead of bullet points to guide a user through a process when the order of the steps is important. You don't need a lead-in line and you can use links in steps. Each step ends in a period because each step should be a complete sentence.

Example

Follow these steps if you have a dispute with your neighbour.

1. Try to solve the problem informally by talking to them.
2. Contact their landlord if your neighbour is a tenant.
3. Use a mediation service if raising the issue informally doesn't work.
4. Contact the police if your neighbour is breaking the law by being violent or harassing you.
5. Take legal action through the courts as a last resort.

Math content

Use a minus sign for negative numbers: -6

Ratios have no space on either side of the colon: 5:12

Add one space on each side of symbols: +, -, ×, ÷ and = (2 + 2 = 4)

Use the minus sign for subtraction. Use the correct symbol for the multiplication sign (×), not the letter x.

Write out and hyphenate fractions: two-thirds, three-quarters.

Write out decimal fractions as numerals. Use the same format for a sequence: 0.75 and 0.45.

Meeting the user need

Write for the user, not for you. Content needs to be:

- findable
- easy to understand
- actionable

Publish only what someone needs to know to complete their task. Nothing more.

People don't usually read text unless they want information. When you write for the web, start with the same question every time: what does the user want to know?

Meeting that need means being:

- specific
- informative
- clear
- concise

Money

When writing about currency, use the dollar sign before the amount. Include a decimal and number of cents if more than zero: \$500; \$4.50; \$0.15.

Natural language

Let natural language shape the experience. Try to write the kind of conversation you'd have in real life if the content wasn't being presented through a website. For natural language:

- use "you" and "your"
- use contractions, like "you're"
- be conversational, not stuffy or formal
- be gender neutral
- call programs and services what the general public call them
- explain program names
- reflect how users will experience your program or service, not the internal business process

Numbers

Show numbers numerically, not as words.

Write all numbers in numerals (including 0 to 9) except when they're part of a common expression that would look strange (like "one or two of them").

Avoid starting a sentence with a number.

If a number starts a sentence, write it out in full: "Twenty-three Nova Scotia businesses ..."
(except when it starts a title or sub-heading).

Use numerals for numbers under 10 in headlines, titles, and sub-headings.

For numerals over 999, insert a comma for clarity: "It was over 9,000."

Spell out common fractions, such as one-half.

Use a % sign for percentages: 50%.

Use a 0 where there's no digit before the decimal point: 0.5%.

Use "500 to 900" and not "500-900" (except in tables).

Use MB not KB for anything over 1MB for file size. For under 1MB, use KB. Keep it as accurate as possible and up to 2 decimal places. For example: 4.03MB.

Abbreviate big numbers if there are space restraints, as in a tweet, chart, or table: 1k, 150k.

Use "to" in address ranges, for example: 49 to 53 Cherry Street.

For ordinal numbers, spell out first to ninth. After that, use 10th, etc. In tables, use numerals throughout.

Use figures for all ages, sums of money and times of day.

Page length

While novascotia.ca has no minimum or maximum page length, consider that:

- people read about 25% of text on a web page
- the challenge to understand increases for every 100 words you put on a page

This means that the quicker you get to the point, the greater the chance your target audience will see the information you want them to.

Paper documents

When creating content for the web, try not to be influenced by paper documents (or even old web pages). Often, they have not been written from the user's point of view.

Additionally, do not attempt to redevelop some types of paper documents for the web. This includes paper documents that are long, dense with information and have a linear narrative structure. It is best to post these types of documents as PDFs along with a plain language description. Examples include highly technical documents, permanent publications and official documents.

Percentages

Always use % with a number. Using the percent sign (%) improves content's scannability, allowing users to absorb the content more quickly.

Plain language

Plain language is mandatory for all novascotia.ca content. The website is for everyone and the content should be as straightforward and clear as possible.

For help with word choice, see the words to avoid list at the end of this document.

Don't use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. For example, use "buy" instead of "purchase," "help" instead of "assist," "about" instead of "approximately," and "like" instead of "such as."

Take care not to lose the user's trust with government buzzwords and jargon. Often, these words are too general and vague and can lead to misinterpretation. You can generally get rid of them by breaking the term into what you're actually doing. Be open and specific.

Write conversationally. Picture your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-to-one but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

Province of Nova Scotia

Use the Government of Nova Scotia, not the Province of Nova Scotia, when referring to ourselves.

Ranges and spans

Use "to" in ranges instead of a dash or hyphen: January to March 2016 (easier for screen readers).

For tables, use a hyphen (-) to indicate a range or span of numbers (easier for screen readers).

Reading level in case of emergency

Reading level must be at grade 5 or 6 for critical warnings to reach most of the public.

SEO (search engine optimization)

Many people who use novascotia.ca find our content through a search engine. Use the same vocabulary as your audience so that search engines can match your content with search queries. This starts with your page title, teaser, summary, and first paragraph.

If people can't find your page, they won't read your content.

We write for humans, not machines. We don't use aggressive SEO techniques like keyword stuffing to bump search results. But we also want to make it easy for users and search engines to find and share our content. Here are some ways to do this:

- organize your page around one topic. Use clear, descriptive terms in titles and headings that relate to the topic.
- use descriptive headings to structure your page and highlight important information.
- give every image descriptive alt text (for those who use screen readers).

Sentence length

Don't use long sentences. Check sentences with more than 20 words to see if two sentences would be clearer. A range of 10-20 words per sentence is a general guide, with an average of 15 words.

Serial comma

We do not use them.

“Sign in” vs “log in”

Use “sign in” or “start” rather than “log in” (verb) for call-to-action where users enter their details to access a service.

Don't use “login” as a noun; say what the user actually needs to enter (username, password, etc.).

Spaces

Use only one space after a period, not two.

Start page

All documents, service transactions and web applications must have a starting point on novascotia.ca unless they're accessible by invitation only as part of a gated process. Start pages consist of:

- the name of the transaction service, document, or web application
- a short introduction
- a call-to-action button
- additional information

The name of the service, document or web application should tell people what it lets them do and who it's for. Avoid acronyms and noun phrases. The best names start with a verb, like “Pay your car tax.”

Introductions should be no more than a few lines. Focus on things that most users will definitely need to know, like costs or required documents. There's no need to mention something that users will already know.

The call-to-action button text should contain a clear call to action to start the transaction service, download the document or start the web application.

Additional information might include other ways to access the service or information.

Structuring your content

Your content should present information in small pieces or “chunks” of information to make reading and understanding faster and easier.

Summaries

Many people who use novascotia.ca start with a search engine. If they can't find your page, they won't be reading your content.

To help users find your content, use the vocabulary they use, starting with your page title, teaser, and summary.

Summary text provides a brief overview of the content to explain the main point of the content, what it will help users do or understand and who it's for. This text helps users confirm they're on the right page or find the right information.

Teasers

Along with the title, the teaser is usually what users see in search results. Make sure users can see quickly whether this page will have the information they want.

Teasers should

- be 140 characters or less (including spaces)
- expand on the title without repeating it
- be clear and specific
- explain the point of the page
- make sense in search results and navigation lists
- be front-loaded with words users are likely to search for
- be written in plain language (no jargon)
- explain any acronyms in the title
- only use acronyms if they are common
- be active and include a verb

Technical terms

When you need to use technical terms, you can. They're not jargon. You just need to explain what they mean the first time you use them.

Times

- Use "to" in time ranges, not hyphens, en rules or em dashes: 10am to 11am
- Use lowercase without periods for "am" and "pm"
- Show time using a 12-hour clock: 5:30pm not 17:30hrs
- Use midnight, not 00:00
- 6 hours 30 minutes

Titles

Titles organize pages and guide users. A title appears at the beginning of a page or section and briefly describes the content that follows.

Titles also help with search engine findability. Think about how the title will look in search on novascotia.ca and on search engines.

Titles are in sentence case.

Don't use punctuation in a title unless the title is a question.

Titles should

- be 65 characters or less (including spaces)
- be unique within the site
- be clear and descriptive
- be front-loaded and optimised for search
- use a colon to break up longer titles
- not contain dashes or slashes
- be active when possible
- not have a period at the end
- not use acronyms unless they are well-known
- be written in sentence case
- be written in plain language (no jargon)

Trade marks

Avoid using trademarked names when possible (use "tablet" not "iPAD").

Transactions

When linking to a transaction, launch the user straight into the start of the transaction. Don't refer to the functionality or web application as a "tool" or a "service." Don't use words like "Use this tool to check" or "This service helps you to."

Translations

If your content needs to be translated into another language, like French, remember that clear, simple sentences make translation easier. Expressing your ideas and messages with clarity helps the translation process, which results in equally clear and easy to follow content. If space and layout are important considerations, keep in mind that French is another language, so things are said and presented differently. More space might be needed because sometimes more words are used, although it's not always the case.

Underlining

Use underlining only for links.

URLs and websites

Capitalize the names of websites and web publications. Don't italicize.

Avoid spelling out URLs, but when you need to, leave off the `http://www`.

URLs should be short, memorable, easy to type, and well structured. In most cases, everything a user can reach on your site should have a distinct URL that a user can bookmark and use later to reach that same location.

When creating URLs, use dashes to separate words, omit articles (a/an/the), use the stems of verbs (/make-thing/ rather than /making-thing/) and avoid extraneous terms.

Username

Username not user name.

Voice and tone

Our voice is our unique personality. A well-crafted voice communicates personality and values — it's a distilled representation of the brand.

Tone is more like attitude — the emotional context of a piece.

At `novascotia.ca`, we communicate in a friendly, straightforward way. We consider our voice to be:

- credible
- clear
- conversational
- friendly
- helpful
- accessible (welcoming to all audiences)

We believe that government communication should be easy to read, and our voice represents this.

The tone of `novascotia.ca` is respectful, helpful and informative.

Respectful: Think about being warm, engaging, sincere and respectful. If the website could speak, would a user want to engage in a conversation?

Helpful: Think about replicating the best customer service. Be patient, be sensitive to the user's situation, be supportive and be willing to provide assistance.

Informative: Think about gaining the user's trust by delivering timely, reliable, official, accessible and authoritative information.

Website

Website should always be used as one word, not two.

When to use “we”

In the “about us” section of the department profile, lead with “we” – it will be very obvious who the “we” is on this page.

However, it’s not obvious who “we” is in all content. For many pages, users might enter the content in the middle of a page or arrive at the page directly from Google.

Using “we” is fine when you make clear who the “we” is. Don’t assume the audience will know. Each time you use “we,” make sure you’ve already used the full name of the department or office in that specific section.

Words to avoid

See the words to avoid list at the end of this document.

Writing for the novascotia.ca audience

The novascotia.ca audience is potentially anyone living in the province who needs information about their government, or people abroad who want to do business in or travel to Nova Scotia. This means government must communicate in a way that most people understand.

The best way to do this is by using common words and working with natural reading behaviour.

If you’re writing for a specialist audience, you still need to make sure everyone can understand what the content is about.

Write positively

Use positive language rather than negative language. One way to detect negative language is to look for words like “can’t,” “don’t,” etc.

Example

Yes: The office is closed Sunday.

No: The office is not open on Sunday.

References

We adapted these guidelines from several organizations who are championing user experience, plain language, and information accessibility:

- Canada.ca
- GOV.UK
- 18F
- MailChimp

As we created the guidelines, we also referred to these resources:

- Microsoft Style Guide
- The Associated Press Stylebook
- The U.S. Government Publishing Office
- Conscious Style Guide

Words to avoid list

- & (use “and”)
- 24x7 or 24/7 (unless there is zero service downtime)
- advancing
- agenda (unless it’s for a meeting)
- aggregated (use “total”)
- approximately (use “about”)
- ascertain (use “find out”)
- assist (use “help”)
- click (not everyone will be clicking; many devices don’t have a mouse to click)
- click or click here for links (we need to be more specific; links should provide information on the associated action or destination)
- collaborate (use “working with”)
- combating (use “working against” to “fighting”)
- coming soon (we offer it or we don’t)
- commence (use “start” or “begin”)
- commit or pledge (we need to be more specific – we’re either doing something or we’re not)
- comprehensive information
- concur (use “agree”)
- countering
- deliver (pizzas, mail and services are delivered – not abstract concepts like “improvements” or “priorities”)
- deploy (unless it’s military or software)
- dialogue (we speak to people)
- did you know
- easy (explain a simple process without saying it is easy)
- empower
- enables (explain what it does or the benefits)
- end user (only appropriate for internal discussions)
- endeavor (use “try”)
- e-service (use “service”)
- FAQs or frequently asked questions (we don’t use FAQs on novascotia.ca. If you write content by starting with user needs, you won’t need to use FAQs.)
- facilitate (instead, say something specific about how you’re helping)
- focusing
- foster (unless it’s children)
- impact (don’t use this as a synonym for “have an effect on”, or “influence”)
- it’s important to or it’s vital to (it’s not our job to tell users what’s important to them. Either they have to do something or they don’t.)
- in order to (use “to”)
- initiate (use “start”)
- innovative (use words that describe the positive outcome of the innovation)
- key (unless it unlocks something. A subject/ thing isn’t “key” – it’s probably “important”)
- land (as a verb only use if you’re talking about aircraft)
- learn more (we need to be more specific; links should provide information on the associated action or destination)

- lets you do or allows you to (it sounds like people serve the service, not the other way around)
- leverage (unless in the financial sense)
- liaise
- navigating (we need to be more specific – users don't navigate a process or service)
- new (unless announcing something that is new to government as part of a news release, speech or story; i.e. position appointment, service, program or initiative)
- obtain (use "get")
- online (unless you're talking about an option to complete a process online; users know they are online)
- online application (use "application")
- online form (use "form")
- online service (use "service")
- overarching
- please (please call, please email should be "call" or "email")
- prior to (use "before")
- portal (use words that describe the outcome of the portal)
- possess (use "have" or "own")
- prior (use "before")
- progress (as a verb – describe what are you actually doing)
- promote (unless you're talking about an ad campaign or marketing promotion)
- purchase (use "buy")
- quick links
- request (use "ask")
- retain (use "keep")
- robust
- set out (use "shows")
- simple or simply (explain a simple process simply, rather than saying it's simple)
- slimming down (processes don't diet – we are probably removing x amount of paperwork etc.)
- solicit (use "ask for")
- sorry or we're sorry (use only in error messages that result in serious problems for the user)
- streamline
- strengthening (unless it's strengthening bridges or other structures)
- strive (we try)
- subsequent (use "next")
- such as (try "including" or "like")
- sufficient (use "enough")
- tackling (unless it's a contact sport)
- take me there (we need to be more specific; links should provide information on the associated action or destination)
- terminate (use "end")
- thank you
- thought leader (refer to a person's accomplishments)
- today or tomorrow (users see information on their timeline, not ours)
- touchpoint (mention specific system components)
- transforming (what are you actually doing to change it?)

- under construction (we offer it or we don't)
- utilize (use "use")
- very
- visit novascotia.ca for more information (users think they are already on novascotia.ca)
- we understand that (focus on facts and examples proving that we understand)
- welcome to our website (users know they are on the novascotia.ca website)
- what's new
- your needs (we need to be more specific – what's the actual need?)

Avoid using directional terms (left, right, up, down, below, above, beside) to describe content position on a page – for many users it doesn't match what they see on their screen (or with assistive technology) and leads to confusion.

Avoid using figurative language – it doesn't say what you actually mean and leads to slower comprehension of your content. For example:

- drive (you can only drive vehicles; not schemes or people)
- going forward (unless you're giving directions)
- in order to (superfluous – use "to")
- one-stop shop (we are government, not a retail store)

In most cases, you can avoid figurative language by describing what you're actually doing or eliminating the word if it's not really needed. Be open and specific.

Write conversationally. Picture your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-on-one and with the authority of someone who can actively help.

Authority

Amendments to the Public Service Act were passed in December 2013 that require Communications Nova Scotia (CNS) to provide a centralized delivery of communication services, including strategic internet planning and design, on behalf of the province. The Internet Strategy unit at CNS has been tasked with providing this service, which includes implementation of the Province of Nova Scotia's Web Strategy.