Guidelines for Writing for the Web at Colorado College

As the online face of the college, the Colorado College website is the college's most widely viewed communications channel. It is the first stop for people seeking information about the college, and it is crucial to recruiting the next generation of CC students as well as attracting a diverse, world-class faculty, staff, and administration. This makes it a primary place in which we must clearly and authentically communicate who we are and what we do. Because the web is by nature extremely dynamic, our website is uniquely positioned to reflect the rhythm of CC life and showcase place – from campus to field study to study abroad.

Connection to the Brand
Our website will present content that conveys the rigor, passion, energy, and adventure of the CC experience. It will communicate our intellectual engagement by showing the academic experience in all its forms, not only inside the classroom but across the campus and the world at large. It will present stories of our community in action, engaged with the world, doing work that matters. We will illustrate our culture of exploratory discovery by highlighting stories of creative, bold, independent thinking.

Our website will exemplify innovative thinking and attention to detail in both its design and its function. The website should be thoughtfully and intelligently cutting-edge, echoing the bold independence of our people, place, and program. The user experience should be inviting and engaging, with attention to detail that will ensure it works delightfully well for all of our various online audiences.

Cohesiveness and consistency
We will ensure that all parts of the site work together to tell one cohesive story. Visual style, voice, and tone should be consistent throughout the site. The tone of voice will be smart, progressive, and professional, while also feeling aspirational and inspirational. It will feel approachable, friendly, and not intimidating. The visual design and content should strongly communicate our three main brand distinctions: our pioneering Block Plan; our place in the Rocky Mountain West; and the creative people who make up our campus community.

Integrating key messages
Through the stories we tell, themes, and choice of words — especially for news headlines, event titles/teasers, and other featured content — website visitors should associate Colorado College with its key characteristics: its program, place, and people, as laid out in this plan.

Incorporating first-person perspectives
Authenticity is essential to our audiences, so we will use first-person narratives whenever possible. Prospective students want a sense of the true nature of the CC community, and direct exposure to that community is the best way to achieve that goal. Student and faculty-generated content, good photography with descriptive captions, and video will help us tell real stories. Student-written and student-curated content, including student photography, will figure prominently on the site to allow the personality of the CC community to show through.

Who is our Audience? Who are we Writing For?
Audience will depend on the page and area of our website, but primarily, our audience is current and prospective students. Secondary audiences include alumni, parents and prospective parents, staff, faculty, and others who are curious about Colorado College.

Who is Colorado College? How do we Describe Ourselves?

Brand Attributes
We are...

Intelligent
We are perceptive, aware, discerning, and deep thinking.

Engaged
We value our people, their ideas, and opinions. We're an intellectually curious community, where discussions are supported and actively pursued.

Independent
We do things differently here, in our Block Plan and our culture of exploratory discovery. We encourage – almost require – that our community dive into its passions. We're innovative, taking our cue from our Rocky Mountain history and location, always driving toward the next mountaintop.

Tenacious
We dive into work from day one. We're rigorous, and those rigors bring the greatest rewards. Our community doesn't cruise; it challenges. Passion is our purpose, but potential is our focus. We live our learning here, and we are guided by boundless enthusiasm for the next experience.

How do we put our Brand Attributes into Action?

Brand Execution

Intelligent
We are perceptive, aware, discerning, and deep thinking.

Tone of Voice
We are relatable, aspirational, and use language that reflects and relates to the language of our campus and classrooms. We're candid about our experiences. We don't use academic jargon, but retain a higher level of linguistic sophistication. Our writing is dynamic and accessible to all audiences. We're articulate, authentic, and confident.

Engaged
We value our people, their ideas, and opinions. We're an intellectually curious community, where discussions are supported and actively pursued.

Tone of Voice
Our language is present in the moment. We tell our stories in the present tense, because that's how time works here. We're a community focused on doing and daring, and our people-centric storytelling reflects that same focus.

Independent
We do things differently here, in our Block Plan, our culture of exploratory discovery. We encourage – almost require – that our community dive into its passions. We're innovative, taking our cue from our Rocky Mountain history and location, always driving toward the next mountaintop.

Tone of Voice
Our wording reflects our spirit of independence. We use words and tell stories that matter. We show our true colors, our innovative and bold approach to learning. We're a community that requires courage to join, and our "CC speak" doesn't shy away from that. CC is about individuals supported by our eclectic collective. We're a place where risk is embraced, not cautioned against. The narration of the CC experience is told with authenticity.

Tenacious
We dive into work from day one. We're rigorous, and those rigors bring the greatest rewards. Our community doesn't cruise; it challenges. Passion is our purpose, but potential is our focus.
We live our learning here, and we are guided by boundless enthusiasm for the next experience.

Tone of Voice
The adventurous nature of CC is present at the forefront of all our work. Our culture of possibility, our vivacious energy, sets us apart. We're intense, we don't hold back, and we expect as much from ourselves as we do from our college – to be as good as we can be.

Our Overall Writing Style
Colorado College's people are intelligent, individualistic, innovative, and high achieving. These qualities must be reflected in all of the college's communications. The tone of voice in communication is smart, progressive, and professional, while also feeling aspirational and inspirational. The tone reflects CC's rigorous, bold, and courageous approach to learning, with notes of its trailblazing and independent character. It never feels apathetic, lazy, or irreverent. However, it also does not imply that the college takes itself too seriously; when humor is used, it should be used insightfully. While the overall tone of voice should be professional, it also needs to feel approachable, friendly, and inviting.

In communicating with all audiences, keep in mind that everyone today is inundated with messages from email, advertising, social media, news media, etc. It is important to be concise

and clear so that our communications do not add to the clutter or create a feeling of overwhelm. We seek to be concisely engaging and informative.

Web Writing is Engaging and Action Oriented
Web communications should reflect the same tone as print communications, however they should be briefer, and action driven. Web communications must motivate readers to learn more and should display a clear call to action.

Our Tone of Voice Should be Approachable and Impactful
When communicating to students or prospective students, the tone should be aspirational and compelling. It can be more relaxed and approachable, conveying support from the college. Tone is dictated by subject matter; the more official the subject matter, the more professional and direct our communications should feel. The less official the subject matter, the more we can use casual yet thoughtful, intelligent language.

Content Strategies

1. Make sure top-level pages work together to tell one story.
    Websites often grow in fits and starts with various authors adding content at different points in time. The result is a site that is rife with duplicated information and pages that do not flow together to tell one cohesive story. With few exceptions, the content of a page should be unique, adding the next bit of information to the greater story.

2. Keep style and tone relatively consistent.
    There must be a general consistency of style and tone across all of the externally focused top-level messaging of the site. Overall, the tone of writing throughout the site should be smart, knowing, engaging, and straightforward. One of the best ways to check the style of web writing is to read it to yourself out loud. If it sounds natural, it's likely to be good.

    A little variation in writing style and tone is ok, however, when developing content for areas of the site with different audiences. For instance, Student Activities may have a more playful tone than Giving to CC.

3. Incorporate first-person narratives.
    In general, use first-person narratives as much as possible. Prospective students want to get as accurate a sense as possible of the true nature of the CC community, and direct exposure to that community is the best way to achieve that goal. Blogs, student/faculty-generated content, good photography with descriptive captions, and video can help to give this impression.

4. Use opening paragraphs on section/department/office homepages.
    Each section/department/office homepage should include one to two short opening paragraphs of text that introduce the content area and link to key pages within the section. Keep these short, so they can be read quickly and easily. These intro pages should be around 200-300 words in length.

5. Refrain from using internal jargon or acronyms without introducing the terms first. The primary audience for the institutional site is external (and even some currents students may not be familiar with a shortened office name or activity nickname). You should not expect them to be familiar with language used internally.

6. Consider quick readability. Most pages should not exceed 500 words. Pages deep in the site with very technical information can be longer, but even lists of policies and procedures lose their usefulness (i.e., no one reads them) when they run down a long page without use of headers, bullets, or other ways to break up the information.

7. Use sidebars appropriately. Page sidebars (and other ancillary content blocks) should be reserved for content that supplements the main area of the page. At the very least, this might include related links or available document downloads – and at best, can include rotating stories, quotes, testimonials, or images that help to explain and bring life to the main content area. On pages where the sidebar is used for sub-page navigation, only very pertinent information (such as contact info or deadlines) should be added. This additional information should always be placed below any navigational elements.

Writing for the Web: General Principles

People absorb information differently on the web; approach writing for the web in a different way than you would writing for print. In writing, re-writing, or editing for the website, here are seven things to keep in mind:

1. Be concise.
   Keep word counts low, especially on top-level pages that should be telling the story rather than conveying lots of detailed information. Most basic informational pages ought to be no longer than 400-500 words, and top-level pages and section homepages should aim for between 150-300 words.

2. Use an opening paragraph to summarize page content.
   Flipping through the site, any visitor should be able to quickly absorb the most important information on the page to determine whether she needs to take the time to read the entire page.

   On primary public-facing pages (that is, all pages one click away from the home page), the text should be written specifically with a first-time visitor in mind. This is because inside page landings are common with search engines (e.g. landing inside a website from a Google search). Every page should be treated as a first entry point to a website.

3. Use plain language.
   Reading through a webpage, any visitor should be able to quickly understand what you are communicating to them. Use concrete, common words. Use the simplest tense of a verb possible. Use you/your and the active voice. Use useful headings.

The benefits of plain language are both tangible and intangible: Plain language gets your message across in the shortest time possible. More people are able to understand your message. There is less chance that your content will be misunderstood, so you spend less time explaining it. If your document gives instructions, your readers are more likely to understand them and follow them correctly.

4.   Be conversational, but not clever.
The use of contractions (it's, we're, you'll, etc.) is encouraged. Some of the rules that are applied to formal writing don't apply as strictly to web writing. For example, if the natural rhythm of a sentence is best suited by ending it with a preposition, so be it.

CC is staffed by an extremely knowledgeable and thoughtful group, and using words like "our" and "we" can help convey that online. Again, one of the best ways to check the style of web writing is to read it to yourself out loud.

5.   Use meaningful subheadings to guide a reader through the page content.
Along with short paragraphs, breaking up a page with subheadings allows a reader to quickly determine what information is most important for their needs. This is a good general principle for all content pages of a site; for long, policies-and-procedures-type pages, it's absolutely essential.

As a general rule, use subheading for every 125 or so words of web content. Top-level pages often benefit from a much more widespread use of headings and subheadings. Many good top-level pages pair small subheadings with short paragraphs to give a visitor a very clear idea of what's to be found throughout that section of the site.

'Overuse white space' is a good rule of thumb for web writing. Reading from computer screens is on average 25 percent slower than from paper, so short paragraphs and frequent subheadings give users more room to read.

6.   Use text formatting, like bulleted lists, pull quotes, and paragraph breaks, to quickly convey information.
On most basic content pages there shouldn't be more than one or two bulleted or numbered lists. If you have a page that is burdened with lots of lists, you may want to consider alternative ways of presenting that content.

7.   The text should guide readers around the site.
Links within the text are important means of limiting duplicate information and directing visitors to key content throughout the site. On section homepages, these links should complement the navigation as a secondary means of directing readers to section sub-pages. Be judicious: Too many links within a paragraph also diminishes their effectiveness as content guides.