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To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

USDA is committed to making its information materials accessible to all USDA customers and employees.
Introduction

USDA information

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) generates and disseminates information about its programs and activities to the U.S. agricultural community, to a large segment of the nonfarm population, and to many foreign nationals. The complexity of USDA information is broad. Within the varied audiences are both willing and unwilling readers who range from agricultural scientists to inner-city school children. All communication methods and media are utilized: print, video, radio, film, Internet Web sites, e-mail, billboards, signs, data transmission networks, press releases, exhibits, visitor centers, meetings, symposia, and speeches.

Audiences’ receptivity to information is based on judgments they make about the importance of the information and their opinion of the sender. Such judgments are made and opinions formed whether or not an organization makes an effort to solicit them. If information is clearly presented at an appropriate level of understanding, audiences will respond positively. Consistency with the quality and style of presentation is the basis of standards. When these standards are applied, the Department links with its audiences, communication is enhanced, and the unit cost for information products is reduced.

To help forge this link, these generic specifications, common to all visual information, are presented as a guide for communication planners. These standards are compatible with mandatory visual standards and USDA Visual Information Standards, Print, Dimensional, Presentation and Electronic Media, Specifications and Uses, also issued by the Office of Communications Design Center. Other conforming standards are: Office of Communications Guidelines, Style Guidelines for Media Materials, January 2002; USDA Stationery Systems, Specifications and Uses, December 1998; The USDA Symbol, Its Purpose and Use, August 1996. Certain compatible standards have been established for agencies and programs. They are Service Center Signs, National Food and Agricultural Council, September 1996; Design Standards, Farm Service Agency, November 1997; and style guides for identities established with the Risk Management Agency, the Economic Research Service, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and for certain programs in the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.
The responsibility of USDA information

For USDA information to be meaningful and cost effective, it must be clearly written and presented through an appropriate media. Most important it must close the communications loop by being received, understood, and responded to by the intended audience—only then is there communication. To be accepted, messages must be audience specific, that is, written and presented in a format receptive to a given audience. Those who create USDA information need to be aware of the willingness (or unwillingness) of readers, the multiplicity of media choices, and most important, the competitiveness in the communication environment (the place where all information is received). A means of measuring its acceptance should be part of every USDA program’s communication plan. The process is: message generation ➡ transfer through media ➡ receipt by user ➡ response by user ➡ measurement of user response. The goal of all USDA communication is to close the loop. The Department is committed to adherence of guidelines established for special audiences under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

USDA Audiences

Academe
Agents and Educators
Agricultural Businesses
Agricultural Managers and Advisors
Agricultural Producers/Farmers and Ranchers
Associations/Partners
Consumers
Food Processors/Importers, Exporters
Foresters
USDA and Other Government Workers
Inspectors/Food Safety Workers
Natural Resource and Environment Workers
Researchers
Rural Nonfarm Workers
School Lunch and Other Food Providers
Shippers
Special Program/Outreach Recipients
Students
1. Begin at the Beginning

Top-to-bottom, left-to-right.

All who learn to read in Western alphabets are taught to begin at the top of a page and read left to right, top to bottom. This process, known as following the Gutenberg Window, is applicable to all media. Other arrangements of information risk slowing the reader and diminishing perception. Information in varied electronic media, such as Web sites, can be manipulated with color and motion, attracting the eye to any part of the screen. While appropriate for selling products and highlighting priorities, the basic reading process remains the same and deviation from the norm may place a burden on the reader by increasing reading time. Begin at the beginning.

The Standard

Adhere to the principal of the Gutenberg Window, top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading. Be aware that the eye begins searching for information in the top left corner and will naturally move to the lower right corner. Place information elements to capture this process.

Specific Recommendations

1.1 Congress should adequately fund existing drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839), the Bureau of Reclamation’s (USDA) Environmental Quality Incentive Program (Public Law 96-333, Title 10, Part II), and the National Drought Mitigation Center, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Geological Survey. Congress should fund these programs to better serve the needs of the western part of the country.

1.2 The President should direct the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers to find new ways to meet the drought planning and mitigation needs of the western United States, particularly the western part of the country. These agencies, along with the Department of Agriculture, should develop a comprehensive drought assessment program to encourage efficient water management and serve as a planning tool.

1.3 The President should direct all appropriate federal agencies to cooperate fully and to provide all assistance possible to encourage development of plans and implementation of comprehensive state and local drought preparedness plans through state law, as specifically directed by the National Drought Policy Commission, we strongly endorse preparedness as a key element to realizing the goals of national drought policy. Federal interests and the public at-large prepare their plans and proactive mitigation measures, risk management, resource stewardship, environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Western Drought Early Warning System, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

1.4 Federal agencies providing drought planning and implementation of comprehensive state and local drought preparedness plans through state law, as specifically directed by the National Drought Policy Commission, we strongly endorse preparedness as a key element to realizing the goals of national drought policy. Federal interests and the public at-large prepare their plans and proactive mitigation measures, risk management, resource stewardship, environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Western Drought Early Warning System, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

1.5 The President should direct all appropriate federal, state, local, and tribal governments to use or adapt existing planning and implementation of comprehensive state and local drought preparedness plans through state law, as specifically directed by the National Drought Policy Commission, we strongly endorse preparedness as a key element to realizing the goals of national drought policy. Federal interests and the public at-large prepare their plans and proactive mitigation measures, risk management, resource stewardship, environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Western Drought Early Warning System, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

1.6 Congress should adequately fund the National Drought Policy Commission, which was also required by the Act. Our recommendations should be considered in light of the need to protect the sovereignty of the United States of America. All of our recommendations should be implemented by the Council, the states, and urban and tribal planners to use or adapt existing planning and implementation of comprehensive state and local drought preparedness plans through state law, as specifically directed by the National Drought Policy Commission, we strongly endorse preparedness as a key element to realizing the goals of national drought policy. Federal interests and the public at-large prepare their plans and proactive mitigation measures, risk management, resource stewardship, environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Western Drought Early Warning System, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

1.7 None of our recommendations should be construed as diminishing the rights of states to control their own water resources. The President should direct all appropriate federal, state, local, and tribal governments to use or adapt existing planning and implementation of comprehensive state and local drought preparedness plans through state law, as specifically directed by the National Drought Policy Commission, we strongly endorse preparedness as a key element to realizing the goals of national drought policy. Federal interests and the public at-large prepare their plans and proactive mitigation measures, risk management, resource stewardship, environmental Quality Incentive Program (16 U.S.C. 3839) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Western Drought Early Warning System, the National Drought Mitigation Center, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

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2. Visual Accessibility

The presentation of visual information begins with a blank page, screen, or exhibit panel. Every element added—text, images, and data—increases the information available to the reader. It also increases the complexity of information the reader must sort in order to comprehend. The blank part of a page is known as "white space," regardless of what colors are used. The more white space there is on a page, the greater the opportunity for seeing and perceiving information elements. However, for reasons of economy, pages cannot be left mostly blank. Studies have shown there to be an efficient ratio between the text, images, data, and the white space surrounding these elements. When an appropriate ratio is obtained, the information is offered good visual accessibility, and communication is enhanced.

The Standard

The established ratio for USDA visual information is 60% for the text/image/data area and 40% dedicated to white space. An appropriate range is 58/42 to 65/35.

Information overload is when there is too much information to perceive. It gets ignored, passed along unattended, or given an arbitrary review. This happens with as much as 25% of all information we receive.

Zones
- Title/heading
- Text
- Call out
- Illustration
- Page
- Exhibit

White space

Exhibit
3. Infozones

Ordered information.
The increasingly competitive communication environment demands
that information be presented in a deliberate purposeful manner,
regardless of media used. Infozones, information ordered into
zones, accomplish this. They provide clear visual itineraries for
readers by connecting pertinent parts in a logical order. Typo-
graphic grids and other unit systems, a manner of dividing a blank
space (page, screen, or exhibit), are used to establish zones. Zones
are places to assign the elements of visual information: text (titles,
heads, story, call-outs, summaries, captions, quotes), images
(photos, spot art, illustrations), data (charts, tabular material,
infographics), and white space. Zones may have subsets. Elements
like call-outs, quotes, tables, tabular material, infographics, and
images may be placed into separate zones or within a text zone.
Zones, when prioritized by content, create ordered information.

The Standard

1. Set up a grid system to create zones.
2. Give the zones a hierarchy and assign the
   information elements to the zones by order
   of dominant, sub-dominant, and subordinate.
3. Limit the number of information elements
   in a zone, preferably to three.
4. Within the dominate text zone, identify
   quotes and or call-outs, and write summa-
   ries.
5. Visualize data to the extent possible.
6. Select only images that support, explain,
   or enhance the text.
7. Follow the rules for adequate white space.

Zones

Title/heading

Text

Quote

Summaries

Data

Illustration

The typographic grid system shown on this page is based on the
generate page divided into three columns with zones for heads and titles,
text, images, and subsets within the text zone.

Zoned pages were
developed for application
to reference books,
manuals, catalogs, and
textbooks, where quick
retrieval is more impor-
tant than linear
storytelling.
Bacteria that cause disease are called “pathogens.” When certain pathogens enter the food supply, they can cause foodborne illness. Only a few types cause millions of cases of foodborne illness each year. Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented. Proper cooking or processing of food destroys bacteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typeface</th>
<th>Letterspacing</th>
<th>Word spacing</th>
<th>Leading</th>
<th>Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 point Times Roman</td>
<td>12/14.5 (12 point type set on 14.5 points)</td>
<td>20% of the square of the type</td>
<td>120% of the type size</td>
<td>&quot;ragged right&quot; or &quot;irregular right.&quot; The other kind of alignments are “justified,” and “centered.” Justified should not be used for lines shorter than 70 characters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type sizes of 9 to 12 points are equally legible. Line length may vary. Very short lines increase the number and duration of fixation pauses. Very long lines greatly increase the number of regressions.
5. Infographics

Visualized data. Graphics and data support linear content. Information graphics help explain the relationship between content and data by visualizing the quantity of things within the framework of a subject. Infographics enhance traditional bar charts, line graphs, and pie charts by adding the visual dimension. They are collective summaries that help the reader to quickly identify pertinent points in a message.

The Standard
Show elements in accurate proportional relationship to each other (the same as would be seen in traditional charts or graphs).
Illustrate a theme icon (a visual metaphor) that best presents what the data are showing. Use easily recognizable icons that the audience will understand.
Simplify the illustration to contain no more than three visual elements.

Place the illustration in a context which reflects the title.
Select and limit the data presented.
Use visual summaries when possible.
Write brief challenging titles. Ask a question, make a statement.
Give the source for the data.

“...The world is complex, dynamic, multidimensional; the paper is static, flat. How are we to represent the rich visual world of experience and measurement on mere flatland?”

Where The Trees Are
Percent of Tree Cover In States

Most
West Virginia 78.9%

Average
All States 32.8%  

Least
Kansas 8.6%  

Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

Credit for source

Selected and limited set of data
6. Pixel Media

Web pages.
The Internet, an international system of computer networks, offers information in many forms. We are most familiar with Web pages, a hypertext-based system that allows us to retrieve documents which may contain text, graphics, audio, and motion. A Web page’s structural origin is in printed pages and the principles of print design apply. But Web pages “stand alone.” Consequently, they must contain sufficient information to:

- inform the user who is presenting the information (identifiers),
- provide a clearly structured format so that content is easily understood (hierarchies, titles and supporting graphics), and
- direct users to related material (navigational tools).

Design consistently. The use of zones for the basic elements (identifiers, navigation buttons, titles and content) is essential.

The Standard

Organize content by subject matter rather than by your organization’s structure. Make navigation clear and uncluttered. Write effective headings, use hierarchies. Be succinct. Long running text is usually not read.

Avoid “splash screens.” Animation, virtual reality, and sound gimmicks slow page download times. Keep the code simple by using style sheets instead of font tags. Style sheets speed coding and decrease page load times.

Avoid serif fonts such as Times Roman. Use sans serif fonts like Arial or Verdana.

Use colors only for clarity and emphasis. Maintain appropriate contrast between text and background. A plain white background is best.

Keep content width to about 800 pixels to accommodate most monitors.

Mandatory USDA standards: All USDA agency home pages must have links to the agency’s home page, the main USDA home page, the USDA nondiscrimination statement, the USDA privacy policy, the agency’s Freedom of Information Act Web site, and FirstGov. Some agencies may require links to partner or cooperator Web sites. Always provide links back to main level pages from all secondary pages in the site.