

Communicating IT well:

Writing user-facing Knowledge Base articles

Introduction

When we write content such as web pages, news items or Knowledge Base articles, it's important to consider the target audience.

If information is aimed at the general University of Manchester community (ie staff or students outside of IT), it needs to be understandable to as many people as possible, although we should assume basic technical knowledge such as how to open a program, locate a menu item and so on.

Before you start writing

Include some introductory information about the intended audience for this guide and/or a very brief opening statement to provide a bit of background, if necessary.

'Bite size is the right size' – keep your guides short; the equivalent of one page or a maximum of two.

Jargon and technical terminology

Unless relevant to the context of the information, avoid jargon where possible in the body text and title, although you may want to use it in the keywords field.

Always refer to the "Consistent terminology for user-facing IT communication" document, which lists commonly used jargon words and suggested alternatives.

While it's likely that you won't simplify the jargon as much for Support Analyst articles, you should still ensure the other sections of these guidelines are considered.

Acronyms and abbreviations

If using acronyms or abbreviations, ensure they are explained in full in the first instance of the article, with the acronym itself following in brackets.

For example, use "Connect to the Virtual Private Network (VPN) using the GlobalProtect VPN software" instead of "Use the GlobalProtect VPN client to connect to the VPN"

Exceptions to this rule include departments such as IT and HR, brand names such as SPSS and 'household name' terms such as PDF and HTML.

If an acronym is already expanded in the title, it is not usually necessary to expand it in the body text of the article.

Try to avoid using "UoM" or "ITS" unless absolutely necessary.

Images and screenshots

Consider adding a screenshot if it will assist the user in completing a task. However, screenshots should be used sparingly to prevent the guide from being too long.

Screenshots usually work better if saved as PNG files. If a JPEG file is compressed too much, it will come out blurry and unreadable. JPEG files are more suited for photographic images.

Images should be fewer than 600 pixels wide, especially if the screenshot is in portrait orientation rather than landscape.

All images should have an alternative description (Alt Tag) for accessibility reasons. This must describe the image in a way that will convey the same information provided by the image to users who are unable to view it, however you do not need to repeat what you've already written in the body text.

When editing a screenshot, if you need to highlight a particular area of the image, use a rectangle with a red 2-pixel outline. Hex code #FF0000 preferred.

Ensure all usernames and other personally identifiable information are fully redacted from screenshots. A solid black box looks tidier than a scribble or blur.

Never, ever use clipart or memes. Good quality images present a far better impression.

Don't use images from random websites or search engines such as Google Image Search unless you're absolutely sure you have permission to use it. Most images published on websites remain copyrighted to the original owner, although some images may be published under a Creative Commons license.

Lists

Indenting should be used for lists of tasks. If publishing a series of step-by-step instructions, a numbered list should be used. If publishing a list of items, a standard bulleted list should be used.

An example of a step-by-step list

1. Open Microsoft Word
2. Click **File**
3. Click **Open**
4. Select the file you want to open

An example of a list of items

- Kilburn Building
- Sackville Building
- Alan Gilbert Learning Commons
- University Place

Contacting IT Services

As the Knowledge Base articles are based in (service name), you're not likely to need to tell people how to contact IT Services. However, those times that you do, advise them to use the 'IT help and support page' at www.itservices.manchester.ac.uk/help unless the request is likely to be urgent or time critical

"Support Centre" is the correct terminology. "Service Desk", "Service Centre" or "Help desk" should not be used.

If writing information which mentions contacting the IT Support Centre, please make the Support Centre manager and/or escalation leads aware of this.

For general comments and feedback, advise people to use [Talk to us](#).

University house style and tone of voice

The University's [brand microsite](#) has an extensive guide on the University house style. However, we have taken the key points of this guidance and put an IT Services perspective on them:

Use the first person – address your audience

People respond to people. Speak directly to your reader, person to person.

For example, instead of writing "IT Services provide a variety of services to support students at the University", write "We provide a variety of services to support our students". Instead of "IT Services has a feedback page for any comments our staff and students may have", write "We welcome all your feedback through our [Talk to us page](#)"

"It is strongly advised to eliminate verbose, convoluted and otherwise excessive terminology in the event that alternative methods of written communication have more appropriate clarity for the target audience."

Keep your words direct and to the point.

Be active, not passive

Being passive usually adds unnecessary words. For example:

Passive: It was decided by the University that 2-factor authentication should be implemented.

Active: The University decided to implement 2-factor authentication.

Case

Avoid using upper case for emphasis. Capital letters disrupt the flow of text and make the reader pause.

Avoid "CamelCase" unless you are positive this is used as part of the brand. For example, "GlobalProtect", "PowerPoint" and "iPad" are correct, but "DropBox", "TurnItIn" and "BlackBoard" are not.

Use sentence case in titles, headings and subheadings. For example; use “Printing from your laptop, smartphone or tablet” and not “Printing From Your Laptop, Smartphone Or Tablet”

The following words should be written in lower case, unless appearing at the start of a sentence; eduroam, email, postgraduate, undergraduate.

Email addresses should be written in lower case.

University

The University of Manchester always takes an upper case T, U and M. Never write “Manchester University”.

General references to university or universities take lower case u. If referring to this institution as ‘the University’, use upper case U (but lower case t for ‘the’).

Always treat the University as singular (eg ‘The University is committed to social responsibility’)

Faculties, Schools, Institutes and Centres

‘The Faculty of A’ or ‘the School of B’, not the ‘A Faculty’ or ‘B School’ (except Alliance Manchester Business School, Manchester Medical School and Manchester Pharmacy School).

Full titles can be shortened to ‘the School’, ‘the Faculty’, ‘the Institute’ and ‘the Centre’ but, as with ‘the University’, they should take an upper case S, F, I and C.

Telephone numbers

Write the number out in full; not just the extension number, as many people call from outside the University’s internal phone network.

Prefix the number with “tel”, not “Telephone”. Standard University procedure is to use the international format (eg “tel +44 (0)161 306 5544”), unless you know you are addressing a completely local audience.

Formatting and layout

Emphasis

Bold text should be used sparingly for emphasis. When displaying a step-by-step list, use bold exclusively to highlight menu items. Avoid using italics, coloured text or highlights.

If you need the user to pay specific attention to one particular point, consider whether this would work better in a prominent place, rather than putting it in the middle of the text prefixed with “Note, NB, Warning, Alert” or similar. If you do need to put a

note in the text however, use the prefix “**Note:**” in bold text and sentence case.

Spacing

After a full stop, insert one character space before starting your next sentence. Insert a single line’s space between paragraphs.

Producing the article

Title

People will see the title first in the search results, so it needs to make sense at first glance; reading like it was being delivered as part of a conversation. You do not need to use the words “How to” in the title, as the rest of the contents of the title should clarify the topic.

Examples:

- Set up eduroam on an iPhone or iPad
- Install GlobalProtect on Apple macOS
- Request a temporary IT account for a visitor
- Update your details in the online directory
- “Error 272” in My Manchester.
- Report a fault or empty toner on a Xerox printer
- Install software on a University managed computer

If an article is only applicable to a particular audience, put that audience in brackets at the end.

Examples:

- Set up email on an Android phone or tablet (Staff and postgraduate research students)
- Change a user’s password in URS (Support analyst)

Keywords

Think like a thesaurus

Different people search in different ways, so you should try to think of all the ways a user might look for information.

For example, if we were writing an article about a flash drive, someone may look for “flash drive, “flashdrive”, “USB drive”, “thumb drive”, “memory stick” or “USB stick”, so we should ensure these words are included in the keywords, even if those words are inaccurate or refer to older technology. Despite the fact that “memory stick” is actually a trademark for a little-used proprietary type of storage created by Sony, many people use that term to refer to a flash drive.

If the article is about a service which has replaced an older service, refer to the older service in there so that it’s more obvious to users that they need to use the new service. For example, an article about GlobalProtect may also contain ‘Cisco’ and ‘Shrewsoft’ in the keywords, to point users towards GlobalProtect instead.

Consistency

Ensure that articles on a similar topic contain a consistent set of keywords. For example, all articles about Wi-Fi should contain the keywords “eduroam”, “WiFi”, “Wi-Fi” and “Wireless”.

Avoid using common keywords such as “install”, “set up”, “fault” and so on.

Including additional documentation

In most cases, you shouldn’t need to include additional documentation. However, if you do, you should consider hosting this on the University’s documents server rather than the knowledge base, and linking to it.

Documents should only be available for download as a PDF file unless the document is intended to be user-editable.

Linking to external resources or pages

When you link to a page outside the knowledge base, you do not need to display the address in full. Just write the name of the web page and hyperlink the text to the relevant address, preferably in its own bullet point to ensure the link is clearly signposted.

For example, rather than writing “Find out more about our Research IT team at www.itservices.manchester.ac.uk/research.”, write “[Find out more about our Research IT team](#)”

Never use phrases like “click here for more information” as this makes it difficult for people using screen reading software to understand the page content.