

MTA Editorial Style Guide

This guide is for anyone writing or editing content for the MTA site. It lays out core principles in our content strategy and addresses common and MTA-specific style questions.

This isn't a comprehensive guide. If what you're looking for isn't here, email digital@mta.info. You can also see the [18F Content Guide](#), which inspired much of this.

Content principles

MTA web content is:

Clear: We publish information that helps riders understand and use their public transit system.

Accurate: Riders trust that the information they get from us is correct and up-to-date.

Helpful: We make it easy for riders to find answers to their questions and to get help.

Rider-focused: We prioritize riders' needs over organizational structure.

Inclusive: Our content is available to as wide of an audience as possible. We don't make assumptions about who is using our site or in what context.

Transparent: We build trust with our readers by being forthcoming about how we operate.

Voice and tone

Speak to your reader

- Use "you" and "your" to refer to people who read our site. "You can see alternatives and plan a trip."
- Use "us" and "we" when you're talking about the MTA. "We'll add more information when it's available."

Write simply

- Use short words and short sentences. Try for 25 words or fewer.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Aim for an 8th-grade reading level. (You can check this with a tool like [Hemingway](#) or [WebFX](#).)
- Write subheads in sentence case.

Prioritize clarity

- Make skimmable content. Use descriptive page titles, subheads, and bulleted lists.
- Use active voice. "You will need this case number later" is better than the passive "This case number will be needed later."
- Avoid "click here" language. Make links descriptive on their own.
- Don't include instructions on how to use a webpage. "Scroll down to see the report," etc.

Be humane

- Don't use adjectives as nouns when you're describing a group of people. It should be "homeless people," not "the homeless."
- Be respectful and empathetic. It's our job to help people solve problems and get where they're going.

AP and house style

We follow [Associated Press style](#), with some exceptions for our own house style. Find quick tips on that in the next section.

"And" vs. &: Spell out "and" unless you're referring to something with an ampersand in the title, like MTA Construction & Development.

Dates: Write out the full name of months: "January," "May," "November."

- Don't use a MM/DD/YYYY format unless it's in tabular data.

Frontline, front line: Use "frontline" as an adjective and "front line" as a noun.

- "They cheered for frontline workers," "They were on the front line."

Health-care, health care

- It's "health-care worker," "health-care system," but two words in constructions like "She works in health care."

Serial comma: Use it in lists. "Use the stairs, elevator, or escalator."

Time: Use a.m. and p.m.

- No zeros needed here: 9 a.m.
- Use "noon" and "midnight" if 12 p.m. and 12 a.m. is confusing.

Today, tomorrow: Don't use relative terms for time. Use the day of the week and the date: "Monday, March 23," "Sunday, Jan. 23"

Trademark symbol: Don't use it with MTA product names. It's unnecessary.

Vanity URLs: Include a dash between words for clarity: "mta.info/unicorn-party," not "mta.info/unicorparty."

- If someone is reading the URL in a high-profile way, prioritize whatever's easiest to say out loud instead.

Subway station names, lines, and bullets (draft)

Subway station names: Use "Av," "St," "Blvd" and "Sq" in any context outside of the map. Note the period at the end. Spell out and capitalize "Shuttle": "Franklin Ave. Shuttle."

- Do not use ordinals (st, nd, rd, th) for stations with numbers in their name.
- Examples: "Christopher St," "14 St.-Union Sq.," "138 St-Grand Concourse," "75 Av"

Line, train, service: Think of "line" as "route." Use "train" or "trains" when you're talking about the vehicles themselves. "Service" is what runs on lines.

- "A trains will run over the F line between Jay St.-MetroTech and West 4th St. every weekend in September."
- "While M line service is suspended, you can take a Queens-bound Q train."
- "4 train service will run less frequently overnight while we install a llama enclosure under 14th St.-Union Sq."

Bullets: Use colored bullets when you're referring to train service on the corresponding line.

- Use bullets only when you're talking about service on specific lines. Don't use them for aesthetics/decoration.

MTA products

MetroCard, one word, inner-capped

Metro-Man is Metro-North's safety superhero mascot

Reduced-Fare MetroCard: Only capitalize "Reduced-Fare" in conjunction with "MetroCard." "Seniors and people with disabilities are eligible to pay a reduced fare."

Railroad, rail road, railway: It's Long Island **Rail Road**, Metro-North **Railroad**, and Staten Island **Railway**.

Writing alt text

- Keep it to 125 characters or fewer. (Most screen readers cut off around that point.)
- Put the most important information first. Include keywords.
- Use a period at the end. This way screen readers will pause instead of rushing to the next element.
- Don't lead with introductory phrases like "Graphic:" or "A photo of..."

Keep your users' needs in mind. Ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of this image? Describe the important parts and leave out irrelevant details.
- What is the context with the rest of the page? Take into account what is said about the image in text and what's in the caption.
- Is this too much information to fit? Consider putting longer descriptions into text on the main page. This will be useful for everyone.

Other guides that informed this one

- [18F's Content Guide](#)
- [National Center on Disability and Journalism](#)
- AP Stylebook

Why this is important

The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) requires federal agencies to communicate clearly with the public. [An analysis of federal websites in 2017](#) and found that using plain language:

- Helped agencies establish better connections with the public
- Made it easier for people to understand and comply with rules
- Made government resources more apparent to people who could use them
- Saved agencies time and money

So not only is writing clearly a legal requirement, it helps us serve the public better and reduces costs. It's a win for the MTA and for our riders.