

# Vandelay Writing Style Guide

## Why a writing style guide?

The marketplace for sharing ideas and messages is a loud and crowded space. Distractions abound. Spend 30 seconds scrolling through your various newsfeeds, and you'll see it yourself. When it comes to business communications, ambiguity and inconsistency are surefire ways nudge your readers away from your content and on to the next thing to catch their interest.

So when you have readers' attention, you want to make the most of it. You want them to understand your message clearly and with as little effort as possible. Clarity and simplicity help readers spend their energy on understanding what you're saying, not how you're saying it. The Vandelay House Writing Style Guide is designed to help you do just that.

The guide is divided into two primary sections, House Style and Quick Reference. House Style follows the basic rules and guidance of the Associated Press Stylebook – and it highlights points where Vandelay style diverges. Quick Reference helps readers navigate the common grammar and syntax potholes that we all seem to encounter from time to time.

So turn to this guide for clarity if you're wondering whether healthcare is one word or two (it's one at Vandelay), if you need a reminder on the proper use of quotes or if you want to clarify how to attribute a source.

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# House Style

## Basics

Following certain rules of grammar and mechanics helps you keep your writing clear and consistent. This section lays out our house style, which applies to all of our content unless otherwise noted in this guide.

Write for all audiences. While some people will read every word you write, others will just skim. Make your writing easier to read by grouping related ideas together and using descriptive headlines and subheads.

- **Focus your message.** Create a logical sequence of ideas. Lead with the main point or the most important content. This goes for sentences, paragraphs, sections and pages.
- **Be concise.** Use short words and sentences. Avoid unnecessary modifiers.
- **Be specific.** Cut the fluff. Avoid vague language.
- **Be consistent.** Follow the copy patterns and style points noted in this guide.

## Voice and Tone

Your brand voice is your brand's personality. When you define your brand voice, you spell out how you speak to customers. And you apply this voice throughout all your brand communications.

Vandelay's brand voice is confident, conversational and engaging. Our voice reflects the simplicity of our purpose, to bring cost sustainability to employers and high-quality healthcare to the millions of Americans who struggle to pay their healthcare bills. Our website, social media, emails and marketing content need to reflect these traits to create a brand personality our audiences can depend on.

### Above all, it's a conversation

What does a confident, conversational and engaging voice sound like? Think of how you share important news when you speak with friends. You use contractions. Sometimes you speak in longer sentences because you have a great thought, and you want to get it out in one continuous stream. Sometimes you speak in short bursts. In fragments, even.

And you ask questions, right? Not to elicit an answer, necessarily, but to prompt a nod or two and to hold your friend's attention.

### It's a conversation for and about the reader

Speaking of keeping attention, engaging writing is "reader-centric" or "customer-centric." That's a fancy way of saying that engaging writing focuses on the reader. Customer-centric writing appeals to readers' inherent self-interest, the old "What's in it for me?"

### Here's an example of writer or company-centric writing:

Vandelay plans provide members with free primary care and does not require copays or coinsurance. (The focus is on what Vandelay offers.)

## Here's an example of reader- or customer-centric writing:

As a Vandelay plan member, you get free primary care, and you pay no copays and no coinsurance. (Focus is on how Vandelay's offer benefits the reader. It's a subtle but powerful shift.)

## Variety keeps it interesting

Sentence length plays a bigger part in effective writing than you might think. Shorter sentences pack more punch than longer ones. Every "and" you add to a sentence drains a little more energy from your key message. The more you lengthen a sentence, the more you're widening the reader's focus, asking them to see and think about more. As grumpy newspaper copy editors grumble, "One thought per sentence." Many of these same editors also encourage writers to limit their longest sentences to 13 words.

Try this next time you sit down to write an email or post. Limit your sentences to no more than 13 words.

While Vandelay's voice doesn't change, our tone might shift somewhat, based on the audience or content type. For example, the tone of your LinkedIn content likely will be more formal than your tweets, which might be more relaxed and humorous. And the tone of your emails is more personal and conversational than a press release to media, where you want to be a bit more polished and authoritative.

## Active voice

Use active voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action. Avoid passive voice. In passive voice, the subject of the sentence has the action done to it.

**Active:** Vandelay builds teams of high-quality primary care providers.

**Passive:** Teams of high-quality primary care providers are built by Vandelay.

## Write for the screen

Most people consume online content from screens on their smartphones, tablets and laptops. When faced with huge blocks of copy in such small spaces, most readers click away.

Make your content as easy to consume as you can. Many successful online marketers stick to the 3-5 rule: keep your discussion to 3-5 points, with each point discussed under its own subhead. Under each subhead, keep your discussion to 3-5 paragraphs. Finally, limit paragraphs to 3-5 lines.

Leave a single space between sentences.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

AP Style says there is no need to automatically pair a word with its acronym, as in "The high deductible health plan (HDHP) is among the leading..." This is a convention of the federal government's Government Printing Office style guide, also called GPO style.

When writing for Vandelay, err on the side of clarity. If there is a chance your audience won't recognize an abbreviation or acronym, spell it out the first time you mention it, followed by the applicable acronym. Then use the short version for all other references. If the abbreviation isn't clearly related to the full version, specify in parentheses.

**First use:** High deductible health plan (HDHP)

**Second use:** HDHP

**First use:** Primary Care Provider (PCP)

**Second use:** PCP

If the abbreviation or acronym is well known, such as TNT or FBI, use it instead (and don't worry about spelling it out).

## Attribution

Attributing statistics or statements of fact to their sources helps establish your authority when writing. Citing reliable sources and referencing credible organizations underscores with readers that they can trust the information you're sharing, and, in turn, trust your brand.

Here are three forms of attribution you'll be asked to use when writing for Vandelay.

## Hyperlinks

In general, use hyperlinks as your primary method for referencing sources in digital content. Links to sources help you substantiate your points without slowing the reading experience or cluttering your reader's screen.

For Vandelay blog posts and articles sent out to industry news sites, refer to sources in the run of your copy and embed links to those sources. "Run of your copy" means to include reference to sources as part of your text. ("According to...", "Reliable source name found that ...," and so on.)

### Examples:

"According to a [new CDC report](#) on adolescent health, alcohol and other drug use by our youth remains a major threat to public health."

You can also take a look at this [blog post by Art](#).

**Note:** While linking to sources is your most common form of attribution for content, be sure to review online or print publications before submitting content. Some may prefer footnotes or endnotes.

## Footnotes

Continue to use footnotes in slide decks and other presentations. Footnotes, which list sources and authors at the bottom of a given page or slide, make sense here. Readers don't have the option to click a link to confirm or learn more from a source.

As AP Style does not discuss formatting footnotes, Vandelay uses Chicago Style:

Authors' first name last name, first name last name, listed alphabetically, "Title of the Article Cited," source or publication title, month, day, year. URL

Michael Chernew, Zachary Cooper, Eugene Larsen-Hallock, and Fiona Scott Morton, "Are Health Care Services Shoppable? Evidence from the Consumption of Lower-Limb MRI Scans," NBER, ISPS Working Paper, July 30, 2018. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w24869/w24869.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w24869/w24869.pdf)

## Endnotes

Some publications and online resources prefer to list sourcing material in one list, at the end of the article. As AP Style does not discuss formatting endnotes, Vandelay follows the Chicago Style format:

### For citing online resources:

Author first name, last name, "Title of Article Being Quoted," website, month, day, year of publication. URL

Alan Cohen, "High-value Healthcare: A Model for the Future," BenefitsPRO, April 22, 2021.  
<https://www.benefitspro.com/2021/04/22/high-value-health-care-a-model-for-the-future/>

### For citing journal articles and reports

Author last name, first name. "Title of the article quoted/referenced." *Publication/site in italics*, volume number, edition number, publication date, pp. xxx-xxx. Web site name, URL.

Hinnant, Charles H. "Jane Austen's 'Wild Imagination': Romance and the Courtship Plot in the Six Canonical Novels." *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 294-310. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20107392](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107392).

## When to use which form of attribution

Consider the platform when choosing your method of attribution.

In general, adhere to these guidelines:

### Hyperlinks

- Blogs and website copy

### Footnotes

- Slide decks, short-form marketing materials

### Endnotes

- Longer marketing materials such as white papers and ebooks

## Commonly used Vandelay terms

Please use and treat these words as follows.

Use this	Not this
healthcare	health care
self-funded	self-insured
fully-insured	fully insured
high-performance	high performance
high-value	high value
out-of-pocket maximum	out of pocket maximum
primary care-centered	primary care centered
pre-certification	precertification
preventive	preventative
copay	co-pay

<b>coinsurance</b>	co-insurance
<b>out-of-pocket costs</b>	out of pocket costs
<b>reference-based pricing (RBP)</b>	reference-based reimbursement (RBR)

The following terms are always written with first letter caps:

- Primary Care Team
- Vandelay Concierge Team / Vandelay Member Services
- Health Action Plan

## Capitalization

In general, avoid unnecessary capitals. See the AP Style guide for a detailed discussion.

A few quick pointers come to mind:

**For compositions:** Capitalize the principal words in the names of books, movies, plays, poems, operas, songs, radio and television programs, works of art, etc.

**For titles:** Capitalize formal titles when used immediately before a name. Lowercase formal titles when used alone or in constructions that set them off from a name by commas.

**Title case capitalizes** the first letter of every word except articles, prepositions and conjunctions.

Use title case when stating the name of a report or a title of a book or article.

**Sentence case capitalizes** the first letter of the first word.

Use sentence case when writing subheads in a blog post or article for publication.

When writing out an email address or website URL, use all lowercase.

- diego.costa@Vandelay.com
- www.amazon.com

## Contractions

They're great! They give your writing an informal, friendly tone.

## Names and titles

The first time you mention people in writing, refer to them by their first and last names. On all other mentions, refer to them by their first name.

Capitalize the names of departments and teams (but not the word "team" or "department").

- Marketing team
- Support department

Capitalize titles only before a person's name. Lowercase titles that follow a person's name.

Vice President of Marketing Diego Costa arrived on time.

Diego Costa, vice president of marketing, arrived on time.

## Numbers

Typically spell out numbers one through nine.

Spell out a number when it begins a sentence.

*Fifteen Bruins were suspended for fighting. He had six months to go.*

Use numerals for 10 or above and whenever preceding a unit of measure or referring to ages of people, animals, events or things. Also in all tabular matter, and in statistical and sequential forms.

Otherwise, use the numeral.

**Three** speakers have submitted their bios, but the other **16** have not.

Sometimes it feels weird to use the numeral. If it's an expression that typically uses spelled-out numbers, leave them that way.

A friendly welcome email can help you make a great **first** impression.

That is a **third-party** integration.

Put your best foot forward with the **all-in-one** marketing platform that grows with you.

After you send your newsletter, Alondra will give you a **high-five**.

Numbers over 3 digits get commas:

- 999
- 1,000
- 150,000

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

## Dates

Generally, spell out the day of the week and the month. Abbreviate only if space is an issue.

Saturday, January 24

Sat., Jan. 24

## Decimals and fractions

Spell out fractions.

**Yes:** two-thirds

**No:** 2/3

Use decimal points when a number can't be easily written out as a fraction, like 1.375 or 47.2.

## Percentages

As the AP Stylebook states, use the % sign when paired with a number, with no space, in most cases: Average hourly pay rose 3.1% from a year ago; her mortgage rate is 4.75%; about 60% of Americans agreed; he won 56.2% of the vote. Use figures: 1%, 4 percentage points.

For amounts less than 1%, precede the decimal with a zero: The cost of living rose 0.6%.

In casual uses, use words rather than figures and numbers: She said he has a zero percent chance of winning.

At the start of a sentence: Try to avoid this construction. If it's necessary to start a sentence with a percentage, spell out both: Eighty-nine percent of sentences don't have to begin with a number.

Constructions with the % sign take a singular verb when standing alone or when a singular word follows an of construction:

- The teacher said 60% was a failing grade.
- He said 50% of the membership was there.

It takes a plural verb when a plural word follows an of construction:

- He said 50% of the members were there.

Use decimals, not fractions, in percentages.

- Her mortgage rate is 4.5%.

Use percentage, rather than percent, when not paired with a number.

- The percentage of people agreeing is small.

Be careful not to confuse percent with percentage point. A change from 10% to 13% is a rise of 3 percentage points. This is not equal to a 3% change; rather, it's a 30% increase.

Usage: Republicans passed a 0.25 percentage point tax cut. Not: Republicans passed a 0.25 percentage points tax cut or Republicans passed a tax cut of 0.25 of a percentage point.

## Ranges and spans

Use a hyphen (-) to indicate a range or span of numbers.

It takes 20-30 days.

## Time

Use numerals and am or pm, with a space in between. Don't use minutes for on-the-hour time.

7 am

7:30 pm

Use a hyphen between times to indicate a time period.

7 am–10:30 pm

Specify time zones when writing about an event or something else people would need to schedule. Since Vandelay is based in Buffalo, New York, we default to Eastern time.

Avoid designating time zones as standard or daylight time.

Abbreviate time zones within the continental United States as follows:

**Eastern time:** ET

**Central time:** CT

**Mountain time:** MT

**Pacific time:** PT

## Creating documents

Vandelay uses Microsoft Office to create documents.

Use Corbel 11 as your base font, and single line spacing.

## Naming documents and tracking versions

Name documents by type of content-key word-date-(year, month, day)-version (draft). Dashes make for cleaner URLs when the document is hosted online. The reverse date means that files are automatically sorted in file explorer from newest to oldest.

**For example:**

Blog-5Myths-2021-05-16.doc

If you've revised an existing document, update the version and add your initials to the document name.

**For example:**

Emails-IowaWebinar-2021-05-16-v4-RB.doc

## Quick reference

### Punctuation

#### Apostrophes

The apostrophe's most common use is making a word possessive. If the word already ends in an s and it's singular, you also add an 's. If the word ends in an s and is plural, just add an apostrophe.

- The broker accepted Sam's offer.
- The broker accepted Chris's offer.
- The broker needs to know their clients' employee demographics.

#### Exclamation marks

Use exclamation marks sparingly. Exclamation marks go inside quotation marks. Like periods and question marks, they go outside parentheses when the parenthetical is part of a larger sentence, and inside parentheses when the parenthetical stands alone.

## Hyphens

Hyphens are joiners. Use them to avoid ambiguity or to form a single idea from two or more words.

Use of the hyphen is far from standardized. Think of it as an aid to readers' comprehension. If a hyphen makes the meaning clearer, use it. If it just adds clutter and distraction to the sentence, don't use it.

No hyphen is needed to link a two-word phrase that includes the adverb *very* and all adverbs ending in *-ly*: a very good time, an easily remembered rule.

## The Oxford (or serial) comma (do not use)

In keeping with AP Style, Vandelay House Style does not include use of the Oxford (or serial) comma.

The Oxford comma is the final comma in a list of things.

### For example:

Please bring me an apple, a bagel, and a napkin.

The Oxford comma comes right after bagel.

The sentence above written in AP Style would look like this:

Please bring me an apple, a bagel and a napkin.

For detailed guidance on the use of commas, see the punctuation section in the back of Webster's New World College Dictionary.

## Pronouns

If your subject's gender is unknown or irrelevant, use "they," "them" and "their" as a singular pronoun. Use "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers" pronouns as appropriate. Don't use "one" as a pronoun.

## Question marks

Question marks go inside quotation marks if they're part of the quote. Like periods, they go outside parentheses when the parenthetical is part of a larger sentence, and inside parentheses when the parenthetical stands alone.

## Quotation marks

Use double quotes "word" to refer to words and letters, titles of short works (like articles and poems) and direct quotations.

**NOTE: Periods and commas go within quotation marks.**

**Question marks** within quotes follow logic—if the question mark is part of the quotation, it goes within. If you're asking a question that ends with a quote, it goes outside the quote.

**NOTE: Use single quotation marks for quotes within quotes.**

Who was it that said, "A fool and his money are soon parted"?

Brad said, "A wise man once told me, 'A fool and his money are soon parted.'"

**There is no need to put quotes around common, informal words or phrases.** The sales team really stole the show at the annual conference. To say the sales team really "stole the show" at the conference could introduce unintended irony or sarcasm into the statement and leave the reader wondering what went wrong at the conference.

## Semicolons

Limit your use of semicolons. They usually support long, complicated sentences that could easily be simplified. Try an en-dash ( – ) instead, or simply start a new sentence.

## More to Come

Lastly, this guide is a living document. It is brief by design but we are eager to make it as useful a tool as we can. If you have suggestions for what to add to the guide, please send us an email at [copywriter@Vandelay.com](mailto:copywriter@Vandelay.com). We'll do what we can to include it.

There is no shortage of resources available to help you write with consistency and clarity. Note that these sources are available for purchase.

[The Associated Press Stylebook](#) online

[The Associated Press Stylebook](#) (softcover)

[Grammarly](#)

[Hemingway Editor](#)

[Merriam Webster Dictionary](#)

[On Writing Well](#), William Zissner

[The Elements of Style](#), William Strunk and E.B. White