

# FastTrack Style Guide

Guidelines for creating FastTrack content

**Author:** Ryan Berg (STEYER ASSOCIATES INC)

**Date:** May 1, 2025

**Version:** 3.7

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Tone and style .....	5
Target audience .....	5
Tone of voice .....	5
Sentence structure .....	5
Headings .....	6
General guidelines .....	7
General content rules .....	7
Capitalization .....	7
Numbers, dates, and times .....	8
Spelled-out numbers .....	8
Numerals .....	8
Dates .....	8
Time .....	9
Punctuation .....	9
Abbreviations and acronyms .....	9
Latin .....	10
Verb tense and addressing the user .....	10
Mood of verbs .....	10
Active and passive voice .....	11
Verb agreement .....	11
Person .....	11
Checklist .....	13
General .....	13
Voice and tense .....	13
Headings .....	13
Paragraphs, sentences, words, and phrases .....	14

Punctuation .....	14
Numbers, dates, and times .....	14

# Introduction

The following style guide describes the tone, style, and guidelines to use for creating internal and customer-facing FastTrack content.

The main goals of this guide are to:

- Describe the tone of voice and style of language that tie together FastTrack content.
- Provide general guidelines and reference material.

# Tone and style

## Target audience

FastTrack targets medium-to-large enterprises with 150 or more licenses. These customers typically have many assets to track and may find it more challenging to migrate to the cloud. We talk to our customers in a way that makes them feel important, listened to, informed, and respected. Individuals can range from high-level decision-makers to hands-on IT staff, but they are all just people looking for guidance. Always try and imagine you are face-to-face and project friendliness in your content.

## Tone of voice

The Microsoft voice encompasses how you talk to people, including tone, vocabulary, and personality. Write to make customers feel important, listened to, informed, and respected. Try to balance a friendly voice with clear, accurate language. Simple sentence structures help. Use a voice that's:

- **Warm and relaxed**—We write naturally. Less formal, more grounded in honest, everyday conversations, like talking to a friend. Occasionally, we're fun. (We know when to celebrate.)
- **Crisp and clear**—We're to the point. We use short words. Short sentences. We write for scanning first, reading second. We lead with what's most important. And eliminate nonessentials.
- **Ready to lend a hand**—We show people we're on their side. We anticipate their real needs and offer useful information at just the right time. They're inspired to move forward.

## Sentence structure

Shorter is always better, so get to the point fast. Think crisp minimalism. Where possible, start each statement with an active verb.

Lead with what's most important. Start with keywords so skim-readers spot them easily. Make customer choices and next steps obvious. Give customers just enough information to make decisions confidently. Prune every excess word but write in complete sentences.

Be consistent in your word choice. Use just one term for the same thing in all of the content. Mixing and matching terminology can lead to confusion and mistranslation.

- Cut *you can* and *there is, there are, there were*.

- Be friendly and conversational. Use common contractions: *it's*, *you'll*, *you're*, *we're*, *let's*. Don't mix contractions and the spelled-out version in the same content.
- Include articles like *the*, *a*, *an*. Articles help translators identify the nouns and modifiers in a sentence.
- Avoid words and phrases that are subjective (*easy*, *quick*, *seamless*) or that are overly superlative (*world-class*, *lightning-fast*, *awesome*, *amazing*).
- Don't use (s) to form plural nouns (partner(s), device(s)). Make things plural if you're talking about more than one.
- Avoid using ampersand or plus symbols (&, +).

## Headings

Headings provide both structure and visual points of reference to help readers scan content and find entry points. In your content, use headings consistently.

Write short headings that lead with the most important idea. Headings form an eye-catching outline for the content. If readers don't read the headings, they probably won't read the text. Focus on what matters to the customer, using words they'd use themselves to describe what they can achieve or need to know.

- Keep headings as short as possible but keep *a*, *the*, *that*, and verbs for translation.
- Avoid hyphens where possible to avoid awkward line breaks that may appear when the user resizes their window or views the content using a mobile device.
- Avoid using ampersand or plus symbols (&, +).
- Use sentence style capitalization. Only capitalize proper nouns: *Templates and themes for Office Online*.
- Don't use end punctuation in headings (no periods, questions marks, or exclamations).
- Use parallel construction

# General guidelines

## General content rules

- Make sure that your writing is bias-free.
- Use gender-neutral or inclusive terms to refer to people.
- Write out all product, solution, or offering names precisely and consistently.
- Don't overpromise or use words that make or imply promises. This can cause legal issues. Instead, qualify with words like *help*, *helps*, and *can help*.
- Don't write *Microsoft's* (meaning Microsoft is).
- Avoid jargon, slang, idioms, and colloquiums.
- Don't embed text in a graphic or image.
- Use Segoe font.
- Choose your words wisely and use them consistently. If you mean the same thing, use the same word.
- Don't use words that make or imply promises. This can cause legal issues.
- Words like *safe*, *private*, *secure*, and *protect* can imply the promise of absolute security, safety, or privacy. Use thoughtfully (if at all).
  - Be inclusive of job roles, family structure, leisure activities, and purchasing power.
  - Don't generalize about people, countries, regions, and cultures, not even positive or neutral generalizations.
  - Avoid culturally sensitive terms, like terms associated with military or political actions, historic events, and eras.

## Capitalization

Microsoft general style is sentence-style capitalization.

- Always capitalize proper nouns.
- Use lowercase for everything except the first word in a sentence, user interface (UI) label, phrase, heading, or title (including the titles of blogs, articles, and press releases).
- Don't capitalize the spelled-out form of an acronym unless it's a proper noun.

- In programming languages, follow the traditional capitalization of keywords and other special terms.
- Don't use all uppercase for emphasis.

## Numbers, dates, and times

### Spelled-out numbers

Use for:

- Zero through nine unless space is limited.
- One of the numbers, when two numbers that refer to separate categories must appear together. For example, two 3-page articles.
- At the beginning of a sentence.
- Ordinal numbers, like first. Don't add *-ly*, as in *firstly*, to ordinal numbers.

### Numerals

Use for:

- Numbers in UI.
- Numbers 10 or greater.
- Numbers zero through nine when you have limited space.
- All numbers in a category if one or more numbers requires a numeral. For example, a 16-page article, a 7-page article, and a 3-page article.
- Dimensions. Use the multiplication sign (×), preceded and followed by a space, for tile sizes, screen resolutions, and paper sizes. For everything else, spell out by:
  - The time of day.
  - Percentages. Spell out percent.
  - The coordinates of tables or worksheets and numbered sections of documents.

### Dates

- Don't use ordinal numbers, like June first or October twenty-eighth, for dates. Use a numeral instead.
- Always spell out the name of the month.



- Begin calendars on Mondays, which is the custom in much of the world.
- Don't refer to seasons, which vary across the world. Talk about quarters or specific months.
- Use the date format, month dd, yyyy. Don't use numerals to represent months. For example, *January 5, 2018*.

## Time

Include the time zone when it matters to customers, like in an event listing. In time stamps that automatically display the customer's local time, you don't need to include the time zone.

### Ranges of numbers

- In most cases, use *from* and *through* to describe a range of numbers.
- Don't use *from* before a range indicated by an en-dash, like 10–15.

## Punctuation

Always try and keep it simple.

- Stick to short, simple sentences. Sentences that contain lots of punctuation tend to be complex and hard to read.
- Use only one space after periods, question marks, exclamation points, and colons.
- Include commas after every item in a series, including the last one (this is called the Oxford comma). For example, *Networks, storage, and virtual machines*.
- Use an apostrophe to indicate a missing letter in a contraction (like *don't*) and to form the possessive case of a noun (as in *Insider's Guide*). Don't use an apostrophe for the possessive of it (*its*) to avoid confusion with the contraction of it is (*it's*).
- Use exclamation points sparingly.
- Use question marks sparingly.
- Don't use spaces around em-dashes.
- Don't use a slash (/) to indicate a choice or as a substitute for or. Don't use and/or.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

Acronyms and abbreviations can have an adverse effect on clarity, voice, and search engine optimization (SEO). However, some acronyms, like USB and PC, are widely understood and preferred to the spelled-out term.

## Latin

Avoid Latin abbreviations for common English phrases.

Don't use *etc.*

Use this	Instead of this
for example	e.g.
that is	i.e.
namely	viz.
therefore	ergo

## Verb tense and addressing the user

In the present tense, the action is happening now. The present tense is easier to read and understand than the past or future tense. It's the best choice for most content.

### **Examples:**

- The Windows Start screen is uniquely yours, personalized with your favorite apps, people, photos, and colors.
- Windows Update installs important updates automatically.

## Mood of verbs

The mood of a verb expresses the writer's intent. Most of the time, use the indicative mood. It's crisp and straightforward without being bossy. Don't switch moods within a sentence.

Mood	Use for	Examples
<b>Indicative</b>	Statements of fact, questions, assertions, and explanations—most Microsoft content.	Style sheets are powerful tools for formatting complex documents.
<b>Imperative</b>	Instructions, procedures, direct commands, requests, and headings for columns that list customer actions.	Enter a file name, and then save the file.
<b>Subjunctive</b>	Wishes, hypotheses, and suggestions—avoid.	We recommend that you be careful about opening email attachments.

## Active and passive voice

Voice is either active or passive. Use active voice rather than passive voice whenever you can. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. In passive voice, the subject is the receiver of the action.

- Use verbs (like *is* and *open*) that indicate the action is happening now.
- Avoid *will*, *was*, and verbs ending in *ed* (like *released*) which indicate that text isn't in the present tense.

Voice	Examples
<b>Active</b>	Divide your document into as many sections as you want. Office 365 includes the Office 2016 apps for PC and Mac.
<b>Passive</b>	The site can't be found. The images will be provided.

## Verb agreement

Verbs have singular and plural forms. Use the verb form that agrees with subject of the sentence in number. Try to stay consistent. Don't intermingle singular and plural usage.

When the subject is	The verb is	Examples
A group of things	Singular	A variety of games is available from the Windows Store.
Two or more singular things connected by <i>and</i>	Plural	Office 365 and Azure are both covered by FastTrack.
Two or more singular things connected by <i>or</i>	Singular	Your tablet or phone is all you need to play your favorite games on the go.
A singular thing and a plural thing connected by <i>or</i>	Singular or plural, to match the closest subject	Skype or social media apps are available from the Windows Store.

## Person

In grammar, person refers to the point of view represented by a statement and determines which pronoun to use.

Use second person as often as you can.

In second person, you write as though you're speaking to the reader. Second person often uses the personal pronoun *you*, but sometimes the word *you* is implied. It supports a friendly, human tone and helps avoid passive voice by focusing the discussion on the reader. Consider omitting *you* can whenever the sentence works without it.

**Examples:**

- Create your own unique Lumia experience.
- You can set advanced options later if you need them.

Use first person sparingly.

Use first person (usually *I* or *me*) only when you need to write from the point of view of the customer.

**Example:**

- Alert me when a new Bluetooth device tries to connect to my computer. (Check box text)

Avoid first-person plural.

First-person plural, which often uses the pronoun *we*, can feel like a daunting corporate presence—the opposite of Microsoft's modern voice. It's OK to use phrasing like *we* recommend if it helps you avoid awkward phrasing like *it's recommended*, but write around it if you can. Try to keep the focus on the customer, not Microsoft.

**Examples:**

- Select the people you want to give permission to. We'll verify their identities before opening the document.
- In September, we took a major step forward in introducing Windows 10 to our enterprise customers.
- The scheduled default setting is the easiest way to keep your computer up-to-date. (Instead of *We recommend that you use the scheduled default setting...*)

# Checklist

Use this checklist for best practices whenever you write or review FastTrack content.

## General

- Write out precisely and consistently all product, solution, or offering names.
- Don't create abbreviations or acronyms out of any product name, service name, or trademark.
- Don't use words that make or imply promises.
- Never write Microsoft's (meaning Microsoft is).
- Avoid jargon, slang, idioms, and colloquiums.
- Be careful that your writing is bias-free.
- Never embed text in a graphic or image.
- Use Segoe font.
- Use sentence-style capitalization: everything is lowercase except proper nouns and the first word of a sentence, heading, title, UI label, list, or stand-alone phrase.
- Use title-style capitalization (capitalizing most words) only for book and song titles; article titles in citations; titles of specific individuals.
- Place keywords up front in headings, paragraphs, sentences.
- Avoid using ampersand or plus symbols (&, +).

## Voice and tense

- Use active voice rather than passive voice whenever you can.
- Write in the present tense.
- In general, use second person.

## Headings

- Keep headings as short as possible but keep a, the, that, and verbs for translation.
- Capitalize only the first word (and proper nouns) in a heading.
- Don't include punctuation at the end of a heading.

- Avoid using ampersands or plus symbols (&, +) in a heading.
- Use parallel construction for headings at the same level.

## Paragraphs, sentences, words, and phrases

- Use simple sentence structure. Break down the thoughts into small pieces. Put parenthetical information in a separate sentence. Don't use long, compound, or complex sentences.
- Write complete sentences. Include pronouns like that and who. Include articles like the, a, an.
- Be consistent in your word choice. Use just one term for the same thing in all of the content.
- Use only the most common contractions, and don't mix contractions and the spelled out version in the same content.
- Avoid Latin and other non-English words.

## Punctuation

- Use only one space after periods, question marks, exclamation points, and colons.
- Don't use end punctuation on headings, titles, subhead, and UI titles.
- Include commas after every item in a series, including the last one.
- Use only one space after a period, question mark, exclamation mark, or colon.
- Use a slash (/) to imply a combination (on/off switch). However, don't use a slash to indicate a choice or as a substitute for or. Don't use and/or.

## Numbers, dates, and times

- In body text, spell out whole numbers zero to nine. Use numerals for 10 and above.
- Use appropriate terms and formats for dates, times, and seasons of the year.