



2026

Website Content Guide

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

WEB SERVICES, DIVISION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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1. PURPOSE, AUTHORITY, & INTENDED USE

1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide establishes guidelines and best practices for writing and maintaining public-facing website content for Valdosta State University. Our goal is to help departmental content owners create pages that are clear, useful, accessible, accurate, and consistent with the University's brand.

Your website is **not** an internal filing system. Instead, it is a public service and an important decision-making tool. Visitors arrive at your site to complete tasks: compare programs, understand requirements, find services, contact the right person, or to determine whether Valdosta State University is the right school for them. Content must help them do that quickly and confidently.

This guide focuses on the quality of written content. This document is not a guide for technical website development in Cascade CMS, nor is it a playbook for advanced marketing tactics. Instead, we will cover what to say, how to say it, and how to make it understandable to real people.

1.2 OBJECTIVES FOR THIS GUIDE

All VSU website content should accomplish the following objectives:

- Put the visitors' needs before internal organizational structure.
- Explain information in plain and direct language.
- Help users find the most important information without unnecessary reading.
- Reflect VSU's voice: clear, student-centered, human, and focused on impact.
- Support equal access for people with disabilities and for visitors with different reading abilities, language backgrounds, devices, and familiarity with higher education.
- Remain current, accurate, and owned by a responsible department.

VSU's Brand Guidelines direct communicators to be clear and concise, know the audience, make messaging about "you," and be human. Those principles are the foundation of this guide.

Write for the person trying to accomplish something, not for the department trying to describe itself.

1.3 WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDE

This guide applies to faculty, staff, student employees, and departmental editors who create or revise public web content. It is especially intended for subject-matter experts who know their programs and services well but may not write for the web every day.

Subject-matter expertise is essential. However, expertise should be translated into language that prospective students, current students, families, alumni, community members, and other visitors can understand without insider knowledge.

2. THE CORE CONTENT STANDARD

2.1 START WITH THE VISITOR'S QUESTION

Before drafting or revising a page, identify:

1. Who is this page for?
2. What are they trying to understand or do?
3. What information do they need first?
4. What should they be able to do next?
5. What action, if any, should the page help them take?

A page should not begin with a department history, mission statement, committee structure, or administrative context unless that information directly answers the visitor's immediate question.

WEAK CONTENT

The Department of Environmental Geosciences is committed to facilitating educational excellence through interdisciplinary engagement and innovative curricular offerings.

STRONG CONTENT

Study environmental geosciences at VSU and learn how land, water, climate, and natural resources shape the world around you. Build practical skills through fieldwork, research, and hands-on learning.

The stronger example tells prospective students what the program is, what they will study, and why it matters.

2.2 PUT THE ANSWER BEFORE THE BACKGROUND

Use an "answer first" approach:

- State the essential fact or service.
- Explain the details.
- Provide supporting context, exceptions, or institutional background afterward.

Visitors should not have to read several paragraphs to discover a deadline, eligibility requirement, office location, program format, or contact method.

WEAK CONTENT

In keeping with the University's commitment to student achievement and academic success, the Academic Support Center offers an array of services intended to enhance learning outcomes for members of the campus community.

STRONG CONTENT

The Academic Support Center offers free tutoring, study support, and academic coaching for VSU students.

2.3 USE “YOU” WHEN APPROPRIATE

VSU's brand guidance encourages communicators to make messaging about the audience rather than the institution. Use “you” and “your” when speaking directly to prospective and current students.

WEAK CONTENT

Students must submit all required documents before registration.

STRONG CONTENT

Submit all required documents before you register.

Use direct address thoughtfully. It is especially effective for admissions, financial aid, academic programs, student services, campus life, and event content. Avoid forced familiarity in formal policy, legal, regulatory, or emergency communications.

If a sentence begins with “VSU offers...” ask yourself whether it would be stronger if it began with “You can...”

3. KNOW THE AUDIENCE BEFORE YOU WRITE

3.1 DO NOT WRITE ONE PAGE FOR “EVERYONE”

Different audiences arrive with different questions. A page may serve more than one audience, but its primary audience must be clear.

AUDIENCE	PRIMARY QUESTIONS
Prospective students	What can I study? Is this a good fit? What will it cost? What can I do after graduation? How do I apply?
Current students	What do I need to do now? Where do I go? What deadline applies? Who can help me?
Parents and families	What are the costs, requirements, timelines, and support systems?
Faculty and staff	What is the process, policy, resource, or responsibility?
Alumni and community members	How can I participate, connect, attend, support, or learn more?

Higher-education research consistently emphasizes that prospective students need straightforward information about programs, costs, application requirements, student life, and outcomes. Carnegie’s higher-education guidance also frames content around the visitor journey rather than the institution’s internal structure.

3.2 WRITE FOR THE STAGE OF THE VISITOR’S JOURNEY

A prospective student researching a major needs different information than an admitted student preparing to enroll. A current student facing a deadline needs different information than a parent learning about VSU for the first time.

Use the visitor’s likely stage to determine what leads the page:

- **Exploring:** What is this program, service, or opportunity?
- **Comparing:** What makes it distinct? What are the options, requirements, costs, or outcomes?
- **Deciding:** What are the next steps, deadlines, and contacts?

- **Acting:** What exactly should the visitor do now?
- **Using a service:** What is available, when, where, and how does the process work?

3.3 RESPECT VISITORS WHO DO NOT KNOW UNIVERSITY TERMINOLOGY

Do not assume visitors understand terms such as:

- cohort
- matriculation
- baccalaureate
- articulation agreement
- upper division
- modality
- registrar
- FERPA
- practicum
- concentration
- credit hour

Some terms are necessary. When they are, define them in plain language the first time they appear or provide brief context.

WEAK CONTENT

Students must satisfy all pre-matriculation requirements.

STRONG CONTENT

Before you enroll, complete the required admissions steps, including submitting your final transcript and any required health records.

If a high school senior or a new employee may not know the term, explain it.

4. VOICE, TONE, AND BRAND ALIGNMENT

4.1 WRITE LIKE VALDOSTA STATE

VSU web content should be:

- **Clear:** Use familiar words and direct sentences.
- **Concise:** Remove unnecessary introductions, repetition, and filler.
- **Human:** Sound like a helpful person, not a brochure or policy manual.
- **Confident:** State what VSU does without exaggeration.
- **Student-centered:** Explain value in terms of what visitors can learn, experience, accomplish, or access.
- **Impact-oriented:** Connect programs and services to real outcomes.

VSU’s messaging guidance specifically cautions against academic language and marketing jargon and encourages relatable, audience-specific communication.

4.2 AVOID “MARKETESE”

“Marketese” is inflated, vague language that makes a claim without providing useful evidence or meaning.

Avoid phrases such as:

- world-class
- cutting-edge
- premier
- unparalleled
- transformative
- state-of-the-art
- robust
- innovative solutions
- dynamic environment
- leading-edge
- exceptional opportunities

These words may be appropriate only when the page immediately explains what makes the claim true.

WEAK CONTENT

Our world-class faculty provide transformative learning experiences.

STRONG CONTENT

Learn from faculty who bring research, professional practice, and one-on-one mentorship into the classroom.

The stronger version gives the reader something concrete to evaluate.

4.3 PREFER EVIDENCE OVER ADJECTIVES

Replace broad claims with specific proof:

INSTEAD OF	PREFER
“Outstanding facilities”	“Practice in dedicated nursing simulation labs.”
“Career-ready education”	“Complete internships, clinical experiences, research, or fieldwork connected to your program.”
“A vibrant campus community”	“Join student organizations, attend campus events, and find support through residence life and student services.”
“Personalized attention”	“Meet with advisors and faculty who can help you plan courses and explore opportunities.”

Do not invent outcomes, rankings, partnerships, placement rates, or claims of distinction. Use only information that is current, verified, and approved for publication.

4.4 ADJUST TONE TO THE CONTENT

A single institutional voice does not mean every page has the same emotional tone.

- **Admissions pages:** Encouraging, clear, motivating.
- **Academic program pages:** Informative, aspirational, specific.
- **Student services pages:** Supportive, practical, reassuring.
- **Policies and procedures:** Direct, neutral, precise.
- **Emergency content:** Brief, factual, action-oriented.
- **News and stories:** Engaging, active, people-centered.

5. STRUCTURE CONTENT FOR SCANNING

5.1 ASSUME VISITORS WILL SCAN BEFORE THEY READ

Web visitors often scan headings, links, lists, bold text, and the first words of paragraphs before deciding whether to read more. Content must make its meaning visible at a glance.

Nielsen Norman Group's research on university websites found that prospective students and parents frequently struggled with insider language and common usability problems. Its guidelines emphasize clear access to majors, application information, audience tasks, and meaningful institutional information.

5.2 USE A PREDICTABLE PAGE STRUCTURE

For most pages, use this order:

1. Clear page title
2. Short opening that answers the main question
3. Most important details
4. Supporting information
5. Related resources or next steps
6. Contact information, when needed

For longer pages, add descriptive headings so visitors can jump to the section they need.

5.3 WRITE HEADINGS THAT COMMUNICATE

Headings are not decoration. They should tell users what is below them.

WEAK HEADINGS

- *Information*
- *Resources*
- *Additional Details*
- *Overview*
- *Important Notes*

STRONG HEADINGS

- *Apply to the Program*
- *Tuition and Financial Aid*
- *Required Courses*

- *Schedule an Advising Appointment*
- *Internship and Research Opportunities*
- *Contact the Office of Financial Aid*

A visitor should understand the page's main points by reading headings alone.

5.4 USE SHORT PARAGRAPHS AND USEFUL LISTS

Aim for one main idea per paragraph. Break dense information into bullets when the reader needs to compare options, follow requirements, gather documents, or understand a sequence.

WEAK CONTENT

Students seeking to change their major should complete the necessary request form, consult with their academic advisor, determine how the proposed change may affect academic progress, and ensure that the request is received by the appropriate deadline.

STRONG CONTENT

To change your major:

- 1. Meet with your academic advisor.*
- 2. Review how the change may affect your degree plan.*
- 3. Complete the required request form.*
- 4. Submit your request by the published deadline.*

5.5 KEEP ONE IDEA IN EACH SENTENCE

Long sentences are difficult to scan and can hide important conditions.

WEAK CONTENT

The program, which is designed to provide students with a foundational understanding of the discipline while also allowing opportunities for exploration across multiple related fields of study, prepares graduates for a range of career and graduate-school possibilities.

STRONG CONTENT

The program introduces you to the foundations of the discipline. You can also explore related fields through electives and applied learning opportunities. Graduates may pursue careers or continued study in related areas.

6. CREATE STRONG ACADEMIC PROGRAM PAGES

6.1 TREAT ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AS DECISION PAGES

For many prospective students, a program page is not simply an academic description. It is a major decision point. It should help visitors understand what they will learn, what they will do, what makes the program distinctive, and where it can lead.

Carnegie advises institutions to organize academic program information around prospective students' needs, including curriculum, hands-on learning, program-specific opportunities, and career or graduate-school outcomes.

6.2 REQUIRED ELEMENTS FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAM PAGES

When applicable, program pages should include:

- A plain-language summary of the program.
- The degree name and credential.
- What students study.
- Notable courses, topics, concentrations, or specializations.
- Hands-on learning, internships, clinicals, research, fieldwork, studios, performances, or labs.
- Facilities, equipment, or learning environments that matter to the student experience.
- Student organizations or related experiences.
- Career paths, professional preparation, licensure information, or graduate-school pathways, when verified.
- Admissions, portfolio, audition, prerequisite, or program-entry requirements, when applicable.
- Clear next steps and relevant contacts.

6.3 MAKE PROGRAM PAGES CONCRETE

Avoid copying catalog language as the primary public-facing description. Catalog language may be required for academic accuracy, but it is often not sufficient for prospective-student understanding.

CATALOG-STYLE CONTENT

The Bachelor of Science in Biology provides a broad foundation in biological principles and prepares students for advanced study and professional opportunities.

WEB-READY CONTENT

Study living systems from cells to ecosystems. In VSU's Biology program, you can build your foundation in genetics, ecology, physiology, and laboratory science while preparing for careers, professional programs, or graduate study.

6.4 MAKE SERVICE PAGES TASK-ORIENTED

Service pages should quickly answer:

- What does this office help with?
- Who can use the service?
- What should I do first?
- What documents, deadlines, costs, or eligibility rules apply?
- How do I get help?

WEAK CONTENT

The Office of X serves as a centralized resource for the coordination and facilitation of services related to student success.

STRONG CONTENT

The Office of X helps students with [specific services]. Start by [first action], or contact us if you are not sure which option applies to you.

7. MAKE CONTENT ENGAGING: STORY-TELLING

7.1 SHOW THE EXPERIENCE, NOT ONLY THE CLAIM

Engaging content does not require exaggerated language. It requires useful detail and authentic examples.

Use stories, student perspectives, faculty expertise, alumni outcomes, projects, events, and community impact to show how the University's work affects people.

WEAK CONTENT

VSU provides life-changing opportunities.

STRONG CONTENT

Through undergraduate research, internships, performances, clinical experiences, and student organizations, VSU students can apply what they learn beyond the classroom.

7.2 FEATURE PEOPLE WITH PURPOSE

People-centered content is most effective when it helps the visitor understand an experience or possibility.

A strong story should answer at least one of these questions:

- What did this student learn or accomplish?
- What challenge did they overcome?
- What opportunity did they use?
- What did they create, research, perform, or contribute?
- How did a faculty member, program, or service support them?
- What might a future student recognize in their own goals?

Do not use a profile merely to fill space. Tie it to a program, service, value, or audience need.

7.3 USE AUTHENTIC, INCLUSIVE EXAMPLES

When selecting stories, examples, and images, represent the range of people who may see themselves at VSU: students at different stages, varied academic interests, commuters, residential students, transfer students, adult learners, first-generation students, and people from different backgrounds.

Recent enrollment research emphasizes that students weigh practical factors such as affordability, scholarships, safety, diversity, and campus experience. Niche’s 2024 survey drew on responses from 15,764 students and identified those factors as influential in enrollment decisions.

7.4 CONNECT STORIES TO ACTION

A story page should offer a next step, such as:

- Explore the program.
- Learn about undergraduate research.
- Visit campus.
- Apply now.
- Find student organizations.
- Contact an advisor.
- Read related stories.

A story should help a visitor picture a possibility—and show where to go next.

8. ACCESSIBILITY AND LANGUAGE RESPONSIBILITIES

8.1 ACCESSIBILITY IS CONTENT QUALITY

Accessible writing helps everyone. It supports visitors using screen readers, visitors reading on mobile devices, people with cognitive or learning disabilities, visitors whose first language is not English, and people who are unfamiliar with university processes.

As a public institution, VSU has a responsibility to make information understandable and available to the broadest possible audience. Accessibility is not an optional final review step. It begins when content is planned and written.

8.2 USE PLAIN LANGUAGE

Plain language means choosing familiar words, direct sentences, clear organization, and explanations that help people act.

Plain language does **not** mean oversimplifying academic ideas or removing necessary detail. It means presenting necessary detail in a form people can understand.

PREFERRED CONTENT

- **use**, not *utilize*
- **help**, not *facilitate*
- **before**, not *prior to*
- **because**, not *due to the fact that*
- **start**, not *commence*
- **about**, not *in regard to*
- **if**, not *in the event that*

8.3 USE MEANINGFUL LINK TEXT

Links must describe their destination or action.

AVOID THIS CONTENT

- *Click here*
- *Learn more*
- *Read more*
- *Download*
- *More information*

PREFER THIS CONTENT

- *Review undergraduate admission requirements.*
- *Download the 2026–2027 housing contract.*
- *View scholarship deadlines.*
- *Contact the Financial Aid Office.*
- *Explore the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre.*

Meaningful links help all users decide whether to follow a link. They are especially important for visitors using screen readers, which may present links outside the surrounding sentence.

8.4 WRITE USEFUL ALT TEXT FOR IMAGES

Alternative text, or alt text, describes the meaningful content or purpose of an image for visitors who cannot see it.

Good alt text should be:

- Brief
- Specific
- Based on the image’s purpose on the page
- Written as information, not decoration

WEAK ALT TEXT

students

STRONG ALT TEXT

Two nursing students practice a patient assessment in a simulation lab.

Do not begin with “Image of” or “Photo of” unless the format itself matters. Do not add alt text that repeats nearby caption text word for word. Decorative images that add no information should not receive descriptive alt text.

8.5 USE HEADINGS IN LOGICAL ORDER

Headings help visitors scan content and help assistive technology users understand page structure.

Follow a logical hierarchy:

- **Heading 1:** Page title.
- **Heading 2:** Main sections.

- **Heading 3:** Subsections within a main section.
- **Heading 4:** Subsections within a subsection, only when needed.

Do not choose headings because they look larger or smaller. Use headings to describe the content structure.

8.6 DO NOT RELY ON VISUAL CUES ALONE

Avoid instructions that depend only on color, location, or appearance.

AVOID

Select the green button on the right.

PREFER

Select **Submit Your Application**.

If the page only works when someone can see colors, images, or layout, the content is not finished.

9. ACCURACY, GOVERNANCE, AND CONTENT LIFECYCLE

9.1 EVERY PAGE NEEDS AN OWNER

Departments are responsible for the accuracy and timeliness of the content they publish. Every page should have a clear content owner: an office, role, or team accountable for reviewing it.

Content should not remain online indefinitely because it was once correct.

9.2 REVIEW CONTENT ON A SCHEDULE

Editors should review content:

- Before each recruitment or application cycle.
- Before each academic year or term, when relevant.
- Before publishing dates, prices, requirements, deadlines, or eligibility information.
- When a program, policy, service, form, office location, or contact changes.
- At least annually for evergreen pages.

Kristina Halvorson's content-strategy framework emphasizes that content requires governance across its lifecycle: planning, creation, maintenance, review, and removal—not merely publication. This guide adopts that principle as a core Web Services standard.

9.3 REMOVE OR REVISE OUTDATED CONTENT

Outdated content damages trust. Review for:

- Expired dates and deadlines.
- Former employees or inaccurate contacts.
- Retired programs, services, forms, or processes.
- Broken references to events, initiatives, or offices.
- Old tuition, fee, scholarship, or requirement information.
- Claims that cannot be verified.
- Duplicate pages that provide conflicting information.

When information is no longer useful, remove it, archive it according to institutional practice, or replace it with current guidance.

9.4 IDENTIFY THE SOURCE OF IMPORTANT FACTS

Before publishing, editors should verify facts with the responsible office or authoritative institutional source. This is especially important for:

- Admission requirements.
- Tuition, fees, scholarships, and financial aid.
- Degree requirements.
- Licensure or accreditation claims.
- Career-outcome data.
- Eligibility criteria.
- Deadlines.
- Legal, safety, health, and policy information.

When in doubt, do not make the claim until it is verified.

10. EDITORIAL STANDARDS & QUALITY CHECKLIST

10.1 BEFORE PUBLISHING, CONFIRM THE PAGE MEETS THESE STANDARDS

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

- Is the primary audience clear?
- Does the opening answer the visitor's main question?
- Does the page use language that audience will understand?
- Does the page help the visitor take an appropriate next step?

CLARITY AND TONE

- Is the writing direct and concise?
- Does the content avoid jargon, acronyms, and vague promotional language?
- Does it use "you" where appropriate?
- Does it explain the impact of a program, service, or opportunity?

STRUCTURE AND READABILITY

- Is the most important information near the top?
- Are headings descriptive?
- Are paragraphs short?
- Are lists used for steps, requirements, and comparable items?
- Can a visitor understand the page by scanning its headings and links?

ACCESSIBILITY

- Are links meaningful out of context?
- Is alt text useful for meaningful images?
- Are headings in a logical hierarchy?
- Are instructions understandable without relying on color, location, or appearance?
- Is the language readable for a broad public audience?

ACCURACY AND MAINTENANCE

- Are names, dates, deadlines, requirements, and contacts correct?
- Has the office responsible reviewed high-stakes information?
- Is there a department or role responsible for future updates?
- Has outdated information been removed?

10.2 THE FINAL-READ TEST

Before publishing, read the page as if you are:

- A prospective student who has never visited VSU.
- A parent trying to find a deadline.
- A current student using a phone between classes.
- A visitor using a screen reader.
- A person who does not understand university terminology.

If any of those visitors might ask, “What does this mean?” or “What do I do next?” revise the page.

11. CONCLUSION: THE VSU WEB CONTENT COMMITMENT

Every VSU web page represents the University. It can either create clarity and confidence or create friction and confusion.

High-quality content does not depend on elaborate language. It depends on understanding the audience, presenting the most useful information first, writing with a human voice, organizing information for scanning, and maintaining accuracy over time.

The standard is simple:

- Be clear and concise
- Make it about the visitor
- Show meaningful impact
- Use specific, accessible language
- Keep content current and useful

Editors should use this guide as a routine planning, writing, and review tool—not only when creating new pages, but whenever existing content is updated. Clear content is an essential part of how VSU serves students, families, faculty, staff, alumni, and the broader community.

The best university web content makes the visitor feel informed, capable, and ready for the next step.
