



CITY OF CUPERTINO STYLE GUIDE

Grammar
Spelling
Punctuation

2020 Edition

Questions or comments? Email communications@cupertino.org

Contents

Introduction 2

Clear and Effective Writing 3

Inclusive Language 5

Punctuation 6

Spelling and Grammar 7

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of the Cupertino Style Guide. The purpose of this document is to establish consistent grammar, punctuation, and spelling usage in communications, publications, and documents prepared by the City of Cupertino. It is intended for use by all City staff involved in the preparation of documents, including writers, support staff, and managers.

When should you use these guidelines? When you are composing official communications on behalf of the City, including emails, staff reports, letters, memos, press releases, social media posts, and more. There are items that can be excluded from some of these guidelines due to space constraints, such as postcards, flyers, spreadsheets, charts, graphs, and others.

As a first effort, this Style Guide is likely to have gaps in the material it includes, or it will identify areas where there are differences of opinion. It is important that employees contribute their questions, comments, and suggestions to improve the next edition of this guide by emailing communications@cupertino.org. Some differences will come from the American English versus British English spelling of words. The Cupertino Style Guide identifies the American English versions to be correct.

This document will be updated yearly and republished every March 4, also known as National Grammar Day.

Additional Resources:

merriam-webster.com

grammarly.com

The Elements of Style

-William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White

The Book on Writing

-Paula LaRocque

On Writing Well

-William Zinsser

Clear and Effective Writing

The principles for writing clear and effective documents and publications are not complex or magical. They come down to some basic concepts. Here is a brief summary of the elements of writing so that we can communicate well with each other and the public.

1. Know Your Audience

In other words, “Who am I writing for?” Before you begin writing, make sure you know your purpose and your audience. Is the document meant for City Council, staff, residents, business owners, or a specific neighborhood? Knowing your audience will help guide your writing and ensure good planning and a clear message. Without good planning, the writing of the material usually requires more time to complete and revise, which will likely render your document less effective.

2. Use the Active Voice

Government documents are plagued with the use of the passive voice. Authors of staff reports and memos tend to back into their message and end up burying the important information at the end. The passive voice also uses more words than necessary. Instead, use the active voice which is more direct and dynamic. The best way to hold a reader’s attention is by being specific, brief, and concrete. Documents and publications have a far better chance of communicating and achieving their purpose with clear writing, good organization, and valuable information working together. Read more about the [active voice](#).

3. Avoid Jargon

Use words that would be suitable for explaining the issue to the average reader. Don’t talk down to your audience but remember they don’t have the familiarity with the subject that you do. Jargon, acronyms, and long and complex words often confuse and obscure the point. Remember that good communication is part of the City’s efforts toward transparency. But transparency without simplicity is not transparency. The use of plain, straightforward, jargon-free language will be more likely to meet the needs of these diverse audiences successfully.

4. Watch Your Tone

Voice and tone go hand in hand. Your tone should always be professional, and alternate between friendly and approachable depending on what you are writing. Clear, simple, and professional writing is always the best approach. Learn more about [tone](#).

5. Do Your Research

The value of the City’s documents is based on their accuracy and completeness. Check your data and references, and don’t make assumptions. Factual errors, including misspelled names, wrong telephone numbers, and incorrect dates and figures, diminish the level of confidence the reader has in the document and the City’s efforts in general.

6. Proofread and Rewrite

This is the fundamental rule for good writing. Read your drafts carefully, aloud if possible, and don't hesitate to revise them. Professional writers rewrite their material mercilessly. To assure that you have adequate time to review and revise your writing, make sure your preparation schedule deliberately includes it. It always takes more time to correct mistakes, repair clumsy writing, and recover from their effects after the fact than it does to catch them early and fix them. Some brief [self-editing tips](#).

7. Take Responsibility

Whether or not your name will appear on the material you write, take responsibility as if it will be there. Take pride in the authorship of quality material.

“When something can be read without great effort,
great effort has gone into its writing.”

-Enrique Jardiel Poncela

Inclusive Language

The City understands the importance of language that is inclusive, accessible, and respectful.

See the AP Stylebook and [18F Inclusive Language](#) for more specifics, including how to reference nationality, race, ethnicity, mental illness, and more.

Ability and Disability

Only reference a person's disability when it is relevant to what you're writing. If you must mention it, always emphasize the person before the disability. When writing about a person with disabilities, don't use the words *suffer*, *victim*, or *handicapped*.

Correct

She has a disability.
people with autism
wheelchair user

Incorrect

She is disabled.
autistic people
wheelchair-bound

Age

Avoid referring to someone's age unless it's relevant to what you're writing about (for example, when referring to benefits that are available to people of certain ages).

Gender-neutral

Use neutral terms instead of gendered alternatives:

Correct

councilmember
firefighter
people, humanity
to staff, to run, to operate
workforce, employees

Incorrect

councilwoman, councilman
fireman
mankind
to man
manpower

Gender and Sexuality

Use *different sex* instead of *opposite sex* as this recognizes gender as a spectrum, not binary.

Use *spouse* or *partner* instead of *husband* or *wife*.

Use *parent* instead of *mother* or *father*.

They and *theirs* may be used as singular pronouns.

Correct

Residents should take out
their garbage.

Incorrect

A resident should take out
his or her garbage.

Punctuation and Symbols

Punctuation is just as important as the words you choose to use. Punctuation changes the pace of reading, offers sentence variety, and most importantly, clarifies meaning.

Ampersand (&)

Use only when part of a formal name: *AT&T*, *Ben & Jerry's*. Not a replacement for “and.”

Exclamation Point (!)

Use sparingly. Overuse defeats the purpose of using them and could make a reader feel like you are yelling at them. Remember, watch your tone.

Hyphen (-)

The fewer hyphens the better. Hyphens are joiners. Use them to avoid ambiguity or to form a single idea from two or more words: *self-driving car*, *four-year-old child*, *small-business owner*.

Hyphens should not be used to replace “to” or “through” in times, dates, and years.

Oxford Comma, Serial Comma

The last comma in a list, which goes before conjunctions such as “and” or “or.” Always use.

Correct

I love my parents, Beyoncé, and Michael Bublé.

Incorrect

I love my parents, Beyoncé and Michael Bublé.
(Reads as if you are the child of two pop stars.)

Period (.)

Use one space after a period. Period.

Semicolon (;)

Best to avoid it. Use a period instead.

Slash (/)

Should never be used as a replacement for “and” or “or.”

Quotation Marks (“ ”)

The period and comma always go within the quotation marks. The dash, semicolon, colon, question mark, and exclamation point go within the quotation marks when they apply to the quoted matter only. They go outside when they apply to the whole sentence: *Did the dog bark every time he heard Jim say “I’m bringing dinner”?*

Correct

“I love Cupertino,” she said.
“I love Cupertino.”

Incorrect

“I love Cupertino, she said.”
“I love Cupertino”.

Spelling and Grammar

a, an

Use the article **a** before consonant sounds: *a historic event, a one-year term* (sounds as if it begins with a “w”), *a united stand* (sounds like “you”).

Use the article **an** before vowel sounds: *an energy crisis, an honorable person* (the “h” is silent), *an NBA record, an 1890s celebration*.

acronym, initialism

Always spell out the name of an agency or organization on first reference. The name can be shortened on second reference.

First reference

Silicon Valley Clean Energy

Association of Bay Area Governments

Valley Transportation Authority

Second Reference

SVCE

ABAG

VTA

addresses

Always spell out with or without a number: *10300 Torre Avenue, McClellan Road, Stevens Creek Boulevard*. Lowercase and spell out when used with more than one street name: *Torre and Rodrigues avenues*.

Always use figures for an address number: *9 Morningside Circle*. Spell out and capitalize **First** through **Ninth** when used as street names. Use figures with two letters for **10th** and above: *7 Fifth Avenue, 100 21st Street*.

adopt, approve, enact, pass

Amendments, ordinances, resolutions, and rules are **adopted** or **approved**.

Bills are **passed**. Laws are **enacted**.

a.m., p.m.

Lowercase, with periods, and space after the number. Avoid redundant: *10 a.m. this morning*.

Note: when ending a sentence with **a.m.** or **p.m.**, the period following the “m” also signifies the end of the sentence.

Spell out “to” or “through” when mentioning a timeframe in a sentence: *8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.*

Use **noon** to indicate 12 p.m. Use **midnight** to indicate 12 a.m.

among, between

Between introduces two items, and **among** introduces more than two: *The funds were divided among the three projects. Project responsibilities will be split between two employees*.

biannual, biennial

Biannual means twice a year and is a synonym for the word semiannual. **Biennial** means every two years. **Semiannual** may be more clear than **biannual** in some contexts.

bimonthly

Every two months: *My bimonthly magazine subscription gives me six issues a year.*

Semimonthly means twice a month: *Items of Interest is published semimonthly in the first and third weeks of the month.*

biweekly

Every two weeks: *We are paid biweekly, 26 times a year.*

cancel, canceled, canceling, cancellation

The forms of **cancel** in American English are typically *canceled* and *canceling*. *Cancellation* is the usual spelling in American and British English.

city, city of

Capitalize **city** as part of a proper name: *City of Cupertino, New York City.*

Lowercase elsewhere: *a California city.*

Capitalize **city** on second reference to the City of Cupertino: *The City has 200 employees.*

Always capitalize Cupertino. Use **City of Cupertino** and **the City** in reference to the government agency. Never use in reference to the community or geographic city: *Cupertino has excellent schools.*

city council

Capitalize when part of a proper name, or specifically referring to the City of Cupertino: *The Cupertino City Council.* Capitalize on second reference when referring to the Cupertino City Council: *The City Council voted unanimously.*

Retain capitalization if the reference is to a specific council but the context does not require the city name. Lowercase in other uses: *the council, a city council.* Lowercase for plural references: *the Cupertino, Saratoga, and Sunnyvale city councils.*

city hall

Capitalize with the name of a city, or without the name of a city if the reference is specific: *Cupertino City Hall, City Hall.* Lowercase plural uses: *the Cupertino and Santa Clara city halls.* Lowercase generic uses: *You can't fight city hall.*

citywide, countywide

One word. Use lowercase when referring to the larger Cupertino community: *A citywide trend in unemployment rates has emerged.* Use uppercase when referring to the City of Cupertino: *The Cupertino City Council approved a new Citywide policy.*

citizen, resident

A **citizen** is a person who has acquired the full civil rights of a nation or community. To avoid confusion, use **resident**, not **citizen**, in reference to people who live in cities.

commission

Capitalize as a proper name: *Planning Commission*. Lowercase plural uses: *The Parks and Recreation and Library commissions*.

committee

Do not abbreviate. Capitalize when part of a formal name: *Audit Committee*.

councilmember, commissioner

One word. Upper case when used as a title: *Councilmember Catherine Cupertino*. Lowercase when used collectively: *Cupertino councilmembers are elected every four years*.

county

Capitalize when an integral part of a proper name: *Santa Clara County, Alameda County*. Capitalize the full names of county governmental units: *the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, the Alameda County Department of Social Services*.

Retain capitalization for the name of a county body if the proper noun is not needed in the context. Lowercase the word county if it is used to distinguish an agency from state or federal counterparts: *the Board of Supervisors, the county Board of Supervisors, the Department of Social Services, the county Department of Social Services*. Lowercase the board, the department, etc. whenever they stand alone.

dates

Spell out all months. Do not use “th,” “nd,” “st,” or “rd” after a date, e.g., 10th, 22nd.

December 2020 was a cold month.

January 4, 2020 was the coldest day of the year.

July, August, and September make up the first quarter of the fiscal year.

days of the week

Capitalize days of the week and do not abbreviate: *The Cupertino City Council meeting will be held on Tuesday, November 3, 2020.*

department, division, office

Capitalize when part of a proper name: *The Community Development Department, the GIS Division, the City Clerk’s Office*.

Retain capitalization on second reference to the same department: *The Public Works Department was called out to a fallen tree in the road. The Department responded quickly.*

director

Capitalize when used as a formal title before a name: *Carl Cupertino, Director of Administrative Services*. Uppercase on second reference when referring to a specific person: *the Director*. Do not capitalize in job descriptions, generic usage, or informal designations: *the directors on the committee*.

email

One word. Lowercase with no hyphen.

fiscal year

Spell out for first reference: *It is set for Fiscal Year 2020-2021*. Use of initials acceptable for second reference: *FY 20-21*.

full time, full-time, part time, part-time

Hyphenate when used as an adjective phrase: *He was a part-time employee. He works full time*.

general plan, general fund

Capitalize only when accompanied by city name or referring to specific title or item: *The Cupertino General Plan was recently updated. The City's General Fund is threatened by the recession*.

Lowercase for generic use: *The general funds of cities support basic services. The state requires every city to have a general plan*.

internet, intranet

Lowercase.

mayor, vice mayor

Upper case when used as a title: *Mayor Carla Cupertino, Vice Mayor Cooper Cupertino*.

Uppercase on second reference when referring to a specific person: *the Mayor*. Lowercase when used in general terms: *The West Valley mayors sent a letter to the state*.

numbers

Spell out numbers under 10. Use digits for 10 and above. Spell out at the beginning of a sentence.

The child turned five years old yesterday. Thirty-five people attended the meeting. The street was flooded with 11 inches of water.

over

It generally refers to spatial relationships: *The plane flew over the city*.

Avoid using with numerals: *The City paid more than \$5,000 for the contract service*.

percent, percentage

Use the % sign when paired with a numeral (with no space): 4.7%, 0.3%. Spell out the percent when used at the beginning of a sentence but try to avoid this construction. Use **percentage** when not paired with a number: *The percentage of people disagreeing is small.*

seasons

Use lowercase for spring, summer, fall, winter and derivatives such as springtime unless part of a formal name: *Summer Winds Nursery, Winter Olympics.*

setup, set up

Setup (one word) is a noun: *It can take a while to learn the setup of the office's filing system.*

Set up (two words) is a verb: *The Infrastructure Division will set up the new employee's computer.* **Set-up** is not a recognized word in American English and should not be used.

staff

Lowercase and singular: *Staff is meeting to set its agenda.* In external documents, avoid using **staff** and instead use **City of Cupertino** or a program name: *The IT Department is overseeing updates to the phone system.*

web addresses

Web addresses should not include “www” if the link will work without it (always check to be sure). Always lowercase. Avoid using long and obscure web addresses.

Correct

For more information, visit
cupertino.org/lehigh

To view upcoming meetings,
visit cupertino.org/calendar

Incorrect

For more information, visit
www.cupertino.org/lehigh

To view upcoming meetings,
visit cupertino.org/visitors/calendar-of-
events

webpage, website

One word. Lowercase.

years

When a phrase refers to a month and day within the current year, do not include the year: *The meeting is scheduled for October 6.*