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WEB CONTENT: Writing Guidelines

This document is a basic guide to writing for the Lewis & Clark website. Where necessary, specific content recommendations for individual site pages or sections will be provided in a separate document.

Much of the writing on the current Lewis & Clark site is quite good—in both style and subject matter. Though much of the current content will migrate unchanged to the new site, some editing and new writing will bring the site in line with communications goals and best practices. This document sets out a plan for that process.

Once the site content we've marked for edits/rewrites is addressed, we recommend reviewing and potentially revising the text on the "straight migration" pages for consistency. From the moment writing/editing begins through the ongoing maintenance of site content, attention must be paid to presenting a consistent voice, storyline, and structure.

In developing new writing or editing current content, we hope to maintain consistency with the best writing on the current site, as well as incorporate the additional recommendations listed below.

Writing for Lewis & Clark

There should be general consistency of style across all externally focused areas of the Lewis & Clark site. The tone of top-level text should be smart, knowing, engaging, straightforward, and judiciously witty. Getting across that this is a rigorous academic environment is important. The text should evoke Lewis & Clark's institutional values and guide readers around the site.

Content for each of the three schools should have a slightly different tone that reflects their different audiences. Many of the law school and grad school prospective students are working adults seeking quick access to program, cost, and application information. While it is important to quickly direct them to the basic transactional information, we should always work to expose them, even if very briefly, to the unique characteristics and values of Lewis & Clark. The law school's tone should be straightforward and businesslike; the grad school's should also be straightforward but a bit more warm and welcoming; and the undergraduate college's should be geared a bit more toward a younger audience—but without alienating parents, another important audience.

In general, we recommend using first-person narratives as much as possible. Prospective students are looking for real and unfiltered content. Blogs, good photography with captions, and video can help to give this impression. In addition, parts of the site that are managed directly by faculty or students (such as profile pages or sites for student groups) ought to be as easily accessed as possible.

It is certainly true that content doesn't have to be literally unfiltered to have this impact. But we should be careful not to overmanage first person narratives, as today's audience is sensitive to packaged and manufactured content. The approach taken by Lewis & Clark's admissions offices with its bloggers is, we think, right on the money: bloggers are expected to write content that reads well and reflects positively on Lewis & Clark, but their posts aren't edited.

Site Goals

Though they will not be relevant for every page, it is important to keep in mind the new site's overarching goals:

1. To create a *virtual common ground* and build a sense of community—both within each school and across all three schools—as well as creating greater synergy.
2. To better serve and connect with *alumni*.
3. To convey *key institutional messages* (see below) in authentic ways

Key Messages

Through the stories, themes, selection of examples, and general choice of words, readers should come away associating Lewis & Clark with some of its key characteristics.

The following positioning elements, developed in a strategic communications planning effort in 2006, are designed to set Lewis & Clark apart from similarly situated institutions of higher education and lay the foundation for all communication strategies and messaging. These concepts resonate with Lewis & Clark's audiences and ought to be reinforced in the site's writing wherever possible. They are all wrapped up in a new content theme, *Uncommon Journeys*, to be discussed in more detail later. This platform was developed by Metropolitan Group in November 2006.

1. **Academic leadership.**

Lewis & Clark has innovative programs and is producing cutting-edge scholarship. The site should portray a 21st-century version of exploration by highlighting pioneering experiences in the scientific and intellectual sense. Collaborative research between students and faculty is one example. Lewis & Clark's leadership encourages the highlighting of scholarly activities of national significance on the site.

2. **In and of Portland**

Portland and Lewis & Clark share a similarly progressive and innovative ethos. Additionally, Portland is one of the most positively viewed cities in the United States. Many undergrads come to Lewis & Clark because of Portland's urban environment, cultural scene, and outdoor activities.

Because Lewis & Clark is located on a hill in a residential neighborhood six miles from downtown, it is sometimes perceived as isolated from the city. Therefore it is important to emphasize Lewis & Clark's accessibility to and connections with the heart of the city.

In practical usage, consider occasionally using “to Portland” as a synonym for “to Lewis & Clark,” in contexts where it makes sense. And consider using “here in Portland” instead of simply “in Portland.” But again, do this only where it makes sense.

3. Global and local engagement

Lewis & Clark is a place where students and faculty see themselves as active citizens, feel a sense of responsibility to the world, and go out and do something about it. Lewis & Clark’s range of study abroad programs, combined with the fact that most undergraduates travel abroad or engage in area studies during her education, makes an emphasis on global engagement not only desirable but practical. Additionally, Lewis & Clark recruits a significant number of international students and boast one of the strongest programs for Third Culture Kids—American citizens who have grown up abroad.

The site should provide compelling stories about this type of work within the context of the Lewis & Clark education. The strong CAS international studies program is obviously an important part of Lewis & Clark’s global reach, but there are many other examples at CAS as well as Law and Grad. When writing feature stories about faculty, students, and alumni, those aspects of their experiences that touch other parts of the world ought to be highlighted.

Lewis & Clark is also deeply engaged with and committed to the City of Portland, the region, and Oregon. The law school and graduate school train the area’s future lawyers, teachers, administrators, and counselors. Students, faculty, and staff live and work and perform community service throughout the area. Lewis & Clark’s engagement with the world spreads outward from Portland.

Institutional Attributes

Lewis & Clark’s three schools share some common attributes that ought to be reinforced where possible throughout the site:

- There’s an emphasis on the *liberal arts approach*. Even the Law School has been referred to as a “liberal arts college version of a law school.”
- Schools take a *hands on, personalized approach to learning*, where students are viewed as collaborators, not as passive receivers of knowledge.
- Faculty, students, staff care about the *common good*, share a sense of *social justice*, and are *service-oriented*.
- There is a general focus on *environmentalism* and *sustainability*.
- Students are multidimensional and multidisciplinary and are engaged learners.

The Audience

The institutional homepage (www.lclark.edu) should be a news, events, and feature story vehicle that continually communicates key institutional messaging in a “showing” rather than “telling” way. It should serve as the gateway for all audiences, with particular attention paid to prospective students.

In general, the primary audience for the top level of each school site is external: prospective students, parents (for CAS), peer institutions, and the general public. However, the site should not ignore the needs of students, faculty, and staff, who should be able to access resources and information easily. Tools such as My LC will facilitate their day-to-day use of the site. Additionally, content deeper in the site should serve the needs of the internal audience while giving prospects a glimpse into the Lewis & Clark world.

Alumni are also very important, and the site should be used to begin to build a stronger alumni community. Much of this should be accomplished through alumni-specific services. But news stories and general site content can connect (or reconnect) this audience as well. Finding ways to channel content about the day-to-day lives of students and the activities of professors can remind alumni of their time at Lewis & Clark and keep them up-to-date on the work of their favorite professors, etc. Static page content should also include specific, real references and examples and, of course, be kept up-to-date.

Section homepages (About Us, Academics, Admissions)

Each section homepage should include approximately two short opening paragraphs of text that, together, tell the story of Lewis & Clark, and individually introduce that content area and highlight key pages within each section. The first paragraph should be primarily “marketing”-style content, a well-written introduction to that section’s concerns. The second should include links to the various site pages of importance, in paragraph form. (Most of these links will be redundant to the section’s navigation, but will give it more context and make information more accessible.) It will be important to keep these short, so they can be read quickly and easily.

Uncommon Journeys

The messaging statement “Uncommon Journeys” will be used as a general theme for a set of feature stories that illustrate the kinds of people, activities, and outcomes we associate with Lewis & Clark. Stories along this theme will be presented on the homepage and be utilized throughout the site more deeply as they’re generated.

Many individuals in the Lewis & Clark community have stories that can be told as a journey, with Lewis & Clark being a transformational destination. Perhaps a student came from a challenging background to achieve academic excellence at Lewis & Clark; another student may have had life-changing experiences during overseas study. An alum may have taken a sharp turn in his career path after college, leading him somewhere he didn’t

expect but that has turned out to be a revelation. A faculty member may have journeyed through the Ivy League, or through fieldwork in Brazil, before arriving here.

Uncommon Journeys should not always be about the most famous, most accomplished, most lauded individuals. We are looking for a balance between promoting Lewis & Clark's tradition of excellence in all areas of human endeavor— academic, athletic, social— and the everyday experiences of students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Above all we are looking for true stories about real human beings, that prospective students, alumni, donors, and the current Lewis & Clark community can identify with and admire. Together these stories will present a well-rounded glimpse into the lives of real Lewis & Clark people, showing us as we are, but in our best light.

Style and Tone

If there is one word that describes the ideal style and tone of our copywriting efforts for the new Lewis & Clark site, it's *friendly*.

Without being cutesy or overly casual, we should always seek to project a tone of openness and informality, letting the prospects, students, parents, faculty, staff, and alumni who read the Lewis & Clark site's pages know that we're happy they're here. Also, clarity is extremely important; we want our audience to understand the information without difficulty.

The following represent some of our general recommendations for higher education writing in particular:

1. **Be concise.**

Keep word counts low, especially on top-level pages that should be telling the story rather than conveying lots of detailed information. Most basic informational pages ought to be no longer than **400-500 words**.

Some pages deeper in the site may need to convey lots of detailed information, such as policies and procedures related to admissions or financial aid. But even pages like these should not exceed **800-900 words**, with very few exceptions. If a page's content cannot be kept under this limit, it might be a good candidate for becoming a downloadable, printable PDF document.

2. **Use an opening paragraph to summarize page content.**

Flipping through the site, any visitor should be able to quickly absorb the most important information on the page to determine whether she needs to take the time to read the entire page.

On primary public-facing pages (that is, all pages one click away from the home page, as well as main pages of noteworthy administrative or departmental sites), *the text should be written specifically with a first-time visitor in mind*. Opening paragraphs of other pages can simply summarize and/or contextualize the page's content. We typically set the opening paragraph in large font to draw attention to it and make it easy to read.

When an entire site is constructed with concise, thoughtful opening paragraphs, a visitor can browse the site quickly and get a well-rounded accurate sense of the whole institution's character. This helps increase visitor interest and attachment.

3. **Be conversational**, but not too clever.

The use of contractions (*it's, we're, you'll, etc.*) is encouraged. Some of the rules that are applied to formal writing don't apply as strictly to Web writing. For example, if the natural rhythm of a sentence is best suited by ending it with a preposition, so be it.

One of the best ways to check the style of Web writing is to read it to yourself out loud. If it sounds natural, it's likely to be good.

4. **Use bulleted lists** to quickly convey information, but don't overuse them as this detracts from their effectiveness.

In general, on most basic content pages of a website, there shouldn't be more than one or two bulleted or numbered lists. If you have a page that is burdened with lots of lists, you may want to consider alternative ways of presenting that content. (This section of this document, in which numbered points are followed by explanatory paragraphs, is one possible example.)

5. **Keep paragraphs short.**

A good paragraph should be no more than 100-120 words. Keeping paragraph length under control makes it easier for readers to keep track of a page of content. Web writing generally benefits from shorter paragraphs than are typically used in newspaper or magazine writing. Because reading a computer screen is more physically demanding than reading newsprint, it is good practice to give a reader more frequent chances to pause or look away briefly.

6. **Make use of meaningful subheadings** to guide a reader through the page content.

Along with short paragraphs, breaking up a page with subheadings allows a Web reader to quickly determine what information is most important for her needs. This is a good general principle for all content pages of a site; for long, policies-and-procedures-type pages, it's absolutely essential.

As a general rule, there ought to be a subheading for every 200-300 words of Web content. And top-level pages often benefit from a much more widespread use of headings

and subheadings. Many good top-level pages pair small subheadings with short paragraphs to give a visitor a very clear idea of what's to be found throughout that section of the site.

“Overuse white space” is a good rule of thumb for Web writing. Much more than in a newspaper, readers need pages that aren't stuffed with content. Short paragraphs and frequent subheadings give users more room to read.

7. Use “you” and “we.”

An education of the caliber offered by Lewis & Clark is a collaborative experience; therefore it makes sense for the website's copy to reflect this. Instead of referring to “the prospective student,” let's make an effort to address her directly. Instead of saying “financial aid officers,” let's say “we.” Of course there are contexts where this kind of treatment may not be appropriate. But as a general rule, welcoming Web text invites a second-person reader to become part of a first-person-plural community.

Avoid an “us vs. them” kind of tone, where the “we” perhaps represents admissions staff or other administrators. In some cases, the “narrator” ought to be the student body itself, with the “we” representing the students in general.

Grammar and Usage

For standards on grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage, Lewis & Clark's official print and Web style guide can be found here:

<http://www.lclark.edu/dept/pubcom/styleguide.html>

The one exception to these rules is that we will be referring to Lewis & Clark as LC when referencing the section My LC—a customizable area of the site for internal and external users to create their own homepage with links, news and events feeds, etc. This exception is motivated by the ubiquitous use of LC in conversation among students and alumni. As this section of the site is personalized with custom content, the vernacular approach to the school's abbreviation is justified.