Maryland Municipal League (MML) Style Guide: Writing, Grammar and Formatting Styles

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Grammar and Writing Style Guide Standard for MML: General Style/Positioning

MML's writing, grammar and formatting style generally follows the Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual. A separate MML Style/Brand Guide provides information on logo usage, colors, fonts and images.

Following are some general guidelines:

Abbreviations/Acronyms: Generally, it's best to avoid abbreviating any word which most readers may not recognize.
- Except in the case of direct quotations, Mr., Ms., Mrs., Dr. and other titles may be abbreviated.
- Co. or Cos. may be used when at the end of a specific company name.
- Jr. or Sr. may be used after an individual's name.
- Abbreviate a.m., p.m. and no. when used with specific times/numbers, ex. Room No. 206.
- Abbreviate Ave., Blvd., and St., when used with numbered addresses. Never abbreviate road.
- Abbreviate state names except Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah when used in conjunction with an address or a city, separated by a comma. Don't abbreviate when standing alone in text.
- Only use an acronym when it would be understood by most readers, ex. CIA, FBI. In most cases, spell out organization names once in text with the acronym in parentheses at the end, then subsequently, use the acronym, ex. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Bulleted Lists: The above is an example of using a bulleted list, however, it isn't usually necessary to use full sentences or punctuation at the end of each item. The context should define whether or not the item list should begin with a capital letter, whether an introductory sentence is needed and any necessary punctuation.

Capitalization: Generally, avoid unnecessary capitalization. Capitalize the following:
- proper nouns like people, places, corporate entities (see MML specifics below)
- proper names (John, Mary) and short versions of proper names ex. the Derby for Kentucky Derby
- titles (see MML specifics)
- the principal words in titles for movies, books, plays, poems, songs, magazine and newspaper names, etc.
- the, an, a, and other words of less than four letters only if the first or last word of a title
- first word that stands for a sentence ex., The man sat
- derivatives from proper names, ex. Christianity, American, French but not french fries or pasteurized

Specific to MML Capitalization:

City and Town: Capitalize when part of a city name (Kansas City, West Palm Beach) but lowercase elsewhere (a Maryland city, city government, cities in Maryland). When referencing even a specific city, ex. Annapolis is the

Capitol of Maryland. The City is southeast of Baltimore. The City's government is a strong mayor municipality. The same is for town.

City or Town Council: Capitalize when part of a specific city council (Baltimore City Council) but not in general use (the city councils…).

Legislative Titles: Use Sen., Sens., Rep., Reps. as formal titles with a list of names. Spell out and capitalize before a specific name. Spell out and use lowercase in other uses (MML visited state senators and representatives). Spell out other titles and use lowercase for other uses not with a specific name (assemblyman/woman, city councilor, delegate). Capitalize Legislature when in reference to the state of Maryland or other states. Use lowercase when referenced generically (No legislature approved the amendment).

Logo: The colors for the MML logo are as follows: Hex# for the red is #FE0116
Hex# for the yellow : #FDD86B
Of course, the black is black.

Official Titles: In general, capitalize when used with an individual's name (Mayor Gavin Buckley) and use lowercase when not with a name (the town's mayor, the group of mayors) or when set off by commas (the mayor, Gavin Buckley, made the decision to run in April).

Font: Per the MML Style/Brand Guide, we use Arial 11 point font. Copy is flush left and paragraphs are <u>not</u> indented. This is perceived as one of the more modern font styles and works well both online (computer and smartphones) and in print.

Graphics: MML encourages the use of images and graphics, adhering to the "a picture paints a thousand words" idiom. Advertising space file size, format and other specifications are detailed in the MML Media Kit.

- Photos being used on the website - the best file format are JPG, with a resolution of 72 dpi and in RGB.

- Photos for *Municipal Maryland* magazine - the resolution should be 300 dpi, high resolution JPG or TIFF files or in CMYK. Make sure any photos LOOK like they are Maryland. Images from the web (72 dpi) cannot be used.

- Website logos, illustrations, icons, etc. should be PNGs at 72 dpi and in RGB for web.

- Print logos, illustration, etc. should be vectors (eps file format).

Line Spacing: MML uses single spacing within articles and other documents with double spacing between paragraphs. Use single spacing following bolded, underline paragraph/subject headings. Double space after titles.

Magazine Article Length: Articles for Municipal Maryland should generally be between 750 to 1,500 words.

Newsletter Article Length: It is generally recommended for email newsletters that authors use between 500 - 600 words, depending upon the complexity and importance of the subject matter.

Page Layout Detail: MML uses standard margins in everyday Word documents and increased margins when possible in printed materials.

Punctuation:
- **ampersand** – use only if it is part of a company name, ex. AT&T
- **apostrophe**
    - use with s in possessives, ex. the alumni's funding; quasi possessives, ex. your money's worth and contractions, ex. you're and for omitted letters (ne'er-do-well) or omitted numbers ('20s)
    - don't use with possessive pronouns (your) or descriptive names (Diners Club) or plurals of numbers
- **colon** – goes outside quotation marks. Use at the end of a sentence to introduce lists, texts, dialogue, Q&A and capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or start of a complete sentence
- **comma** – use to separate a series of items, but not before and or other conjunctions unless the series is complex. Use also with non-essential clauses or phrases, introductory clauses and phrases, before a conjunction, when introducing direct quotes and before attribution (unless statement ends with a question mark or exclamation point. Also use to separate similar words and with hometowns and ages, ex. Mary Richards, 36, of Minneapolis, MN.
- **dash** – use when a phrase that otherwise would be set off by commas contains a series of words that require commas to separate, to denote an emphatic pause, with attributions and datelines
- **ellipsis (….)** – use to denote deletion of words in quotes, texts or documents or to indicate hesitation. In most cases, try to avoid using.
- **exclamation point** – to express a high degree to surprise or strong emotion. Try not to use!
- **hyphen** – use when the reader wouldn't be clear if it weren't used, ex. small-businessmen. Use also when a two or more-word modifier precedes a noun, ex. full-time job. Don't use when the modifier is used after a noun in most cases, ex. The team scored in the first quarter. Use to separate numbers, ex. fifty-five and 10- to 20-year sentence.
- **parentheses** – interrupt the reader. Try to avoid.
- **periods** – use at the end of a sentence, after a statement that is more of a suggestion, after initials and enumerations in a list summary. Use one space after a period as it is easier for the reader.
- **question mark** – use at the end of a direct question and inside or outside of quotation marks, depending on the context
- **quotation marks** – use for direct quotes. Close the quote only when the quotation paragraphs end but use open quotation marks for every paragraph containing a quote. Use for each person's words no matter how brief, but not when formatting as Q & A. You can also use quotation marks to denote irony, nicknames, composition titles and unfamiliar terms.
- **Semicolon** – use to indicate a greater separation of thought and information than a comma would convey (basically with longer listings of items ex. next of kin includes…) or to link two or more independent clauses, ex. the package was due last week; it arrived this morning. Place outside quotation marks.

Dates: Generally, October 23, 2018 is the best format for clarity.

Times: Acceptable format for lists and for text copy is: 3pm – 4pm.

Phone Numbers: Use parenthesis around the area code and a hyphen between the first three and last four numbers, ex. (301) 464-7273.

Voice: the use of active voice is encouraged whenever possible. Some examples include:
- o   Be sure to find your hotel in early March before some properties will sell out.
- o   Run to the workshop of your choice to be sure and get a seat.
- o   You'll get more out of the sessions if you arrive on time and minimize all distractions.

Writing Style: Clarity and brevity are encouraged in all communication. Make Ernest Hemingway your author-example and use short, clear sentences: subject, verb, object. MML's style is professional and businesslike, but also fun at times. We are advocates for Maryland's municipalities and stress our passion for municipal government in every communication opportunity. MML tries to express complex information and ideas in the clearest and simplest way possible.

Some General Writing Tips: Even *The Economist* references George Orwell's "Six Elementary Rules:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

To elaborate:

- Write like you would tell a story or talk with a colleague, not like you're drafting a new law.
- Be concise. People are busy. There is a lot of competition for your readers' attention. Get their attention and get to the point.
- Think like your reader. Who are they? What are their main interests? What do THEY think they need to know? How do they want to be addressed?
- Avoid acronyms and insider language and references. Not every reader knows what you know.

The *Style Guide* is an effort by current staff to help MML's communications "speak with one voice" by using the same look and style consistently. Guidelines are based on what is current and acceptable in most professional publications, however, your editorial team acknowledges that there are differences of opinion on many of the style choices. What's most important is consistency – people should know a piece is from MML in the first few sentences they read of anything we send out whether it's an E-Bulletin, memo, magazine or email. That's the goal!