



SNHU Academics Style Guide

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Introduction

This style guide outlines the usage standards for the learner-facing content at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU).

The core SNHU style is based on *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Most citation styles are based on the **seventh edition** of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA manual). In certain disciplines, other styles (such as MLA) may be used for citations.

For questions about specific terms, consult [Merriam-Webster](#).

Style Guide

This section contains general guidelines for writing or editing learner-facing material.

Any changes to SNHU style conventions (exceptions or additions) must be approved by the editorial team and relevant stakeholders in Academics leadership.

All approved exceptions must be documented in this guide. Do not create course- or program-specific style sheets.

Accessibility

Basics

Editors are expected to verify that all course materials, including instructor-facing documents, meet accessibility standards. While there are some things editors can fix themselves, they should rely on the ID to address what's beyond the scope of an editorial review. For example, editors may pick up on missing alt text, but it should fall to the ID to coordinate the creation of that alt text.

Accessibility duties for editors include checking images for alt text, using proper document structure/headings, formatting tables properly, and so on.

Alternative Documents

For accessibility purposes, alternatives must be provided for some resources. The following cases are common, but there may be other resources that would require alternative versions:

- Videos
- External images that lack useful alt text
- Internal infographics that are hard for screen readers to handle

The most common example of an alternative document is a text-only version of an image or infographic. Ideally, text-only versions should be rendered as **Microsoft Word documents for students to access**. If there's a need to use PDFs (for example, a specific request), that's okay, but the documents should adhere to the OAC's guidelines for creating accessible PDF documents.

Text-only documents created by SNHU should include the [SNHU logo](#) in the header. Make sure the image has this alt text: "SNHU logo." If, however, you're using an existing PDF (either from SNHU or an external source), there's no need to use the logo.

The language provided may be used as is, or it may be adapted to fit a particular case. The important thing is that the **resource title** should be linked (not just *here*, *transcript*, or other generic terms). Note that you should replace the angle-bracketed text with the real title; the angle brackets themselves should **not** be included in the learner-facing material.

Video transcript:

A video transcript is available: [Transcript for <Title of Video>](#).

Text-only alternative for a single image in a course:

A text-only version is available: [<Title of Resource> Text-Only Version](#).

Text-only alternative for an image or images in a resource:

A text-only version of the image in this resource is available: [<Title of Resource> Text-Only Version](#).

Text-only versions of the images in this resource are available: [<Title of Resource> Text-Only Versions](#).

Audio described video:

An audio described version of this video is available: [<Title of Video>](#).

Note the following:

- The text-only document titles contain the resource title or a shortened form of it.
- No quotation marks are used for resource titles included in text-only document titles.
- Even though the *file* name may contain the course code, the title mentioned in the language should **not include the course code**.
- The language should be placed at the **very end of the description** (after any guiding questions).
- If there are multiple alternative versions of a resource (for example, a transcript and an audio described version), list each as its own paragraph below the description. For extreme situations (for example, many resources with several alternate documents each), IDs should consult with an editor to discuss other options (maybe using bulleted lists).

Consider these examples:

Reading: [Ratcheting Up the Pressure: High School Students and Standardized Testing](#)

This article explores techniques that educators can use to help their students deal with the stress of standardized testing. Consider the following as you read:

- How can teachers best address the anxieties of their students?
- How can you apply the methods in a real-life scenario?

Text-only versions of the images in this resource are available: [Ratcheting Up the Pressure Text-Only Versions](#).

Video: [Predict and Manage: Predictive Policing in the United States](#) (10:56)

This video explains the history of predictive policing. As you view the video, consider the following:

- Which technologies are most effective in urban environments?
- How should police departments in rural areas adapt their approach?

A video transcript is available: [Transcript for Predict and Manage](#).

An audio described version of this video is available: [Predict and Manage](#).

Citations

Basics

For quotations appearing in learner-facing material, editors and IDs must credit sources according to the citation method preferred by that program.

Most programs follow **APA style (seventh edition)**, which uses in-text citations and a reference section.

Use **MLA style** for the following programs (course codes):

- ENG
- GRA
- LIT
- MFA

Use **Chicago/Turabian style** for the following programs (course codes):

- HIS

The editorial group has access to hard copies of the APA, Chicago, and MLA guides, but you are encouraged to access the [Purdue OWL](#) website and the online version of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (available through the Shapiro Library).

For a summary of changes in the latest edition of the APA guide, refer to [Changes in the 7th Edition](#). IDs and editors should follow the guidelines below. (Note the exception to APA preferences.)

- **Do not** include the place of publication in citations.
- **Do not** include the words “Retrieved from” before a URL in citations unless a retrieval date is also needed. (See section 9.16 in the seventh-edition APA manual for guidance on when to use a retrieval date.)
- **Do not hyperlink** URLs in citations, contrary to APA recommendation. (The URLs should be included where relevant—just not hyperlinked.)

Special Considerations

Editors and IDs should keep the following in mind:

- **Crediting Sources of Information:** While the need to cite sources applies mainly to direct quotations, there may be cases where certain **types of information** need to be sourced, even if they’re not directly quoted—for example, statistical information or the views of a certain author.

According to Theresa Wilmington (2019), the most important aspect of leadership is empathy. This module examines that concept by . . .

References

Wilmington, T. (2019). *Leadership on the edge* . . .

- **When to Use Reference Sections:** Reference lists should be **included only for relatively long pieces** such as module overviews and supplementary resources created by SNHU. For shorter pieces (activity descriptions, discussion prompts, quiz feedback, and so on), do not include a reference section. In those cases, credit the source by including the **title and author** either in the main flow of the sentence or in parentheses. (You may also include URLs, but they should not be hyperlinked.) However you incorporate that information, it should be placed so that it credits the source without interfering with the flow of the assignment.

In *Leadership on the Edge*, Theresa Wilmington posits, “A leader who lacks empathy is not a leader.” In this assignment, you will explore this concept by . . .

Leadership cannot exist without empathy (*Leadership on the Edge*, Theresa Wilmington). In this assignment, you will explore this concept by . . .

According to Theresa Wilmington, “leadership cannot exist without empathy” (<http://www.unlinkedtitleofthesource.org>). In this assignment, you will explore this concept by . . .

When a reference section is used, it should appear at the **very end** of the overview or document, as it’s secondary information that shouldn’t interfere with the flow of the primary elements.

- **Title:** A reference section should be titled with the plural “References” even if there’s only one source in the section.
- **Exceptions:** Editors and IDs should conscientiously apply relevant citation styles, as learners often use SNHU citations as a model for formatting their own. However, at the editor’s discretion, some exceptions may be made—for example, unusual cases that aren’t addressed in the APA guide or cases where not all the information is available. Get as close as you can to the proper format without sinking too much production time or effort into it. That is, it’s more important to **give credit where credit is due** than it is to rigidly apply a style guideline.

For example, if the editor and ID have taken reasonable steps to ascertain full source information but still know only the author, title, and URL, that’s sufficient.

Management Enhancement Foundation. (n.d.). Honing your leadership skills.
<http://www.managementenhancementfound.org/leadership.htm>

- **URLs and DOIs:** For guidelines on using URLs and DOIs in citations, see sections 9.34–9.36 of the APA manual (seventh edition). However, note that SNHU does not use active hyperlinks for URLs or DOIs.

Personal Pronouns

First Person

First-person **singular** pronouns should never be used in course materials. (It would be confusing or distracting for students to see something like “I would suggest that you begin your project early.”) Exceptions may be made for scenarios that use fictitious characters. (For example: “John J. presents to the emergency room with this complaint: ‘I’ve been losing feeling in my legs at night sometimes.’”)

Contrary to previous practice, the use of first-person **plural** pronouns (*we, us*) is permissible in course material. While the editor should not make changes just to avoid first-person plural, a change may be made if there is some reason to do so (grammatical error, problematic inconsistency, and so on). Both of these examples are allowable.

In this module, we will examine the importance of the supply and demand theory.
This module will examine the importance of the supply and demand theory.

A first-person plural pronoun may be helpful to walk students through a complicated example, especially in math courses.

To solve $x + 2y = 145$, we must first . . .

Second Person

Any material directed toward the student (module descriptions, task prompts, overviews, etc.) should refrain from using *the student* or *students* and should use the second person (*you, your*) instead. Exceptions may be made to this guideline if the supervising ID and content editor feel the content demands a different treatment.

In this module, you will begin working on Project One.

Second person is also necessary with scenario-based examples.

A student comes to you, the assistant principal of the high school, and tells you that another student has a stolen item in her backpack . . .

Use second person for instructor-facing text:

If you feel students are struggling with this assignment, reach out to them.

Third Person

Editors and IDs should **avoid third-person pronouns that are restricted to a specific gender**. For example, avoid constructions like “An educator needs to be aware of her certification status” and “An educator needs to be aware of his or her certification status.”

Keep in mind that this pattern applies to nonspecific antecedents. If the person’s gender is known, it’s okay to use a gender-specific pronoun: “Einstein often lamented that the cosmological constant was his greatest blunder.”

Before opting for the singular *they* (described below), editors and IDs should try to find a convenient **alternative** such as changing the antecedent to a plural (to match the plural pronoun) or using gender-neutral language (*one, that person, that person’s*, and so on). See *Chicago* 5.255 for other workarounds.

Educators need to be aware of their certification status. They should make sure to attend workshops to stay current. They may find that . . .

or

Certification status should always be on the mind of an educator. Workshop attendance is one way to stay current. The educator may find that . . .

If there’s no simple way to recast the sentence, however, editors and IDs are encouraged to **freely use** third-person plural pronouns (*they, them, their, themselves*) in reference to singular antecedents.

Imagine a scenario in which you need to hire another employee and add them to your team. It is crucial that they have strong interpersonal skills and that they understand how to listen carefully to clients. Their negotiating skills must also be highly developed.

Note that even when a plural pronoun has a singular antecedent, the related verb is still plural in construction—for example, “A student says that **they have** no time to complete the assignment.”

Quizzes and Knowledge Checks

For quiz and knowledge check questions, IDs and editors should follow the guidelines in “Best Practices and Standards for Creating Quiz Items” [available to employees through an internal document directory]. The guidelines below are designed to complement those best practices by providing some specific style considerations.

Options

Follow these **basic treatments** in multiple-choice and multiple-select options:

- Use sentence case.
- Use ending punctuation only if the options are complete sentences.
- Indicate the correct answer (or answers) with highlighting. Do **not** insert an asterisk or any other text, as this could accidentally be copied into the student-facing item.

Note the correct usage in the following examples:

According to the textbook reading, which of the following is the most harmful effect of using conflicting source material? Select one.

- A. It could distract the student.
- B. It could make the student feel frustrated.
- C. **It could invalidate the student’s test results.**
- D. It could lower the student’s homework average.

According to the textbook reading, which of the following is the most harmful effect of using conflicting source material? Select one.

- A. Distracting the student
- B. Frustrating the student
- C. Invalidating the student's test results
- D. Lowering the student's homework average

Follow the **best practices** listed below.

- **Parallelism:** All options should be **parallel** in structure. For example, avoid mixing fragments with complete sentences, and don't use three adjectives and one noun.
- **Agreement Between Stem and Options:** All options should **match the logic of the stem**. For example, if the stem sets up the answer to be an adjective, don't use nouns for the options.
 - In some cases, it may be hard to find four options that can be placed into a single category. In such cases, you may need to **adjust the stem** so that it doesn't imply the options are all in the same category. For example, if three of the options are book titles but one of the answers has to be a magazine title, you could simplify the question to "Which of the following is . . ." (instead of "Which of the following books is . . .").
- **Good Distractors:** Use **plausible but indisputably incorrect distractors** (wrong answers). Consider this stem: "Which U.S. president was in office during the September 11 attacks?" *George W. Bush* is the key (correct answer), so good distractors might be *Bill Clinton* or *Barack Obama*. A bad distractor would be any obvious outlier that the student could eliminate without knowing the content. For example, while *George Washington* would certainly be an incorrect answer, it's so implausible that it wouldn't be a good distractor.

Student Feedback

The feedback feature may be used as a way to give students real-time guidance on the concept that's being tested. Feedback text will become visible to the student once they answer the question. The approach to feedback varies according to the needs of the type of assessment.

- For **knowledge checks**, the feedback may provide fairly comprehensive information to help the student understand the content. The feedback should be written by the SME and ID, but quotations are okay as long as the source is credited.
- For **graded quizzes** that allow students multiple attempts on each question, feedback **should not provide the answer**, as that would allow students to simply retake the quiz and get a perfect score based on that feedback. However, the feedback may give students hints on where to find the information for themselves.

For more information on this topic, refer to the required resources.

For any sources mentioned in student-facing feedback, there's **no need to use full citations**. If IDs need to give credit for a quote, it's sufficient to mention the title and author. IDs may record as much source information as necessary in the *internal* notes, but the student-facing text shouldn't contain full citations or a reference section.

Do not use hyperlinks in student feedback, as this could become a maintenance problem in the future. Likewise, referring to specific module resources (even unlinked) is discouraged in student feedback.

Standard Language

IDs and editors should adopt the language below.

- For any item that **depends on viewpoints** expressed in the assigned reading, introduce the item with a phrase such as “According to the textbook reading.” However, if the correct answer is a **universally recognized fact** (that is, true no matter which resource is used in the course), no such phrase is needed. Consider the following examples:

According to the textbook reading, where is the best place to sit during an interview?

According to the module resources, what should an officer do first during an arrest?

but

Which of the following subatomic particles has a negative charge?

Who was the first president of the United States?

- In **multiple-choice items**, include this direction after the question and before the options, but do not enclose it in parentheses:

Select one.

- In **multiple-select items**, include this direction after the question and before the options, but do not enclose it in parentheses:

Select all that apply.

Things to Avoid

Please keep the following in mind as you write or edit quiz questions:

- **Avoid open stems.** An open stem is one in which a sentence in the stem is completed by the options. This construction should be avoided because it can be difficult for students to parse, but it also conflicts with the style of using “Select one” or “Select all that apply” between the stem and options.
- **Avoid options like *none/all of the above, none/all of these, options A and C, and so on***, as this construction can compromise the student’s ability to answer the question. Also, options are generally randomized by the system, so it’s logistically problematic for an option to refer to the other options.
- **Avoid echoing** an important term from the stem in any single option, as it could unfairly influence the student’s response. For example, consider this stem: “According to the textbook reading, what is the most important aspect of working with victims of crime?” If a single option contained the word *victim* (or variants such as *victimology*), the student could be falsely attracted to that option or could be deterred from answering correctly because it seems too obvious.

Therefore, the options should try to steer clear of echoing important terms from the stem. However, if the term is an unavoidable part of the concept being tested, include the term in all four options. If it's not realistic to use it in all four options, use the term in just two options. Do not use the term in just three options, as the fourth option would stand out because it's the only one without the term.

Rubric Language

Adapting the Language

The substance of each criterion in a rubric should match the corresponding criterion in the prompt. However, since the prompt and rubric use different grammatical constructions, the language must be adapted for the rubric. Most of the time, you just need to change the verb:

Prompt language:

Explain why the judge dismissed the case.

Adapted for the rubric:

Explains why the judge dismissed the case

When the prompt uses a second-person pronoun (*you, your*), you'll need to adapt the language further by **broadening the phrasing in the rubric**. Omit words like *you, yours, one's*, and so on.

Prompt language:

Reflect on the insights you've gained throughout the course.

Adapted for the rubric:

Reflects on insights gained throughout the course

Passive voice can be useful. (Passive voice is correct and acceptable despite the superstitions surrounding the construction.) Consider this example:

Prompt language:

Explain why you chose this topic.

Adapted for the rubric:

Explains why the topic was chosen

Rationale

Prompts use a second-person perspective (implied subject *you*), but rubrics use the third person (implied subject *student* or *submission*). Given this difference, you'll need to be especially careful with prompts that use a second-person pronoun. For example, if you said in the rubric, "**Explains** why **you** chose this topic," you're really saying, "**Student** explains why **you** chose this topic," which

is incorrect. Phrases like “Reflects on one’s insights,” “Reflects on their insights,” and “Reflects on student’s insights” are problematic for similar reasons.

Using a broader phrasing in the rubric solves all of these problems. If you feel uncomfortable with elliptical phrasing, remember that the rubric is already abbreviated (e.g., often omitting articles) because it’s not intended to be a full set of instructions to the student. It’s simply a grading tool that maps to the prompt but follows its own phrasing patterns.