

Style Guide

Public Service Department Website

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Overview

This is a guide prepared by Isaiah Keepin for the Vermont Public Service Department. The goal of this guide is to aid the Department in maintaining a clear, readable, and consistent style on their website.

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Writing for the Web

Explain abbreviations or acronyms

It's easy for any of us to forget that your readers often won't be familiar with the same abbreviations that we are. Always define an abbreviation or acronym when it's first used, then use freely after that.

Link to outside internet sources

If you mention another source or organization on the internet, provide a link. Don't make your reader look it up themselves and guess whether they found the one you had in mind.

Write timelessly

Where possible, avoid referring to the current year or date. This will help your writing not to appear dated over time. Of course, the date of an event is often an essential piece of information - if so, include it. But don't refer to the current date when there is not otherwise a reason to do so.

Make it obvious where to click - don't say "click here"

When there is a link in your text, never use the phrase "click here". Instead, make it obvious where to click. The link text could be a description of the destination of that link, or of the action that can be taken at that link. For example:

- For excellent weather reports, check out the [National Weather Service](#).
- Google offers free email accounts. [Sign up for one now.](#)

Paragraphs

Use bold or italics for emphasis. Don't use underline

Underline is for links only. If you use it, people will be confused, thinking it is a link. Use bold or italic styling when you need to indicate emphasis.

One space after a period

Many of us learned to add two spaces after a period when typing. This convention comes from the typewriter days, when typewriters often didn't add enough space after a period. Now, when writing for the web, one space after the period is standard.

One carriage return after a paragraph

The web standard is to add a bit of empty space between paragraphs, to make them easier to read. The built-in styles will do this automatically. You should only press the "return" or "enter" key once between paragraphs.

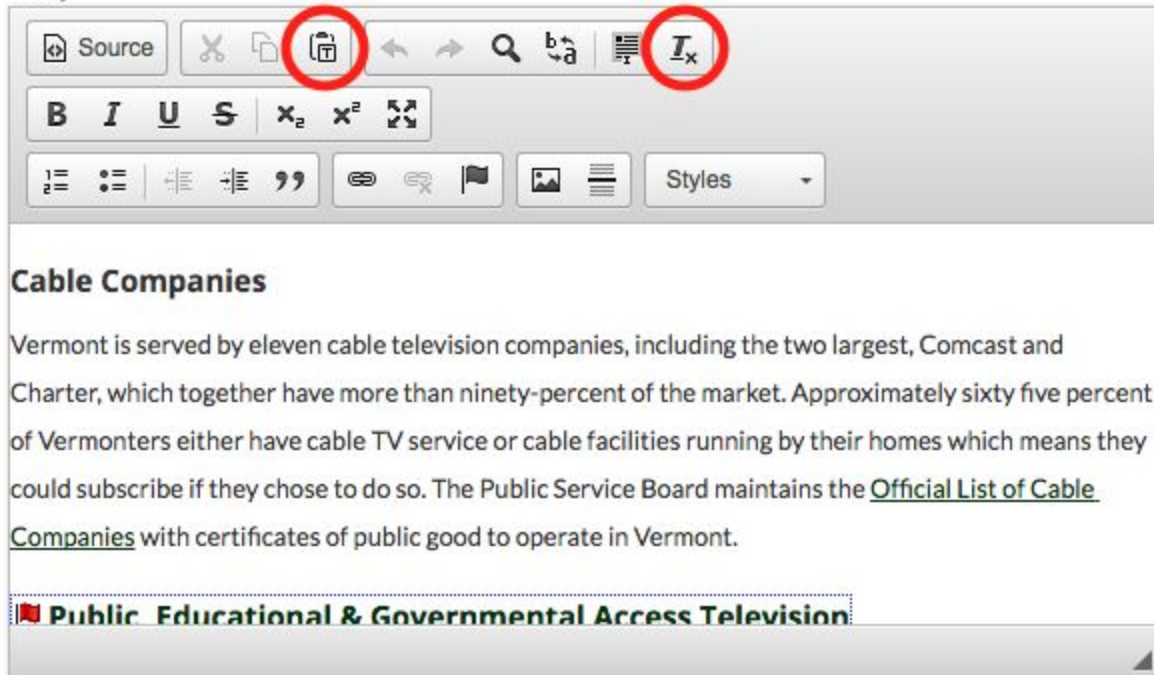
Paste without formatting - don't import formatting from Word etc

The best way to import text from another word processing program (such as Microsoft Word) is to paste the text in without formatting, and then apply formatting using the tools built in to the website. This might seem like extra work, but it avoids countless formatting headaches.

The best way to do this is to use the "paste as plain text" button to paste in the text. This button looks like a clipboard with the letter "T" (see below).

Another option, useful if you run into formatting trouble at any point, is the "remove all formatting" button. This button looks like a capital letter "T" followed by a small "x" (see below).

Body



The image shows a rich text editor interface. The toolbar at the top includes a 'Source' button, followed by icons for undo, redo, search, and list. Two icons are circled in red: a lock icon and an 'I_x' icon. Below the toolbar are buttons for bold (B), italic (I), underline (U), strikethrough (S), subscript (x₂), superscript (x²), and a list icon. A second row of icons includes a list icon, a quote icon, a link icon, a comment icon, a flag icon, an image icon, and a 'Styles' dropdown menu. The content area below the toolbar contains the following text:

Cable Companies

Vermont is served by eleven cable television companies, including the two largest, Comcast and Charter, which together have more than ninety-percent of the market. Approximately sixty five percent of Vermonters either have cable TV service or cable facilities running by their homes which means they could subscribe if they chose to do so. The Public Service Board maintains the [Official List of Cable Companies](#) with certificates of public good to operate in Vermont.

Public Educational & Governmental Access Television

Headings

Headings are very useful in writing for the web. They help summarize and describe content. They help users quickly find the information they are looking for. Also, search engines like Google use the headings on a page to direct search traffic to that page.

Use headings freely

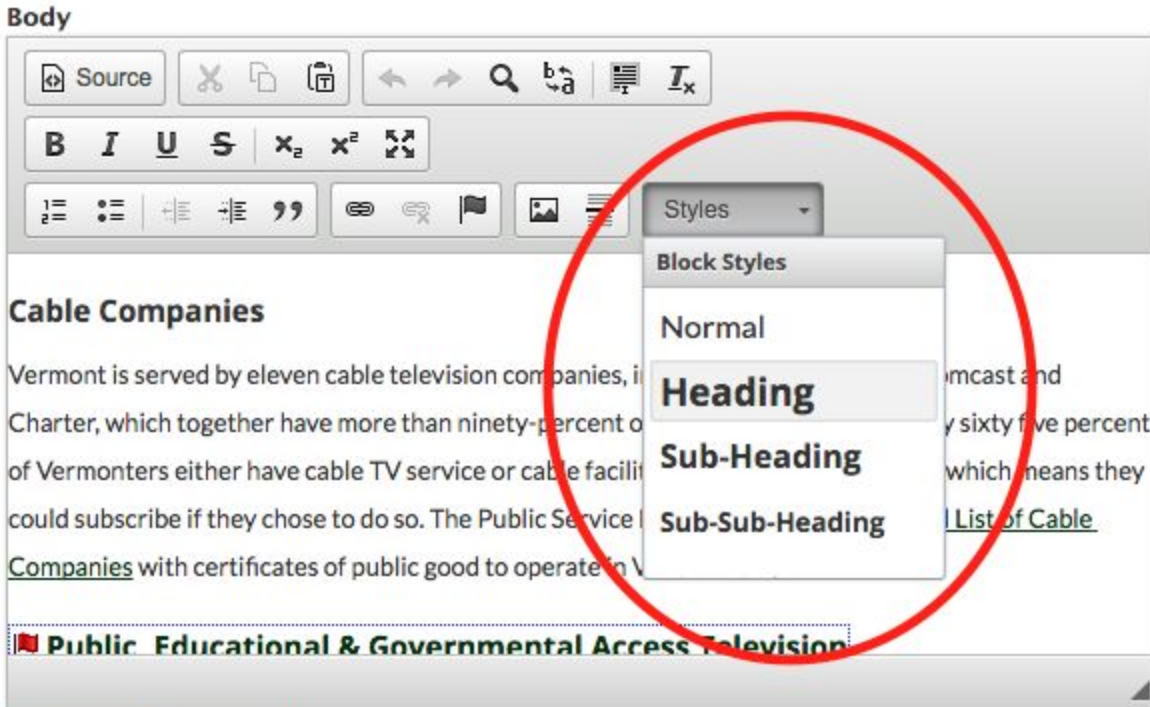
Whenever you feel you are starting a new topic or sub-topic, feel free to describe it with a heading. Even simple headings like “Overview”, “Details”, or “Resources” help organize content and set expectations for your readers.

As of this writing, the “School Energy Management Program” page is a great example of good use of headings (see Resources at the end of this guide).

Use heading styles

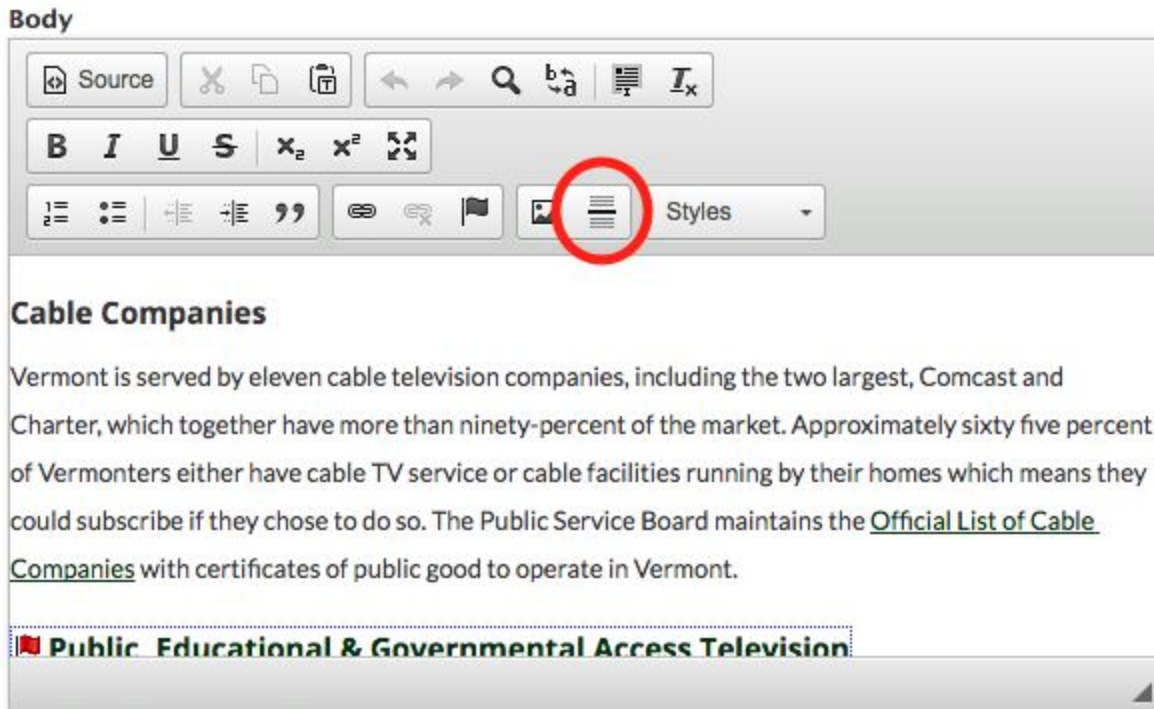
When you need to make a heading, use the “style” button on the editor (pictured below). Don’t “manually” create your own heading formatting by changing the font size, setting it to bold and italic, etc. A consistent visual style is important to the website, so making your own heading styles is discouraged. Also, it’s considerably more work for you to maintain.

Here is what the Styles menu looks like. Note that there are three levels of headings available. For those interested in the code, these three correlate to `<h3>`, `<h4>`, and `<h5>`.



Yes to lines. No to indentation and colons

For longer pages, you may want to divide the content using horizontal lines above major headings. This guide follows that practice. Here is the button in the content editor that inserts a horizontal line:



Don't use indentation to indicate that content is under a certain heading. Trust that the larger, bolder font of the heading is enough to get your reader's attention. Especially with sub-headings, multiple steps of indentation become confusing and difficult to read. The problem is only compounded on mobile devices with small screens. Writing for the web means relying more on vertical organization like headings and letting go of horizontal organization like indents.

Also, there is no need to end your heading with a colon (:). The larger, bolder font style is enough to indicate that it is a heading referring to the subsequent text. Adding a colon is noisy and unnecessary.

Page subtitles can be useful

Our web framework automatically inserts the title of the web page, so there is no need to restate the page title in a heading. However, page titles are often quite short. This is good for displaying them in a menu, but can be confusing if important information is left out. Feel free to start your page with a heading that is basically a longer page title, or a subtitle for the existing page title.

As of this writing, the "Energy Saving Resources" page offers a good example of using a subtitle heading (see Resources section at the end of this guide).

Let the heading do the work

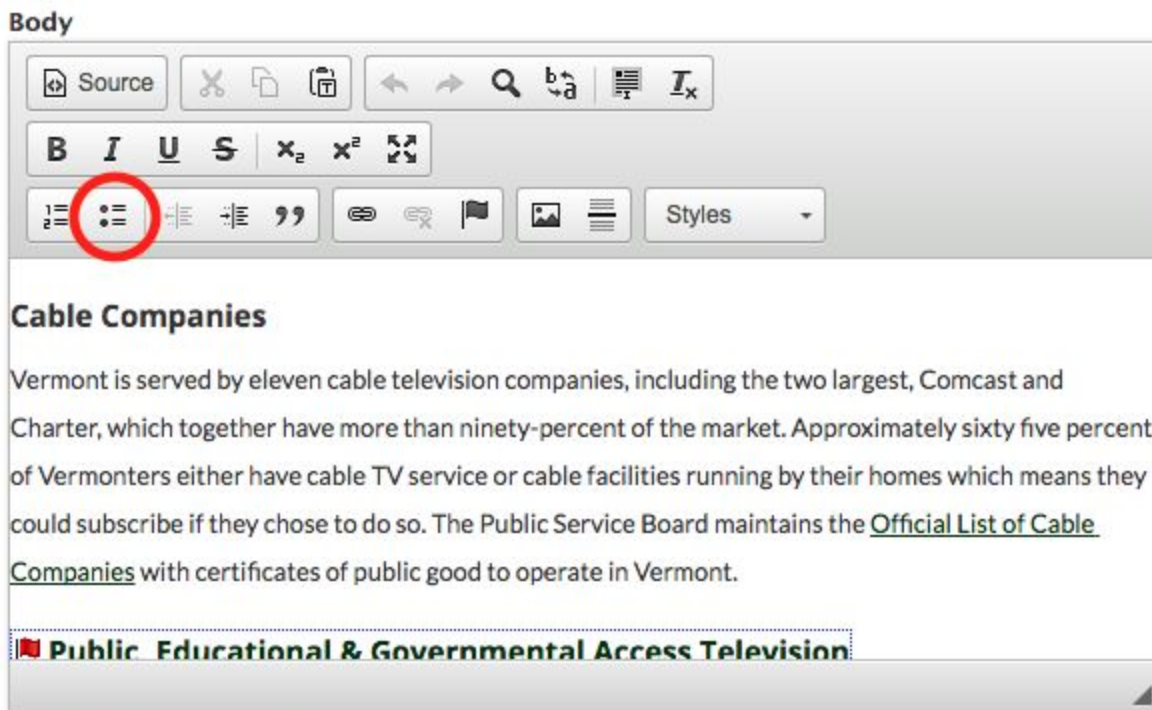
Don't make the first sentence after a heading be a restatement of the heading itself. If the heading says "Cats", the first sentence should not be "This section is about cats." That is exactly

the same thing the heading was supposed to convey. Instead, trust that your reader understands what the heading means, and just begin discussing your topic.

Lists

Use the bulleted list style for lists

When you need to make a list short items, you will usually want to use the bulleted list button pictured below.



Do not “manually” create a bulleted-list style yourself. For example, don’t make a series of one-line entries each beginning with a dash. The bulleted-list style will display much better.

Prefer bullets to numbers

Use numbered lists sparingly. Bulleted lists are almost always more readable. Only use a numbered list when:

- You are actually counting something
- The order of your list is essential
- You need to refer to list items by number

For longer items, use a series of paragraphs

Bulleted lists are best for one-line items. Up to three or four lines is okay. Beyond that, just use a series of paragraphs, ideally each having its own sub-heading.

Lists with only one item are okay

Sometimes you want something to stand out below a body of text. For example, your paragraph may be describing an online resource, and you want the link to that resource to stand out. Or perhaps you want to emphasize the date and time of a meeting. In these cases, it is fine to use a bulleted list for that one item. The indentation and bullet will help the information stand out.

Resource lists should start with the link

When making lists of online resource links, start with the link and follow up with a description of the resource (if necessary). Don't make the link bold or otherwise add formatting - the default link formatting should be enough. Don't put the link at the end of the list entry - this is less readable. Here is an example:

Example list of online search resources

- [Google](#). The original and still considered the best by many.
- [Bing](#). Microsoft's attempt to build a search engine.
- [Yahoo](#). Once mighty, now fallen from greatness.

Links

Long links are good

Short, one-word links are common in less formal settings on the web, but in business or government settings, it is better to make the link as descriptive as possible. If a reader clicks on that link, they will be taken away from your writing, so you want them to have a clear idea of where they will be taken. This also helps the link be noticed in the first place.

Set links apart

Links should usually be set apart from surrounding text in some way. Again, in less formal writing for the web, we often see short links interspersed with descriptive text. In a more formal setting, though, we expect to see links emphasized more. Ideally they should be on their own line, or at the beginning or end of the paragraph.

Native link styling is enough - don't add emphasis

It's important that the website have consistent formatting for links. The system should automatically style links in a way that gets the reader's attention. Don't manually add styling to your links (bold, italic, etc). Rest assured - they will get noticed.

Tables of Contents

Use a table of contents for longer pages

Tables of contents are great. They can allow you to have a very long page that is still readable and useful to users. A great example of a website that uses long pages with tables of contents effectively is www.wikipedia.org.

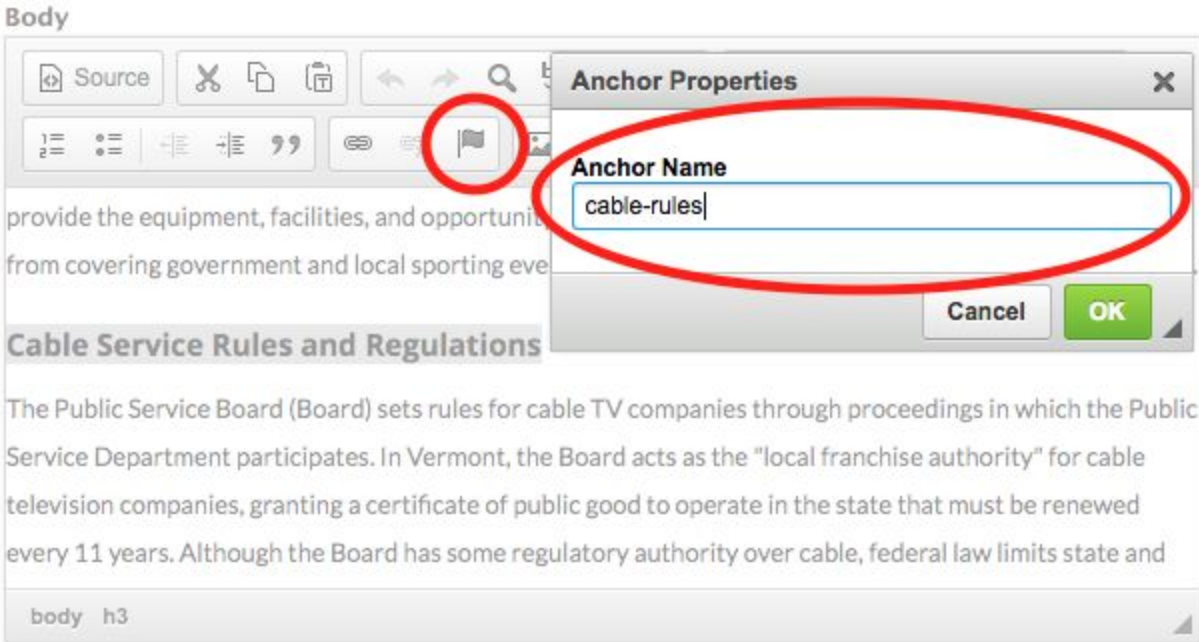
As of this writing, the “Thermal Energy Taskforce” page is a great example of using a table of contents in a longer page (see Resources section at the end of this guide).

Overview, then Contents, then body

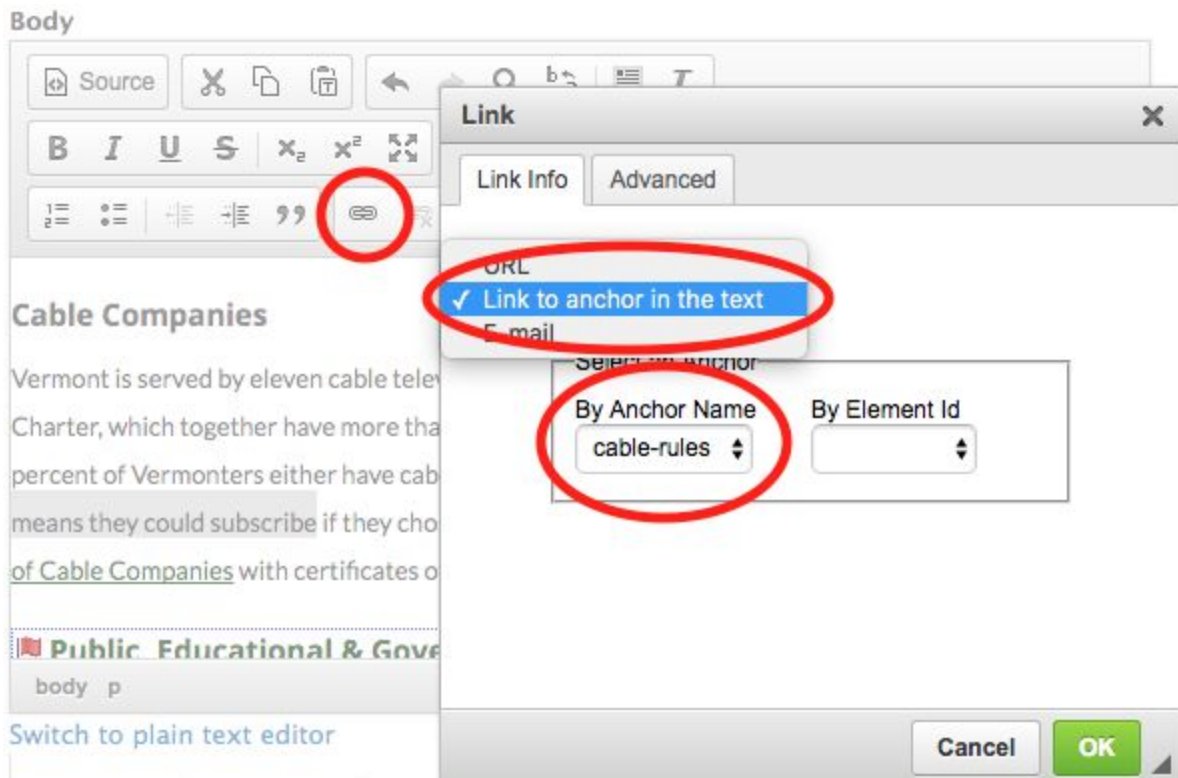
Best practice when using a table of contents in a page is to first have an Overview section that summarizes your material. Follow that with a Contents section that is the table of contents. After the table of contents, present the main body of your material, nicely divided into sections by headings of course.

Contents should link to body

The table of contents should be a list of anchor links pointing to the major headings in the main body of the page. To do this, first, make each heading an anchor by using the “anchor” button. This button looks like a flag (see below). It will ask you for a name for the anchor. Choose something short and descriptive - this will not display visibly on the page.



Then, make each item in the Contents list be a link to that anchor. Use the usual “link” button, and then choose “Link to anchor in the text” for the link type. Select the name of the anchor you want to link to.



Tables

Strongly avoid using tables in your text

Unfortunately, tables are difficult to display online. As more and more people view the web on small screens, our design choices have become constrained. Horizontal information, such as table columns, have become difficult to display. Instead, we focus on vertical ways of organizing information, such as headings in a list.

While the editor will allow you to insert a table into your text, this is never recommended.

Instead of a table, use a list

It is often possible to display data in a vertical list that once may have been displayed in a two-dimensional table. When the most recent or relevant data is on the top of the list, this may even be an improvement for your readers.

As of this writing, the “Schedule & Minutes” section of the “Clean Energy Development Board” page is a great example of using a list where once a table may have been used (see Resources section at the end of this guide).

For true tabular data, attach a file

If you really do have tabular data that is best displayed in a table, prepare the table in some other program (Microsoft Excel for example) and link to the file from your page. You may wish to convert the file to PDF format first. This will be much easier for your users to view on any device they wish.

Resources

Example page: Good Use of Headings

SCHOOL ENERGY MANAGEMENT PROGRAM (SEMP)

Target Audience

Vermont school administrators

Purpose

Maximize the long-term benefits of federal, state, and local investments by providing schools with management tools and the support required to successfully implement effective, long-term energy management systems and practices.

Program Description

This program is located at the Vermont Superintendents' Association's office in Montpelier, which also houses the Association of School Boards and Principals' Association. Program staff work under the direct supervision of Jeff Francis, Director of the Superintendents' Association and in close coordination with the Public Service Department (PSD). The program works with local school officials to save energy based on the highest need first. Need is determined based on an energy use index, either BTU's per student per year or BTU's per square foot per year. School administrators enter into an agreement outlining the scope of the energy project to be performed. Typically, this could include the following: tracking of energy use from records; identification and implementation of operation and maintenance improvements to increase energy efficiency; identification and implementation of projects to save money through capital intensive retrofits; coordination with the utility demand side management programs available as well as programs of the PSD and the Department of Education; and assistance in preparing applications for funding or financing, as well as assistance in presenting the energy programs to boards or voters. The program attained a high level of acceptance of energy efficiency services as part of normal school management by locating an energy efficiency experts inside an organization set up to meet the needs of school managers.

Energy Management Services/Contact

Are you considering or planning school improvements? Take full advantage of this opportunity to maximize energy efficiency. Call SEMP for energy efficiency consultation on any of these areas:

- Renovations and additions
- New Construction
- Energy Efficiency Projects
- Indoor Air Quality

SEMP complements the expertise of architects and engineers, helping them to focus on all cost effective energy efficiency opportunities available to your school.

Contact SEMP for more information: 802-229-5834

Example Page: Subtitle Heading

ENERGY SAVING RESOURCES

Energy Saving Resources at the Public Service Department

The Public Service Department. The Public Service Department tracks energy prices, consults on energy policy, and provides limited technical advice to individuals. It does not provide direct services, or make recommendations about specific service providers or products. It does not have financial resources to assist individuals in weatherizing their homes. If you have more questions, or desire information about topics not covered by this web page, please [Contact Us](#). Be sure to type "Energy Efficiency" in the subject line and include your name, address, phone number and email address in the body of the message.

Other State and Local Resources

- [Efficiency Vermont \(EVT\)](#) is one of the State's Energy Efficiency Utilities (EEUs). EVT's website is a resource for energy savings both at home and at work.
- [Burlington Electric Department \(BED\)](#) is one of the State's Energy Efficiency Utilities (EEUs). BED provides efficiency services in its service territory. Their website provides information regarding its programs.
- [Vermont Gas Systems](#) - Energy Efficiency Program. Whether you're building a new home, trying to save energy in an existing home, or installing a new furnace, boiler, or hot water heater, Vermont Gas has efficiency experts on staff and three distinct "HomeBase" energy efficiency programs to help you make the best decisions for your specific situation.

Federal Resources

- [Home Energy Saver](#) Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing. Offers users an interactive tool for exploring the best ways to save energy and provides resources to help them make it happen.
- [U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Website](#). Offers a wealth of resources for consumers. Find helpful information for energy saving tips, insulation, heating and cooling.
- [Energy Star](#). If you are thinking of purchasing a product that plugs in or burns fuel, take a moment to check out this website. It provides information on consumer electronics and appliances that cost less to operate and saves you money year after year.

Example Page: Table of Contents

THERMAL EFFICIENCY TASKFORCE

Overview

The Public Service Department created and facilitated a task force to ensure an integrated and comprehensive statewide whole-building approach to thermal energy efficiency that will put Vermont on the path toward meeting the state building efficiency goals set forth in statute. The taskforce will complete initial analysis and recommendations by the end of December 2012.

Contents

- [Description](#)
 - [Subcommittees](#)
 - [Report](#)
-

Description

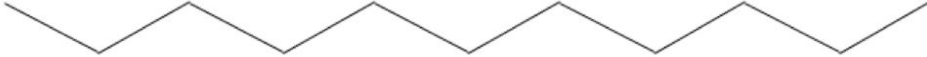
The Thermal Efficiency Taskforce was created to ensure an integrated and comprehensive statewide whole-building approach to thermal energy efficiency that will put Vermont on the path toward meeting the state building efficiency goals set forth in statute.

Goals

- Improving the energy fitness of 25% of the state's housing stock by 2020 (approximately 80,000 housing units).
- Reducing annual fuel needs and fuel bills by an average of 25% in housing units served.
- Reducing total fossil fuel consumption across all buildings by an additional one-half percent each year, leading to a total reduction of 6% annually by 2017 and 10% annually by 2025.
- Saving VT families and businesses a total of \$1.5 billion on their fuel bills over the lifetimes of the improvements and measures installed.
- Increasing weatherization services to low income Vermonters by expanding the number of units weatherized, or the scope of services provided, or both.
- The task force will complete initial analysis and recommendations by the end of December 2012 and will address the following areas:

Program/Services Assessment

Building upon the work accomplished in the Comprehensive Energy Plan and related recent reports and efforts, the Task Force will first work to clearly identify: 1) all current market actors delivering thermal efficiency services; 2) programs providing incentives and technical assistance; and 3) the relationship between and interrelatedness of electric and thermal efficiency measures and services. The assessment will also consider the following:



Example Page: List Instead of Table

CLEAN ENERGY DEVELOPMENT BOARD



Schedule & Minutes

2016

- [January 13](#)
- [April 6](#)
- [June 8](#)
- July 27
- October 12

2015

- [January 14](#)
- [April 8](#)
- [June 10](#)
- [July 6](#)
- [October 14](#)

2014

- [January 15](#)
- [April 9 - Electric Vehicle Charging Briefing](#)
- [April 9](#)
- [May 8](#)
- [May 14th](#) - 5:30 to 7:00 PM. Public Hearing on FY 15 Program Plan. Location: Brattleboro Union High School. Multi-purpose room.
- [June 19](#)
- [July 17](#) 10:00 - Noon
- [July 25](#) 9:00 am - 10:00 AM
- [October 1](#)
- October 22: 4:00 PM

2013

- [January 24th](#)
- [February 1st](#)
- [April 8th](#)
- [June 19th, 10am - Noon](#)
- [July 10th](#)
- [October 9th](#)

2012

- [January 25th](#)
 - [March 14th](#)
 - [June 13th](#)
- 