# **Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Editorial Guidelines**

Welcome to MSNHA’s editorial guidelines, a document that provides standards and best practices for creating and publishing content for our organization. These guidelines are intended for anyone who writes, edits, reviews, or approves content for our website, newsletter, blog, social media or other communication channels. The purpose of this guide is to ensure that our content is clear, consistent, accurate and engaging and that it reflects our organization’s mission, vision and values. By following these guidelines, you will help us communicate effectively with our audience, promote our brand identity and voice and support our goals and objectives.

**EDITORIAL PROCESS**

The editorial calendar is set by the MSNHA media coordinator with input requested on a regular basis from other staff members and periodic review requested from the director.

Selected topics should always tie back to our mission and vision as well as our identified content pillars. If there is a topic we want to cover that we’re not experts on, seek partners or individuals who are better suited to speak on the topic via a guest post, as a paid contributor or as an expert reviewer.

**Ensuring Accuracy**

* Finding, Evaluating and Citing Sources:
  + Use a variety of sources to verify and support your information, such as official documents, public records, experts, eyewitnesses, surveys, etc.
  + Seek out the original source of data or other information – don't rely on someone reporting it secondhand.
  + Avoid assumptions, generalizations and opinions that are not backed by evidence. Never assume a subject’s thought process, point-of-view, reasons, etc.
  + Cite statistics and direct quotes when possible.
  + Evaluate the credibility, accuracy, bias and relevance of sources, and avoid relying on anonymous or unnamed sources or outdated information.
  + Sources should be cited within the article:
    - For digital content, hyperlink the source of the information
    - In print format, cite the source within the text using parentheses or use footnotes.
    - For either format, you may wish to say, “According to (source), \_\_\_” to add clarity about where the information came from.
  + It is good practice to spend a few minutes browsing for any recent news articles related to your topic or subject to ensure you are not overlooking any relevant context or walking into a potentially controversial topic.
  + The MSNHA is a complex web of partners and topics with many varying perspectives. It is always good practice to seek input from a knowledgeable staff member for a second set of eyes to ensure there is not a potential conflict or issue you are not aware of that may impact how the content is received.

**Review Process**

* Before sharing your first draft, always be sure to self-edit first.
  + Read through everything at least once, but ideally come back to it with fresh eyes for another review as well.
  + Reading the piece out loud can be helpful to check for flow and tone and to identify and avoid words that repeat too often, clunky sentences, etc.
* When your first draft is ready, send it for internal review to the media coordinator as well as any other staff who helped provide input or materials for the content and/or additional staff who are experts on the topic.
* Incorporate feedback from the internal review process to create a second draft for external review:
  + When writing about anything related to Indigenous peoples or Tribal entities, always send to historic resources manager and director to evaluate language and potentially invite Indigenous review.
  + When writing about or partnering with other organizations, always seek to get a member of that organization to review the content before publishing.
  + When writing about a person, always allow them to review the piece (if living) or invite review from family or another close contact (if no longer living).
* Once content has been approved, you may publish the content (see Content Standards below).
* For emails, always be sure to notify and receive approval from the person that will be listed as the sender (ex: Jon for e-news, Nicky for Upper Yakima Basin content, etc.).

**EDITORIAL STYLE**

Below are some quick guidelines to get you started! Check the full style guide for details.

**Tone and Voice:**

* Your tone and voice should be clear, engaging, informative, balanced and inspiring.
* You should review your content critically to avoid potentially offensive phrasing such as sexist or racist adjectives, verbs implying something that may not be true (use “said” instead of “gossiped,” for example), gender identification, sexual orientation and generalizations (don’t say something such as “All women celebrated when they won the vote” because it’s demonstrably false).
* You should employ neutral and non-hostile language based on facts from credible sources and your own observations.
* You should use active voice, simple sentences, positive language and action verbs.
* You should avoid jargon, acronyms, slang and technical terms that may confuse your audience.
* You should address your audience as “you” and refer to your organization as “we” or “us”.
* You should address subjects in your article by their last name after introducing them with their first and last name, as well as their title. After first reference, use last name or an appositive (such as “the general”).

**Style and format** for social-media posts, press releasesmost website content should follow the [Associated Press Stylebook](https://writer.com/blog/a-comprehensive-guide-to-the-ap-style-of-writing/) for spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage. We follow [Chicago Manual of Style](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html) for academic, research and educational works. Ask media coordinator if you need help. See the full MSNHA style guide for other common words, phrases and acronyms.

**CONTENT STANDARDS**

Our goal is to share accurate and objective information while sharing the stories that make northwest Alabama such a fascinating and significant place. Our content guidelines emphasize consistency and clarity to ensure a smooth and accessible reading experience for our audiences.

**Historical Content**

* Cite sources as footnotes before submitting a draft for edits and review. Also include an alphabetized source list at the end of your content. If the source is digital, include the link in the accompanying footnote AND bibliography. Make sure that your publication dates, author names, and titles are correct before submitting your content draft.
* Avoid passive language in your writing. Instead of saying "The fence was jumped over by the dog," say "The dog jumped over the fence."
* Historical writing should be both informative and engaging. Clearly present historical context, major takeaways, and themes you want to convey. Always write with detail and avoid generalizations.
* Avoid speculation. Historical evidence must always underly any conclusions. If you are developing a connection between two phenomena, the connection must always be plausible and reasonable.
* Generally, avoid reliance on direct quotations. Originality is always more engaging. If using direct quotations or block quotes, follow two rules: 1.) Introduce your quotation before its use and explain why you used it after. Quotations must flow smoothly into your writing. 2.) Only use quotations and block quotes that are absolutely necessary to explaining your point. A direct quote from a work of literature or primary source may, rarely, be the most effective means of illustrating an argument.
* Avoid generalizations and sweeping statements in historical narrative. "An economic boom gave everyone new jobs" becomes "An economic boom gave many people new jobs."
* Review the following webpage for more tips and guidelines to analyzing sources and writing historically: <https://courses.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/>.
* In publishing blog posts, our editors will include a link below the text leading to a document with a full source list. For other historical writing where including sourcing is inefficient (Website text, STQRY tour text), we’ll include only digital links. For exhibit banner/label copy text and other physically produced historical writing, we will not include footnotes but will maintain the original source list for reference.

**Website Content (blog post, project page or NHA story)**

* Aim for 500-1,000 words.
* Keep the paragraphs short and use sub-headings to break up the text and make it more readable.
* Use bullet points or numbers to break up long sections of text when it makes sense.
* Tie it back to MSNHA and our work as much as possible. Include hyperlinks to any relevant pages on our website or past blog posts.
* Avoid simply writing a “we did this” story – dig deeper into the impacts of the work, human stories, relevant history and context, connections to NHA themes, etc.
* Photos:
  + We will need a strong header image - check out our other [blog posts](https://msnha.una.edu/blog/) to see how the header image displays as a cropped horizontal banner on desktop and more regular sized horizontal image on mobile.
  + Include suggested photos. Make sure MSNHA has the right to publish the images, and provide the source(s) and a caption for each picture. Photos must be high-resolution.
* Uploading in WordPress:
  + Use header treatments in order: H2 (set to left align), H3, H4, etc.
  + Use full width photos when possible, reserving smaller photos for those that are lower quality or less impactful.
    - Resize photos to 1,024 px wide and set quality to 10/12 to reduce file size
  + Add alt-text to photos.
  + Include captions on photos (italicize).
  + Share author as “**Post by: Name, Title**” (enter in the right column).
  + Tag the appropriate categories (right column).
  + Fill in the **focus key phrase** and **meta description.**

**Social Media Posts**

* **Crafting content**: Posts should educate and inspire while increasing awareness of MSNHA while uplifting partner organizations and converting awareness to deeper levels of engagement (Sign up for newsletters, attend events, volunteer, donate, etc.).
* **Voice and Tone:** Casual, informative, easy to learn from and even tongue-in-check are all good ways to engage audiences. Maintain a consistent voice, tone and style across all social media platforms. This helps build recognition, trust and loyalty for your brand.
* **Tag Partners**: Always tag relevant partners in your posts. This not only gives credit where it’s due but also increases the reach of your posts.
* **Use Relevant Hashtags**: Use relevant and popular hashtags related to your content and try to find niche audiences through hashtags. This can help increase visibility and engagement.
* **Compelling Caption and Visual**: Create a compelling caption that grabs attention and encourages users to engage with the post. Use high-quality, relevant visuals to make your posts more engaging. On Instagram, this can look like using more reels, memes or engaging images.
* **Accuracy**: Ensure all information shared is accurate and up to date.
* **Free of Typos**: Proofread all posts to ensure they are free of typos and grammatical errors. This helps maintain a professional image.
* **Call to Action**: Include a clear CTA in your posts, whether it’s asking users to visit your website, donate, volunteer or simply like and share the post.
* **Link**: Always include a link for users to learn more, donate or get involved. Make sure the link is working properly before posting. Check included phone numbers and email addresses.
* **Know Your Audience**: Identify your target audience and tailor your content to resonate with them.
* **Feedback**: Listen to feedback from your audience and adjust your strategies accordingly. Always respond to questions and comments and flag comments that require more guidance from management in crafting a response.
* **Social Media Handles**:
  + **Instagram --** @muscleshoalsnha
  + **Facebook --** @muscleshoalsnha
  + **YouTube –** @muscleshoalsnha

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