LifeWays

LIFEWAYS EDITORIAL STYLE GUIDE

Whether you're writing for a flyer, an email, or a presentation, this reference document will provide guidance on LifeWays voice, tone, audience and language preferences when it comes to writing for the public.

Note: For style, grammar and punctuation, **we follow AP Style**, with the exception that LifeWays uses Oxford commas in all publications.

> *An oxford comma is the comma before the "and" in a list.*
> *Example: LifeWays is a helpful, fulfilling, and trustworthy organization.*

VOICE

LifeWays' voice is casual, friendly, and conversational. We want to present ourselves as accessible and friendly providers of mental health services; Leading individuals through difficult and intimidating topics and breaking them down in plain language they can understand. We educate when appropriate and act as a support for someone who is struggling. We aim to inspire hope and provide help.

LifeWays' voice is:

- Professional
- Reliable
- Accurate
- Friendly
- Casual and conversational
- Helpful
- Informative
- Positive, but also realistic

LifeWays Voice = A Trusted Friend

You want to write as if you're a professional giving advice to a good friend. We want to be welcoming, inclusive and meet people where they are. We speak to them in a way that sounds natural.

TONE

There's a difference between voice and tone. You always speak with the same voice, but your tone changes depending on the person, situation, and emotional state of the person you are speaking with.

While our editorial voice will stay the same, our tone may change depending on the audience we are writing for. Also, consider the reader's state of mind. Are they relieved

to finally have a diagnosis? Mad that they had an appointment rescheduled? Confused about how to sign-up for a wellness program? Be sure to adjust your tone to match the emotions and state that the person you are writing for may be in.

For example: Our tone may change and become softer in areas of our website or social media posts where we are talking about sensitive topics such as support for people who are in crisis. Just like in regular life, your tone changes depending on the situation.

Tone has measurable impact on readers' perceptions of LifeWays' friendliness and trustworthiness.

AUDIENCE

When writing content, it's important to consider who you are addressing. Are they familiar with LifeWays? Are you asking for something or are you providing support?

Here are LifeWays' main audience categories to consider:

- Consumers of LifeWays services
- Jackson and Hillsdale County community members
- Community Partners
- LifeWays Providers
- Caregivers – Parent of a newly diagnosed child or long-term caregiver of adult living with MI
- Individuals living with mental illness
- Youth/young adults learning about mental wellness
- Veterans / active-duty service members
- LGBTQ+ community members
- BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community members
- Advocates – Friends of individual living with mental illnesses or individual wanting to get engaged with the cause

LANGUAGE

LIFEWAYS SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

The names of LifeWays programs, events, and happenings should be consistent. Here are some common ones to keep in mind.

LifeWays
The official dba of our organization is "LifeWays". We should simply refer to ourselves this way, not as LifeWays Community Mental Health.

LifeWays 24/7 Crisis Services
Our collective unit of crisis services should be referred to as 24/7 Crisis Services. When speaking about these services in the public, if we have not already identified who we are, it is important that you refer to them as "LifeWays 24/7 Crisis Services" to present some kind of ownership of the services by the organization.

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESSES

- **Use person-first language**
  A person is not defined by a condition, and someone should not be addressed as such.

  For example:
  - A person experiences bipolar disorder — they're not bipolar.
  - A person experiences mental illness— they don't belong to a group called "the mentally ill."

  This applies to mental health conditions and when referring to individuals from a racialized, social or cultural group.

- **Don't use mental health conditions as adjectives**
  You shouldn't call someone or yourself "OCD" because they/you like to organize. Nor should you say the weather is "bipolar" because it keeps changing. This undermines legitimate diagnoses of sometimes difficult to manage mental illnesses.

- **Avoid stigmatizing language**
  Don't refer to someone as "crazy," "psychotic," or "insane." For people going through challenging symptoms beyond their control, it can be very harmful to be labeled by words with negative connotations. Additionally, the casual use of these words when unrelated to mental illness can perpetuate stigma and discrimination.

- **Don't use the term "others" or "abnormal"**
  Referring to people experiencing mental illness as "others" or "abnormal" creates an "us versus them" narrative. This can make people experiencing mental illness seem inferior, different, and as though they're the outliers of society — which they are not.

- **Be cautious when talking about suicide**
  We strictly follow the suicide reporting guidelines.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY TERMINOLOGY
We refrain from using "minority" when referring to individuals or groups identifying as non-white, non-heterosexual, and/or non-cisgender.

"Minority" is not always accurate depending on the location or situation.

Instead, we use the terms underrepresented or overrepresented group to talk about specific populations, depending on the context.

For example: The Black community is underrepresented when it comes to receiving adequate mental health care and overrepresented when it comes to the prison population.

- **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)**
  "POC" refers to a person or group who identify as non-white.

- **Black**
  Black refers to people in the entire Black diaspora and are based on the experience of Blackness in the U.S. It could include immigrants of different cultures that are perceived Black even if they self-identify differently due to another dimension of cultural identity. The "B" in "Black" should always be uppercase.

- **African American**
  Under the larger umbrella of the Black community the term African American represents those whose origin is from the African continent but history and life experience is reflective of the U.S.

- **Latinx**
  Refers to people with Latin American ancestry (Central America, South America or the Caribbean). Since the Spanish language is typically gendered, the term Latinx is used to eliminate a binary choice (male vs. female) that is limiting and excluding to trans individuals and others who identity as fluid or non-binary.

  The use of Latino/Latina is also permitted for anyone who would prefer to identify with these terms.

- **Hispanic**
  Refers to people who have ancestors from Spain or other Spanish-speaking countries.

- **Indigenous population**
  Refers to those who are native to the U.S.

- **Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)**
  Refers to people whose ancestry is from Asian countries or Pacific islands.

- **LGBTQ+**
  Refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer,

questioning, or intersex.

- **Non-binary language**
  Our preference is to minimize binary language so that our content is relatable for all audiences.

  Example:
  We wouldn't say: "When an individual comes to LifeWays **he/she** can expect a warm and welcoming environment."

  Instead, we would say: "When an individual comes to LifeWays **they** can expect a warm and welcoming environment."

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAIN LANGUAGE

The majority of Americans are at the literacy level of high school or below. The goal of plain language is to help the reader understand the content and information we are providing. When using plain language, you can be as specific as you need to be while still using clear language. It is important to note that using plain language is not "dumbing down." Common words are more effective than jargon and it is a more effective way of communicating what you want. Plain language also helps essential information stand out.

- **Use familiar words**
  - Aim to keep your writing as close to speech as possible (Ask: Would I talk this way in conversation?)
  - Avoid expressions, idioms, clichés and slang
  - Stay away from jargon, anything "inside baseball" and marketing lingo ("best ever")

- **Be concise**
  - Reduce excess wording and focus on the main point
  - Ask: What do readers need to know? What are the essentials?
  - Keep sentences short and simple

- **Use the active voice**
  Active voice is direct, concise, stronger and less awkward to read

  Example: "The animals were rescued by the volunteers" should instead be phrased as, "The volunteers rescued the animals."

- **Use Engaging Titles**
  A title is the first piece of content people read. Often, it is the only piece of content people read. With that said:

- o Tell readers something useful
- o Keep to 5 words or less
- o Avoid cute or faddish vocabulary
- o Ensure it's understandable, especially out of context of your article

- **Don't be Abstract**
  Give pointed advice. Give readers something to act on. Saying "be there for your loved one" may sound nice, but it's vague. Give them specific things they can do.

- **Make Sure Your Content is Relevant**
  Content should directly address the topic at hand. For example, if a page is about managing mental health in the workplace, you don't need to include something about supported employment (that would be on a page about finding work).

- **Make Sure Your Content is Factually Accurate**
  In your writing, you should always fact-check:
  - o Statistics
  - o Research studies
  - o Medical information/treatment
  - o Diagnostic criteria
  - o Spelling of any names mentioned
  - o Academic degrees, if possible

- **If a study is mentioned, make sure it's:**
  - o From a legitimate source
  - o Less than 10 years old

- **Make the Content Scannable**
  No one wants to read a giant wall of text. Use headings, subheads and bulleted lists to break up content. They can help cut the length and take the place of transitional sentences. And, most importantly, they help divide up your content so people can find what they need.

- **Use Bulleted Lists Strategically**
  - o Avoid ending bullet points with semicolons. Use a period after every bullet point that is a full sentence or commas if it is a bulleted list. Use all sentences or all fragments, not a mixture.
  - o Make bullet points consistent in structure (punctuation, capitalization, verb tense).
  - o Be consistent.
  - o Match the first word in each point.
  - o Make the bullet points easy to read.

- o Bullet points are meant to be short. Additionally, there should not be more than 5-7 bullet points in one list.
- o Avoid using transition words and phrases such as "secondly" or "another point."

- **Don't Use Colloquial Phrases**
  - o Colloquial, or cliché, phrases are only understood by certain communities, like native English speakers.
    - For example:
      Avoid saying: "If you are feeling under the weather, consult your doctor."
      Instead use: "If you are feeling sick, consult your doctor."