Frequently Asked Questions *Style Guide*

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e-write.
Writing for online readers

1. Answer the question completely.

Make sure your answer is complete. Keep your response short and to the point—long enough to completely answer the question, but no more. Don't include information that is interesting but is not central to the question.

Use links to provide additional interesting, relevant, and related information. But don't force the user to click a link to get an answer to the question.

Example

How much electricity does a typical nuclear power plant generate?
In 2005, the average U.S. commercial nuclear reactor generated 7.7 million megawatt hours (MWh). The nation's 103 operating nuclear reactors generated 788.56 billion kilowatt (kWh) hours, about 20% of the nation's electricity.

Learn More: Statistics about nuclear generated electricity

1.1. Choose the appropriate question word.

Each question word – *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *how* – requires a particular type of information for a complete answer:

- *Why* questions should be answered with reasons.
- *How* questions should be answered with procedures or steps in a process.
- *When* questions should be answered with times or dates, etc.
- *Where* questions should be answered with locations – bricks and mortar or online.
- *Who* questions should be answered with a name, title, or role.
- *What* questions should be answered with examples, instances, etc.

Examples

This ***how*** FAQ has a **procedure** answer:

> **How do I convert short tones of coal to metric tons?**
> Convert short tons of coal to metric tons by multiplying the number of short tons by .907185. For example, 12,300 short tons X .907185 = 11,576 metric tons.

This ***why*** FAQ uses **reasons** to answer:

> **Why are gasoline prices so high?**
> According to EIA's analysis, four factors contribute to the sharp rise in gas prices:
>
> - **Rising crude oil prices**. The price of crude oil—from which gasoline is refined—has risen dramatically from about $60 per barrel in July 2005 for West Texas crude oil to about $70 per barrel in July 2006.
> - **Reduced gasoline supply**. U. S. gasoline production has not recovered from the damage to refineries from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.
> - **Strong gasoline demand**. Despite higher prices, demand for gasoline has remained relatively strong.
> - **Requirements for cleaner burning fuel**. The transition to ethanol incurred costs: replacing storage tanks and using a more expensive gasoline blendstock—compounds and additives used to produce gasoline. The logistics of delivering ethanol to some areas also increased gas prices.

1.2. Link to more information.

1.2.1. Include links to provide additional relevant information.

Most links should appear at the end of the answer under "**Learn More**." But sometimes links embedded within the text are useful, for example, to provide a supporting graphic or other information, such as a definition, that is essential to the response.

1.2.2. Choose link text that clearly identifies what users will get when they click the link.

- Whether you write an embedded link or a **"Learn More"** link, choose your words carefully. The link text should enable users to predict exactly what information they'll get by clicking.

- If the title of the page you're linking to accurately describes the link's contents, use the page title as the link.

Example

> **Learn More:** EIA *Primer on Gasoline Sources and Markets*

- If you're concerned that the title of the page you're linking to may be confusing for users, write a "Learn More" link that incorporates the actual page title with your explanatory text.

Example

Learn More: Review *Energy Consumption, Expenditures, and Emissions Indicators, 1949-2005* for historical data on energy use per person.

- Note the use of bold, title case, and the colon for "**Learn More**" links.

1.2.3. Identify EIA reports or analysis in link wording.

Example

Learn More: Review EIA *Weekly Retail On-Highway Diesel Prices*.

1.2.4. When linking to a file other than a web page, indicate the file format after the link.

Use (PDF), (Excel), (Word) at the end of the link to indicate file type.

Example

Learn More: Read *Overview of U.S. Petroleum Trade*, EIA statistics on U.S. oil imports and exports. (PDF)

2. Write for easy online reading.

2.1. Write concise answers.

2.1.1. Answer the question only, using as few words as possible.

Example Of An Answer Rewritten For Conciseness

Concise Answer

Does EIA calculate and regulate diesel fuel surcharges?
No. EIA is not involved in calculating, assessing or regulating diesel fuel surcharges. Fuel surcharges are negotiated privately by the shipper and the trucking company. EIA collects and disseminates weekly retail diesel fuel price data. Many shippers and truckers use that weekly retail price information in their fuel pricing formulas.

Learn More: Review EIA *Weekly Retail On-Highway Diesel Prices*.

Wordy Original

Does EIA calculate diesel fuel surcharges?
The EIA has no information regarding the use of fuel surcharges, how fuel surcharges are calculated, or how fuel surcharge formulas are constructed. The EIA provides weekly retail diesel fuel price data with an explanation of the methodology, http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/oog/info/wohdp/diesel.asp. Many shippers and truckers use that weekly retail price information in their fuel pricing formulas. Fuel surcharges are a private contracting matter between the shipper and the trucking company. The EIA does not encourage or discourage the use of fuel surcharge price adjustment formulas in contracts. The EIA does not assist in writing contracts nor does it provide advice on disputes arising from contract interpretation. Some trucking and shipping companies have information regarding fuel surcharge formulas on their web sites.

2.1.2. Use bullets to make text scannable.

Examples

Easy-to-Scan Bullets
A barrel of oil yields these refined products (percent of barrel):

- 47% gasoline for use in automobiles
- 23% heating oil and diesel fuel
- 18% other products, which includes petrochemical feedstock—products derived from petroleum principally for the manufacturing of chemicals, synthetic rubber and plastics
- 10% jet fuel
- 4% propane
- 3% asphalt

Hard-to-Scan Text Block
From a barrel of oil, 47% is refined to gasoline for use in automobiles, 23% is refined to heating oil and diesel fuel, 18% is refined to other products, which includes petrochemical feedstock such as polypropylene, 4% is refined to propane, 10% is refined to jet fuel, and 3% is refined to asphalt.

2.2. Write short sentences and paragraphs for easy online reading.

2.2.1. Divide long sentences into two.

If a sentence is 35-40 words or longer, reread it and consider dividing it into two shorter sentences.

2.2.2. Write short paragraphs.

If a paragraph is 7-10 lines or longer, reread it and consider dividing the long paragraph into two shorter ones.

3. Use a professional tone.

Use relatively formal language rather than informal. However, that doesn't mean you should use stiff or bureaucratic language. Aim for a professional, conversational tone. (Imagine you are speaking to your supervisor rather than your friend.)

3.1. Avoid idioms and informal speech.

Don't write: What's behind high gas prices?
Do write: Why are gasoline prices so high?

Don't write: Are we running out of oil worldwide?
Do write: Do we have enough oil worldwide to meet our future needs?

3.2. Choose the more formal word over the colloquial one.

To maintain a professional, businesslike tone, chose the more formal word. For example, write *hydropower*, not *hydro*.

3.3. Use contractions sparingly.

3.4. Use personal pronouns.

Don't write: Is there enough oil to meet future needs?
Do write: Do we have enough oil worldwide to meet our future needs?

Don't write: How can a person find out which country the gasoline at a station comes from?
Do write: How can I tell which country the gasoline at my local station comes from?

4. Edit for correct style.

4.1. Explain terms, acronyms, and abbreviations.

4.1.1. Explain unfamiliar terms.

- Most people who use EIA's FAQs are not subject matter experts, so explain unfamiliar terms for them or link to the Glossary at http://www.eia.doe.gov/glossary/index.html.

- Try other techniques for explaining terms such as providing a synonym or a written or visual example or illustration.

Example
This answer neatly explains the terms *physical unit of measure* and *British thermal unit* without becoming overly long or wordy.

> **How do I convert fuels from one unit of measure to another – from gallons to barrels, for example?**
> To compare fuels, you must convert physical units of measure, such as weight or volume, and energy content measures of each fuel to comparable units. One way to compare different fuels is to convert them into British thermal units (Btu). The Btu is the amount of energy required to raise the temperature of one pound of water one degree Fahrenheit. To convert physical units of measure, use the Energy Calculator - Common Units and Conversions.

4.1.2. Spell out terms the first time you use them in each FAQ, followed by the correct abbreviation or acronym in parentheses. Use only the abbreviation after the first use.

Example

In 2004, the average monthly residential electricity consumption was 908 kilowatt hours (kWh).

- Check the Glossary at http://www.eia.doe.gov/glossary/index.html for correct abbreviations.

4.1.3. Edit for preferred usage.

Use This	Avoid This
web site	Web site or website
kilowatt hours	kilowatt-hours
U.S.	United States

4.2. Use consistent formatting for questions, number, dates, and bullets.

4.2.1. Capitalize the first word and use bold for questions.

Don't write: Can I Tell Which Country The Gasoline At My Local Station Comes From?
Do write: **Can I tell which country the gasoline at my local station comes from?**

4.2.2. Numbers

- Write out numbers from one through nine. Use figures for numbers 10 and above.
- Express percentages in figures: 8%, not eight percent.
- Express physical units of measure numerically.

Don't write: three kWh
Do write: 3kWh

4.2.3. Bullets

- Capitalize the first word of each bulleted item.
- If the bulleted item is a complete sentence, end with a period.
- If the bulleted item is a word or phrase, do not use any punctuation.

4.2.4. Titles

- Italicize titles of reports, publications, or articles.
- Do not italicize web page titles.