

MSUToday Story Editorial and UX Guidelines

Introduction

This guide supports UCAM writers and editors in creating clear, engaging and consistent MSUToday stories. It aligns with MSU's editorial standards, search engine optimization, or SEO, best practices and digital accessibility.

Storytelling

Use the guidelines on the [Brand Studio website](#) to establish the appropriate voice and tone and to communicate clear messages.

Review the [best practices](#) for writing for SEO to help balance writing for audiences with writing for search engines.

The [MSU Editorial Style Guide](#) follows [AP Stylebook](#) with custom deviations for MSU. [Merriam-Webster](#) is the dictionary of choice.

Body Structure

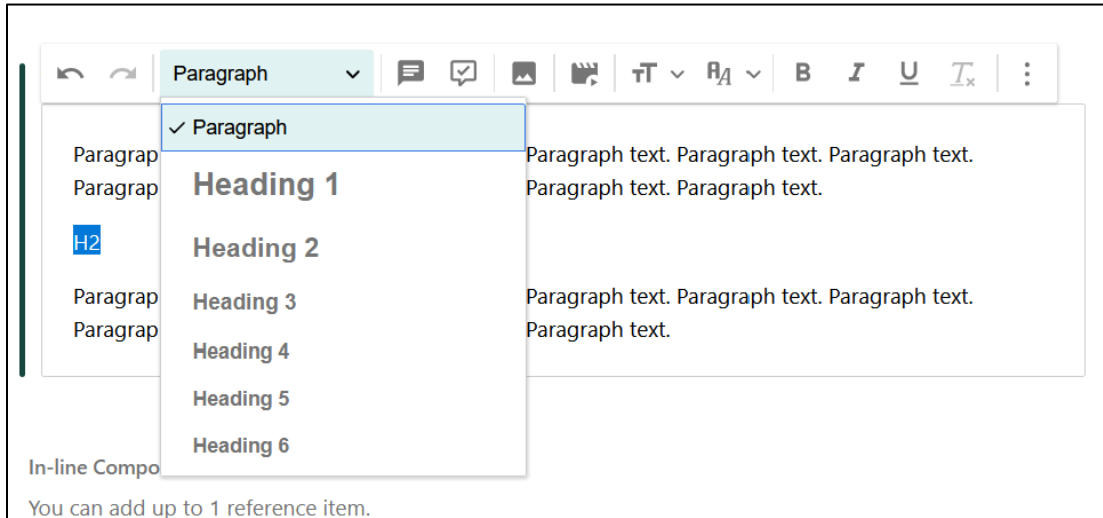
To improve search rankings and appear in AI-powered search results, focus on creating original, high-quality content that meets journalistic standards.

- **When writing any story:**
 - Aim for a natural, conversational tone.
 - Use active voice and clear language, avoiding jargon.
 - Adapt your messaging and content for your intended audience.
 - Use synonyms and related terms to enrich your writing.
 - Best practice: paragraph length should be between two and four sentences with line spacing and breaks.

- **Subheads:**
 - Use to break down your story into distinct sections or address major points related to the main topic.
 - Improve readability, are informative and help guide skimmers.
 - Using H2s support search engine indexing. Simply bolding text will not trigger indexing by search engines and fails to meet accessibility requirements.
 - Best practice: Use every 200–300 words or two to four paragraphs.
 - Use H3 subheadings within H2 sections to delve into more specific details or subtopics. The H3 is available after an H2 to further organize content, such as introducing bullets within a section.

Key takeaway

Always make subheads within a story an H2, not simply bolded text. Never use H1 within the body text.



Keyword Use

Keywords are the search terms a user might enter in a search engine. Using keywords in text helps search engines understand what your story is about so people searching for that topic can find it. At the same time, overuse can hurt both readability and search rankings.

- **Best practice:**
 - Identify 1–2 primary keywords per story that reflect what the story is mainly about.
 - Choose quality over quantity.
 - Place within the first 100 words of story. After that, use naturally in key places.
 - Include in the headline and at least one subhead as well as the meta description (link to section) and URL.
- **Examples:**
 - Drought-resistant wheat
 - Sustainability ranking
 - Student mental health resources
- **Avoid:**
 - Keyword stuffing — when the same phrase appears too often in a way that feels forced or repetitive.
 - Search engines can penalize this, and readers find it annoying.

Example of keyword stuffing:

MSU researchers are developing drought-resistant wheat. Drought-resistant wheat is a major breakthrough for drought-resistant wheat farming. This drought-resistant wheat research shows drought-resistant wheat could save crops worldwide.

Revised:

MSU researchers are developing a new variety of wheat that thrives in drought conditions. The breakthrough could help farmers maintain crop yields during dry seasons, supporting global food security.

Notice how the second version uses synonyms (variety of wheat, thrives in drought, crop yields) instead of repeating the exact same phrase.

Adding Links

Linking to related stories and content on MSUToday, as well as to colleges, units, researchers and other online sources throughout the MSU ecosystem is good for SEO and makes for an optimized user experience in both customer journey and accessibility.

- **Best practice:**
 - Only add a link on the first reference, not subsequent references.
 - Each link should serve a clear purpose, whether for SEO or to enhance the user experience.
 - The clickable text should be short and to the point, ideally two to five words.
 - The clickable words should accurately describe the linked page's content, providing context for both users and search engines.
 - Aim for around five to 10 internal links per 2,000 words, or roughly one link every 200–300 words.
 - Aim to get a link within the first 100 words to help SEO.
 - Incorporate relevant keywords into the clickable text while ensuring they fit naturally within the surrounding content.

- **Avoid**
 - Overlinking, as too many links can dilute their value and confuse users.
 - Generic text like “click here” or “read more” within your story, as it lacks context and can reduce SEO value.
 - Using the exact clickable text repeatedly for links to different pages.
 - Opening links in new windows or tabs; the default is the same window. A new window is bad for accessibility and user experience.
 - Only open the link in a new window when:
 - Linking to a website outside of MSU
 - Linking to PDFs or other file types
 - Consider adding a notification in the clickable text that a new window will open.

Accessibility

Follow the guidelines and information available on the [Digital Accessibility website](#).

Using Assets

Assets, such as images or graphics, within a story enhance the reader experience by breaking up long sections of text and/or adding visual context. All assets must contain alt text.

- **Best practice:**
 - Each asset should have a clear purpose and support the story's message.
 - Strategically position assets near the text content they correspond with to enhance comprehension.
 - Include one relevant asset for approximately every 350 words to maintain reader engagement.
 - Begin with the highest-quality file possible.
 - Avoid photos that contain text, as it reduces readability.
- **Alignment:**
 - Always right-align the first asset. Make sure it is placed below the first sentence. If the asset is in line with the first sentence, it will appear above the text on mobile.

Desktop view



Associate Professor of History Yulian Wu has been awarded a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in the School of Historical Studies for the 2025-26 academic year. This prestigious membership allows for focused research and the free and open exchange of ideas among an international community of scholars at one of the foremost centers for intellectual inquiry.

During her stay, Wu will work on her research surrounding nephrite jade, the most coveted luxury mineral in Qing China (1644–1912), the last imperial dynasty in China.



Yulian Wu

Mobile view



Yulian Wu





Associate Professor of History Yulian Wu has been awarded a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in the School of Historical Studies for the 2025-26 academic year. This prestigious

- Limit left-aligning an asset.
 - Staggering assets in a story does not translate to mobile; assets will always appear full width.
 - Left-aligned assets can disrupt visual flow and impact readability.
- Center alignment is recommended for large images as it creates a balanced focal point and can highlight important visuals, especially images by MSU photographers.

Video and carousel placement:

- If there's relevant video, prioritize placing it near the top of the article after a short intro of the story text (see example below). Do not put the video at the very top to avoid the hero image and video stacking.
- Unless story is about the gallery, place a relevant gallery in the top third of the story. If the gallery is a main highlight of the story, treat it the same as you would a relevant video.
- Videos and galleries should help guide readers through stories and keep them engaged, so make sure to pay attention to the flow and where they are placed so not to over-clutter a story.
- Remember to check the mobile view.

Examples of video placement:

<p>The Super Bowl goes Spanish: Bad Bunny's cultural moment</p> <p>By: Alex Telep</p> 	<p>The Super Bowl goes Spanish: Bad Bunny's cultural moment</p> <p>By: Alex Telep</p> 
<p>The Bad Bunny Effect</p>  <p>Perhaps you've heard him featured on Cardi B's 2019 hit "Jhatibá." Maybe you've seen him host Sublime Mueve Loco. You might have even seen his name during the Grammys, in recent headlines, or come across songs from his most recent album, "Dale Play Más Fines" on your music streaming app of choice.</p> <p>Bonito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Bad Bunny, is everywhere.</p>	<p>The Bad Bunny Effect</p>  <p>Perhaps you've heard him featured on Cardi B's 2019 hit "Jhatibá." Maybe you've seen him host Sublime Mueve Loco. You might have even seen his name during the Grammys, in recent headlines, or come across songs from his most recent album, "Dale Play Más Fines" on your music streaming app of choice.</p> <p>Bonito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Bad Bunny, is everywhere.</p> <p>The Puerto Rican superstar, three-time Grammy Award winner and 17-time Latin Grammy Award winner, has redefined what it means to succeed in music, crossing cultural barriers while remaining steadfast in singing only in Spanish. On Feb. 8, he'll take the stage as the halftime show headliner at Super Bowl LIX, marking the first time the halftime show will be performed primarily in another language.</p>

Captions

Asset captions provide context and relevant details, often highlighting something in the image that isn't immediately obvious, especially its connection to the surrounding text.

Best practice:

- Provide additional context or explanation.
- Describe the image.
- Include interesting or unexpected facts.
- Include relevant keywords for search optimization.

Avoid:

- Editorializing or trying to interpret someone's feelings or thoughts.
- Using phrases like "is shown" or "is pictured."

Credits:

- Images taken by an MSU photographer must be credited by name, when possible. Always confirm the correct spelling of names.
 - For UCAM, used the photographer’s preferred spelling.
 - G.L. Kohuth
 - Garret Morgan
 - Nick Schrader
 - Anthony Siciliano
 - Jacob Templin-Fulton
 - Derrick L. Turner
- When there is not a photographer name, include Courtesy Photo, or Photo Courtesy of (unit name).
- Graphics created by UCAM members must be credited by name if the caption field is available. Always confirm the correct spelling of names.

Exceptions to including captions:

- Illustrative, decorative or “mood” images
- When information is already clearly provided in surrounding text

Note:

The In-Line Component does not have the option of a caption. If a full-width image with a caption is desired, use the *Full-width story image* preset and keep the image centered in the text box.

Heroes

When a story is viewed on mobile, only the exact center of a hero image is visible. Always use your best judgement for impact and design. When possible, keep the focal point of the image in the center. Begin with the highest-quality file possible.

Desktop example:



Mobile example:



Original: Image appears blurry.



Alternate option

Key takeaway

Always check the preview of the story during the pre-publishing stage to confirm there are no cropping or pixelation issues, particularly with the hero. If needed, select a different image that is still relevant to the story.

Headlines

Headlines are the most powerful element for attracting reader attention — both on the page and in feeds, search engines, email newsletters, social media and paid advertising.

[MSU research: What makes a good headline](#)

- **Reader engagement:**
 - 80% of visitors read the headline; only ~20% read the full article.
 - A clear, active headline instantly communicates value and entices readers to click or keep reading.
 - A compelling headline can dramatically increase time on page and sharing rates.
- **[Search engine optimization:](#)**
 - Search engines treat the headline as a primary ranking factor.
 - Headlines should contain a clear keyword or phrase users are likely to search for, ideally toward the beginning.
 - Well-optimized headlines boost visibility in Google News and drive more organic traffic.
- **Best practice:**
 - Ideal length: 50-60 characters
 - If more details are needed, add a subhead.
 - Use active voice and clear language, avoiding jargon and overusing keywords. Common words outperform big words.
 - Avoid clickbait; ensure alignment with story content.
 - Per AP style, use sentence case by only capitalizing the first word and any proper nouns. Include minimal punctuation for clarity.

Example: The Headline box in the left panel is marked in red.

HEADLINE

Recommend 60 characters or less for SEO

Student view: The importance of ethics in family law

SUBHEAD

- **When to use MSU:**
 - Focus headlines on what the reader cares about first (person, discovery, event). This is more engaging and more search-friendly for people not already searching “MSU.”
 - Lead with the action/subject, making it clearer to a broad audience and improving SEO for keywords.
 - Include MSU near the beginning when the audience expects to see the institution as the subject, such as institutional news or the MSU affiliation is the news.
- **Examples:**
 - **Original:** MSU medical schools welcome nearly 500 aspiring physicians
 - **Adjusted:** Nearly 500 aspiring physicians start their medical studies

 - **Original:** MSU study finds accessible wireless ultrasounds are accurate
 - **Adjusted:** Wireless ultrasounds provide accurate, accessible benefits for athletes

Key takeaway

Write headlines for humans first — clarity and relevance — while weaving in keywords for discoverability.

Subhead

A subhead appears just below the main headline. It’s an optional but powerful tool to add clarity, context or detail that supports the headline — especially when keeping the main headline short and engaging.

- **When to use:**
 - The main headline is more than 60–80 characters.
 - Additional information does not fit in the main headline character limit.
 - Clarifying the topic of a complex story.
 - Highlighting secondary people, locations or outcomes.
 - Writing for a broader or unfamiliar audience, like the national informed public.
- **Best practice:**
 - Length should be 90–120 characters, approximately 15–20 words.
 - Include supporting details, context, keywords or a more complete summary of the who, what and why.
 - Tone is explanatory or contextual and can use full sentences or informative fragments.
 - Avoid repeating words/phrases from the headline; don’t simply restate it.
 - Per AP style, use sentence case by only capitalizing the first word and any proper nouns. Include minimal punctuation for clarity.
- **Examples:**
 - **Original:** MSU’s cisplatin cancer drug wins national award
 - **Adjusted:** Groundbreaking cancer drug wins national award
 - **New subhead:** Discovered at MSU, cisplatin is the industry standard for chemotherapy treatments

 - **Original:** MSU researchers address gap in substance use disorder treatment
 - **Adjusted:** Providing support to those in need

- **New subhead:** MSU researchers and community partners address gaps in substance use disorder treatment

Key takeaway

Subheads improve SEO by offering another keyword-rich element for search engines to index. They add scan value for readers deciding whether to click into or continue reading a story.

Example:

HEADLINE

Recommend 60 characters or less for SEO

Student view: The importance of ethics in family law

SUBHEAD

Summaries

Article summaries should highlight key takeaways up front to help readers quickly decide whether the content is relevant to them. Since many users scan rather than read in full, summaries must support easy skimming and be clear and informative.

- **Best practice:**
 - Use two to five concise bullet points.
 - Use non-stylized text (no italics, bolding, etc.).
 - Contain story highlights, relevance, impact, key takeaways.
 - Write in plain, concise language, not full sentences and avoid jargon.
 - Include who, what, why details.
- **When to use:**
 - Feature stories and long-form stories, more than 400 words
 - Research stories (e.g., “Why this matters” bullets)

Summary example:

Summary

- Enrollment for Rx Kids Detroit is now live at RxKids.org and is open to all city of Detroit families who are at least 16 weeks pregnant or who have a 2026 newborn.
- The program launched in Flint in 2024 and has reached more than 5,600 families across the state.
- Early results from other Rx Kids communities across Michigan show near-universal enrollment, improved family stability, reduced financial stress and better health for moms and babies.

Michigan State University's [Rx Kids](#) program has launched in the city of Detroit, marking the life-changing program's

Credits, Attributions and Contacts

Including the name(s) of the people involved in creating the story is a user experience best practice. It shows there is a human voice behind the content and increases transparency and credibility.

Author

Always include the name of the primary writer or content creator. If the writer and media contact are the same person, include the name in both fields.

Select the primary writer or content creator in the Public Author(s) field under the Details tab on the content details page. The field is required in the Standard Story Template.

The screenshot shows a form titled "Standard Story details" with a "Cancel" button and a "Save" button. Below the title are three input fields: "Read Time" (a simple text box), "Public Author(s)" (a text box with a "+" icon on the right), and "Media Contact(s)" (a text box with a "+" icon on the right).

Public author(s) will appear as a byline directly under the article headline, with the format "By [Name]."

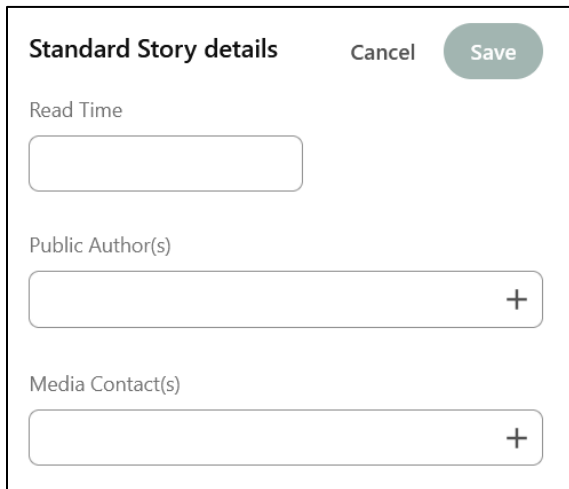


Include multiple author names when two or more people actively collaborated on writing, interviewing or crafting the narrative. Limit to those who played a significant editorial role — not reviewers or approvers.

Media Contact

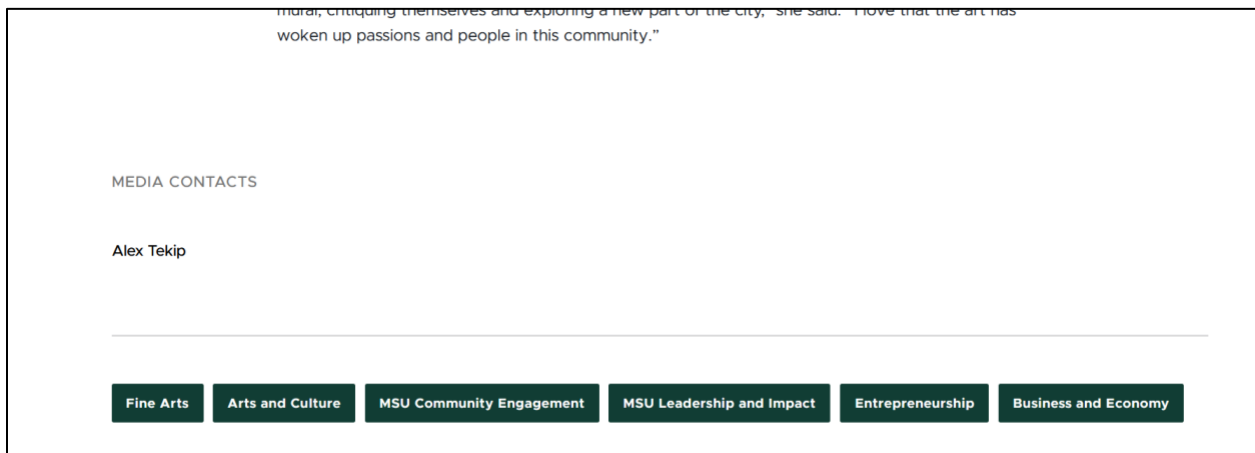
The only people listed as media contacts on MSUToday stories should be members of UCAM. Specifically the PR and Issues groups based on their assigned areas: <https://msutoday.msu.edu/for-media/contacts>.

Select the names in the Media Contact(s) field under the Details tab on the content details page.



The screenshot shows a form titled "Standard Story details" with "Cancel" and "Save" buttons. It contains three input fields: "Read Time", "Public Author(s)", and "Media Contact(s)". Each field has a plus sign (+) on the right side, indicating that multiple items can be added.

The contacts will appear below the story text, above the selected topics.



The screenshot shows a story page with a "MEDIA CONTACTS" section. The name "Alex Tekip" is listed under this section. Below the contacts, there is a horizontal line and a row of topic tags: "Fine Arts", "Arts and Culture", "MSU Community Engagement", "MSU Leadership and Impact", "Entrepreneurship", and "Business and Economy".

Clicking on the name of a media contact opens a small box that will include contact information for that person.

Assets

See the Credits section under Using Assets.

Other Contributors

MSUToday stories often involve many people beyond writers, including designers, videographers and subject-matter experts. List the names of these contributors at the end of the story text.

Example:

Design by: [NAME]

Video by: [NAME]

Always confirm the correct spelling of names.

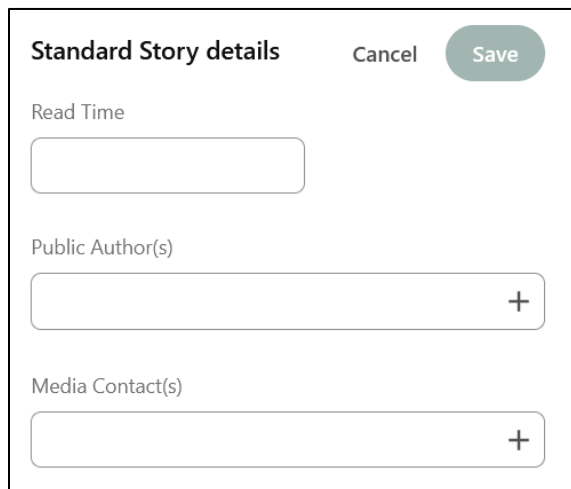
Read Time

Providing a read time improves user engagement and helps readers manage expectations. Optimization tests have shown that including a read time leads to a higher story read conversion.

To calculate read time, identify the total word count including headline, subhead, summary and captions. Divide that number by 200 and round to the nearest whole number.

Key takeaway

Read times are required for all stories on MSUToday.



The screenshot shows a form titled "Standard Story details" with a "Cancel" button and a "Save" button. The form contains three input fields: "Read Time" (a single text box), "Public Author(s)" (a text box with a "+" icon), and "Media Contact(s)" (a text box with a "+" icon).

Meta Titles and Descriptions

Meta titles and descriptions are used by web browsers, search engines and social media. They are vital for SEO, search engine rankings and audience engagement.

The meta title is used for search engine optimization and may also be crawled by AI bots. Include a descriptive title of the content item.

The meta description is used for search engine optimization and may also be crawled by AI bots. Use clear, concise language fit for public consumption.

Meta Titles

- Use the text in the Headline field
- Character limit (50–60 characters)

Meta Descriptions

- Write a concise meta description (around 150–160 characters) summarizing the story and including at least one keyword.
- If not redundant to the meta title, consider using the lede or subhead.
- Consider including secondary keywords that don't fit into the meta title or headline.

Key takeaway

Meta titles and meta descriptions are required for all stories on MSUToday.



The image shows a form with two input fields. The top field is labeled "Meta Title" and the bottom field is labeled "Meta Description". Both fields are empty and have rounded corners.

Story URLs

For MSUToday, authors are responsible for developing the story URLs that must be finalized before the Prepare to Publish step in the [workflow](#).

Best practice:

- Create short, descriptive URLs that include the primary keywords.
- Keep URLs short, readable and lowercase.
- It is not necessary to include MSU.

Avoid:

- Repeating the exact headline
- Full sentences
- Stop words, which are ignored by search engines
 - Examples: the, a, an, in, of, on, for, and, to, with, is, at, by

Examples:

- **Original:** msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/10/researchers-lead-\$37m-study-to-shed-light-on-perimenopause-and-psychoisis
- **Adjusted:** msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/10/study-sheds-light-perimenopause-psychoisis

- **Original:** msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/10/michigan-makes-historic-investment-in-families-through-rx-kids
- **Adjusted:** msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/10/historic-investment-health-pregnancy-infants

How to create:

- The URL is generated by the name the content author gives the content item.

Once a content author selects “Prepare to publish,” the name of the content item and taxonomy cannot be changed.

