

A *Vistas* Style Guide

by the Information Committee of the Eldorado Community Improvement Association

- *Articles 300 to 400 words or less, unless assigned by editor*
- *Articles written in objective, third person, unless a personal memoir*
- *Submission by fifth for following month (April 5 for May issue)*
- *Pictures uncropped, 4 Mb or larger, caption, names and photo credit*
- *Include author(s) names and at least one email address*

Vistas, the monthly newsletter of the ECIA, is a service to the community of Eldorado at Santa Fe, funded by the annual assessment paid to the home owners' association by lot owners of Eldorado. It presents information of interest and use to everyone living in the community, articles by ECIA Board, by staff of the contracted management firm, HOAMCO, and by residents themselves. The ECIA Information Committee, community volunteers functioning on behalf of the ECIA Board of Directors and the Eldorado community, act as editors to maintain the quality and integrity of *Vistas*. The Information Committee (IC) holds regular meetings. Like those of the ECIA Board of Directors and all ECIA committees, these are open to all resident members of the Association. This guide explains the IC's standards for writing in *Vistas*, including conventions of spelling, literary mechanics, syntax and style, for everyone writing for this publication, to insure consistent readability and quality while protecting residents' right to express their views in courteous, clear and competent fashion.

The pages of *Vistas* are open to the Eldorado homeowners whose assessment payments support the publication. Both the Board and IC encourage participation in the dialogue. We also understand that not everyone writes with professional skill or results. However, your desire for and right to expression are important to the entire community as well as to each individual. The purpose of this guide is to help the non-professional writer produce an article as readable and informative as possible.

Writing for this general audience is not the same as writing a legal brief, a novel, an inter-office memo, academic dissertation or scientific report. Nor can the article ignore the standards of courtesy, respect and decorum that are part of civil discussion. These standards will help you, the writer, get across what you have to say more effectively – and isn't that why you want to publish something in this or any form? After all, if readers cannot understand exactly what you are saying, you have failed them – and yourself. Unless it's a signed memoir, keep the tone objective and leave out "I" and "me".

Vistas, like any publication, strives to serve its readers with the ABCs of good writing, as they are often called: *Accuracy*, *Brevity* and *Clarity*. Keep these in mind as you prepare an article for this, or any, publication. Verify facts that you present. If you offer opinion, conjecture or belief, say so clearly, and if appropriate, identify the source. "A good way to do this is to quote someone," said a representative of the Information Committee, "This can also get an idea across quickly." Respect your reader's time and tell your story directly without wandering. Make your points so they cannot be misunderstood by anyone, even a reader skimming through the article. Writing for *Vistas* is journalism as much as for any newspaper or magazine, and the motto in newsrooms is "Write it tight and write it bright." In other words, use as few words as necessary, and make them work. Cut your prose to the bone whenever you can; another newsroom motto says "If in doubt, leave it out." But if it's vital, keep it in. In this guide, you'll see some deliberate tongue in cheek bad examples. And you'll see many of these ideas in use, like ending a sentence or paragraph with a verb. As you read, look for that to appear.

Short sentences are good. Keep It Simple, Straightforward – and clear. Prefer short words to pomposity, but avoid cuteness and cant. Cut-down sentences are acceptable. Like this. But only when the meaning is absolutely clear. Use more verbs and fewer adjectives. A catchy word that sizzles beats a long-winded polysyllabic circumlocution any day. But. Not talk bullets: robot, telegram – not human. Sad.

Never be afraid to use short paragraphs when you have something distinct to say.

Write in what grammarians call active voice: *Somebody does something*, rather than *something is done by some person* – or, often, nobody; it just “happens” without anyone taking responsibility. Except for earthquakes and weather, that’s incomplete reporting – a journalistic sin. Sometimes, it’s whitewashing to hide an important fact, and that casts doubt on your whole message. Why handicap yourself? Questions are okay. So, rarely, are *italics*. But avoid the teen-age exclamation point! Please!!

The first sentence, which pro writers call a *lead* (pronounced and sometimes spelled “lede”) literally pulls your reader into the article. It tells the relevant facts, or at least enough to grab the reader’s attention to keep on reading and not jump to some other eye-magnet. Don’t hold your big news until the end. Busy readers may never get there. This is where your news article differs from a mystery, law brief or thesis: tell the big news first, then explain who, what, where, why and how.

Always write for your *reader’s* convenience, not your own. Identify people clearly. Explain programs and organizations before you call them by initials (an exception in *Vistas*: ECIA is already identified on the front page and we all know about it because we live here). If you have to explain a new idea, do it clearly and briefly. The rule of thumb is: *never discount the reader’s intelligence, but never assume he or she already knows some vital fact about your subject*. Otherwise, why write?

Vistas does not print opinions or arguments as individual articles. However, verified facts about any topic are always valid, when the purpose is to increase understanding rather than to change beliefs, sway judgment, or belittle an individual or group of people. This is a matter of courtesy and respect for other human beings. If you would be offended by the way something is said, don’t write it about someone else. That is not to say that you should hide facts that may be uncomfortable, if they are necessary to understanding. But remain calm, objective, fair and kind in the way you say it. Needless to say, direct personal attacks and coarse language have no place in any respectable publication.

A few specifics: Dates take the form of “May 3,” not “May 3rd,” “3 May” or “5/3” Abbreviate *Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov.,* and *Dec.* with periods, but spell out the rest. Time of day is “10 AM, 5:45 PM” not “10:00 a.m.” or “6pm.” Initials in names take periods: “J. P. Morgan” but others do not: “USA, ECIA, UNM” (HOAMCO is the full and correct name of ECIA’s management contractor, originally Home Owners’ Association Management Co.). Avoid shorthand or jargon forms or unfamiliar abbreviations. And don’t use ALL CAPS for emphasis. Just write effectively, now that you know how. Most articles should be 300-400 words long, unless you’ve been asked otherwise by the editor. *Eldorado* was originally *El Dorado*; the school, fire fighters and a few others use that in their legal name.

Headlines come *after* the article has been edited and placed on a page. It is not the writer’s job to create the headline, although suggestions are certainly welcome. In general, the headline, like the lead, should engage the reader and tell enough of the story to attract attention. It can be clever, but should not be a memo subject line. Proofread and spellcheck your article – twice – before you send it to *Vistas*.

Articles are due on the fifth of the month preceding publication (this is important for a story about an event set for a certain date; sending it in earlier is always appreciated) to articles@eldoradosf.org and include the writer’s name, organization if applicable, telephone number (an editor may have questions) and email address (an editor may get a forwarded copy without the “reply” feature available and need to contact you). Email uncropped 4Mb or better photos with caption information and photo credit. Technical specs are available from the IC. Most articles are under 400 words. Emailed articles can be single-spaced. Whenever possible, the IC returns the edited article to the writer to check facts and be sure nothing is misinterpreted, before publication.

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ECIA Information Committee: Pam Henline, chair; Lee Chiacos; Bill Dunning; Bonn Macy