OSNews Style Guide

Rules and guidelines for publishing and participating on OSNews

Contents

Why a style guide?

As made clear in our mission statement below, we aim to inform our readers about a wide variety of topics in the technology world. However, 'just' informing our readers is not our only goal: we want to bring the news as balanced and unbiased as possible, in a reliable and predictable manner. With reliable we mean that we want our readers to be able to trust OSNews for not trying to influence their ideas and attitudes towards certain products, companies, operating systems, applications, and so on. With predictable we mean that our readers should be able to instantly tell what type of news item they are dealing with; whether they are editorials, interviews, news items, or reviews, our readers should be able to tell them apart and take them for what they are in the blink of an eye.

Consistency goes a long way in achieving both reliability as well as predictability. Some might call it boring; we call it a core element of reporting news, reviewing products, or interviewing key players in the technology field. That is why OSNews needs a clear set of guidelines in how to handle and present the news to its readership.

> Our mission statement reads: *"Our goal is to inform our readers with the latest news on a vast range of operating systems and computing environments, from the well-known mainstream OSes, down to small (but also very interesting technically) hobby or embedded ones. True to our tagline, "Exploring the Future of Computing," we're always on the lookout for the next major advance in computing technology, and eager to speculate on how it might change the way people use computing power in their daily lives. With this in mind, it's important to stress that though our focus is operating systems, there will always be other computing-related news that catches our attention."*

This guide caters not only to OSNews editors, but also to authors who choose OSNews as their venue of publication. In this guide, you will find our article guidelines, which should be followed as closely as possible to streamline the publication process.

Important to note, however, is that the following are guidelines, and not rules; there is a big lexical difference between the two. Where a rule allows little to no room for flexibility, a guideline can be deviated from if it benefits the cause it was intended to guide. What this effectively means is that the editorial staff of OSNews may ignore these guidelines if they believe they stand in the way of achieving their goals. A consequence of this is that these guidelines are not set in stone; they will change over time, just as OSNews has changed over time, to better adapt to the ever evolving landscape it is part of.

1.   News items

News items are the most common things you see on OSNews. They consist of a headline (§1.1) and a short summary (the 'teaser', §1.2) which also carries the link to the original story; apart from that, every news item is stored in a database category, attached to which is an icon (§1.3).

1.1   Headlines

OSNews headlines are usually copied from the source news article, to prevent editorialisation; however, when the source article's headline is deemed unfit (for whatever reason) you should change it to your liking. When constructing a headline, there are many relevant points of consideration.

A basic, simple rule is to avoid the use of too many words that do not carry any lexical meaning; for instance, definite and indefinite articles can more often than not be omitted, while 'and' can usually be replaced by a comma. This improves the 'flow' of the headline:

> Microsoft Releases a Patch for Windows 2000 and XP
> Microsoft Releases Patch for Windows 2000, XP

A second important rule concerns capitalisation. On OSNews, we capitalise each word in the headline except for: a, and, for, of, on, the, to, by, in, with (an exception is of course the first word in a headline which is always capitalised). This is done for aesthetic reasons:

> Give A Child A Video Game - And Maybe A Job
> Give a Child a Video Game - and Maybe a Job

However, an exception is made for 'to' when it is part of an infinitive:

> Apple to Switch to SPARC
> Apple To Switch to SPARC

Thirdly, the form the headline takes can be influenced by the type of article it links to. Roughly, there are four different types: interviews, reviews, general articles, and news stories. For the last two, it suffices to simply copy the existing headline from the source article; however, for the first two it is often wise to apply a template, because the authors of those articles often choose a more artistic headline which does not describe the article's contents very well (thus confusing OSNews readers). For the interview, there are two standard templates to choose from:

> Interview: Chris Moore, [of] PC-BSD
> Torvalds: 'Use KDE'

For the review, there is only one template:

> Review: Apple's iPhone

As a final note on headlines, when reporting on potentially controversial content, be sure to make clear that direct quotes are not the words of our editorial staff by using quotation marks:

> 'Windows XP More Secure Than Linux'

1.2   Teasers

The teasers are the actual news items on OSNews. They contain the meat of the story, and can be very difficult to write. More often than you would think, authors or journalists do not write a proper short summary of their story, meaning you will have to manually construct one. What content you put in your teasers is up to you, a style guide will not help you there; however, there are two elements in which a style guide can be of help.

These two core elements of a teaser are quoting and linking. Both are related to 'giving credit where credit is due'; you must always make sure that it is *more than crystal clear where the words in your teaser are coming from*. I will start with quoting, which is the more complicated of the two.

When linking to a 'mere' news item, where the original author's opinion is not visible, you should not use quotes when you copy the introduction and/or a few sentences:

> Microsoft has been forced to acknowledge that a substantial number of PCs running the new version of its Windows operating system will not be able to play high-quality DVDs. The Vista system will be available to consumers at the end of the month. However, in an interview with The Times, one of its chief architects said that because of anti-piracy protection granted to the Hollywood studios, Vista would not play HD-DVD and Blu-ray Discs on certain PCs.

Whenever you add your own words to that introduction, you should use quotation marks and italics:

> Yet again hell freezes over. As if Apple's switch to Intel wasn't enough, Sun has announced that IBM is going to sell Solaris on its blade servers. *"IBM has agreed to sell Sun's operating system with its BladeCenter servers in 'the coming months', according to an IBM spokesman. This is quite the surprise given IBM's contentious relationship with Sun. IBM's services organization, however, does do a large amount of business selling Sun servers and Solaris, which may have helped seal the deal."* Jonathan Schwartz announced it in his blog as well.

When linking to articles and editorials you should put the teaser as a whole between quotation marks. You should only use italics when you have added your own words (as above); making a whole teaser italic looks very unattractive:

> "This tutorial shows how you can back up and restore hard drives and partitions with Ghost4Linux. Ghost4Linux is a Linux Live-CD that you insert into your computer; it contains hard disk and partition imaging and cloning tools similar to Norton Ghost. The created images are compressed and transferred to an FTP server instead of cloning locally."

Direct quotes should always be put between quotation marks as well as in italics:

> Novell's controversial pact with Microsoft reflects the desire of the number two Linux seller to position itself as a mixed-source company. Speaking to ZDNet Asia last week, Maarten Koster, the newly-appointed president of Novell Asia-Pacific, noted that the company positions itself in the market differently from its rivals. *"You've got Red Hat as a pure open source company, and you've got Microsoft as a [commercial] license-based company,"* Koster said. *"The reality is, most Novell customers run a mixed-source IT environment."*

Finally, descriptions (i.e. when you copy part of the "about" page of a newly-announced project) are treated as articles/editorials.

The second core element of teasers is the links inside it which point the readers to the source articles. In this style guide, I will not dive too deep into this; there is only one thing to keep in mind, and that is to make sure that the link to the main source for the teaser should be those words that are

most relevant (among other things, this is mostly done for search engine optimisation), i.e. the words in red in the following example:

> Open-source database company MySQL has decided to stick to the current General Public License rather than move to an upcoming revision, pending broader industry acceptance. MySQL, one of the most successful commercial ventures to use the GPL, has modified its license terms from 'version 2 or later' to 'version 2' only, according to Kaj Arno, the company's vice president of community.

Other than this basic rule, use your own creative mind to link in a meaningful way; however, always make sure that the main source is linked as described above. Obviously, this is not always as easy as in this example, so creativity is really a must here.

As a final note, whenever you link to a special filetype, for instance a .mp3 podcast or a .pdf article, be sure to add, between square brackets, the filetype in question; this way readers do not feel 'tricked' into downloading files they do not wish to download.

> The European Commission's enterprise and industry department just released the final draft of what could be the biggest academic interdisciplinary study on the economic/innovative impacts of FLOSS [.pdf]. The study was done by an international consortium, led by the United Nations University/University of Maastricht's department of innovation; UNU-MERIT for short. The study was prepared by senior researcher Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, who did a tremendous amount of FLOSS studies the last few years, amongst them on FLOSSpols and FLOSSWorld.

1.3   Database category

Each news item or article must be put into its respective category in the database; this choice also defines which icon or logo will show in the top left corner of the news item in question. Most of the time, this choice is fairly straightforward; sometimes, however, this is not the case.

Firstly, news regarding Linux distributions often poses problems because there are so many of them, and hence not all of them have their own category and logo in the OSNews database. Most of the time, it is appropriate to just put these stories in the General Linux category, but there are cases where they can be put in, for instance, the category of the 'parent' the distribution in question is derived from. For instance, it is perfectly acceptable to put a story regarding CentOS in the Red Hat category. In the same way, items about Ubuntu derivatives (Kubuntu, Xubuntu, etc.) can all be put in the Ubuntu category.

Obviously, there are exceptions. One of those is Elive. Even though this distribution is a Debian derivative, it is better put in the General Linux category because of its highly differentiated nature (it uses E16/E17 as its desktop environment). The same applies to, for instance, SymphonyOS.

A second troublesome aspect concerns FreeBSD derivatives. FreeBSD recently revealed its new logo, so we thought we would give them a hand by changing the old logo on the FreeBSD category to the new one. After a big flame war on OSNews (and a few angry emails), we were forced to use this new logo *only* for FreeBSD stories, and *not* for any stories on FreeBSD derivatives. As a consequence, we created a General BSD category in which all non-FreeBSD/NetBSD/OpenBSD/PC-BSD items are put, to avoid any problems from happening in the future.

2.   Original Content

Original content are articles, interviews, editorials, reviews, etc., which are published by OSNews itself; contrary to news items (§1), they do not originate from other websites or publications. Original content can come from OSNews' editorial staff, or from 'third party' authors who have chosen OSNews as their venue of publication. Below I will set out which html-code is allowed, what format we need the article to be in, and so on. These guidelines apply to both the editorial staff as well as articles contributed by the community. These guidelines, as strict and arbitrary as they may seem, are necessary to streamline the publication process; to increase the chances of your article being accepted, it is wise to adhere to them as much as possible.

I will first deal with the legalities (§2.1), after which I will explain what type of html tags are allowed (§2.2); I will then focus on which file format the article must be submitted in (§2.3), how to take care of images and screenshots (§2.4), information regarding spelling, grammar, and punctuation (§2.5), followed by a complete example article (§2.6).

2.1   Legal

The OSNews editorial staff reserves the right to edit submissions for content and clarity as well as the right to publish or not publish your article. Articles submitted and published on OSNews are not to be re-published elsewhere, except maybe in translation cases to other languages (to be decided on case by case basis). You may freely re-publish your article elsewhere after a period of 30 days of the article being live on the OSNews web site (however, please let us know that you intend to later re-publish your article elsewhere).

Since full credit will be given to the author, please add a few lines of information about yourself at the bottom of your article so we can include it in a "About the author" paragraph of the article when it goes live (please note that you should not include that information in the email you are going to send us, include it at the bottom of your article instead).

2.2   HTML formatting

OSNews articles use a limited set of html tags for formatting. The best method of writing these tags is 'by hand'; using a WYSIWYG editor (such as Apple's iWeb, Microsoft's Frontpage, or the open-source NVU) will more often than not present HTML code which cannot be published by OSNews due to a number of reasons (mainly browser compatibility) which are beyond the scope of this style guide.

The following HTML tags are allowed:

```
<p> <a href> <b> <i> <u> <strike> <br> <blockquote> <code> <pre> <img> <li>
<ul> <ol>
```

When absolutely necessary, you may also use the `<table>` tag. For the use of other tags, please ask the editorial staff whether they are allowed or not.

The `<a>` and `<img>` tags require some extra guidelines. The `<a>` tag should be used in its most basic of forms; more attributes within the tag are not only unnecessary, they are also not allowed (*please note the use of the quotes for validation purposes*):

```
<a href="http://www.osnews.com">OSNews</a>
```

The `<img>` tag does need a few attributes when being used, mostly to set things like width and height. An example (again, note the quotes; they *must* be used):

```
<img src="image.jpg" width="XXX" height="XXX" border="X" alt="image"
title="image" />
```

To align the image, you can use the `align` attribute within the `<img>` tag. If you want no border around your image, be sure to add `border="0"`.

2.3 File format

Articles *must* be submitted as plain text (.txt) files; please do not send us Word documents or OpenDocument files as they will automatically be turned down. The easiest method of writing an article for OSNews is to use a simple notepad application which supports spell checking, such as Gedit, Kwrite, or TextEdit. Please make sure that your editor of choice supports 'word wrap', which makes sure there are no arbitrary line breaks in your article.

2.4 Images and screenshots

Even though including images and screenshots is by no means a must, they do add an extra touch to your articles. Especially when it comes to reviews, screenshots can tell more than a thousand words. When reviewing an operating system, try to include screenshots showing the default, unaltered desktop; this gives people an objective idea of what the operating system looks like.

The images or screenshots should be included in .jpg format with 20% compression rate (this equals to "80% quality"), .png, or .gif format; this depends which format gives you the smallest file size while maintaining a good quality ratio. There is no need to create thumbnails; we will take care of that for you. Images which do not use thumbnails should not be wider than 600 pixels.

2.5 Spelling, grammar, and punctuation

We will tolerate some spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes, but only up to a certain level; we are willing to fix things here and there but with the advent of spelling and grammar checkers there is no need for articles to have a lot of these types of mistakes. We can understand the difficulties of writing in a language other than your native one (two of our editors are non-native speakers of English), so we are open to work with third party authors to make changes and improvements.

There are a few things to take note of. Firstly, because of the lack of a governing body for spelling and grammar rules in the English language, the world has been blessed by slightly different variants of the language. On OSNews, we have decided to not standardise on either of these variants; use whatever you are most comfortable with (probably American English or British English). However, please do try to be consistent in your preference.

Secondly, do not use any 'em' dashes [−] or smart quotes ["] (or any other non-ASCII character for that matter); they pose problems for some older or more obscure browsers. Try to refrain from using smilies.

2.6 Article example

Below is an example of what your article should look like before submitting it to OSNews. As previously mentioned, adherence to this style guide increases the chances of your article being accepted and published on OSNews.

```
<p>
<b>Title</b>
</p><p>
This is the first paragraph of this amazing, one-of-a-kind article. You will all
love it, and worship the greatness that is <a href="http://xyz.net">Xyz</a>, for
it is truly great.
</p><p>
This is the second paragraph of this review of Xyz. Xyz is <i>really good</i> at
doing nothing.
</p><p>
<img src="image.jpg" width="200" height="150" align="left" border="X" alt="image"
title="image" />
</p><p>
This is the conclusion.
</p><p>
```

```
<b><u>About the author:</b></u><br />
<i>I am greatness, and I work for company Abc. I regularly exhibit my
greatness.</i>
</p>
```

3.   Commenting on OSNews

Despite being 'only technology', the subject matter at OSNews has been known to ignite strong emotions. Consequently, on occasion people may get carried away in the comment sections. We want to maintain civil discourse at OSNews, and make the site a place where opinions can be aired and arguments can be waged without nastiness, trolling, and pointless dogmatism. This is even more important to us than 'free speech'. Most of our readers prefer to read thoughtful, civil comments, and are willing to take the risk of their own comments being de-emphasized in exchange for that privilege.

I will first take of the legalities (§3.1); then I will explain the how and why of our moderation system (§3.2), after which I will set out the rules for commenting on OSNews (§3.3). Finally, I will set out our banning policy (§3.4).

3.1   *Legal*
The readers' comments are owned by whoever posted them. We are not responsible for them in any way. Literally.

3.2   *The moderation system*
For a long time, OSNews' moderation system consisted of the editors 'manually' sifting through all the comments, frantically trying to keep up with the sometimes hundreds of comments on some stories. To ease this task, a 'report abuse' button was added to each comment, so readers could exert at least *some* influence on moderation.

This system was anything but ideal. It proved to be a Pandora's Box; we received many accusations of bias and censorship, and to some extent, those complaints had some validity in them. Even though the editorial staff has never purposefully tried to influence OSNews' comments, it may have well happened unconsciously. Hence, we needed a new moderation system. The obvious choice was to 'out source' moderation to the readers themselves.

Moderation is a dual edged sword, but ultimately it serves one purpose: to make it easier for our readers to locate good content. The guidelines are as such: when voting up a comment, you should be promoting insightful comments that you believe other readers will enjoy reading. It should be based less on agreement with the content and more on quality of argument or ideas set forth.

Likewise, moderating down a comment is appropriate only when the comment violates the OSNews commenting rules, set out below. A comment that contains an unpopular opinion should not be voted down, but rather, should warrant a response. The 'vote down' function should be used sparingly to demote comments that do not add to the conversation and/or contain offensive or personal attacks.

3.3   *Rules*
Despite the fact that moderation is now in the hands of our readers, we as editors still have the power to moderate in the 'old-fashioned' way. OSNews is still *our* website, and if we deem a comment in violation of the rules set out below, we will act accordingly; this can be in the form of moderating your comment to a score of -5 (with or without locking it from any further moderation), or making it 'invisible' (effectively deleting it). The latter is only used in the case of spam or when the author has specifically asked us to remove his comment (i.e. because the comment was posted on the wrong story).

Submission of a comment on OSNews implies that you have acknowledged and fully agreed to the following terms:

I.   No gratuitous use of profanity, biting sarcasm, or personal disparagement, especially directed at individuals.

II.   No personal attacks on story authors, other readers, or news editors of this web site.

III.   Even if you are in violent disagreement or have strong feelings, find a way to keep your comments calm, and try to explain your reasoning, instead of just ranting.

IV.   OSNews is not just an open source news web site, and it is not just an "alternative" OS site. Do not post comments that merely disparage a particular OS or company. Some examples of sentiments that are in violation of this rule: 'M$ Sucks!', 'Apple is dead!', 'People who use KDE should be shot!', etc. If you hate Microsoft, or Apple, or Linux, or whatever, you may still talk about your hatred on OSNews, but please do so with reasoned, on-topic arguments.

V.   Make sure you have read the entire news story before you start commenting on it. Something might have already been covered in the article, but you 'missed it'.

VI.   This is the most subjective of the rules, but its enforcement is important to everyone's enjoyment: no mindless OS wars. In other words, please constrain your zeal for your particular pet OS, company, or product. Regardless of your intention, comments that we deem to be likely to ignite a flame war will be moderated down. Even including a throwaway 'X rules, Y sucks' line into your reasoned masterpiece may result in the whole post being moderated down by the community or by the OSNews editors (see XII).

VII.   Keep comments on-topic. Even if they are reasoned, witty, and well-written, they may be moderated down if they are off-topic. This includes meaningless posts, off-topic ASCII art, and posts that just say 'Cool!'.

VIII.   OSNews is not just about operating systems. We report on other technology news, on development issues and articles, hardware, and if it is a slow news day, we might kick in some sci-fi movie news or other stuff we might find interesting. It is not your job to tell us what should and should not be posted on OSNews. Hence, any comment along the lines of 'Why is this OSNews?' will immediately be moderated down and locked from any further moderation. No questions asked.

IX.   When we deem a conversation off-topic or in violation of any of these rules, we will often moderate all comments on the topic, including rebuttals and other responses. We want to put the flame war to rest, so this may mean that even though your comment is well within the rules and was carefully crafted, it will become an innocent casualty.

X.   Political diatribes, criticism of a country's foreign policy, attacks on an author's, editor's, or reader's country of origin, ethnic slurs, and most other comments related to politics and religion are not allowed. However, this rule has some flexibility since every now and then a news story is published that is so deeply rooted in politics that political debate is inevitable. However, understand that even on these stories, political discussion is like walking on shattered glass with a blindfold over your eyes: you are bound to get cut.

XI.   Do not use comments as a platform to discuss OSNews' moderation or editorial policy. If you want to complain about your comment being moderated down, your story being rejected, or you want to accuse OSNews of censorship, please do so in an email. We are actually eager to discuss our thinking with readers, and will almost always reply right away to emails on that subject.

XII.   Even if your comment might be nicely crafted and written, but you include one line of text that does not comply with the above, it will result in the moderation or deletion of the comment as a whole.

XIII.   Inclusion of a 'signature' to your comment that contains a 'Free iPod' or other conga line promotional pyramid scheme link are not welcome on OSNews; especially if the accompanying post seems to be merely a pretext for including the promotional text. OSNews readers are welcome to use the comments to promote their own products and services, or products that they have an interest in, but only if those promotions are on topic and relevant. If we ever run an article about winning free iPods, everyone will be welcome to post their 'win a free iPod' links. Likewise, if you develop a file system, we welcome you to explain its virtues in a thread about file systems, but if you bring it up out of the blue during a discussion of developer tools, your comment will be removed.

In spite of these rules, OSNews has a large amount of flexibility when it comes to commenting. Comments make OSNews lively and entertaining, and hence we do not wish to constrain our readers too much; this is also why we as editors try to refrain from moderating as much as possible. We do not want to achieve 100% 'on-topicness' - we want a lively and entertaining debate.

3.4   Banning

Repeated offenders may be banned from commenting privileges or even from access to the site. Having your comment moderated down constitutes as a warning, and you may be warned hundreds of times before we will resort to banning; however, if you are a really big troublemaker, you will be banned without a second thought. We will typically email you before you are banned to ask you to stop your negative behaviour, or we will address you directly in the comments' section to ask you to amend your behaviour.

People are generally banned for a limited period of time (just to get their attention), though we reserve the right to ban someone for life.

If you find you have been banned from OSNews, it means that you have been very naughty indeed. It means that you have violated the terms above, probably hundreds of times; despite having seen your posts moderated down, you have continued to engage in the behaviour that OSNews' staff and its readers have objected to. It means that you have been emailed or addressed directly in the forums, and you have either ignored those entreaties or more likely you have insulted or disparaged the person contacting you. Even after all that, we are usually willing to lift your ban and return you to full citizenship under the following conditions:

I.   You send us an email in which you ask to be reinstated;
II.   In that email, you tell us, to the best of your understanding, why *you* think you were banned;
III.   You read and acknowledge any return emails if they are necessary for us to clarify the reasoning behind the banning;
IV.   You agree to cease the offending behaviour.

4.   Recommendations

Each news item, editorial, interview, or review on OSNews can be 'recommended' by our readers. Clicking the 'thumbs up' icon while being logged in to OSNews will result in you recommending the item in question. Many people have asked us, since we implemented the system, what a recommendation *means*.

When you recommend an article, you are putting up a little red flag next to the item, which tells other readers 'this is an item you should read'. *Why* you find other people should read the article is irrelevant; it could be well written, it may have high quality screenshots, it might simply be an entertaining read. The recommendation system, therefore, is a method of signalling to other readers which items are worthwhile.

Contrary to what some seem to think, the recommendation system is *not* used by OSNews editors to determine what articles to (not) publish in the future. Recommendations in no way influence what kind of news appears on OSNews. More often than not, articles which express unpopular opinions or are simply about less popular matters (i.e. many programming articles) are not recommended, but this has nothing to do with the actual quality of the article.

To sum it up, a recommendation means what the word itself already entails: you recommend this article to your fellow readers. It does not have any influence on OSNews' content in the future.

Closing notes

The goal of this guide was to consolidate all the information about publishing and participating on OSNews into one guide, for easy reference. Before this guide, all this information was scattered across the website, and as a result, we rarely (if ever) received an article which complied to our guidelines, making the publication process unnecessary complex. This made publishing articles very tedious, as we had to manually remove invalid html, add the html we did need, remove non-ASCII characters, you name it.

Since OSNews is a voluntary effort, maintained in our free time, we wanted to change this, and this guide is one of the first small steps in easing the work of OSNews editors; the big step, as you may or may not know, is a completely redesigned website, OSNews version 4.0 - which is something of a completely different order. You will be amazed.

Legal

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