

Style Guide

Sample pages

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Contents

Introduction

Our writing style

Our tone of voice

Writing for the web

Common queries – how should I write?

Introduction

This style guide is designed to support the production of high quality 'on message' written content.

The way we write is part of our brand and it can have a huge impact on our readers and how they regard us. This competency has many facets including the clarity, consistency, and tone of voice that all help ensure readers value us for what we truly are and understand what we have to offer.

Our writing needs to project and reflect the values* that together describe 'our personality' or mindset:

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This guide is designed to help you, as a writer, to draft your copy to reflect this personality and ensure that our organisation projects itself in a consistent way. Whilst it is not designed to teach anyone *how* to write, but rather how we should express our values and brand identity, the guide does offer some pointers about *writing for the web* as this requires a particular written style best suited to how people typically skim read web copy.

Our writing style

As well as reflecting our personality, our communications need to be clear and consistent. We hope that having this guide will help keep our style consistent across a range of media, as well as improving readability and reducing the number of errors we make.

In general, a good written style is unobtrusive, plain and simple. It uses straightforward words, few capital letters and hyphens, and as little punctuation as is consistent with good sense and grammar.

It also helps if you:

- **Keep it short and simple.** Avoid confusing people by never using a long word where a short word will do. Don't use formal words: for example, use 'buy' instead of 'purchase'; 'help' instead of 'assist'; 'about' instead of 'approximately'; and 'like' instead of 'such as'. Avoid using long sentences with complicated sub-clauses
- **Remember that not all readers will have English as their first language.** Make sure your expressions are simple (eg, 'before' **not** 'prior to'; 'because' **not** 'due to the fact that')
- **Use contractions (eg, can't, don't).** It's less formal and more conversational
- **Use the same language readers use.** Use Google Insights to check the terms people search for when you're writing for the web. Of course, there will be exceptions
- **Don't use clichés.** Try to keep the content fresh

Our tone of voice

Our tone of voice is our 'personality' expressed in the words we use and how we put these words together (our style) to address our readers. The choice of language will help project the essence of our business and values to our audiences and help us to be known for what we really are.

Writing for the web – a brief guide

A website is rarely read 'logically' from 'page 1' – it isn't read like a book and therefore it should not be written like one. The following simple guidelines are offered. If adhered to, visitors are more likely to stay on-site for longer as they will find it easier to skim read, understand our content and find what they are looking for.

Reading ages

A report from a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee in 2006 revealed that some 12 million adults in the UK have literacy skills equivalent to an 11 year-old or younger. For the web writer, it's therefore important not to overestimate the reading ability of our audiences.

It's crucial that web writing looks inviting and easy to read. To achieve this:

- Keep headings/subheads short
- Paragraphs should not exceed five lines, based on a line width of 8-10 words
- Sentences 20 words maximum
- Use short words
- Avoid similar length paragraphs and sentences close together
- Use short subheads throughout the text

- Use bulleted and numbered lists
- Make use of white space to help text stand out
- Don't centre your text

Common queries – how should I write?

Abbreviations

An abbreviation is the shortening of a word or phrase. The first time you introduce an abbreviation, write the word or phrase in full followed by the abbreviation in brackets. In later references use the abbreviation alone. If in doubt, explain.

Dos and don'ts

- Always use an abbreviation (and only write the abbreviation) when it is much better known than the full word or phrase
- Do consider whether using an abbreviation could confuse your readership. If in doubt, spell it out
- Don't use full stops between letters. So write: UK, WHO, NICE, etc. However, do check whether an organisation has full stops in the title and always use their own punctuation
- Don't use full stops for initials and names, but do use spaces. For example: P G Wodehouse, J K Rowling, not PG Wodehouse or JK Rowling (or P.G. Wodehouse etc)
- Don't overuse abbreviations and don't make any up
- Write telephone in full, not phone (or 'phone) in the body of any copy

Acronyms

An acronym is an abbreviation formed from the first letter of each word in a name or phrase. As a general rule, every letter of an acronym is capitalised and there are no full stops in between the letters.

Dos and don'ts

- Don't use acronyms unless they are necessary
- Don't make up new acronyms
- Don't overuse acronyms

- Don't introduce an acronym in the document without spelling it out in full the first time. Use the full name or phrase with the acronym in each new section – don't assume that the reader has necessarily read previous sections. If in doubt, explain.

Active and passive voices

In the active voice, the subject is the person or thing that performs an action. In the passive voice the object becomes the subject of the sentence. *Always* use the active voice: it is more direct and dynamic.

Examples:

The active voice

Regulators have translated their framework into seven different languages.

The passive voice

This framework has been translated into seven different languages by the regulators.

Address the reader

Address the user as 'you' where possible

Ampersand

An ampersand (&) is used to represent the word 'and'. It is often used in titles, product names, department names and geographic locations. It may also be regularly used in tables, charts and forms when space is limited.

Dos and don'ts

- Do use when they are part of the name of a company
- Do use them in constituencies, when two names are joined to form one unit. For example, Mergers & Acquisitions

- Do use them in certain well-known abbreviations and contractions. For example, R&D or M&A
- Don't be tempted to use ampersands to abbreviate the word 'and' in general usage

Apostrophes

The apostrophe is the punctuation mark that usually causes people the most problems.

The apostrophe has two main uses:

To show possession (that someone or something belongs to another) and to show that one or more letters have been omitted (a contraction).

To show possession:

- When the name or noun is singular, add an apostrophe (') then 's' to the word. For example: "Today we are recognised as one of the world's leading clinics"
- If the name or noun is singular and already ends in 's' add an apostrophe then 's' to the word, eg the boss's, Charles's, Jones's
- If the name or noun is plural and does not end in 's', add an apostrophe then 's'. For example, the men's cloakroom was next to the conference room
- If the name or noun is plural and ends in 's', add an apostrophe (') after the 's'. For example, the specialists' consulting rooms are modern, light and welcoming

There is one exception to the rule. When its means 'of it' there is no apostrophe. The rule is: it's = it is; its = of it.

To show that one or more letters have been omitted:

When we are speaking we often cut short certain sounds, running words together. For example, did not becomes didn't, will not becomes won't. When we write these words, we use an apostrophe to show that a letter is missing (see below).

Dos and don'ts (and this how *dos and don'ts* should be written)

- Don't use an apostrophe to make a plural and don't add an apostrophe to decades
- Write 2010s **not** 2010's

Book and journal titles

Capitalise and italicise book and journal titles, but use lower case for definitive article if not part of title.

Examples:

She was reading *A Tale of Two Cities*.

She was reading the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

But...

She was reading the dictionary.

Journal, magazine and newspaper titles should also **always** be presented in italics.

She was reading *The Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*. She was reading the *Journal of Public Mental Health*.

Brackets

Brackets are used in pairs to indicate that the words enclosed are not essential to the meaning of the sentence but provide additional information, an explanation, an afterthought, or clarification. The information contained within the brackets is

referred to as ‘parenthesis’. We use round (brackets) not [square] ones. Always leave a single space before the first of the pair of brackets.

Dos and don'ts

- Do put the full stop inside if a whole sentence is within brackets
- Do put the full stop outside if only part of the sentence is in brackets
- Do use square brackets to introduce a sub section within brackets
- Don't overuse brackets in your writing as it can distract your readership

Bullet points and numbering

Bullet points provide structure and draw attention to key facts. They make it easy for the reader to find and follow information. They are particularly useful when writing for the web. However, it is not always essential to use a bullet pointed list.

Ampersands should not normally be used in a list. See **Ampersands** above.

Use a bulleted list if each item in the list is of equal importance. Use a numbered list if each item is ranked in sequence or in order of priority.

Dos and don'ts

- Do use bullet points when you want to compile a list where each item has *equal* importance
- Do use numbering when you want to outline a logical or prioritised sequence of events
- Do be consistent with your formatting of bullets in a document: use this type of bullet and
 - If required
- Do use a colon (:) at the end of any *sentence* prior to starting the bulleted or numbered list, but not otherwise. **Headings** don't have colons; try rewriting any

sentence that you want to use as a heading so that it is not in fact a sentence. (Note: a sentence has a verb and an object (usually) and expresses a complete thought)

- A bullet point with two or more sentences should be punctuated above as above (ie, no full stop at the end of the second sentence but a full stop as normal at the end of the first one)
- Do use an initial capital letter for the first word of each item in the list
- Don't use punctuation such as semi-colons or full stops at the end of a bullet point
- It is not essential to use bullet points in every list that you write. For example, in you might write a series of points after a colon such as here... "including: CT scans; MRI scans; X-rays; and ultrasound". A comma would also be acceptable between each item
- Ampersands in lists should only be used as indicated above
- If you are writing "Please note", then only use it as follows. Please note: xxxxx; xxxxx; xxxxxx; xxxxx. It should not be used as a heading to a bulleted list

Capital letters

Also known as an upper case letter, the primary use of the capital letter is to indicate the start of a sentence.

People are fond of using capital letters. Our style is to avoid capital letters wherever possible. They should not be used to lend emphasis or importance, (use italics or rephrase the sentence).

Named organisations or authorities take capitals, but general references do not. For example: 'The Devon NHS Trust was...'; 'the health authority was...'; 'Yorkshire Social Services decided....'; 'social services decided...'

The Government always takes a capital letter when it refers to the proper noun, but not otherwise.

Ask yourself: is it a proper noun? Why am I using capital letter? So don't write **Fax** or **Telephone** in the middle of a sentence for example.

Nouns name people, places or things. A proper noun is a specific (or one of a kind) person, place or thing.

Example: "UK governments have shown their support of the NHS over the years" but, "The coalition Government has introduced wide ranging reforms..."

Some tips –

Too many capital letters are distracting and can slow down a reader.

Examples:

Lower case

local authority, county council

Upper case

West Sussex County Council, the National Health Service and the Health Service.

An upper case or capital letter is also used for:

- Proper names and brand names
- Name of a place, institution or event
- Someone's job title when it's connected to his/her name
- Titles of publications
- Days of the week

- Months of the year
- Religions, religious terms and festivals
- Names of languages
- Nationalities or ethnic groups
- Use capital letters when writing acronyms (not small caps unless this is part of the organisation's style identity)
- Don't write whole sentences in capital letters: **IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO READ AND IS NOT SEEN AS PROFESSIONAL; IT COMES ACROSS AS BEING RATHER RUDE OR SHOUTY**

Captions

A caption is a short description used to accompany an image or photograph. It connects the photograph or image to the copy surrounding it.

Dos and don'ts

- Do incorporate the four Ws to communicate the essential facts of the image: Who? What? Where? And when?
- Do add quotes, descriptions and additional information to enrich your caption
- Don't put a full stop at the end of a caption
- Don't forget to identify people in a picture by their names

Children (or young people)

Never refer to children or young people as 'kids'.

Colons and semi-colons

A colon (:) "delivers the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words" (Fowler).

For example:

The following items are needed by members of your team: a pen, a notepad, a ruler, a rubber, and a hole-punch.

It is also used before a whole quoted sentence. Dr Simon Williams said: “It is clear that patients really appreciate it when appointments run to schedule.” (NB: the position of the full stop.)

A heading does not have a colon (or a full stop). So **don't** write:

Simon Smith wins top healthcare award:

A semi-colon (;) is neither a comma nor a full stop but something in-between. In other words, they mark a pause that is longer than a comma but shorter than a full stop. They can also be used in a list of ‘items’ after a colon instead of a comma. These items are usually not single words but rather phrases.

Don't confuse the use of a colon with that of a semi-colon; they are not interchangeable.

Both a colon and a semi-colon should be placed immediately after the word – leave no space – but leave a single space after the punctuation.

Compounds

A compound word is a word that is formed from two (or more) other words. Words that form a compound can be written separately, linked with a hyphen or joined together. There are no set rules, each example of a compound should be judged separately. To be sure you are writing your compound correctly refer to a dictionary.

Dos and don'ts

- Do remember that when you merge two words together you will change the meaning of the word
- Do be consistent in the way you write compound words in a publication
- Don't create new compounds
- You should write:
 - Website (not Web-site)
 - Email (not e-mail)
 - Cooperate (not co-operate)
 - But write e-commerce, e-communications and e-signature
 - Co-exist

Dashes/hyphens

The long dash or hyphen (–), also known as the *em dash*, is used to introduce an explanation, amplification, paraphrase, particularisation or correction of what immediately precedes it. The short dash (-), also called the *en dash*, is sometimes used between numbers, eg 1-5.

Dos and don'ts

- Do use *em* dashes **in pairs** before and after a section to add meaning or explanation
- Don't use more than one pair of *em* dashes per sentence and ideally not more than one pair per paragraph
- Do use the *em* dash to introduce something that develops or is an example of what has gone before
- Do use the *em* dash to illustrate sequences
- Do include a space before and after the *em* dash but not before the *en* dash

Data

Data is plural so you should write 'data are' **not** 'data is'

Dates

An often forgotten but hugely important fact is that numerical dates are not universally recognised. Take, for example, the date 02/03/06; this will be read as 02 March in the UK and 03 February in the USA. Therefore it is important to write dates consistently in full. For example, 23 August 2014.

Dos and don'ts

- Do separate the name and number of the day with a comma, when used together, eg Monday, 22 July 2014
- Do begin the day of a week with an initial capital letter
- Do use a hyphen (n dash) without spacing when referring to a span across two calendar years, eg this will run through 2006-07
- Do separate two financial years with a "/", eg Budgetary year 2006/07
- Do write particular decades as 'sixties', '1960s' or '60s' – there is no need to use an apostrophe
- Don't write *from* 2006-07; instead write *in* 2006-07 or *from* 2006 to 2007
- Don't write *between* 2006-07, instead write *in* 2006-07, *between* 2006 and 2007 or *from* 2006 to 2007
- Don't use numerical dates. For example, 02/03/13 (see above)
- Don't use 'th', 'st', 'nd' after the number. For example, 2nd March 2014

Effect and affect

These two words with similar spellings are often confused and misused.

The key thing to remember is that:

- Affect is mainly used as a verb – it means to influence and
- Effect is mainly used as a noun – it means a result or outcome

So we should write:

‘This operation will affect how you feel’, but ‘this is likely to have an immediate effect on the result.’

Effect is *very* occasionally used as a verb (eg, to effect [or bring about] change) but its use is mainly restricted to formal language and affect is *very* occasionally used a noun.

Except and accept

These two words are often confused – again they sound similar but mean different things.

Accept means to believe, or receive something offered, or take on (a responsibility).
Except means exclude.

Example: “I accept all the points you made except the second one.”

Exclamation marks

Avoid the use of the exclamation mark – particularly on promotional materials. It cheapens the brand!

Foreign words and phrases

Don't use foreign words and phrases unless there is no English alternative. For example, "Monthly reporting has become common practice among the team", is preferable to "Monthly reporting has become *de rigueur* among the team".

Dos and don'ts

- Do put a translation of the foreign word in brackets after the first usage
- Don't use an untranslated foreign word or statement if it might confuse, annoy, frustrate or insult your readers
- Do italicise foreign words and phrases when being used, unless they have become part of everyday English. *Et al* should be italicised. Below are some examples of foreign words that have become anglicised and can therefore be written in normal font:

- ad hoc
- a propos
- bona fide
- café
- de facto
- en masse
- en route
- in situ
- post mortem
- raison d'être
- status quo
- vice versa
- vis-à-vis