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Style Guide

Writing with accuracy and consistency

Latest Update
16 November 2020

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Introduction

- “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of simple minds.” (*Emerson, via The Economist Style Guide*)
- “Unless you get in the habit of being precise you’ll be open to misunderstanding when something is capable of having two meanings.” (*Keith Waterhouse, via John Humphrys, Beyond Words*)

This style guide continues to evolve after its rudimentary beginnings in January 2020. The plan is to build it up over time as and when I come across particular examples of usage. It was originally envisaged as a series of webpages, but the PDF format opens up more — and better — layout options.

Purpose of this style guide

As a writer, proofreader and copy-editor, I value consistency and accuracy in the use of English very highly. The primary purpose of this style guide, therefore, is to act as a point of reference for me in my work, collecting together in one place at least some of the myriad rules, conventions, quirks and anomalies of English spelling, punctuation and grammar. If others find it a helpful guide, all the better!

Although this style guide covers key areas of grammar and punctuation, it is not intended to be a primer, still less a complete reference guide.

First principles

My approach is guided by two principles:

- ensuring that text is clear, easy to follow and free from unnecessary clutter
- using the minimum amount of punctuation consistent with accuracy and clarity of meaning

Keeping up with an evolving language

There is no one definitive set of rules governing the use of English. There are, of course, many ‘rules’ that are more or less universally accepted. But there is also a large and expanding grey area about which there is much less agreement — hence the importance of style guides, helping to ensure consistency within a publication or organisation.

How this style guide is set out

A brief outline of a rule or convention is followed by one or more examples. I have used the following colour coding:

- This fits the rule and is an ‘acceptable’ use of English
- This doesn’t fit the rule or is an incorrect use of English
- This may be a grey area, or an example of usage acceptable to some but not others

References

I initially borrowed heavily from the 2016 *University of Oxford Style Guide*. I couldn’t see a copyright symbol anywhere and they do say it is “freely available online”, but I owe them a heavy debt. Much of the wording has now been amended, but I have retained their general layout.

The main works of reference I use are shown below. As a rule of thumb, the more I use a particular work, the higher up the list it appears. It goes without saying that they don’t all agree with each other. Where there is controversy or significant disagreement, I have indicated my source in square brackets after the relevant explanation or example.

- *Oxford University Style Guide* [PDF, Hilary term 2016]
- *Have You Eaten Grandma*, Gyles Brandreth [2018]
- [*The Guardian and Observer online style guide*](#)
- [*The BBC News online style guide*](#)
- *The Economist Style Guide* [2005 edition]
- *The Pocket Book of Proofreading*, William Critchley [2007]
- *Ofsted Style Guide* [PDF]

It is possible that you stumbled across the style guide by chance on your journey across the internet. If you find it of value, feel free to let me know.

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Abbreviations, contractions and acronyms

Abbreviations

These are formed by omitting letters from the end of a word. A full stop is not required.

| **Only *Connect* is normally on at 8pm on Mondays.**

Contractions

These are formed by omitting letters from the middle of the word. A full stop is not required.

| **The current occupier of 10 Downing St is a liar, say many of his detractors.**

| **It's Mr. Spock not Dr. Spock who is second in command in *Star Trek*.**

well-known and commonly used contractions

- wi-fi
- sci-fi

Acronyms

These are formed from the initial letters of words. If the result is pronounceable as a word, only the initial letter need be capitalised. If it is only pronounceable as a series of letters, it should be written as a single string of upper-case letters. Full stops should not be used after each letter of the acronym. *Style guides disagree on this.*

| **The future of the BBC is in jeopardy, say its supporters.**

| **The greatest achievements of Nasa arguably all occurred before the year 2000.**

| **Labour's Ernie Bevin was a key figure behind the creation of N.A.T.O. in the 1940s.**

Specific abbreviations

ampersands

Do not use, except as part of an official name — use 'and' instead.

| **Supertramp released their best albums on the A&M Records label.**

| **Morrissey & Marr were widely seen as the Lennon & McCartney of the 1980s.**

people's initials

Close up the space between letters. A full stop is not required.

| **AJP Taylor's best book is *English History 1914–1945*.**

measurements

No space between the number and the measurement.

| **Allan Wells won the gold medal in the 100m at the 1980 Olympics.**

page references

These are usually written in full. If not, no gap or full stop is required. Note the abbreviation for a range of pages, using an en-dash.

| **Chapter two of *The God Delusion* begins on p51.**

| **All the action took place on pp25–35.**

Latin references

No full stop is required, except at the end of a sentence.

| ***Queen II* is packed with great songs eg *Father to Son, White Queen, Nevermore*.**

| ***Queen II* is packed with great songs: *Father to Son, White Queen, Nevermore* etc.**

Capitalisation

General rule

Do **not** use a capital letter unless it is definitely required. See also page 8 for rules about titles of books, films and songs.

Jobs, roles and titles

The basic rule is that jobs and roles are lower case and titles are upper case. But this area causes a real headache. When is it a job role and when is it someone's actual title? It may feel wrong (and cause some upset) but lower case should be used in most cases, even for prestigious jobs:

- **Boris Johnson is the current prime minister; the pope was born in Argentina.**
- **Jurgen Klopp, manager of Liverpool, has brilliantly white teeth.**
- **Bill Gates, former chairman and CEO of Microsoft, is very rich.**

Use upper case if the person's title prefixes the name and also in direct address:

- **Archduke Franz Ferdinand; President Trump; Pope Francis**
- **“What are his chances, Doctor?”**

Use upper case if you are clearly making a point of stating someone's job title:

- **“I am proud to introduce Lisa Nandy, Member of Parliament for Wigan.”**
- **“I am proud to introduce Lisa Nandy, who is the member of parliament for Wigan.”**

Use upper case to sign off formal letters and for very specific titles:

- **Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector**
- **Richard J Evans was Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University.**
- **Richard J Evans was a professor of history at Cambridge University.**

Use upper case for royal and noble titles and for high-ranking figures in the Church:

- **The Queen pointed out that there have been two queens named Elizabeth.**
- **the Prince of Wales; Richard, Duke of York; the Black Prince**
- **Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, said ... The archbishop went on to say ...**

other style guides

This is the guidance given by the Bloomsbury publishing group in version 1.2 (September 2016) of their style guide.

Use an upper-case initial when referring to the title as, or part of, a proper noun; otherwise, use a lowercase [sic] initial:

President Obama; Barack Obama, the president; King Abdullah II; the king of Jordan; Member of Parliament (UK); the foreign secretary; Pope Benedict XVI; the pope

The BBC News style guide includes the following:

A few titles are always capped up, whether you name the person or not (eg the Queen, the Pope, Archbishop of XX). But our style generally is to minimise the use of capital letters.

Any post mentioned without reference to the post-holder should be in lower case.

Political job titles have initial caps only when the title is next to the name, in whatever order.

Also use lower case for all jobs outside politics, with or without a name.

Capitalisation ... *continued*

Names that are normally lower case

The following are normally lower case.

- jobs — *prime minister, chief executive, headteacher, head of department*
- school subjects — *history, science, English literature, French, RE*
- geographical but non-specific regions — *north-west England*

Names that are normally upper case

The following are all normally upper case.

- government departments — *the Home Office, the Department for Education*
- the Cabinet, the Cabinet Office, the Privy Council, Home Affairs Select Committee
- government agencies, public bodies etc — *the Crown Prosecution Service*
- political parties — *the Labour Party, the Conservatives*
- acts of parliament — *the Children Act*
- airports, bridges etc — *Liverpool John Lennon Airport, Wigan Pier*
- buildings, stadiums etc — *the DW Stadium, Liverpool Empire, Sydney Opera House*
- institutions — *Tate Modern, the Bank of England*
- organisations — *Official International Queen Fan Club* [but *Queen fan club*]
- schools, universities, churches etc — *Hawtreys High School, Reading University*
- geographical features — *Solsbury Hill, Grantchester Meadows*
- religions etc — *Christianity, Judaism, Pentecostalism, Methodism*
- countries, continents, specific regions — *England, Europe, North America, Middle East*
- treaties — *the Treaty of Versailles, the Peace of Westphalia*
- wars — *Thirty Years' War, Gulf War*
- battles — *the Battle of Hastings*
- family members [if used as a name] — *Mum, Dad, Gramps, Nanna etc*

Capitalisation in history writing

Examples specifically relating to the writing of history.

- Russian Revolution
- Hundred Years' War, Second World War
- Cold War, Swinging Sixties, Great Depression
- the Exclusion Crisis, the Ridolfi Plot, the Cuban Missiles Crisis
- the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment
- the ancient world, ancient Rome [*but* the Roman Republic]
- middle ages, medieval England, early-modern Britain
- 'the so-called dark ages' or 'the period often referred to as the dark ages'
- Richard, Duke of York; the eleventh Earl of Mar [*not* '11th']
- the Battle of the Somme, the Battle of Naseby
- British Empire, Dutch Republic
- communism, socialism, anarchism, liberalism, fascism
- Marxism, Nazism, Thatcherism
- Second World War, the Cold War
- the '80s, the eighties

Capitalisation ... *continued*

Adjectives derived from proper nouns

These are referred to as 'proper adjectives'. Caution is advised here. Use a capital when the adjective relates to names of people, organizations, countries etc. With food, use a capital where the item retains a strong link with the place of origin (and may even be a legally recognised name).

However, many such adjectives have lost their capitalisation over time, usually when they have lost any link to the original use of the term — indeed, it might not even be obvious they were originally proper nouns.

- *Dancing Queen* is a typically well-crafted slice of Scandinavian pop.
- President Trump was positively Shakespearean in his eloquence.
- Cornish pasty, Parma ham, Worcestershire sauce
- gargantuan, titanic, caesarean, draconian, herculean, spartan, champagne, bordeaux, cardigan, bolognese
- french windows, danish pastry, russian dressing, alsatian dog

Names with prefixes

Follow the preference of the individual, if known; if not, use lower case for the prefix. Alphabetise by the prefix.

| Dick Van Dyke appeared as the bad guy in an episode of *Columbo*.

| Carl von Clausewitz wrote the classic *On War* in the nineteenth century.

Brand names in everyday usage

Use a capital when used as a brand name but not when used as a verb.

| He much preferred using a Hoover rather than a Dyson when cleaning the house.

| His favourite activity of the week was a spot of hoovering.

Songs, books, albums etc

General rule

Titles of books, journals, plays, films, songs, albums, other musical works etc should be given in italics. Only significant words should be capitalised. See also Capitalisation.

Note that style guides often differ on this. OUSG, for example, says to use single quotation marks and roman (not italic) type for titles that are not whole publications eg short poems, short stories, songs, chapters in books, articles in periodicals etc.

***Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* is a collection of short stories, of which *Silver Blaze* is my favourite.**

***Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* is a collection of short stories, of which 'Silver Blaze' is my favourite. [OUSG]**

***Bohemian Rhapsody* is from the album *A Night at the Opera*.**

'Bohemian Rhapsody' is from the album *A Night at the Opera*. [OUSG]

significant words

- The first word and last word in the title should be capitalised.
- All other nouns and active verbs should also be capitalised.
- Conjunctions (eg 'and', 'but', 'or'), short prepositions (eg 'in', 'out', 'by', 'for', 'from') and articles (eg 'a', 'an', 'the') are not capitalised unless they are the first or last word.
- For prepositions, words that are four or fewer letters should not be capitalised. Words that are five or more letters should be capitalised (eg 'across', 'among', 'beyond').
- Some other short words should always be capitalised, such as 'also', 'be', 'if', 'than', 'that', 'thus' and 'when'.

phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs also need to be capitalised. Phrasal verbs combine verbs and prepositions or adverbs into an idiomatic expression whose meaning differs from that of the actual definitions of the individual words used eg *put off*, *beat up*, *try out*

***I'm In Love With My Car* is from the album *A Night at the Opera*.**

***Put Out the Fire* is from the album *Hot Space*.**

Numbers, times and dates

Writing numbers

Spell out whole-number words for one to ten; use figures for numbers above ten. If there are a lot of figures in a paragraph or text, some above ten and some below, use figures throughout to allow easy comparison. Use commas, without a gap, with larger numbers.

- | **The farm had 50 sheep, 35 cows and 5 horses.**
- | **The total number of people who attended was 4,378,068.**

Spell out the number if it begins a sentence. If it's an unwieldy number, reorganise the sentence.

- | **Sixty million was the approximate death toll during the Second World War.**

Use a combination of a figure and a word for very large round numbers (such as multiple millions/billions etc), or abbreviate it to 'm', 'bn' etc.

- | **The population of the Earth is now more than 7 billion people.**
- | **The population of the Earth is now more than 7bn people.**
- | **Liverpool paid around £75m for Virgil van Dijk.**

Ordinal numbers

Spell out words for 'first', 'second' and so on up to and including 'tenth'; use numbers and 'st'/'nd'/'rd'/'th' for larger ordinal numbers. Don't use superscript (to prevent problems with line spacing).

- | **The 44th president of the USA was Barack Obama. The 45th president is a disgrace.**

Percentages, measurements and currency

Always use figures and symbols for percentages, measurements and currency.

- | **Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration, according to Thomas Edison.**
- | **Blackpool Tower is 158m tall.**
- | **The price of the ticket was 50p; I sold it for £2.50.**

Fractions

Use a hyphen to write out fractions, but only when the fraction is being used as an adjective rather than as a noun.

- | **One third of contestants got the answer wrong.**
- | **a half; a third; a quarter; a fifth etc**
- | **two-thirds; three-fifths etc**
- | **They each got a one-third share.**

Amounts

There is some confusion about the definition of certain numbers.

- **one million — 1 followed by 6 noughts, abbreviate like this: £25m**
- **one billion — a thousand million (1 followed by 9 noughts), abbreviate like this: £25bn**
- **one trillion — a thousand billion (1 followed by 12 noughts), abbreviate like this: £25tn**

Numbers, times and dates ... *continued*

Time

Use a full stop rather than a colon for the 12-hour clock. No need to add '00' minutes if the time is on the hour. Use 'noon' rather than '12 noon' and the same for 'midnight'.

■ **The film starts at 11.30am and finishes at 1pm.**

■ **The bar closes at 12 midnight.**

Use a colon if using the 24-hour clock. Be consistent — don't switch between the 12-hour and 24-hour clock.

■ **The band are due on stage at 22:00.**

Writing dates

Always put the date before the month. Don't use 'th' etc with dates — just the number and month — and never precede the number with 'the'.

■ **The date of Easter Sunday this year is 12 April.**

Put a space between a date and 'BC' or 'AD'. Use a small 'c' for 'circa', meaning 'about' or 'around', with no space between it and the date.

■ **The Renaissance began c1450.**

■ **Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC.**

Spans of time

When indicating a span of time, the later date may be shortened to two digits if the two dates are in the same century, and (sometimes) to a single digit if in the same decade. Saying it aloud sometimes helps here. If not (or to avoid ambiguity), write both dates in full. The dates should be separated by an en-dash. Never use 'between' and then an en-dash.

■ **The Second World War (1939–45)**

■ **The first Blair government (1997–2001)**

■ **The early years of the Liberal government (1906–08)**

■ **The so-called 'Winter of Discontent' (1978–9)**

■ **The First World War (1914–8)**

■ **The first Blair government (1997–01)**

■ **The first Blair government was from 1997–2001.**

If using 'from' with a start date/time, always use 'to' to indicate the end date/time rather than an en-dash; alternatively, just use an en-dash without 'from'.

■ **Winter runs from December to March**

■ **Winter runs December–March.**

■ **Winter runs from December–March.**

Highlighting and emphasising text

Bold type

Use bold sparingly to emphasise the part of your text you wish to stand out — someone's name, a deadline date or another key piece of information.

Punctuation which follows bold text should not itself be bold (unless the whole sentence is in bold type).

If quoting from a speech, you might want to use bold text (or italic text) to emphasise words in writing on which the speaker placed particular emphasis in the speech.

Use of italics

Use italics to flag part of the text which is different from that surrounding it.

If quoting from a speech, you might want to use bold text (or italic text) to emphasise words in writing on which the speaker placed particular emphasis in the speech.

... and you end in the grotesque *chaos* of a Labour council — *a Labour council* — hiring taxis to scuttle round the city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers.

Use italics for foreign words and phrases if they form part of the text.

France and Germany are the *de facto* leaders of the European Union.

Underlining

Avoid underlining for emphasis; this generally suggests a hyperlink.

Punctuation

Apostrophes

Use apostrophes with noun phrases denoting periods of time (use an apostrophe if you can replace the apostrophe with 'of').

- | **The concert is coming up in three weeks' time.**
- | **They only received 30 minutes' notice of Ofsted's arrival.**

However, do **not** use apostrophes in adjectival phrases.

- | **She is eight years old.**

Do **not** use apostrophes before contractions accepted as words in their own right.

- | **He is suffering from a rotten case of 'flu.**
- | **They spent ages arguing on the 'phone.**

To clarify something which will look odd if an 's' is added, consider italicising it or placing it in single quotation marks.

See also Brandreth p79 for possible use of an apostrophe here.

- | **Subtract all the *xs* from the *ys*.**
- | **Dot the 'i's and cross the 't's.**
- | **Here is a list of *dos* and *don'ts*.**
- | **Here is a list of *dos and don'ts*.**

The use of an apostrophe when more than one person is involved can be tricky.

- | **Eric and Ernie's show [*one show as the duo 'Eric and Ernie'*]**
- | **Eric and Ernie's shows [*more than one show as the duo 'Eric and Ernie'*]**
- | **Eric's and Ernie's shows [*Eric has shows and Ernie separately also has shows*]**

[Check out this blogpost for a longer discussion about apostrophes.](#)

Brackets

round brackets

Use in place of a pair of dashes or commas around a non-defining phrase (one which adds extra information, a translation, dates, an explanation or a definition).

- | **The Cuban Missiles Crisis (1962) was a defining event of the Cold War.**
- | **Today's temperature may exceed 32°C (100°F).**
- | **The outcome was (at least as far as they were concerned) disastrous.**

square brackets

Use to enclose comments, corrections, references or translations made by a subsequent author or editor. The contents should be in italics.

- | **The reviewer waxed lyrical about the guitar prowess of Richie [*sic*] Blackmore.**
- | **The reviewer waxed lyrical about the guitar prowess of Ritchie Blackmoore [*sic*].**

Square brackets are often used to paraphrase (usually in order to shorten) a section of a quotation. They can also be used to denote brackets within brackets.

using other punctuation with brackets at the end of a sentence

The placing of punctuation depends on what is in brackets. Only consider using a full stop inside the brackets if what is contained in the brackets is itself a full sentence.

- | **He didn't drink up at last orders (which is unusual for him).**
- | **He didn't drink up at last orders. (That's unusual for him.)**

Punctuation ... *continued*

Bullet points

Don't punctuate the end of bullet points which are a list of items.

My favourite groups include:

- Queen
- Genesis
- The Smiths

In the example below, note that each bullet does not start with a capital letter. This is because of (a) the way the lead-in sentence is written and (b) the fact that they are not complete sentences in themselves. This is a style choice. Some people always start bullet points with a capital letter. Your software applications may automatically do this as well.

The drinks on offer were:

- tea
- coffee
- hot chocolate

If text inside the bullet point is a complete sentence in its own right, add a semi-colon to the end of each point and a full stop to the end of the last one.

There are a number of causes of the Second World War, including:

- the aggressive foreign policy of Germany. This is the one most commonly cited;
- appeasement. Historians have tended not to be kind to Neville Chamberlain;
- the invasion of Poland. This triggered the outbreak of war.

Colons and semi-colons

colons

Use a colon to introduce a sub-clause which follows logically from the text before it, is not a new concept and depends logically on the preceding main clause.

| When I went to university, I studied two subjects: history and international relations.

| There is only one drink guaranteed to get the grey cells motoring: tea.

Do not use a colon if the two parts of the sentence are not logically connected.

| I am going to the pub later: tomorrow, I am back in work.

Colons can also be used to introduce direct speech.

| Freddie said: "Thank you for coming along and making this a great occasion."

semi-colons

Use a semi-colon to link two related parts of a sentence, neither of which depends logically on the other and each of which could stand alone as a grammatically complete sentence.

| I am going to the pub later; however, tomorrow I am back in work.

| *Selling England by the Pound* is the best Genesis album; *Abacab* is possibly the worst.

Use semi-colons in place of commas in a complicated list or sentence if it will improve clarity, particularly if the list of items already include commas.

| I have seen Wigan Athletic play at White Hart Lane, London; Anfield, Liverpool; and Old Trafford, Manchester.

Punctuation ... *continued*

Commas

Use a pair of commas to surround a non-defining clause — one which adds descriptive information but which can be removed without losing the meaning of the sentence.

Note that only 'which' or 'who' can be used in this type of clause, not 'that'.

■ **The film, which was released in 1978, is entirely derivative and offers nothing new.**

■ **The film that was released in 1978 is entirely derivative and offers nothing new.**

In the second example above, the sentence would only make sense if the film in question was one of a small group of films and that, by saying '1978', it's obvious which film the writer has in mind.

Do not use commas to surround a defining clause — one which cannot be removed without losing the meaning of the sentence.

Note that 'which' or 'who' can be replaced by 'that' in this type of clause.

■ **The album that features *Brighton Rock* is possibly Queen's best.**

■ **The album which features *Brighton Rock* is possibly Queen's best.**

commas in sentences with people's names

Think about essential (no comma) v non-essential (yes, comma needed) information.

If the identifier-name in the sentence is the only thing of its type in the world, use a comma before and after the name. The exception to this is when the identifier starts with 'a' or 'an' and the name is incidental to the meaning of the sentence.

■ **He asked Queen's drummer, Roger Taylor, a question. [*there is only one Queen drummer*]**

■ **A Wigan dog trainer, John Smith, won the lottery last week. [*incidental information*]**

■ **A Wigan dog trainer won the lottery last week. [*it makes sense without the name*]**

In the examples below, by contrast, no commas are used, either because identifier-name is not the only thing of its type in the world or the identifier starts with 'the' and the name is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

■ **Thin Lizzy's guitarist Gary Moore was exceptional. [*Thin Lizzy had several guitarists*]**

■ **The Wigan tightrope walker Doris Smith has vertigo. [*it doesn't make sense with no name*]**

Do not use a comma to join two main clauses, or those linked by adverbs or adverbial phrases (eg 'nevertheless', 'therefore', 'however'). Either use a semi-colon or add a coordinating conjunction (eg 'and', 'but', 'so'). If the two main clauses are relatively short, the comma may be omitted.

■ **My favourite group is Queen, and I have all their albums.**

■ **My favourite group is Queen and I have all their albums.**

■ **My favourite group is Queen; I have all their albums.**

■ **My favourite group is Queen, I have all their albums.**

Use a comma after an introductory adverb, adverbial phrase or subordinate clause; or use a pair of commas surrounding it if it is in the middle of a sentence.

■ **The first Stone Roses album was a triumph. However, the follow-up wasn't.**

OUSG says **not** to use a comma after a time-based adverbial phrase. This is a bit contentious. TESH suggests that a comma is not necessary before a short phrase at the start of a sentence if no natural pause exists. The Economist concurs.

■ **After listening to the CD I went to the pub.**

■ **Whenever I watch Question Time I feel the urge to throw up.**

■ **In 2012 the Olympics took place in London.**

Punctuation ... *continued*

using commas in a list of adjectives

Use a comma where two or more adjectives modify a noun.

- | She was a clever, articulate, convincing spokesperson for the group.
- | She was a clever, articulate and convincing spokesperson for the group.

Do not use a comma before the final adjective if it is part of a noun phrase.

- | He had turned into a cantankerous old man.
- | He had turned into a cantankerous, old man. [*old man* is a noun phrase]

The Guardian owns up to a nice example of how a misplaced comma can completely alter the meaning of a sentence. It involves the noun phrase 'black economy'. Ouch.

- | Neocon economists often claim a large, black economy turbo-powers growth ...

the OUSG approach to lists

The OUSG explains its rules thus. Use a comma between multiple qualitative adjectives (those which can be used in the comparative/superlative or modified with 'very', 'quite' etc).

- | He was tall, dark and handsome with big, alluring eyes.

Do not use a comma between multiple classifying adjectives: absolutes which either are or are not, such as 'unique', 'English', 'black' etc.

- | It was an edible German mushroom.

OUSG suggests not to use a comma between classifying and qualitative adjectives. This is contentious — see the examples below.

- | It was a large German mushroom with hard black edges.
- | It was a large, squishy German mushroom with hard, frilly black edges.

'including' and 'such as'

Use the distinction between defining and non-defining information. If what follows is defining information, do not use a comma. If it is non-defining information, use a comma.

- | Music genres such as dance and hip-hop are awful.
- | Music genres, such as dance and hip-hop, are awful.
- | I have read loads of books by Sebastian Faulks, including *Birdsong* and *Human Traces*.

the 'Oxford comma'

Use the 'Oxford comma' to prevent ambiguity in a list.

Examples below courtesy of Brandreth p20. In the first, John and Catherine are my parents, and I am thanking two people. In the second, John and Catherine are not my parents, and I am thanking four people.

- | I want to thank my parents, John and Catherine.
- | I want to thank my parents, John, and Catherine.

Ellipsis

Use an ellipsis [...] to show that some text is missing, usually from a quotation.

Style guides vary on whether and in what circumstances there should be a space before and/or after the ellipsis. Brandreth discusses this in detail on pp56–57.

- | This is no time for...hesitation.
- | I keep finding my concentration drifting... And then suddenly I'm back in the moment.
- | "... it's five-year mission ... to boldly go where no man has gone before."
- | "Space — the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise* ..."

An exclamation mark or a question mark should follow the ellipsis, if required.

- | What the ...?

Punctuation ... *continued*

Hyphens, en-dashes and em-dashes

hyphens [-]

Use a hyphen with prefixes, in numbers and in adjectival phrases with a verb-participle.

Hyphens are an endangered species. More and more words traditionally spelt with a hyphen — anti-semitism is one such — are increasingly seen without one.

- **Anti-semitism is on the rise;**
- **The post-1979 generation have never experienced social democracy;**
- **The mid-nineteenth century was the golden age of free trade;**
- **Forty-two is the answer to the question;**
- **The film is surely due a re-release;**
- **vice-chancellor, vice-president, vice-chair etc**
- **This style guide is awe-inspiring.** [*An example of a noun and verb-participle*]

Use a hyphen in adjectival phrases but only before a noun.

- | **This is an up-to-date style guide.**
- | **This style guide is up to date.**

Use a hyphen in compass points unless used geographically rather than directionally.

- | **They are heading north-west.**
- | **The north west is the most friendly and welcoming region of England.**

Use a hyphen to stand for a common second element in all but the last word of a list.

- | **NCS is for 16- and 17-year-olds.**

Use a hyphen to write out fractions, but only when the fraction is being used as an adjective rather than as a noun.

- | **One third of contestants got the answer wrong.**
- | **a half; a third; a quarter; a fifth etc**
- | **two-thirds; three-fifths etc**
- | **They each got a one-third share.**

Do not use a hyphen in an adjectival phrase before a noun where the first element is an adverb ending in -ly (but note that any other adverbs in adjectival phrases do take a hyphen).

- | **She was a highly respected writer.**
- | **It was a well-delivered speech.**

Adverbs do not normally need to be linked to participles or adjectives in simple sentence constructions where they come after the noun.

- | **The speech was well delivered.**
- | **The speech was well-delivered.**
- | **It is a little-known rule.**
- | **The rule is little known.**

Examples of words increasingly seen without a hyphen (especially in *The Guardian*):

- **neoconservative, neoliberal, neoclassical**
- **subcommittee, subcontinent**
- **nonaggression, nonstop, nonconformist**
- **shortlist, longlist** *but* **short-term, long-term**
- **thinktank**
- **email**
- **prewar, postwar**

Punctuation ... *continued*

en-dashes [–]

The *en-dash* is longer than a hyphen. A shortcut is ALT + 0150 using the right-hand number pad.

Use the *en-dash* to link concepts or ranges of numbers, with no spaces either side.

- **the Anglo–Irish Agreement**
- **chapters 3–4**
- **Adolf Hitler (1889–1945)**

Use it also between names of joint authors/creators/performers etc to distinguish from hyphenated names of a single person.

- | **The Morrissey–Marr partnership revolutionised music in the eighties.**
- | **Rebecca Long–Bailey was the continuity candidate in the 2020 Labour leadership contest.**
- | **Many moderates believed that a Long–Bailey–Burgon victory would spell disaster.**

em-dashes [—]

The *em-dash* is longer than an *en-dash*. A shortcut is ALT + 0151 using the right-hand number pad.

Use the *em-dash* in a pair in place of round brackets or commas, surrounded by spaces.

- | **It was — he realised afterwards — a set-up.**

Use it singly and surrounded by spaces to link two parts of a sentence, in place of a colon.

- | **There was but one explanation for such gibberish — she was completely drunk.**

Punctuation ... *continued*

Full stops, question marks and exclamation marks

Do not use a full stop at the end of titles, even if they make a sentence, but, if a title ends with an exclamation mark or question mark, do include it.

| ***Help!* was released in 1965.**

Use a full stop, not a question mark, at the end of a reported question.

| **She asked him what he was drinking.**

| **“What are you drinking?” she asked him.**

Quotation marks and inverted commas

Style guides vary on this.

Use double quotation marks for direct speech or a quote. Use single quotation marks (inverted commas) for direct speech within the quote.

| **“Friends, Romans, countrymen,” he began, “lend me your ears.”**

| **“I heard it described as ‘their Sgt Pepper’ when it was first released,” he claimed.**

Use single quotation marks to add emphasis to something within a sentence.

| **I thought it extraordinary that they should choose the name ‘Rufus Tiger’.**

Place any punctuation which does not belong to the quote outside the quotation marks (except closing punctuation if the end of the quote is also the end of the sentence).

| **“Friends, Romans, countrymen — lend me your ears.”**

Miscellaneous

Personal pronouns

'I' is always the subject of a sentence and 'me' is always the object.

- | Eddie and I are heading to the pub later.
- | Al is meeting Eddie and me in the pub later.
- | Al is meeting Eddie and I in the pub later.

myself, yourself etc

All pronouns ending in *-self* or *-selves* are reflexive pronouns and are used only to refer back to the subject of the sentence. They can never be subjects of a sentence themselves.

- | Neil met up with a group of us in the pub, including Eddie, Al and me.
- | Neil met up with a group of us in the pub, including Eddie, Al and myself.
- | I sometimes surprise myself at how much I drink.
- | We sometimes surprise ourselves at how much we drink.

gender-neutral singular pronouns

Rather than using he/she or s/he, use 'they'.

- | When a bibliophile enters a bookshop or library, they are sure of a magical experience.

Singular or plural?

This is a judgement call. Plural verbs for teams, groups, organisations etc tend to sound more natural if the sense is of *a group of people*. However, if the sentence is clearly referring to *the organisation itself* rather than the people within it, a singular verb is probably more appropriate.

Note that 'the government' can usually be followed by either a singular or plural verb, so focus on consistency.

- | "The government has handled the Brexit negotiations dreadfully," she commented.
- | "The government have handled the Brexit negotiations dreadfully," she commented.
- | "In my opinion, Liverpool are cementing their place in football history," he said.
- | "In my opinion, Liverpool FC is cementing its place in football history," he said.
- | Led Zeppelin are one of the all-time great rock bands.
- | Amnesty International was founded by Peter Benenson in 1961.
- | Amnesty International were founded by Peter Benenson in 1961.
- | Amnesty International are campaigning for their release.

Miscellaneous ... *continued*

Words and phrases

See also the A-Z listings at diogenescommunications.co.uk/style-guide

- **T-shirt, U-turn, X-ray**
- **shortlist, longlist *but* short-term, long-term**
- **prewar, postwar**