

# Plain Language Commission Style Guide

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## How to use this guide

### What are style guides?

In many areas of written English there are definite rights and wrongs. For example, incorrect grammar and punctuation can change your message, or make it ambiguous. These failings may also give a poor impression of you and your organization.

But in other areas there isn't one correct way of writing, so you must choose. Style guides give you guidelines on your options. All publishers and newspapers, and many organizations, have their own style guides, to ensure a consistent house style within and between their publications.

### Our overall guidelines for using a plain style

When we edit your document for accreditation with the Clear English Standard, we follow these overall style guidelines:

- Write sentences that average 15–20 words.
- Keep the word order simple. In most sentences, put the doer early and follow it with an active-voice verb.
- Use everyday English, sound grammar and accurate punctuation.
- Where appropriate, use *I*, *we* and *you* to make the writing more human.
- Maintain the flow by starting some of your sentences with connectors like *but*, *however*, *so* and *because*.
- Use commands when writing instructions.
- Cut unnecessary words.

These are also the skills we train you and your staff in, through our in-house and distance-learning courses. You can read more about our accreditation criteria at <https://www.clearest.co.uk> under 'Editorial'.

### Purpose of this style guide

Within these overall guidelines on style, there are many specific points we encourage you to adopt because we believe they make your writing clearer. So this style guide aims to:

- explain our style choices
- help you decide your own style choices on these points
- make documents you send us for editing and Clear English Standard accreditation clearer and more consistent – meaning we can turn these round more quickly and save you money
- be a useful resource for other visitors to our website.

### Structure of the guide

The points we cover in this guide are ordered alphabetically. For each entry, the guide:

- explains any linguistic jargon we need to use to explain the point
- notes our preferred option and explains why we suggest it
- summarizes other options. If you decide to use these, your writing won't be wrong but may be less clear. It may also affect whether we can accredit your document with the Clear English Standard, though we try to be reasonably flexible about customers' style preferences. And we're always happy to discuss these with you.

At all times in the guide, we aim to:

- avoid linguistic jargon you don't need to know – for example, we reference entries in user-friendly terms
- illustrate points with examples where this helps make them clearer.

## How to decide which option to follow

The central idea of plain language is to think always of your readers and how easily they will understand your message. So for each entry, we decide which option to suggest based on:

- research evidence on effective writing, where it exists, or
- where it does not exist, modern conventions in written English.

Plain English aims to use familiar words and phrases, and to convey the message in as 'invisible' a style as possible (that is, one that isn't noticeable to the reader, and so doesn't distract them from the content). We therefore recommend following the style most likely to be familiar to the reader – which may vary by audience type and location. You can read more about our approach in our article 'Linguistic Niceties and Nasties', at <https://www.clearest.co.uk> under 'Publications'.

We do think of writers too, and try to promote options that are simple for them to follow. Writing to simple principles is more likely to be consistent, and so is better for readers.

Whether or not you choose to take our advice, it's important to have good reasons for your style choices, so you can justify them. Useful sources of evidence include the following:

- 'The Cambridge Guide to English Usage' (by Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press, 2004) summarizes current practice around the world on English style and usage, drawing on the British National Corpus (BNC) and Cambridge International Corpus. (A corpus is a collection of samples of written and spoken language.)
- You can use the BNC to check which variants or words or phrases are more common at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>. The BNC comprises 100 million words from a range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century. On the home page, there's a search box. Type in the word or phrase you're interested in, and you'll get a list of up to 50 randomly selected instances headed by a note of the total frequency of the word or phrase.
- William Sabin (author of 'The Gregg Reference Manual') recommends another quick and easy technique for checking the frequency of different words and phrases. He searches Google (<https://www.google.co.uk/>) under the 'News' tab to see which option is most popular. He uses this site rather than a general search engine as the copy it searches (4,500 news sources) has been edited.
- 'Designing Public Documents: A review of research' (by Elaine Kempson and Nick Moore, Policy Studies Institute, 1994) brings together the results of over 250 studies about writing and designing public information.

## How we can help further

Over the years, we've written style guides for many organizations. This style guide comprises the guidelines we usually include in these, as well as some extra ones. But if you'd like a more detailed style guide, or one that uses examples specific to your organization, we'd be pleased to work with you to develop your own corporate style guide. Please contact Martin Cutts at [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk), telephone 01663 733177.

## Other useful guides

Some larger style guides cover not only guidelines – areas of language where you have choice – but also rules – where there is only one right way of doing things, for example correct grammar, punctuation and choice of words. For guidance on rules, we recommend these books:

- Cutts, M 'Oxford Guide to Plain English' Oxford University Press 2020
- Fowler HW and Burchfield RW 'The New Fowler's Modern English Usage' Oxford University Press, 1996
- Jarvie G 'Bloomsbury Grammar Guide: Grammar Made Easy' Bloomsbury, 2007
- Manser MH (ed) 'Good Word Guide' Bloomsbury, 2011
- Trask RL 'Penguin Guide to Punctuation' Penguin, 1997.

# A to Z of style choices

## 1 Abbreviations

**Explaining the jargon** Abbreviations are short forms of:

- words (with the end or middle missing, eg *Mr* or *Miss*), or
- phrases (formed from the first letters of the words in the phrase, eg *AIDS* and *MBA*).

Words abbreviated by removing the middle are sometimes called contractions (see section 7 too) like *Middx* for *Middlesex* and (more strangely) *Warks* for *Warwickshire* and *Hants* for *Hampshire*. Abbreviated phrases pronounced as a word rather than a series of letters, for example *AIDS*, *ASBO*, *EPOS* and *UNESCO*, are sometimes called acronyms. Some people use the term 'initialisms' for abbreviated phrases pronounced as a series of letters, such as *MBA*, *BC*, *FBI* and *HTML*.

### The issues

1. So long as your reader understands them, abbreviations communicate more concisely. But it's confusing to include abbreviations your audience won't understand (or – perhaps even worse – may misunderstand) and not explain them.
2. Some people use full stops with abbreviations.

### Our advice

When you first want to use an abbreviation, ask yourself whether your readers will understand it. If they may not, write it out in full the first time and put the abbreviation in brackets after it. Next time, use just the abbreviated form. If you're writing a longer document that readers may not read from the beginning, write it out at the start of each section. Here's an example:

The Trust employs community psychiatric nurses (CPNs). CPNs work with...

We suggest not using full stops with any abbreviations. Pam Peters says this option 'is easiest of all to implement'. It means the writer doesn't have to distinguish between the different types of abbreviation and follow different rules for each. Some people say it could cause confusion between lower-case abbreviations and normal words, for example *am* (short for *ante meridiem*) and *am* (as in *I am*), and *fig* (short for *figure*, and the fruit). But the context normally makes this clear, or you can change the sentence a little to clarify it.

**Other options** You can do the same except not put the abbreviated form in brackets afterwards:

The Trust employs community psychiatric nurses. CPNs work with...

The 'Health Service Journal' follows this style, but we think it's less clear, as the reader has to look back and work out which word or phrase you've abbreviated.

Other options for punctuating abbreviations include:

- using stops for all abbreviations (traditional American style)
- using stops for abbreviations but not contractions (a once-common British style)
- using stops for abbreviations that have just an initial capital or are entirely lower case, but not for those that consist of full capitals
- using stops for abbreviations that begin with a lower-case letter only.

Other than the first of these, which wouldn't be usual for the UK, the others are all more complicated to apply.

## 2 **Among and amongst, while and whilst**

**The issue** Some people write *among* and some *amongst*. A similar pattern applies to some other pairs of words, such as *while* and *whilst*, and *amid* and *amidst*.

**Our advice** We suggest using *among*, *while* and *amid* because they're more common. Searching Google under the 'News' tab for *among* and *amongst* gives the following results:

- All countries – 363,215 (97%) occurrences of *among*; 10,633 (3%) of *amongst*
- UK – 22,547 (91%) *among*; 2,101 (9%) *amongst*
- US – 261,824 (99%) *among*; 3,978 (1%) *amongst*.

The BNC confirms the shorter forms are more popular. They also sound less formal and more modern (though it seems they were actually around before the longer forms). They're also quicker to type.

In some northern England dialects, *while* means *until*, eg *I work nine while five*, so if any ambiguity could arise, *whilst* is a better choice.

**Other options** You could use the longer forms always, or use the shorter form if the next word starts with a consonant and the longer form if the next word starts with a vowel (the famous linguist HW Fowler noted a tendency for this to happen). But the latter requires the writer to think about it each time.

## 3 **Ampersands**

**Explaining the jargon** An ampersand is any symbol used to represent the word *and*, for example & or +. The word is a shortened form of *and per se and*, which Pam Peters translates as *& by itself makes and*.

**The issue** Ampersands are rare in published documents but we see them often in material that comes to us for editing.

**Our advice** Always use *and* rather than an ampersand in text, unless it's part of a name, for example *Marks & Spencer*. But it's OK to use & in tables and diagrams if space is tight.

**Another option** You could use ampersands in text, but this wouldn't be usual. Pam Peters writes: 'The ampersand is not now used for general purposes in printed text, but replaced by "and" itself.'

## 4 **Capital letters**

**The issue** Should writers give Initial Capital Letters to Anything or Anyone Important? There can be a temptation to reflect the social pecking order by writing, for example, *Managers* but *staff*; *Doctors* but *patients*; and *Officers* or *Councillors* but *the public*.

**Our advice:** As well as looking a bit pompous, capitalizing all these words can slow the reader, according to writing research. WRITING IN ALL CAPITALS IS WORST, But Even Title Case Is Harder To Read than sentence case, which capitalizes only the first word and those words that really need it. So our advice is as follows:

- In general, capitalize only the first word in a sentence, and proper nouns (names of people, places, institutions and documents).
- For job titles, we recommend using capitals only when you're referring to a specific person, for example the Chief Executive. Otherwise, use lower case – such as housing

officers and doctors. In addresses or the complimentary close of a letter (*Yours sincerely* etc), all job titles take initial caps.

- It's OK to use initial capitals for the names of teams, departments, directorates, agencies and outside bodies, eg *Neighbourhood Renewal team* and *Human Resources department*. In these examples, if *team* and *department* are part of the official name, you could give them initial capitals too: *Neighbourhood Renewal Team* and *Human Resources Department*.
- In titles (of booklets and so on), we suggest you give initial capitals to the main words but not to any subheadings except (obviously) the first word. So *Aids and Adaptations* (main booklet title) but *What aids and adaptations are available?* (subhead).
- Contents pages and indexes are best in all lower case except for the initial letters.
- We suggest using lower case for names of benefits and taxes. Though it's better to use lower capitals for the titles of strategies and policy documents, it's OK to use initial capitals for them.

**Other options** It wouldn't be wrong to use capitals more than we suggest, but it could make your document harder to read because they become distracting. In any case, try to be consistent. We see many documents that use a mixture of capitalization styles. Before preparing a long document or a series of related documents, it's a good idea to draw up a capitalization protocol especially if there are several authors.

## 5 Collective nouns

<b>Explaining the jargon</b> Collective nouns are singular in form but refer to a group of people, animals or objects, for example council, government, team and organization.
--

**The issue** It can be hard to know whether to use singular or plural verbs (and pronouns) with collective nouns.

**Our advice** In general, it's best to make the verb agree with the noun, but if the collective noun is thought of as a collection of individuals, it's OK to use the plural. The Guardian's online style guide gives these examples:

[Using a singular verb and pronoun] The committee gave its unanimous approval to the plans.

[Using a plural verb and pronoun] The committee enjoyed biscuits with their tea.

**Another option** Some people use a plural verb with names of organizations, eg *Tesco have done well this quarter*. Pam Peters reports that this is more common in British than American or Australian English. It's OK to do this if you wish, but be consistent: we see many documents that use both singular and plural verbs with the organization's name.

## 6 Contact details

**The issue** Business documents often give contact details for the organization. These are sometimes presented unclearly, and often inconsistently.

**Our advice** It's clearest to present other contact information as a list, with capitals starting each line:

Telephone:  
Email:  
Website:  
Address:  
Open:

### Phone numbers

Don't use brackets for area codes. Put spaces in long numbers, eg 01633 733177. If readers may wish to call from abroad, use this format: +44 (0) 1663 733177.

### Addresses

We advise using:

- no commas when the address is presented vertically:  
Plain Language Commission  
The Castle  
29 Stoneheads  
Whaley Bridge  
High Peak SK23 7BB
- commas after each address line when it's presented horizontally  
Plain Language Commission, The Castle, 29 Stoneheads, Whaley Bridge, High Peak SK23 7BB
- no comma before the postcode.

### Opening times

- Don't use double zeros, full stops or colons in times (*6pm* not *6.00pm* or *6:00pm*).
- Avoid using the 24-hour clock unless you're writing a travel company's timetable.
- Use en-dashes and no space between times (see section 10).
- Abbreviate days of the week if pushed for space, with unspaced en-dashes between days, eg *Mon–Thurs*.

**Other options:** It's not vital to keep to the order we suggest above, but do keep to whatever order of phone number, address etc is consistent for that section.

## 7 Contracted verbs

**Explaining the jargon** Section 1 mentioned contractions that are shortened forms of individual words. Phrases can also be contracted, such as *don't*, *you'll*, *there's* and *we've*. The apostrophe marks the place where a letter or letters have been omitted. It's this type of contraction that we cover in this section.

**The issue** Contracted verbs are common in speech, but when should you use them in writing?

**Our advice** In the past, contracted verbs were thought too colloquial to use in writing, but these days they're common in newspapers, though still not in academic journals. Pam Peters writes: 'But the interactive quality that contractions lend to a style is these days often sought, in business and elsewhere. They facilitate reading by reducing the space taken up by predictable elements of the verb phrase, and help to establish underlying rhythms of prose.'

In our own writing, we use contracted verbs a lot.

**Other options** Some people use no contracted verbs in writing, feeling they're too informal. A half-way house we often apply to documents we edit is to use contractions for phrases that include 'not' (which tend to sound more stilted in their full form), but not for others. Here are some examples:

[Using no contractions] We have rewritten this strategy but we cannot print it yet.

[Using all contractions] We've rewritten this strategy but we can't print it yet.

[Using contractions for *not* only] We have rewritten this strategy but we can't print it yet.

## 8 Dates

**The issue** There are various different conventions for writing dates, some of them country-based.

**Our advice** We recommend writing dates as, for example, *3 March 2008*, that is:

- using this order: day, month, year (the usual order in the UK and Australia)
- using a cardinal rather than ordinal number (*3* rather than *3rd*)
- avoiding commas between the month and year.

If short of space (or in tables and diagrams), you can shorten this to *3.3.08* or *03.03.2008*. It's usual to separate the numbers with dots, though slashes can be useful in form-filling fields as they're more noticeable.

When expressing a span of dates, use an en-dash (rather than the shorter hyphen) to connect the two numbers, with no spaces: *3–4 March*. For more on dashes, see section 10. For spans of years, repeat only those digits that are needed to show the change: *2007–8, 1989–92; 1999–2005*.

A slash can be used to show the span refers to a financial year or other statutory period that doesn't start on 1 January and end on 31 December: 'The organization reported profits for the year 2007/8.'

**Other options** You could use ordinal numbers (eg *3rd*) but this is less modern. If you do, avoid superscript, which is harder to read and looks poor (so write *3rd*, not *3<sup>rd</sup>*).

You could use a comma between the month and year, but this isn't necessary.

In the US, it's common to write the date in a different order: month, day, year. This order is less logical as it doesn't move from the smaller to larger unit. It is unusual in the UK, though several newspapers use it beneath their masthead, eg *May 3, 2008*.

## 9 Equality in language

**The issue** Research shows that language powerfully influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions. In other words, using biased language can prolong inequality in society. Also, it makes little business sense to offend your readers. If they see prejudice in your writing, they'll reject your message. But it's not always easy to know what language to use to encourage equality.

**Our advice**

1. Remember that non-sexist language treats both sexes equally and doesn't refer to a person's sex at all when it's irrelevant.
2. Avoid the generic use of *man*. In its original sense, *man* meant adult human as well as adult male. But now its meaning is so closely identified with men that it's best to say, for example, *layperson* for *layman*; *people* for *mankind*; and *staffed* for *manned*. (For example, *manned space flight*, once the usual phrase, is being superseded by *human space flight*.)
3. Use sex-neutral titles – such as *chair* for *chairman*; *police officer* for *policeman*; *actor* for *actress*; *salesperson* for *salesman*; and *author* for *authoress*.
4. Don't use *he*, *him* and *his* when talking about both men and women. Using *he* or *she* may be clumsy, especially if you need to write it several times. *He/she* and *s(he)* don't look good and are hard to read aloud. But you can often avoid these by using the plural, rephrasing the sentence or using *they*, *them* and *their* as singular, gender-neutral pronouns. Here's an example:

[The original sexist version, from the board papers of an organization several of whose committee chairs were women] Payments to board members must be approved by the relevant chairman in his capacity as responsible officer.

[Using the plural] Payments to board members must be approved by the relevant chairs in their capacity as responsible officers. (There's a risk that people may think several signatures are needed, but the context would usually prevent this.)

[Rephrasing] As responsible officer, the relevant chair must approve payments to board members.

[Using singular 'their'] Payments to board members must be approved by the relevant chair in their capacity as responsible officer.

5. In legislation and contracts, there's a risk that a plural will change the meaning. Rephrasing may be feasible though it can be clumsy and long-winded. Using *you* and *we* can work well in consumer contracts.
6. Sexism may be the most obvious prejudice in writing, but it's not the only one. We recommend Rosalie Maggio's book, 'Talking About People: a guide to fair and accurate language' (Oryx Press, 1997).

**Other options** Although some people still use terms like *fireman*, it's old-fashioned (alternative: firefighter). Recent British law has shifted to gender-neutral language where feasible.

Some authors use male or female pronouns throughout, explaining at the start that they've done so, for example: 'Words relating to one gender are treated as meaning any gender.' But this tends to perpetuate the use of male pronouns.

Some people balk at the use of singular *they*, *them* and *their*. This occurred in our newsletter, Pikestaff, when a reader was unhappy with our regular 'Tell a friend' note: 'If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy Pikestaff, please feel free to forward it to them.' She felt that the plural pronoun ('them') didn't agree with the singular noun phrase ('a friend or colleague'). Yet this usage has been established since the 16th century and many dictionaries, style guides and research studies regard it as acceptable, leading Pam Peters to conclude: 'The appearance of singular **they/them/their** in many kinds of prose shows its acceptance by English writers generally. It recommends itself as a gender-free solution to the problem of agreement with indefinite pronouns and noun phrases.' It can be a little controversial, so you may prefer to avoid it by other methods (using the plural or rephrasing the sentence) where you can. For example, we changed our sentence to: 'If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy Pikestaff, please feel free to forward it to them.'

## 10 Hyphens and dashes

**Explaining the jargon** A hyphen is a short line ( - ) and a dash (officially called an en-dash or en-rule) is a longer one ( – ). There is also an even longer dash ( — ), known as an em-dash or em-rule, but this is uncommon in British English; it's used much more in American English.

**The issue** We see many documents that confuse hyphens and dashes, use them inconsistently, or fail to use them where they could enhance clarity.

**Our advice** We advise using hyphens and en-dashes only, as the em-dash is uncommon in the UK.

### Hyphens

Hyphens are used to link words that could confuse the reader if left separate, but can't (yet) be run together as one word. Many compound words in English (eg *babysitter*,

*downstairs* and (more recently) *website*) started off as separate words, which then became hyphenated and finally joined into single words. If you're in doubt what stage of this evolutionary process a phrase has reached, it's best to check in a dictionary (try always to use the same one, so you're consistent), or use Bill Sabin's technique of searching Google News, as described in 'How to use this guide'.

For phrases that aren't routinely hyphenated, use hyphens when the phrase comes before the noun but not if it comes after:

Hard-to-understand words are best avoided.  
Words that are hard to understand are best avoided.

In many cases, this technique is important to avoid misunderstandings, for example:

- 'we were trying to find an early flowering plant' could be taken to mean that the plant was one of the first to evolve flowers, whereas *an early-flowering plant* means unambiguously that it flowers early in the season
- 'we need more experienced staff' could mean either a greater number of experienced staff, or staff who have more experience (to make the latter meaning clear, you'd need to write *more-experienced staff*).

### Dashes

Use the dash spaced to separate strings of words, and unspaced to link words or numbers in pairs, for example:

I wrote a strategy document – the first of its type – and presented it to the board. It covers 2008–15. The well-attended meeting – which took place at 5–7 pm in the first-floor boardroom – approved the strategy.

Typing en-dashes isn't always easy, as standard keyboards include the hyphen only. If you're working in Microsoft Word and type in a space, then a hyphen, then a space, the program will automatically change the hyphen to an en-dash. But it will leave an unspaced hyphen as just that. So when you need to type a range of dates, like *2008–15* above, you need either to leave spaces and then go back to close them up, or copy and paste a dash in (usually quicker, if you've one nearby to copy).

**Other options** In most cases, you wouldn't be wrong to use hyphens more or less than we suggest, but it could make your writing less clear or even ambiguous. You could use unspaced em-dashes instead of spaced en-dashes to separate groups of words, but this would be uncommon in British English, and requires writers to decide between three marks (hyphen, en-dash and em-dash) instead of just two.

## 11 Hyperlinks

**The issue** When a hyperlink ends a sentence or vertical list, some people omit the full stop, while others include it. The rationale for omitting it is that readers may mistakenly think it's part of the website address. With an extra full stop, the website may then not work (some do and some don't).

**Our advice** We think it's better always to include the full stop because:

- it's the correct punctuation
- it avoids the possible ambiguity if the reader didn't realize the hyperlink ended the sentence and read on as if the words following it continued the sentence
- it rarely causes a problem – Microsoft Word automatically formats each website address, but not the full stop, as a hyperlink, which the reader then clicks on to go straight to the website. In other words, the problem could occur only if the reader cut-and-pasted or typed the address into their browser.

**Another option** You could omit the full stop after a hyperlink that ends a sentence, but the risks of readers thinking you've forgotten the full stop or misunderstanding the text are likely to be greater than the risk of them mistakenly including the stop in the website address.

## 12 *-ing* nouns

**Explaining the jargon** An example of an *-ing* noun is *writing* in this sentence: 'His writing is clear'. The grammatical term for this type of noun is *gerund*.

**The issue** Some people think you should always use the possessive with gerunds (for example 'The manager values **their** coming in early every day' and 'within 10 days of **our** receiving your application'); others think it's OK not to ('The manager values **them** coming in early every day' and 'within 10 days of **us** receiving your application').

**Our advice** Both constructions are common these days. We advise using the form without the possessive as it's more informal, and so in better keeping with plain English, which aims to sound friendly and approachable. Also, using the possessive form can lead readers to think you've made an apostrophe mistake (and so distract them from your message), for example: *The manager values her employee's coming in early*. This sentence would refer correctly to a single employee arriving early, but could be taken as a plural with a misplaced apostrophe. A third argument in favour of the form we recommend is that those who aren't linguists but write documents for organizations may not spot every place they should use the possessive construction, and therefore apply the rule inconsistently or with incorrect apostrophes. The construction without the possessive comes more naturally to most writers, as it's the form people use when speaking and writing informally.

**Another option** You could always use the possessive form, but it would be hard to ensure that you and all those who write for you will be consistent about doing so.

## 13 Italics and quotation marks

**Explaining the jargon** In British English, 'inverted commas' is a common synonym for 'quotation marks' (colloquially known as 'quote marks' or even just 'quotes'), though its popularity is reducing; American English rarely uses the term 'inverted commas'.

**The issue** Italics can be used to make words stand out for a variety of reasons, for example because you want to:

1. emphasize a word
2. give an example
3. highlight technical terms or words that are the focus of discussion
4. mark a word from another language that's not (yet) become an English word
5. make it clear the words are the title of a book, magazine or article.

Quote marks are an alternative for uses 2, 3 and 5. (Of course, they're also used for marking direct speech, but we don't cover this here as there's no choice about how you do this – though practice does vary between countries. Many books tell you how to punctuate speech correctly in the UK – see, for example, Trask's book mentioned in 'How to use this guide'.)

It can be tricky to decide and be consistent about:

- when you need to use italics or quote marks at all
- which of these to use when you do
- whether to use single or double quote marks.

**Our advice** Italics are less easy to read in large chunks than roman type, and because they require you to format the text, take more effort to create and often disappear when people cut and paste text between programs, for example from Word into Quark. So we advise you to keep things as simple as possible:

- Where it doesn't detract from the clarity of your writing, use neither italics nor quote marks. For example, in this style guide we indent quite a lot of examples to show that's what they are. And you can often emphasize text through language and structure rather than typography.
- If you need to use either italics or quote marks, choose quote marks when you can (they'll usually look fine for uses 2, 3 and 5).
- If you need to use either italics or quote marks and the latter don't look right, use italics (you'll usually need to do this only for uses 1 and 4).

We advise using single rather than double quote marks, because they're more usual in the UK (except in newspapers). In their style guides, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses recommend using single quotes. Many people apparently find them more elegant (they give a less busy appearance to the page); they also save a little space and typing effort (no need to press the shift key!). We use double quote marks only for quotes within quotes, for example: The manager reported: 'The chair has now read this annual report and thinks it's "our clearest ever", which is good news.'

**Other options** You could use italics more extensively, though this could make extra work for you and the reader.

Where you use quote marks, you could make these double instead of single. An advantage of double quote marks is that they're easier for readers to distinguish from apostrophes, but we think the downsides, as outlined above, outweigh this plus point.

Some people use double quote marks for quoting someone's spoken words, and single quotes for uses 3 and 5 above. The good thing about this is that it avoids any ambiguity about whether a word or short phrase in quote marks was spoken or is being highlighted for another reason. But such occasions are rare, usually the context will tell you which is meant, and it's harder work for the writer.

## 14 Latin plurals

### The issues

1. Because *data* was a plural in Latin, some people think it should be treated as a plural in English too. So they write *data were collected* rather than *data was collected*.
2. Some people also like to keep the Latin plurals of words that were originally Latin but have become part of the English language, writing *formulae* instead of *formulas*; *fora* for *forums*; *foci* for *focuses*; and *corpora* for *corpuses*.

**Our advice** We prefer to treat *data* as singular. And the style guide of the Information Commissioner's office (which enforces and oversees the Data Protection Act) treats *data* as singular, like a collective noun, as do many other style guides these days.

Pam Peters confirms this trend: the ratio of singular to plural constructions for *data* in the corpuses it uses is 4:7. Dictionaries support this, with both New Oxford and Merriam-Webster's noting that the singular construction is now as much standard English as the plural. *Agenda* and *stamina* are two other Latin plurals that have become purely singular nouns in English.

Note too that it's clearer to use the English plural of Latin nouns. So, for example, prefer *formulas* to *formulae*, *forums* to *fora*, *focuses* to *foci*, and *corpuses* to *corpora*. Readers are more likely to understand the word you're using, and whether you mean it to be singular and plural; and you don't need to worry whether you know the correct forms (for example, it's common to hear people talking about *a criteria* or *a consortia*, incorrectly using the Greek and Latin plurals of *criterion* and *consortium* with singular meaning).

**Another option** You could stick with the Latin approach, but it's less clear for readers, sounds rather old-fashioned and is harder for you as the writer as you must know which words are Latin, which of the five declensions each belongs to, and the correct plural forms of each declension. Few readers have any knowledge of Latin.

## 15 Lists

**The issue** Using vertical lists is a good technique for clarifying sentences that contain a list of items. But vertical lists are often punctuated illogically or inconsistently.

**Our advice** For lists where each point isn't a sentence but follows on from the lead-in statement, we recommend using:

- a colon after the lead-in statement
- lower-case letters to start each point
- a full stop at the end of just the last point.

If it's important to show whether the items in this type of list are 'or' or 'and' items, the simplest and most conventional approach is to do as follows:

We recommend using:

- a colon after the lead-in statement
- lower-case letters to start each point, and
- a full stop at the end of just the last point.

But if each list is a complete sentence, then we suggest the following:

- Still use a colon after the lead-in statement.
- Start each point with an upper-case letter.
- Use a full stop at the end of each point.

Instead of bullet points, you can use numbers (useful if people need to refer to them), or ticks or crosses (good if the items are things the reader should or shouldn't do).

**Other options** Although how you punctuate a vertical list is a matter of style (there's no right or wrong), it's important to be logical and consistent. If you look through different books and periodicals, you'll see many different ways.

## 16 Numbers

**The issue** Some people believe there's only one set of conventions about when to write cardinal numbers (eg, *three* or *3*) as words and when as figures. But books on style and usage show many variations.

**Our advice** We write numbers under 11 as words, and numbers 11 and over as figures, except for the following:

1. We use words for 11 and over when they:
  - start sentences (to avoid the potentially confusing sequence of a full stop, space then figure), for example *Thirty managers...*
  - refer to an approximate figure (eg, *hundreds of people*)
  - are a fraction not attached to a whole number, such as *a twentieth*.
2. We use figures for numbers under 11 when they:
  - include a decimal point, fraction or percent sign
  - represent other precise quantities, used with units of measurement, such as dates, volumes, weight, length, and page, section and chapter numbers
  - appear in sets of numerals some of which are higher than ten, eg *8, 11 and 23...*
  - are presented in tables or graphs.

We apply the same principles to ordinal numbers (eg, *third* or *3rd*).

**Other options** Some plain-language practitioners suggest writing all (or most) numbers as figures. Although this is a little unconventional, there is limited evidence to suggest it may be clearer for readers. For example, a 1987 study by the Department of Health and Social Security (described in Kempson and Moore – see 'How to use this guide') found that people prefer numbers to be expressed in figures than words. And various others (such as the Singapore Land Authority, and parliamentary counsel in Australia) have followed this style for years without apparent difficulty. But we believe that this approach is still unconventional enough to risk distracting readers from the message.

According to Dr Jakob Nielsen, eyetracking research shows that on websites figures catch the attention more than words ([www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/](http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/)).

If you choose to follow our approach, you may prefer to choose a different cut-off point for changing from words to figures. For example, some editors and publishers use figures for numbers from 10 or from 100 upwards. The latter convention is common in scientific writing.

## 17 References

**The issue** If you use or mention a published work in your writing, you need to reference it. The different ways of doing this are sometimes called 'citation systems'.

**Our advice** Citation systems are relevant mainly to academic writing, but there are times when business writing uses or refers to published works. If so, you should do two things:

- Include a list of these (sometimes called a bibliography), typically at the end, but it can be elsewhere. For example, we list works we have used and referred to in this style guide in 'How to use this guide'.
- If you mention a published work as you go along, you need to make sure readers can find its full details in the list, so they can read more if they wish.

There are many different citation styles, as used by different publications and academic fields. These divide into two main types of system:

- Parenthetical systems, as they are known, include basic information in brackets in the document (eg Cutts, 2020), with details in the full list of works. Recommended by the British Standards Institution, the Harvard system is an example of a parenthetical referencing system, and is common in the humanities.
- Notes systems use sequential numbers in the text that refer to either footnotes (notes at the end of the page) or endnotes (notes at the end of the paper), which give the details. Notes systems may or may not require a full bibliography, depending on whether the writer has used a full note form or a shortened note form. Recommended by the Council of Science Editors, the Vancouver system is an example of a notes referencing system, and is used in medical and scientific writing.

We prefer parenthetical systems, because notes systems require the reader to flit around in the text more, which is distracting for them. But you often don't need the brackets, for example when the author is already mentioned in the sentence, as in section 1: 'Pam Peters says this option...'. Since our list in 'How to use this guide' includes only one book by Pam Peters, there's no need to add a date here: the information we give is enough for the reader to identify the book.

In the full list of works you've referred to, you'd usually include the:

- name of the author (family name, and initial of their given name), with (*ed*) after it if the person has edited rather than written the book
- title of the work you've referred to
- title of the book or journal, if the work is part of one of these
- name of the publisher
- year of publication.

There are many different styles for ordering and presenting this information. We do it like this:

[For a book] Cutts M 'The Oxford Guide to Plain English' Oxford University Press, 2020

[For a journal article] Carr S and Cutts M 'Linguistic Nasties and Niceties: Who should we pander to?' Clarity, November 2006

[For a web article] Cutts, M 'Writing by numbers: are readability tests to clarify what karaoke is to song?' <https://www.clearest.co.uk/articles#Readabilitytesting>, 2008

This avoids italics, for the reasons given in section 13, and uses the least punctuation needed to make the information clear.

**Other options** If you're writing for a publisher, you must follow their referencing system. If you're writing for a scientific publication, you may have no choice but to use a notes system.

For business documents, it's better to use a parenthetical system. But within that, your organization can choose how to order and present the information.

## 18 Space between sentences

**The issue** Some people use one space and others two spaces between sentences in a paragraph (that is, after a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark). Using two spaces used to be the usual style, and is still common in American English.

**Our advice** We suggest using a single space between sentences in a paragraph, because:

- it's been the norm in British mainstream publishing for many years
- when you're word-processing a document, two spaces may stretch too much when you fully justify the text
- many computer typefaces are now designed to be suitable for use with single spaces between sentences
- most contemporary style guides suggest using one space only
- with the advent of the web, standard HTML removes extra white space after the first space.

**Another option** You could use two spaces between sentences, but bear in mind the arguments above for using single spaces.

## 19 Spelling

**The issue** Words with a Greek zeta root, like *organization*, can be spelt with an *s* or a *z*.

**Our advice** We use *z* for all words with a Greek *zeta* root, like the Oxford dictionaries do. Some people think this is the American spelling, but in fact, *z* is the older English form and is more widespread in British English than people may think, with data from the British National Corpus (BNC) showing a ratio of just 3:2 in favour of the *s* spelling. It's also the first form given in many British dictionaries for words deriving from the Greek and Latin suffixes, *-izein* and *-izare*, and part of the house style of Oxford University Press.

There are phonological and etymological arguments for using the *z* form, *z* representing better the sound of the suffix, and correlating better with the Greek and Latin forms of the suffix. There are some words – like *surprise* and *analyse* – that can't be spelt with a *z*; these derive from French rather than the classical languages.

Pam Peters agrees, concluding that *-ize* spellings are more widely used in English worldwide and better represent the sound.

**Another option** If you prefer the *s*, it'll never be wrong except in *capsize*. In our editing work, we'll happily follow your house style.

## 20 Which/who and that

**Explaining the jargon** Words such as *who*, *which* and *that* are relative pronouns. They're called 'pronouns' because they replace nouns, and 'relative' because they show how one part of a sentence relates to another. *Who* and *which* can introduce a defining clause (one that defines which person or thing you're referring to) or a describing clause (one that describes the person or thing you're referring to). *That* can introduce only a defining clause. A defining clause doesn't take a comma before the relative pronoun, while a describing clause does.

**The issue** It can be hard to decide whether to use *that* or *which/who*.

**Our advice** When you use *who* or *which*, you need to be very careful to use commas accurately to convey your message; failing to do so can skew the meaning significantly. Here's an example:

All the partners who I met signed the contract which was on the desk. [Two defining clauses, implying that there may be other partners that the writer didn't meet, and other contracts that were in other places.]

All the partners, who I met, signed the contract, which was on the desk. [Two describing clauses, implying that the writer met all the partners, and that there was just one contract.]

All the partners, who I met, signed the contract which was on the desk. [One describing clause, then one defining clause, implying the writer met all the partners, but there were other contracts in other places.]

All the partners who I met signed the contract, which was on the desk. [One defining clause, then one describing clause, implying that there may be other partners the writer didn't meet, but there was just one contract.]

One way of making things much easier is to use *that* where you can. This takes away the pressure to get the commas right, because *that* sounds OK only in defining clauses (that is, those that don't need a comma). So we recommend applying these guidelines, in this order:

1. If your sentence is fine without *that* or *which/who*, then omit these. (This is called the 'zero relative', eg *The man [that] I met carried an umbrella.*)
2. If *that* sounds OK in your sentence, use it.
3. If it doesn't, use *who* (for people) or *which* (for things), with a comma before it.

Applying these rules to the examples would give these results:

All the partners I met signed the contract that was on the desk.

All the partners, who I met, signed the contract, which was on the desk.

All the partners, who I met, signed the contract that was on the desk.

All the partners I met signed the contract, which was on the desk.

Note: Some writers would use *whom* instead of *who* in the sentences above, but this is unnecessary and rather old-fashioned now.

**Other options** It's fine to use *who* or *which* instead of *that* if you wish, but take care to get your commas right to ensure the readers understand you correctly.

You can use *whom* if you wish, but since it's correct to use this only when it's the grammatical object (rather than subject) of the sentence, you need to know your stuff! It'll make your document sound more formal too, which isn't in keeping with plain-English principles.

## Your comments and suggestions

If you have any comments on our style guide, or suggestions for other useful entries, please contact us at [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk). We'd also be pleased to hear about any other research that may inform our future style choices.