BCS House Style Guide

1. Content

Keep it simple

Plan before you write, so you know exactly what you want to say. When you write, say exactly what you mean, using the words the reader will most easily understand. Only use jargon (words, phrases and abbreviations/acronyms only understood by a particular audience) if there's no other way of conveying that information, and only if your reader will understand it. Keep your average sentence length 15 to 20 words.

Make it relevant

What you're writing about should be relevant to your reader. Tell them what they need to know, but leave out what won't interest them. Get to your point quickly.

Dos and don'ts

- Proofread and spell-check your work.
- Avoid one-sentence paragraphs.
- Make sure your work is non-discriminatory on the grounds of colour, race, nationality, ethnic origin, gender, marital or family status, disability, religious belief or sexual orientation (see also Equal opportunities and Gender-neutral language).
- Use the style sheet below for particular spellings.
- Ensure that styles, spellings, abbreviations and so on are consistent throughout your work, and with the house style.

2. Structure and layout

Cross-referencing

Keep cross-referencing as precise and clear as possible. References to headings and chapters are advised. Cross-references to pages are fine, but bear in mind that this will involve careful checking and correcting at page proof stage.

Indicate cross-references as: (see page 124); (see pages 124–26); (see Chapter 4); as shown in Figure 2.3; as demonstrated in Table 4.8.

End matter

Put these items in the following order where included:

Appendices

References

Further Reading

Index.

Figures and tables

If you include figures or tables in your document, they should be clear and self-explanatory. Short and to-the-point legends should be provided.

Figures should appear in the main text close to the figure/table's first mention.

Tables/ figures legends should include the table/figure number. They should be numbered consecutively within chapters, using the chapter number first (use 'I' for figures in an introduction and 'A' for any in an appendix) and begin with an upper-case initial. They should have no terminal punctuation. For example *'Figure 1.1 This is a figure title'*

Cite figures as Figures 2.1 and 3.2, Figures 2.1–3 and don't put brackets around figure and table numbers.

Figure should always be written with a capital 'f'.

Figures can be presented within the text of the paper but you should supply all figures (and this is preferred) separately in an electronic format. Postscript, EPS and TIFF are preferred for print. However gif, jpg or pdf are acceptable for web, depending on quality. Please also supply a legend for each electronic file that corresponds to the legend in the text and reproduces the numbering described above (Figure 1.1 etc.).

Please note that books are printed in black and white so make sure that figures do not include colour-dependent information.

Glossary

Put the term to be defined in bold type.

Don't use any punctuation between the term and its definition. Please just type two character spaces.

Begin the definition with an upper-case initial and end with a full stop.

Headings

In any document, headings have different levels of importance. There is a house style for each level of heading. In a chapter or section, A is the most important heading, then B, C etc.

To indicate clearly which one is which, please use the following:

A heads should be in capitals, for example, HUMAN RESOURCE PLANNING.

B heads should have an initial capital only, for example, Balance sheet for a student.

C heads should have an initial capital and be in italics, for example, *Handling inflation.*

Table and figure headings should have initial capitals, for example, *A function-based structure.*

Images

Images should be used sparingly and should only be included if they directly help to illustrate concepts or replace text. They should not be used to illustrate headings or to break up the flow of text. When deciding whether to include an image, please also bear in mind that the books are printed in black and white.

If an image is not your own, it is likely that permission to use it will be needed and that a cost is involved. See 3. Permissions.

Index

Use lower-case initials for all index entries, except proper nouns.

Don't use any punctuation between the index entry and the first page reference. Please just type two character spaces.

Leave an extra line space between letter blocks.

Indent subentries by one tab stop.

Always use Roman numerals to number.

Main text

Break up the main text into chapters, then by subheadings, complemented by tables, boxes, lists and figures (line work etc.).

If there is an introduction, do not give it a chapter number. Just title it 'Introduction'.

Subheadings help readers to see at a glance the progression of a chapter.

Make headings and figures/table captions as short and to the point as you can. Avoid using headings that are whole sentences.

Preliminary pages

Put these items in the following order where included:

- Table of contents
- List of figures/tables/maps
- Contributors'/authors' biographies
- Foreword (written by someone other than the author, and usually accredited)
- Acknowledgements
- List of abbreviations if appropriate
- Glossary if appropriate
- List of useful contacts/organisations/websites if appropriate
- Preface (written by the author, and not usually accredited)

The table of contents should always include full chapter headings and level-A subheadings.

References and citations

There is a moral and legal obligation to acknowledge the use of others' words or ideas (see also 3. Permissions). Please use the Harvard (author–date) system of reference. The Harvard system gives the author's surname and year of publication (and possibly a page reference) in parentheses in the text and a full reference in a list at the end of the book (or the end of the chapter in a multi-contributed book) entitled 'References'.

Full details of the Harvard Reference system are available in the *Oxford Style Guide*.

The following format for references should be followed:

Book: Author(s) (Year) *Book title*. Publisher location: Publisher. (For example: Hogger, C. (1990) *Essentials of logic programming*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.)

Book chapter: Author(s) (Year) Title of chapter. In: Editor(s)/ author(s) (ed(s)). *Book title*. (Edition) Publisher location: Publisher. Pages. (For example: Harel, D. (1984) Dynamic logic. In: Gabbay, D. and Guenther, F. (eds). *Handbook of philosophical logic*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel. 35-40.

Journal article: Author(s) (Year) Title of article. *Title of journal*, Volume number (issue number/ month). Pages. (For example: Galton, A. (1992) Logic as a formal method. *Comp. J.*, 35 (4). 431–440.)

Paper in conference proceedings: Author(s) (Year). Title of article. In: Editor(s) *Title of conference proceedings*. Place and date of conference. Publisher location: Publisher, Pages. (For example: Minoukadeh, Keyvan (2011) Interaction Design: Serving Corporate Needs. In: *Health, Wealth and Happiness. Proceedings of HCI 2011*. Newcastle upon Tyne, 4-8 July 2011. Swindon: BCS. 12-17.

Technical documents: Document number (year) *Document title.* Publisher location: Publisher. (For example: ITU-T. Z.500 (1997) *Framework on formal methods in conformance testing*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Telecommunications Union.)

Internet source: Author(s) (Year) *Title of document* website name/publisher. Available from: url [date accessed]. (For example: Hodkinson, R. (2012) *IT life in legal*. BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT. Available from http://www.bcs.org/content/conWebDoc/45029 [12 July 2012].)

Make sure all of the references in the text have a corresponding entry in the reference list. Cite all of the references in the reference list in the text. Remove references that are not cited to a separate section called 'Further reading'.

References in the 'Further reading' section should be listed alphabetically by author following the same format as the 'References' section.

Where there are more than three contributing authors please list only the first author and use 'et al.' within the text.

Publications titles should be italicized in the text.

3. Permissions

Copyright material and permissions

Unless agreed otherwise, it is the author's responsibility to obtain written permissions for extensive quotations, epigraphs, figures, tables or any other material, whether published or unpublished, that are in copyright and do not fall under the rules of 'fair dealing'.

If you have not obtained all necessary copyright permissions by the time you deliver the manuscript to us, it is likely that the publication date of your book will be delayed. You may need to review your manuscript to eliminate any expensive material and omit any other material for which, for whatever reason, you have not been able to obtain permission.

Please note that material on the web is still covered by copyright and permission must be obtained from the copyright holder to use this material.

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In the UK and throughout the EU, material is out of copyright at the end of the calendar year 70 years after the death of the author. Fair dealing is not clearly defined, but generally allows, for the purpose of criticism or review, the use of:

- a single prose extract of up to 400 words from a single source;
- a series of prose extracts of up to 800 words, each of which must be no longer than 300 words, from a single source;
- up to 40 lines of verse, provided that they don't comprise more than a quarter of the entire poem.

Copyright permission must be obtained for any other extracts or reproductions of creative works, including:

- short quotations used as epigraphs, regardless of length – these do require copyright permission and must be accompanied by a full reference; quotations from quotations websites and unreferenced quotes of any kind are not acceptable;
- poetry and literary works;
- newspaper and magazine articles;
- drama and film scripts;
- song lyrics;
- photographs or illustrations that are not taken or drawn by you, or in which people other than yourself appear;
- tables, figures and lists;
- single extracts of more than 400 words from academic works, or several extracts from a single academic work totalling more than 800 words.

Requesting permission

If you have established that such material is integral to your book, you need to obtain permission for non-exclusive world English print and electronic use as soon as possible. The publishing department can provide you with a permission request form. You will need to send a covering letter and a copy of the material you wish to reproduce, along with the completed permission form, although increasingly, publishers provide online permission request forms on their websites.

You will need to contact the person or organisation that holds the copyright of the work. Check the copyright page and acknowledgements page of the book from which you are taking the extract; in the case of tables or figures, check the caption too.

For written works the copyright holder could be the publisher, the author's solicitor, a family member or estate holder. Particularly for literary works, there may be separate UK and US/Rest of World rights holders and you will need to obtain permission from all of them.

For photographs, you will need permission from the photographer and from any people pictured, or their next of kin. For works of art, you will need to obtain permission from the artist, a picture library or museum.

The following are helpful for tracing rights holders of written copyright works:

Society of Authors database of rights holders – www.societyofauthors.org

Writers' and Authors' Copyright Holders – www.watch-file.com

Permission grants

You must provide copies of all permission grants to us with your manuscript.

A

Abbreviations

Use abbreviations consistently throughout.

Explain unfamiliar or specific abbreviations at their first mention in the text. Write them out in full with the abbreviation in brackets.

If using a large number of unfamiliar abbreviations, include a glossary.

As a general rule, don't use full stops in abbreviations: *AD, BC, EU, PhD, CV, IT*

Use full stops in *e.g.,* but in formal text write *'for example'*. Use full stops in *etc., a.m., p.m.*

Never use a full stop for a contraction, for example in *Mr* or *Dr*, but do use one for *Prof.*

Accents

Use accents on foreign words, unless the word has been anglicised, for example, *cafe, aperitif*.

Acronyms

An acronym is a series of letters or syllables pronounced as a complete word such as *NATO*. *UEFA, MI6* and *BBC* are not acronyms. Do not use full stops within acronyms.

American/British English

Although the spelling *–ize* is traditional in British English (as well as in American English), we prefer the *–ise* version and this is now accepted and widespread in Britain.

The following words are always spelled with *–ise*:

advertise, advise, apprise, comprise, compromise, demise, despise, devise, enterprise, excise, exercise, improvise, premise, revise, supervise, surmise, surprise.

Ampersand (&)

Use the word *'and'* rather than *'&'*, unless referring to a company name, for example, *Marks & Spencer*.

And/or

Avoid using *'and/or'*. Try to use one or the other or rewrite the sentence to avoid the issue. The same applies to *'his/her'*.

Apostrophes (')

See Punctuation.

B

-based

Hyphenate this when you combine it with another word to form an adjective, for example *work-based study.*

BCS/The BCS

Although we have been traditionally known as The British Computer Society and a number of people are used to referring to our organisation as 'The BCS', we refer to ourselves simply as 'BCS' going forward.

Brackets

See Punctuation.

C

Capitals

Capital letters in English are generally used to distinguish proper nouns from other words.

An exhaustive list of all cases of capitalisation cannot be given here. Please refer to the *Oxford Style Manual.*

Always capitalise:

- The first letter of a word that begins a sentence: ***H****e came by car.*
- The first letter of a quoted sentence if it is complete, and whether or not there are quotation marks: ***S****he replied, '**N**o more are left'. **T**he question is, **W**ill he resign?*
- The first letter of headings and captions.
- Names of recognised geographical region, whether topographical, astronomical, political or merely legendary or popular: ***B****ritain, **P**aris, the **C**hannel, the **St**ates**, T**rafalgar **S**quare, the **P**romised **L**and, **S**aturn etc.*

  In a small number of instances the definite article is capitalised: ***T****he **H**ague* (but ***t****he **N**etherlands*)

  There's sometimes a problem with the names of hazily defined geographical regions. We usually write '*the **M**iddle **E**ast'* and *'**S**outheast **A**sia'* because these regions are now regarded as having a distinctive identity, but we write '***c****entral **E**urope'* and '***s****outheast **L**ondon'* because these regions are not precise. South Africa is the name of a particular country; *'**s**outhern **A**frica'* is a vaguely defined region.
- Names of institutions, organisations, society, movements and adjectives relating to them: *the **B**ank of **E**ngland; the **B**ritish **M**useum; a **N**obel **P**rize; the **C**abinet; the **C**ampaign for **R**eal **A**le; **J**udaism.*
    - Note that articles and prepositions are not capitalised.
    - Note the difference between *the **W**hite **H**ouse* (the US president's official residence – formal name) and *a lovely **w**hite **h**ouse* (i.e. painted in white – descriptive); ***O****xford*

***U**niversity* (formal name) and ***O**xford and **C**ambridge **u**niversities* (descriptive); *the **G**overnment* (when referring to a particular body of persons, the Ministers of the Crown and their staff) and ***g**overnments can decide*… (when referring to a general concept of body).

- The days of the week and the months of the year (but not the seasons).
- The names of languages: *They spoke **A**rabic*. Please note the names of school subjects are not capitalised, unless they happen to be the names of languages, e.g. *she taught geography and Russian.*

Also use capitals to refer to a specific, proper name, but use lower case for non-specific, generic use. For example, academic and job titles are upper case if immediately preceding or following a name, otherwise lower case: *'**P**rofessor **S**mith'*, but *'she was a **p**rofessor of **m**athematics'*, *'**D**avid **C**larke**,** **C**hief **E**xecutive **O**fficer'*, but *'he was the **c**hief **e**xecutive **o**fficer'.*

Words that express a connection with a particular place must be capitalised when they have their literal meanings:

*The result of the **F**rench election is still in doubt.*

It is not necessary to capitalise these words when they occur as parts of fixed phrases:

*In warm weather, we keep our **f**rench windows open.*

A rule of thumb is to only use a capital letter if you're sure you know why it is there. See also Preferred spelling.

Colons and commas

See Punctuation.

Compliment or complement

You pay someone *a compliment*. Soap may be *complimentary* (favourable or free).

You have a full *complement* of students. Ideas can be *complementary* (wholeness, or adding up to a completeness of something).

Comprise or compose

The parts *compose* (make up) the whole. The whole *comprises* (consists of) the parts. The whole is composed of the parts. Never use *'is comprised of'*, although *'consists of'* is correct.

D

Dates

Use the following examples as a guide when writing out dates:

- on 4 August 1982

- from 4 August to 10 December 1982, from 1902 to 1996
- the period 4–5 August 1982, the period August–December 1982
- 1982–96, 1979–2002
- 2000 (not 'the year 2000')
- 19th century, 20th-century computing
- 1900s, 1960s, 2000s (no apostrophes)

Use the following examples as a guide when writing out times (don't use the 24-hour clock):

- 10 o'clock
- from 2.00 a.m. to 2.15 p.m.
- from 10 to 11 p.m.
- 10.00–11.15 p.m.

E

E.g.

This is short for the Latin *exempli gratia* and means 'for example'. Within the main body text, it prints in lower-case roman, with two points and no spaces, and is preceded by a comma.

Preferably use the full English equivalent in the running text.

> *I would be quite happy to do nothing this weekend, for example sit in the garden and read.*

Use the short form in tables, bullets, brackets, and anywhere else where space is tight.

Email

This should not be hyphenated.

If an email address comes at the end of a sentence don't follow it with a full stop.

For clarification regarding other hyphenated words, please see Hyphenation, and Preferred spelling.

En-dash (–)

See Punctuation

Equal opportunities

Take care when describing or addressing different groups of people. For example:

- *'deaf people'* or *'the deaf community'*, not *'the deaf';*
- *'people with disabilities',* not *'disabled people';*
- *'wheelchair users'*, not *'people in wheelchairs';*
- *'elderly people'*, not *'the elderly'* or *'old people';*
- *'lesbian women and gay men'* and *'the gay community'*, not *'lesbians and gays'*, or *'gays'.*

See also Gender-neutral language

Etc.

In full 'etc.' is *'et cetera'*, meaning 'and other things'. It prints in lower-case roman, with a full point.

Try to avoid it in full text – use *'including', 'include', 'and so forth'*, *'and so on'.*

> *I have packed the brochures, magazines, leaflets and so forth*.

F

Fewer/less

Use 'fewer' when the amounts can be quantified, 'less' when they can't.

> *There are fewer than 10 places available.*
>
> *There is less milk than yesterday.*
>
> *Ten items or fewer.*

Fractions

A fraction that stands alone is written out and hyphenated, even when one of the numbers is higher than ten:

> *Two-thirds of the students*
>
> *One-twentieth of the population*

A fraction attached to a whole number should be written in numerals:

> *2½ times per year*

G

Gender-neutral language

Avoid writing anything that discriminates on the grounds of colour, race, nationality, ethnic origin, gender, marital or family status, disability, religious belief or sexual orientation.

Avoid gender-specific suffixes, such as –ess or –rix, for example *'chair*' not *'chairman'*, *'manager'* not *'manageress'*.

Avoid sentences that refer to an abstract, hypothetical person whose gender can't be determined or is not important. If this can't be avoided, use the singular *'they'* as a gender-neutral pronoun instead of '*he'* or *'she'*. Using plural sentence structures can be useful:

> *Ballet dancers need special shoes. They should...*

See also Equal opportunities

H

Hyphenation

Always use hyphens:

- in spelled-out fractions, for example, *one-third;*
- when two or more words frequently used together form an adjective:

    common-sense argument

    an in-depth interview

    the longed-for results

    web-based

Do not use hyphens after an adverb:

'highly regarded' not *'highly-regarded'*.

Do not hyphenate the following:

data management

data migration

data mining

email

Split words in accordance with the *Oxford Minidictionary of Spelling and Word-Division*.

I

Italics

Do not use italics for emphasis. Use bold instead.

Use italics for titles of published books, titles of periodicals, excerpts in foreign languages.

Do not use italics for foreign words that have been accepted as fully part of the English language, for example 'spaghetti' not *'spaghetti'*. However it would be *'par excellence'* and not 'par excellence'.

Publication titles should be italicised.

I.e.

This is an abbreviation of the Latin 'id est', meaning 'that is'. It links two ideas, where the second explains the first:

It is raining cats and dogs, i.e. it is raining heavily.

It prints in lower-case roman, with two points and no spaces, and is preceded by a comma.

Use the full wording in the body text (*'that is', 'which means'*), and the shorter version only when space is tight.

> *It is raining cats and dogs, which means it is raining heavily.*

J

Jargon

Avoid jargon, business-speak and corporate buzzwords – any terms that will only be understood by a select group, and not the group you are talking to.

K

L

Latin plurals

Some are so common that we don't realise they are plurals, for example, *alumni, data, criteria*. However, there are forms that look pedantic and put the reader off, for example, use *forums* instead of *fora.*

Liaison and liaise

Note that the correct spelling has two 'i's.

Lists

Use a numbered list when the contents are a progression of events or things that need to occur or be used in a specific order. Use a bulleted list when the order of its contents is of no significance.

For numbered lists in text use Arabic numerals in parentheses (1), (2), (3), (4) etc. Any secondary listing within a list should be referred to by lower case Arabic letters bounded by parentheses (a), (b), (c), (d) etc.

Either run on lists in the text (if entries are short) or display them with a hanging indent (first line introducing the list full out, subsequent lines indented).

When items in a displayed list are complete sentences, begin with an upper-case letter and end with a full stop as follows:

- Full sentence.
- Full sentence.
- Full sentence. (Use full stops after numbers in displayed lists.)

When items in a displayed list are just words or phrases, begin with a lower-case letter and separate the items with semi-colons. Put a full stop at the end of the last item in the list, for example:

- word;
- phrase;
- phrase;
- word.

If the list contains a combination of the above two types of entry, use the rules for full sentences.

Do not use bullet or number lists of less than three items. They can be better expressed in a full sentence.

Formatting capabilities are restricted on the website; bullet lists are the preferred format.

M

Meter/metre

A *meter* is a measuring instrument: *parking meter, thermometer*.

A *metre* (British English) is a unit of length, i.e. 100cm.

In the US, meter is used for both terms.

Money

Always use numerals to express sums of money.

Use the following examples as a guide when expressing sums of money:

- *10p, 10 euros, 2 rupees*; note that we close up single-letter units but insert a space before/after those consisting of two or more letters;
- *£10, £5,000, £9,999, £2 million, £3.4 million;*
- *£19.00…£19.56* (use the figures after the decimal point for round amounts if there is an amount that follows in the same sentence or flow of thought that has figures after the decimal point).

N

Numbers

Spell out numbers at the beginning of a sentence. In text, spell out numbers less than 10, but use numerals for those greater than or equal to 10.

Always use numerals with units (for example, *15 ml*).

Give numbers below 10 as numerals when the figure is part of a comparison with a number above 9 or is just located close by in the text:

> *Children spend between 6 and 16 hours using computers every week.*

Use numerals for all numbers with ‘million’, for example *2 million, 2.3 million.*

There should always be a zero before a decimal point if no other digit has been given, for example *0.06* not *.06*.

Use words to express *'per cent'*, unless in tables, boxes, lists and labels. For example *two per cent* [text or caption], *2%* [table, box, list or label].

Write out fractions in text (including captions); use numerals in tables, boxes, lists, labels, for example *one-third*, *three-eighths* [text or caption]; *¼, ½, ¾* [table, box, list or label].

Remove the point and plural *'s'* after abbreviated units. For example *1 mol, 6 mol*; not *1 mol., 6 mols*.

O

P

Paragraphs

Use one line return between paragraphs. Don't indent at the beginning of paragraphs. Keep paragraphs short, especially when writing for the web.

Preferred spelling

We recommend the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a first point of reference.

BCS: Refer to 'BCS' or 'BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT', not 'the BCS' or 'the British Computer Society'.

New media terms:

CD-ROM
cybercrime
database
data centre
desktop
dot com
download
ebook
ebusiness
ecommerce
edemocracy
egovernment
email
enewsletter
but: electronic copy
electronic format
electronic participation
electronic services
electronic version
electronic voting
feedback
helpdesk
hyperlink
hypertext
interactive
internet
intranet
laptop
life cycle
mail merge
mailshot
offline
online
upload
web
webmaster
website

Try to avoid:

World Wide Web

net

Punctuation

Apostrophes (')

The apostrophe is used for two purposes:

(1) to show that one or more letters have been missed out

When we are speaking we frequently omit certain sounds, running parts of a word together to make contractions. When these words are written down, an apostrophe is used to show that letters have been missed out, for example *'did not'* - *'didn't'*, *will not – won't*, *might have – might've*, *she is – she's*.

The non-abbreviated version as a rule is preferable in body copy:

It is instead of *it's*

There is instead of *there's*

Cannot instead of *can't*

(2) to show possession.

We use an apostrophe to show that something belongs to someone e.g. *Lord Rochester's monkey, the girl's handbag, the mugs' colour.*

As these examples show, the rule is that if the name or noun is singular, we add an apostrophe followed by the letter 's'. For plurals ending in 's' we add only an apostrophe. Plurals that don't end in 's' follow the same rule as singular nouns (for example *children's playground*).

The 's' is also omitted when the last syllable of the word is pronounced 'iz'*: Bridges' books, Moses' tables,* but *James's coat* or *Thomas's head.*

However, many style guides advise to be guided by pronunciation and use the plural apostrophe only where the 's' would be spoken: *Mephistopheles', Waters', Hedges'* rather than *Mephistopheles's, Waters's, Hedges's*.

There is one exception this rule: When 'its' means 'of it' (i.e. possession) there is no apostrophe. The rule is:

It is = it's	*It's a cat, not a dog*
Of it = its	*He bought a new car; its colour is green*

Acronyms (NATO) and initialisms (BBC) show possession the same way.

BBC's new show

An MP's salary (i.e. the salary of an MP) and *a report on MPs' expenses* (i.e. the expenses of MPs)

The CD's subtitle (i.e. the subtitle of the CD)

Use BCS' rather than BCS's: *BCS' new recommendation.*

Brackets

Parentheses () are the most common brackets.

These are used to include information of less importance to the rest of the content, but that lends extra weight to what you're saying.

If the content in the brackets is an entire sentence and does not occur within another sentence, it needs a capital letter on the first word and a full stop at the end, even when it ends the enclosing sentence:

I never learnt to play the guitar. (I was always tone deaf.)

I never learnt to play the guitar (I was always tone deaf).

The above are both correct and a matter of choice, but either style should be applied consistently—obviously depending on the sense of the sentences—within the whole body copy.

However, if the full bracketed sentence occurs within another sentence, it should not be capitalised and should not end with a full stop within the bracket.

The discussion continued (this was inevitable) after dinner.

Comma

To avoid over-punctuation do not use a comma after *e.g.* or *i.e.* or before *'and'* and *'or'* in lists of words (*e.g. seven, six and five*). It should also be avoided before *etc*. and *'respectively'* and after short introductory clauses such as 'to avoid over-punctuation'.

However, there should be a comma at the end of a clause if there is one at the beginning.

Misusing the comma or leaving it out can completely change the sense of a sentence.

What is this thing called love?

What is this thing called, love?

Commas serve various purposes:

- They are used to divide items in lists. The comma is correct if it can be replaced by the word *'and'* or *'or'*.

  The colours of the Union Jack are red, white and blue.

  The building houses computers, seminar rooms and a library.

- In a longer sentence with more complex clauses it is often better to use a comma after *and*:

  The visitors had a great time looking at the new facilities in the building, having lunch in the cafe, and walking in the park.

  But you wouldn't use a comma for:

  It was an endangered white rhino. (These adjectives are not intended as a list.)

- Commas join sentences with conjunctions such as a*nd, or, but, while* and *yet*.

  The boys wanted to stay up until midnight, but they grew tired and fell asleep.

- Commas fill gaps and can imply a missing word.

  Annie had dark hair; Kate, fair.

- They go before direct speech.

  The boy said, 'Has anyone seen my frisbee?'

- They help to build interjections.

  Stop, or I'll shoot!

- Commas can be used like weak brackets. The bit between the comma can be removed, leaving the sentence less interesting, but grammatically intact.

  I am, clearly, losing my hair.

Note that you can use a comma after a salutation in private letters, but this should be avoided in business letters.

Dear Mr Smith

Colon (:)

Colons have three purposes: to introduce a list, to introduce a piece of direct speech or a quotation, or to separate two parts of a sentence where the first leads on to the second. Never follow a colon with a dash (:-) and never precede one with a space.

En-dash (–)

Longer than a hyphen, this should be used without spaces when there is a distinction in meaning between two words, for example *'Labour–Liberal alliance',* and to replace *'to'* in numerical phrases, for example *'people aged 55–60'*, *'pages 25–30'*.

You can use en-dashes in the same way that you'd use brackets to indicate parentheses. When you use them in this way, leave a space either side of each dash.

Four of the halls of residence – Earnshaw, Halifax, Sorby and Stephenson – are close to one another.

Ellipsis (…)

Ellipsis marks indicate a pause in speaking or an omission of one or more words. Don't use them in the place of a colon.

Exclamation mark

Use very, very sparingly and especially not to denote humour. A rare appropriate use is within quoted speech to signify a genuine exclamation. Never use more than one. Note there is no space before the exclamation mark:

'Stop! Thief!'

Forward slash

Only use in web addresses. Don't use it instead of *'or'* (male/female) or *'to'* (July/August).

Male or female

July to August

Full stop

Take care not to use commas where a full stop and new sentence is more appropriate. If reading a sentence out loud leaves you out of breath, split it up into two shorter ones.

Leave one blank space, not two, after a full stop, colon or semi-colon.

To avoid confusing punctuation, avoid putting URLs at the end of sentences. If you have to, do not use a full stop at the end. You can use a full stop before the URL:

> *Take a look on our website. www.bcs.org*

Question marks

Not needed in requests such as *'Could you please send me an application form.'*

When at the end of a title, don't use other punctuation to end the sentence:

> *'The book is called Why Learn IT?'* not *'The book is called Why Learn IT?.'*

Use after question tags, for example, *'It is late, isn't it?'*

Note that there is no space before the question mark.

Quotation marks

Use single quotation marks for quoted material and dialogue in the text. Reserve the use of double quotation marks for quotes within quotes, for example:

> A source is reported to have said, *'The age of "croissants and consultants" is over.'*

In UK style the full stop only falls inside the quotation mark if the material quoted is a complete sentence.

Run-on quotes of less than 20 words as part of the text. Display quotes of more than 20 words as indented quotes. A single tab indentation will suffice. For the website, these quotes will appear in a box.

Semicolon (;)

Use semicolons to distinguish phrases listed after a colon if commas will not do the job clearly.

Use also to separate clauses with no joining words, for example *'I came; I saw; I conquered.'*

Q

Quotation marks

See Punctuation

R

Readability

Read everything aloud. If it sounds good that way, it probably is.

Web content

Of 79 per cent of people who read articles online only 16 per cent read word for word and only 11 per cent of that 16 per cent finish the article. Therefore shorter articles are better.

- Avoid italics as they are very difficult to read online (see rule for use of italics).
- Never use all capitals; they take 57 per cent longer to read. If you read at 700 words per minute, then a 500 word article takes 30 seconds to read; however, online it takes 43 seconds.
- Headlines should be no more that seven words long. Paragraphs should be short, around five lines long.
- For engaging the readership the 'we/you' balance in a piece should be roughly the same; otherwise it seems either preachy or paternalistic.

When people look at websites they usually look at headlines first, whereas in papers and magazines, they tend to look at pictures first.

Readability can be checked using the Flesch Readability Statistics in Word (under tools; grammar; Flesch reading statistics). A reading ease statistic of 60-70 means that a literate adult can comfortably understand the article.

S

Singular/plural use

A company, party, team, partnership, government or country are all singular and therefore 'it':

The company is doing well.

The team was happy with the outcome.

The government is speeding up its legislation.

When using collective nouns, be guided by the sense:

The Council was elected in May.

The Council (members) are arguing over finances.

Spaces

There should never be more than one space in succession in word-processed text. Not even after a full stop.

T

Tables

See Figures and Tables

Tautology

This is essentially saying the same thing twice. These are also known as redundancies.

Significant landmark

Added bonus

Specialist expertise

Free gifts

U

Up-to-date/up to date

'Up to date' takes a hyphen when it is used in front of a noun, but not when it is used after it:

*I have **up-to-date** information*

but

*the information I have is **up to date***

V

W

Who's/whose

If you can replace the word with *'who is'* or *'who has',* then the word is *'who's'*:

Who's that knocking on the door?

'Whose' is the possessive.

Whose handbag is this?

X

Y

Z