Government
Communication
Service

Style Guide

Introduction

Written communication is at the heart of what many of us do as civil servants.

Good communication is essential to make sure that the Government's policies are understood and that our public services are delivered effectively.

The purpose of this guide is to encourage clear, concise writing and consistent editorial practice. It identifies aspects of English usage that are among the most common causes of uncertainty and misunderstanding and sets out the style appropriate to government communications.

We use many types of communication in government to inform and advise internal and external audiences, including policy documents, ministerial briefings, blogs, emails, tweets, letters, speeches and so on. Some of these have their own rules (social media for example) and speeches offer opportunities to use language more creatively. We should always write with our audience in mind, using simple and engaging language that grabs their attention and keeps it.

Clear, pithy writing shows respect for your reader. It takes more effort to write concisely but if you take the trouble your audience will thank you.

When you come across examples of good, elegant, clear writing make a note of them or collect them as models for you and others to follow. Equally, examples of bad or confusing writing will remind you of what you need to avoid.

This guide is here to help you. Please use it but remember it is a guide not a diktat. It is designed to set a framework within which you can feel confident to write in your own style.

First principles

We can start by setting out some fundamental principles of good written communication:

- use plain English and avoid long or complicated words when short or easy ones are available;
- use active language, not passive. It is usually clearer, more direct and more concise and does not disguise who is doing what. For example, “We will make a decision on your application once we have received your letter”, not “Once we have received your letter, a decision will be made on your application”; and “We recommend that you…”, not “it is recommended that…”;
- avoid technical language and jargon unless you are addressing a specialist audience and even then use it with care;
- use short sentences without multiple sub-clauses. Sentences should usually be no longer than 25 words; and
- you can usually remove a third to a half of what you write in a first draft.

Get someone to check what you have written, especially if it will be read outside government. Read back what you write. If it sounds wrong or comes awkwardly off the tongue then the meaning is probably obscure and you are not communicating effectively. Broadly speaking it is best to write as you would speak.

If in doubt, George Orwell’s five golden rules for good writing:

- never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print;
- never use a long word where a short one will do;
- if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out;
- never use the passive when you can use the active; and
- never use a foreign phrase, a scientific or jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Think how you would describe the issue you are writing about to a family member or friend. Too often we use technical terms that most people, including some of our own colleagues, do not understand. Our aim should be to open up government information so everyone can understand it.

Finally, to emphasise that we need communicators who are confident enough to be themselves, Orwell’s little-known sixth rule says, “break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous”.

You will find a list of additional sources and guides to good writing at the end of this document.

The Guide

Abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms

An **acronym** is formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word. Examples are Defra, DExEU, UNGA, FIFA.

Initialisms are formed in the same way as acronyms, but not pronounced as words. The individual letters are voiced. For example: FCO, DVLA, GDS, GP, ITV, ONS, URL.

If you are going to use an acronym or initialism, spell out the component words in full first, followed by the acronym in brackets. For example: Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU). Use just the acronym or abbreviation for subsequent references.

Do this for all written communications, even those aimed at specialist media. Do not assume the intended audience is familiar with acronyms and technical language.

Exceptions are acronyms/initialisms widely understood and used by the general public, such as PC, BBC, UN, VAT, EU, MP, which you do not need to spell out.

With occasional exceptions (Defra) use upper case without full stops. So, UK not U.K.; DCLG not D.C.L.G.

An **abbreviation** is a shortened form of a word, such as *Dr, St* (saint or street), but is pronounced the same. Where the last letter is the same as the last letter of the expanded form, for example *Dr* and *St*, a full stop is not needed.

Use an before an **initialism** or acronym if the first letter starts with a vowel sound. For example, *a NATO strategy* but *an NHS trust*.

Plural forms of initialisms should not have an apostrophe: DVDs, GPs, URLs.

Capitals

Capitals should be used with discretion.

In a second reference to an organisation use lower case where you are referring to it but not using its full name. So, the *Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs* becomes *the council*, with a lower-case *c*. Exceptions include: *Act, Bill, European Union, Parliament, Royalty*.

Travelling abroad you go through *customs* not *Customs*; and the seasons of the year do not have an initial capital.

Collective nouns

These are either singular or plural, depending on whether the emphasis is on a single entity or its parts. For example, *a team of advisers have*… and *a range of modules are*… but *the range of products is*…

Contractions

Use common sense. Although you might use *hasn't*, *can't*, *won't* and so on in more informal communications such as a blog or email, they are inappropriate in formal correspondence or briefing.

Dates

The standard government style is 24 April 2013, not April 24 2013 or 24th April/April 24th.

Numbers

Spell out numbers under ten unless part of a financial amount or a unit of measurement (£5 or 8 tonnes). Above ten use figures unless it produces an unbalanced result, mixing figures and words, such as *The projects take between eight and 11 years to complete*. In this example, it would be better to say, between *8 and 11 years…*

Separate figures over 999 with commas to make them easier to distinguish: *1,000; 10,500; 105,000*.

Spans or ranges should be spelled out. For example, *from £3 billion to £5 billion rather than £3 billion-£5 billion*. Use the defining unit at the start and end of the range, not *£3 to £5 billion*. Generally, spell out *million and billion*. Financial papers containing numerous figures would be an exception.

Punctuation

Commas tend to be used excessively. They should only be used to clarify and avoid ambiguity.

The use of commas between adjectives or in lists depends on whether they aid understanding or create unnecessary pauses. For example, *successful well-established mutual* is a clear unambiguous phrase that does not need commas, but the *departmental colours include red, blue, mid-blue, blue and turquoise, and green…* would be thoroughly confusing without commas.

A useful exercise for placing commas is to read the sentence aloud and hear where the natural pauses fall. However, avoid using commas before conjunctions (*although, and, because, but, if, or* and so on).

Dashes can be overused and are often a sign of sloppy writing. If you use them for emphasis or parenthesis, use the 'en' rule ('–'), which you can find in special character sets, not the hyphen.

Hyphens should be used between an adjective or participle and noun when they are used together as an adjective, for example *user-focused services, high-achieving media officer, top-quality writing*; or when using numbers as adjectives, for example, *30-year rule*. They are not necessary between an adverb and an adjective or verb qualifying a noun. For example, t*otally enclosed system, specially designed program* or *rigorously enforced spending controls*.

Don't use hyphens as parentheses. Use brackets or dashes.

Generally avoid **italics**. Use single quotation marks if referring to a document, scheme or initiative.

Quotations the rule is that commas and full stops always come after the unquote, except where a full sentence is being quoted. So, *He described the policy as "truly radical"*; but *"The policy," he said, "is truly radical."*

Use double quotation marks for direct quotations. Use single quotation marks within quotes and for terms and words used in an unusual way or context: *the framework allows organisations to 'purchase' a digital delivery team.*

In quotes running to two or more paragraphs open quotes for each new paragraph and close quotes only at the end of the quote.

Use the ellipsis symbol (…) in quoted material to indicate where text has been left out, with a space before and after the symbol (except at the beginning and end of a quote).

Semicolons can be used to connect two sentences or to break up a list of categories. For example: *postgraduate studies; nursing; midwifery and auxiliary medical studies; and health-management studies*.

A-Z of recommended usage

About	This should be used only with numbers rounded-off to tens or hundreds. Do not say *about 572*.
Act	This should be capitalised when it refers to an Act of Parliament. The same applies to *Bill* and *White/Green Paper*.
Adviser / advisor	There is no general agreement on which of these should be used. *Adviser* appears to be more common in the UK, and *advisor* in the US. The Financial Times uses the former. Best advice is to choose one and be consistent.
Affect / effect	Generally, *affect* is a verb and *effect* a noun. When you affect something, you produce an effect on it. However, you can effect (that is, bring about) a change.
Allow / enable	*Enable* means to make able, not to make possible. So, the software enables the user to monitor use of the service; but the software allows use of the service to be monitored.
Ampersand	Should be used only as part of a formal title, such as Department for Work & Pensions, Health & Safety Executive, Tyne & Wear, and not instead of *and*.
Bill	(see **Act**)
Billion	In the UK this means thousand million. Spell it out.
Bullet points	Treat bullet points as part of a sentence. They should: • make sense running on from the start of that sentence and be preceded by a colon; • be in lower case with a semicolon at the end; • have *or* or *and* at the end of the penultimate bullet after the semicolon; and • the last bullet in the series should end with a full stop.
Civil Service	Use initial capitals when referring to the institution but lower case for *civil servants*.
Colons	When used to refer the reader to following copy should not be followed by a hyphen or dash, ':-'.
Compare	This usually goes with *to* or *with*. Use *compared* to if you are pointing out or implying a resemblance between two things regarded as essentially different. For example, *PMQs have been compared to an argument in a school playground*. Use *compared* with if you are contrasting things of the same order. For example, *savings from ICT spend controls were £440 million in 2012/13, compared with £316 million in 2011/12*.

Co-operate and co-ordinate	These take hyphens, but email, infrared, printout, readout, reopen, reuse and worldwide do not.
Council/Councillor/ Counsel	Uppercase for names and titles and lowercase in every other circumstance. Counsel means to give advice.
Dates	Dates should be written *18 June 1815*, without commas. If a span of time is involved, avoid hyphens or dashes and make it *The pilot scheme will run from 1 to 30 April or 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014*. For financial years, use an oblique stroke, not a hyphen: *2012/13*.
Department	This normally takes a lower-case *d* unless a specific government department is being referred to by its official title. So, it is *the Department for Transport* but *the policy of the department is...*
Different from / to	The rights and wrongs of *different from/to* and even (in American English) *different than* are much-debated but we advise using *different from*.
Dots	A series of three dots, an ellipsis, can be used to indicate missing or omitted words in a quote (…).
Due to	*Because* is often better.
Embassy / High Commission	The main UK diplomatic mission in a Commonwealth country is a high commission. Elsewhere, it is an embassy.
Fewer / fewer than	Use fewer for numbers, but *less* for quantity: *fewer than 50 special advisers, fewer government websites than in 2015*; but less *than 75%* and *less than 50 tonnes*.
Gender neutrality	Avoid using gender when referring to a person generically. You can do this by rephrasing the sentence or, if this is not possible, by using *they* or *their*. For example, *not When we hire the new CEO, his first duty will be to …* , but *When we hire the new CEO, their first duty will be to …* , or *The first duty of the new CEO, once hired, will be to…*
Government	This normally takes a lower case *g* unless a specific government is being referred to. So, it is *the British Government*, but *successive governments, government data, the workings of government.*
Headlines	Use sentence case in bold type.

However	It is acceptable to start a sentence with *however*. However, if used to provide a link with the previous sentence it should be followed by a comma. If used to modify a clause no comma is required. However much you insist, there will always be debate.
Initials	Use full stops after the initials of a person. Stops are not necessary when initials are part of an acronym: PCSU, GDS or MCO.
Less / less than	These should be used for amounts/quantity/units of measurement *(less investment, less than 75%; less than 40 miles away).* (See **More than / over**.)
Long / short term	These terms are hyphenated if used as adjectives. For example, *short-term benefit*.
Midlands	The regions are in lower case: *midlands, south west, north east*.
Minister	Use upper case for a full title, such as *Minister for the Cabinet Office*, or when used with a name, such as *Cabinet Office Minister Chris Skidmore*. When referring non-specifically to a *minister* or *ministers*, use lower case.
More than / over	Traditionally, *more* than is considered appropriate before a number or quantity *(more than a billion hits on GOV.UK; more than a metric tonne)*, and *over* in expressions of spatial relationship or age *(over the limit; people over 50)*. We suggest you follow this rule in more formal communications, though *more than/over* are increasingly used interchangeably before numbers and amounts. (See **Less / less than**.)
Multi	This prefix, as in *multidisciplinary* or *multinational*, does not have to be followed by a hyphen, but where it is followed by a vowel, you could use a hyphen for clarity. For example, *multi-ethnic, multi-agency*. (Of course, you could always find a more user-friendly expression.)
Onto	Is one word, except when it means *onwards* and *towards*, as in *move on to the next point*, or *apprentices can go on to full-time employment*.
One nation	This term is all lower case, unless referring to the political standpoint supported by Benjamin Disraeli.
Parliament	This takes a capital *P*, but *parliamentary* is all lower case.
Per cent	Use *per cent* not *percent*. Use the symbol % with a number.
Prime Minister	Use *Prime Minister Theresa May* and *the Prime Minister*.

Program	This spelling is only correct when used in connection with computing – *computer program*, *software program*.
Seasons	The seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter, do not have an initial capital.
Spaces	Insert a single space after a full stop, not two or more.
Spelling	Avoid American spellings (for example, *defence* not *defense*; *cypher* not *cipher*; *cancelled* not *canceled*; *rumour* not *rumor*; *storey* – of a building – not *story*; *manoeuvre* not *maneuver*; *fibre* not *fiber*; *encyclopaedic* not *encyclopedic*; *dialogue* not *dialog*). For words ending *-ise* or *-yse*, use either *s* or *z* (*organise/organize; analyse/analyze*), but be consistent.
That / which	*That* and *which* create subtle differences of meaning. As a general rule, *that* is used to introduce information essential to the meaning of a sentence. *Which*, preceded by a comma, is used to introduce additional information that could be omitted without affecting the meaning. For example: *"The services, which are digital, are new."* The words after *"which"* add information about the services, they are all digital, not some other kind, and they are all new. However, in the sentence, *"The services that are digital are new,"* we are only talking about digital services among others that are not digital, and only the digital ones are new.
Time	Generally, use *am* and *pm* and not the 24-hour format. So, 6.30am (not 0630) and 6.30pm (not 1830 or 1830hrs). Use am/pm, without stops. The 24-hour format may be clearer when writing an operational plan, for example.
UK	The UK is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Great Britain means England, Scotland and Wales. However, say British Embassy, not UK Embassy, and British citizen, unless referring specifically to someone from Northern Ireland.
Under way	This term is two words. For example *the project is under way*.
Verbs	Sentences usually, but not always, need verbs.
While	This should be used to indicate that something is happening at the same time as something else, not as an alternative to *and*.

Weasel words and inappropriate metaphors

Weasel words are vague or ambiguous words and expressions that have been drained of meaning through overuse. They add nothing to the reader's understanding and may even mislead.

The expression 'weasel words' is based on a traditional belief that weasels suck the yolk from birds' eggs, leaving only the empty shell.

Here is a selection of these 'empty shell' words and phrases:

- dialogue (is not a synonym for speaking to people);
- facilitate (instead, say something specific about how you are helping);
- foster (unless it is children);
- going forward (why not just say, *we will* do something);
- in order to / so as to (phrases like these are superfluous);
- initiate (why not just *start*?);
- key (unless it unlocks something. A subject/thing is not *key* – it's probably *important)*;
- land (as a verb – only use if you are talking about aircraft, or fish!);
- leverage (unless in the financial sense);
- progress (as a verb);
- promote/promoting (as in *promoting greater efficiency*; unless you are talking about an ad campaign or some other marketing promotion);
- slimming down (processes do not diet – we are probably removing x amount of paperwork or redundant practices);
- stakeholder;
- streamline;
- transforming (say what you are actually doing to change something); and
- utilise (use *use*).

This is a far from exhaustive list. We all have pet hates that we would include. The point is to think clearly about what information you want to get across and not to fall back on clichés and jargon.

Metaphors

Metaphor is an intrinsic part of the language. Most of the time we are not even aware we are using it. We know you cannot literally 'drive' reform in the way you drive a car or drive cattle, but we know what it means. Some policies or programmes are based on the power of metaphor, such as The Talent Action Plan – Removing the Barriers to Success.

Metaphors can bring writing to life, enhance our understanding and underline meaning in effective ways. But what George Orwell called 'worn-out' metaphors ('thinking out of the box', 'going forward', 'park something', 'touch base') add nothing to our understanding. Others can actually obscure meaning. So, the advice is to use metaphors with care.

Creating digital content

- Writing for the web is a particular discipline. The principles of clear writing apply, but you can find detailed guidance gov.uk/guidance/style-guide.

You should also consider:

- **reading pattern** – when people scan web content, they trace an F-shaped reading pattern – make sure your key content and call to action is in the title, summary and first paragraph of the body copy;
- **title** – think of the search terms people will be using to find this content; make sure your title is meaningful and 'front-loaded' with key words; Google only uses the first 65 characters for its search algorithms, so keep to this limit;
- **notes to editors in media releases** – include links in the text as you go along, rather than in 'Notes to editors'; this section tends to alienate people outside the media and means important content (such as links to reports) is often lost at the end of items and appears without context; and
- **keep it short** – to hold the reader's attention aim for sentences of fewer than 25 words and keep articles brief – many people will not read to the end of long pieces.

Additional sources and reference

- Working with Ministers – A practical handbook on advising, briefing & drafting (new edition of the handbook written by Christopher Jary, revised by the author with Laura Bryant-Smith of the Policy Profession Support Unit; available from Civil Service Learning.
- Plain Words, Sir Ernest Gowers and Rebecca Gowers (new revised and updated edition 2014; paperback 2015, Penguin Books)
- Politics and the English Language, George Orwell, in Essays (Penguin, 2000)
- The Elements of Style, William Strunk Jr and E. B. White – the classic guide to writing good English (4th edition, Longman, 1990)
- GDS style guide (recommended for all government web content): gov.uk/guidance/style-guide
- Worst Words – A compendium of contemporary cant, gibberish and jargon, Don Watson (paperback and ebook, 2015, Random House)
- 'Would your mum understand it? Michael Gove bans jargon in education department.', Daily Telegraph, 30 June 2013