



Writing and Design Style Guide

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Consistently following style guidelines as you write and edit will help you produce quality documents. While consistency is important as you edit your documents, readability should always be the main goal. For matters not handled in this document, we refer to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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General layout and style

Whether a document will be read online or in a printed book, consistent application of style rules is key to a quality reading experience. This section covers some basic layout and style rules, presented alphabetically.

Acronyms. On first use, spell out the phrase followed with the acronym in parentheses, then use the acronym throughout.

Example: Philip Glass Ensemble (PGE).

Acronym list. For especially long documents or documents with a large number of acronyms, include an acronym list. In this list, only capitalize proper nouns or acronyms that require capitalization.

Example: RAM (random access memory)

Alignment. Text should be left aligned. It is best not to “full-justify” text, as this may create odd spacing and hyphenation.

Bullets. In lists, use bullets to delineate each item. Use numbers only if the specific order of the items is important. Ideally the items should be written in a similar voice, tense, and structure. Use sentence case for each item unless there are only one or two words per item. Nest bullets when necessary, using additional inset and a different bullet symbol at each nesting level. Limit lists to no more than three levels.

Case/capitalization of words. Do not capitalize merely to emphasize words. Reserve capitalization only for proper nouns, which are the names of things, such as people, days, countries, companies, etc. A needlessly capitalized word will give your readers pause, making them wonder why you are treating it as a proper noun.

Case/capitalization of headings and titles. There are two general styles of capitalization for headings and titles, as shown below. Choose one and use it consistently.

- **Sentence case.** Capitalize only the first word (and proper nouns).
- **Title case.** Capitalize every word except for articles (a, the), prepositions (to, in), and conjunctions (and, but) of fewer than four letters.

Citations. Inline or in footnotes, when referring to sources of information, put main titles, such as the titles of books or magazines, in italics. When applicable, set titles of individual magazine articles or book chapters in quotation marks. In all cases, follow the title by a comma then the name of the author set in regular text. When possible include a link to the source. Bibliographic lists generally place the author name (last name first) before the title. (More formal documents may require a more rigorous system of citations.)

*Example: (Footnote) *Collected Stories*, “Barn Burning,” William Faulkner (1948)*

*Example (Bibliography): Faulkner, William, *Collected Stories*, “Barn Burning” (1948)*

Headings. Heads, subheads, and inline heads are used to label content, making it possible for users to clearly understand the context of what they are reading and to efficiently “scan” through the document. Also see [Case/capitalization of headings and titles](#) above.

- **Heads and subheads.** Limit the number of levels to four or at most five. Set heads and subheads such that the size, color, and weight of the text will graphically inform the reader where they are in the hierarchy of the document. For example, the level-1 heading should be more prominent than the level-2 heading, the level-2 heading should be more prominent than the level-3 heading, and so on.
- **Inline heads.** Heads that precede content in a sentence, bullet, or paragraph are called inline heads. Inline heads, such as those used throughout this document, should be styled in such a way that clearly sets them apart from the following information, such as by bolding and following with a period. However you choose to set your inline heads, apply it consistently.

Hyperlinks. Any item that is clickable should be set in a style that visually sets it apart from normal text without distracting the reader and affecting readability, such as by underlining or changing its color. The wording of hyperlinks should be active and inform the reader of either what will happen if the link is clicked (imperative verb-based link text), or what content the click will make available (noun-based link text). Whether verb- or noun-based, apply a consistent linking style.

Example: Verb-based link. [Download the report.](#)

Example: Noun-based link. Download the [Music Review Report](#).

Hyphenation. Many editors prefer to disable hyphenation for breaking words at the end of a line. If your document includes hyphenation, you should ensure that specialty words and terms such as company names, function names, and other important terms are not hyphenated.

Flow rules. Different software tools have different names for this, such as *keep*, *flow*, or *protection*. Whatever it is called in your software, as much as your tools allow, prevent page breaks from separating headings from the text immediately following them. This also applies to table and figure names.

Punctuation

Ampersand (&). Only use the ampersand character as a last resort for lowest character counts (such as for social media) or when quoting material from others. Otherwise, spell out the word *and*. If you use the ampersand for stylistic reasons, be sure to apply it consistently. Do not use an ampersand in a file name or email address.

Comma (,). In a series of words or phrases separated by commas, always use a comma before the conjunction. (This is called the "Oxford comma" or the "series comma" and is a source of bickering among editors. If you detest the Oxford comma, then don't use it — but be consistent!)

Example: She liked cats, dogs, and mice.

Em (—). Use an em-dash (not a hyphen) to set a phrase apart with more of an interruption created by commas. Also see Hyphen.

Example: Philip Glass—likely as a result of his studies of Indian music—is known for subverting the traditional Western norms of composition.

Ellipse (...). The ellipse indicates a trailing thought and implies that there is additional content. Therefore, unless that is exactly what you intend to convey, reserve it for only very informal writing. There should be only three dots in an ellipse. If the ellipse appears at the end of a sentence, follow it with a period.

Hyphen. When a combination of words creates an adjective phrase, use hyphens where necessary to unambiguously convey meaning. When the meaning is clear without the hyphen, which is frequently the case with adverbs, then omit it.

Example: The phrase “centrally located vault” is clear without a hyphen. However, “small business ad” needs a hyphen to indicate whether it is an ad for a small business (small-business ad), or a business ad that is small (small business-ad). Also see Em.

Numbers/units. When used in a sentence, either spell out all numbers, or spell out numbers from zero to ten, and use numerals for numbers 11 and higher. An exception is to spell out large round numbers, such as one hundred. Informal writing may simply use numerals.

Always use numerals when citing quantities. The number is followed by one space and then the unit symbol.

Example: 2.5 kg, or 6 MB

The capitalization and symbols for units of measurement are standardized by the *Système international (d'unités)*, or the International System of Units. This is nicely described on [the SI Wikipedia page](#).

Period (.). Always place only one space after the period or other punctuation at the end of a sentence. Also see [Ellipse](#) and [Space](#).

Quotation marks (“”). Especially when writing for an American or global audience, always place the terminating punctuation of a sentence inside the quotation marks:

Example: “This is a sentence.”

In cases where you include quoted content in a sentence, place the ending punctuation inside the quotation marks unless it is a nested quotation:

Example: I will sing “Let it Be.” “He was singing the song ‘Let It Be.’”

Space. Always place just one space after a period or other punctuation at the end of a sentence. The two-spaces rule is only applicable with non-proportional type such as with older typewriters.

For layout purposes, use a tab instead of multiples of spaces to indent text, with exceptions for computer code where the number of spaces are significant.

Globalization

In today’s business environment, many documents are produced for a global audience. If you are producing documents intended for a local audience, then favor language choices appropriate for that locale. Otherwise, following are a few style decisions to make documents accessible across the world.

Dates. Dates are written differently across the world. For this reason, you should spell out (or abbreviate) the month name.

Example: Rather than 11/12/20, write either Dec. 11, 2020 or 11 Dec., 2020.

Idioms. Avoid idiomatic phrases, such as *sneak peek*, *by and large*, *deep seated*, and *for all intents and purposes*. They may make sense to you, but idioms often do not translate well to a global audience and in extreme cases might confuse your readers.

Measurements. Some parts of the world use the metric system (centimeters, liters, etc.), while others use the imperial system (inches, gallons, etc.). Always show every measurement in both values. Which value you show first doesn’t matter, as long as you are consistent.

Example: 27 cm (10.63 in)

Spelling. Multinational corporations, worldwide consortia, and other organizations generally favor English spelling for a global audience. This is reflected in the [Word choice](#) section below.

Time. Some regions prefer a 24-hour clock, often referred to as “military time,” while others use a 12-hour clock that requires the use of am or pm. The best choice depends not only on your audience but also on the type of document. Whichever method you choose, apply your standard consistently.

Another consideration is the time zone. Every organization handles this differently, some using the time zone for their headquarters as their default. When in doubt, specify the time in some reasonable local time zone (such as your own location, or where the event is to be held) and give the UTC time as well:

Example: “The meeting is at 2:00 pm Pacific (10:00 pm UTC)”

Word choice

Language evolves and writing style guides must evolve with it. Following are words that are commonly misused or misspelled. We include English spelling for words so as to accommodate those writing for a global audience. See [Globalization](#) above for more information.

affect, effect. Use *affect* as a verb and *effect* as a noun.

Example: “I wanted to affect the timeline.”

Example: “The effect was brilliant.”

assure, ensure, insure. Use *assure* when you are convincing someone of something. Use *ensure* when you are making sure of something. Only use *insure* when talking about insurance.

Example: “I assure you that it will work.”

Example: “Save your work to ensure that it will not be lost.”

Example: “I paid State Farm to insure my boat.”

behavior, color. Use this spelling rather than *behaviour* or *colour* for an international audience. This spelling variant also applies to many other words ending with *-our*.

e.g., i.e., et al., etc. Instead use *for example* (e.g.), *in other words* (i.e.), *and others* (et al.), and *and so on* (etc.) whenever possible. However if you must use the Latin abbreviations, do not italicize them, and punctuate them consistently with how you would have punctuated the phrases that they replace.

email. Common noun. Never refer to this as electronic mail. Spell it as a single word with no hyphen. Unless specifically directed to do otherwise, email addresses are generally typed using all lowercase letters.

farther, further. Use *farther* for physical distance, and use *further* for additional, or an abstract distance:

Example: “I drove farther than she did.”

Example: “For further discussion, see me later.”

fewer, less. Use *fewer* in relation to a quantity of countable discrete nouns, and *less* for non-discrete, uncountable nouns.

Example: “The process required less time.”

Example: “The process required fewer hours.”

globalization. Use this spelling rather than *globalisation* for an international audience. This also applies to many other words ending with *-sation* when the s is soft.

hanged, hung. People are hanged, objects are hung.

internet. Common noun: do not capitalize.

its, it's. Only use the apostrophe on its to denote a contraction of “it is.” Its without an apostrophe shows a possessive.

Example: “Its high price implied that it’s valuable.”

lay, laid, laying. *Lay* is a present tense verb used when the subject is acting on the object. *Laid* is the past tense as well as the past participle of lay:

Example: (Present) “I lay the book down.”

Example: (Past) “I laid that down yesterday.”

Example: (Past participle) “She must have laid the book down.”

lie, lain, lying. *Lie* is the present tense verb meaning the subject is doing the action. The past tense of this word is *lay*, and the past participle of this word is *lain*.

Example: (Present) “I lie down to sleep.”

Example: (Past) “I lay on that couch all night.”

Example: (Past participle) “He would have lain in bed all day.”

multicore. Common noun. Spell it as a single word with no hyphen.

nevertheless. This means despite or notwithstanding and is always spelled as a single word.

straightforward. This means clear or unambiguous and is spelled as a single word.

their, they're, there. Use *their* as the possessive form of *they*. Use *they're* as the compound form of *they are*. Use *there* to indicate a direction or place.

Example: “They're using their new tools over there.”

toward, towards. Both are acceptable, however favor *toward* for American and global audiences.

trade show. Common noun. Spell as two words.

versus, vs. Except for very formal writing, use the abbreviation, always with a period after the second letter.

Example: “Philip Glass vs. John Cage.”

web, website, web page. Common nouns. Website should be spelled as a single word, however continue to split web page into two words. Also, refer to “the web,” not to “the worldwide web.”

white paper. Spell as two words.

worldwide. Spell as a single word.

your, you're. Use *your* as the possessive form of the word *you*. Use *you're* as the contraction of *you are*.

Example: “I believe you’re using your bicycle incorrectly.”

Document design for PDF

Many documents these days are read on-screen either as PDFs or as web content, rather than in print. Even when printed, these documents are typically printed using at-home or in-office printers, not by a press. This section discusses formatting content specifically for output to a PDF for reading on-screen.

Cover. Set the title in large, bold text, and if possible, set the footer to omit the page number on this page.

Page numbering. The practice of using lowercase roman numerals for document front matter such as a table of contents is not appropriate for today's on-screen documents. Begin the page numbering with page 1 for the cover page, so that the *n*th page of the PDF file should be reflected as the *n*th page in the page number shown on the page.

Even and odd pages. Today, as many documents are no longer printed and bound, we no longer need to use different page layouts for odd- (recto/right) and even-numbered (verso/left) pages. The running heads and page numbers may remain aligned on the right or left side of the page or centered.

Page breaks. In short documents (such as this one), unless a new section would otherwise start very low on a page, do not force new sections to begin on a new page. For longer documents, only force a new page for your highest level of heading, such as for a new chapter or main section. In those cases, it does not matter if the that is an odd- or even-numbered page: unless the document is intended specifically for printing *and binding*, do not insert a blank page to force a section to begin on an odd-numbered page.

Hyperlinks. Navigability is important for documents that will be read on a computer. Design your table of contents such that the page numbers listed are hyperlinked to take the reader to that page. When you insert a cross reference in your document, make it a link that will take the reader to the referenced materials.