

## Writing Guidelines

Writing guidelines aren't as much about being right or wrong as they are about maintaining a consistency that polishes our written communication. Sometimes, written communication is the first—or only—impression of us that people see.

While proper use of the English language can be debated, the overall goal is to be consistent and maximize readability. These writing guidelines are based on three standard reference guides:

- *The Elements of Style*, Fourth Edition, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, Fourth Edition
- *The Gregg Reference Manual*, Eighth Edition, William A. Sabin
- *The Associated Press Stylebook*

There are many rules in the English language that are commonly broken, or that leave room for interpretation. The following guides have been developed to maintain consistency across written material.

### Issues of Style

- Aim for a friendly, informal, direct voice (first person, use “we” and “you”).
- Use concise language and short paragraphs.
- Maintain consistent tense (past, present, future) throughout.
- Eliminate excess words or phrases.
- Minimize the use of unnecessary jargon and technical language.
- Minimize abbreviations, or use them only after a first reference.
- Minimize capitalization (use only for proper names).
- Minimize punctuation (US versus U.S.).
- Avoid starting and ending sentences with prepositions.
- Don't create run-ons by adding too many *ands*.
- Always use a comma before the last item in a list (red, white, and blue).
- Use only one space after the period between sentences, instead of two.
- Always use spell-check, but don't solely rely upon it. Use your own eyes to double check final copy.
- When referring to square footage, use the following format: 20,000 sf. Hyphenate when modifying a noun: a 20,000-sf building
- Use *wayfinding* and *daylighting* as single words without hyphens or spaces.
- Avoid using the past perfect progressive. (“We *had been filling* these orders with Model 212A until we saw your directive.”)
- Stay away from redundant word usage, especially within the same sentence or paragraph. Use a thesaurus to find new words that share the same meaning.

- Avoid frequent use of the word *includes*. Consider replacing the word *includes* with another word when possible: *features, contains, embraces*.
- *Utilize* is over utilized. Consider replacing the word *utilize* with another word when possible: *use, employ, operate, spend, service, help exercise, bring into play, apply, exploit, draw on, manage, handle*.
- Turn hyphenation off.
- Use left-justified (ragged right) text, rather than justified.

### Commonly Missed Rules of Language

#### Know the proper use of *that* versus *which*.

*That*. When used as a relative pronoun, *that* refers to things; it also refers to persons when a class or type is meant. "Here is a picture of the plan *that* I own." When used as a subordinating conjunction, *that* links the dependent clause it introduces with the main clause. "We know *that* we will have to make cuts in the budget."

*Which*. Use *which* (rather than *who*) when referring to animals, things, and ideas. Always use *which* (instead of *that*) to introduce nonessential clauses: "The revised report, *which* was done by Mark, is very impressive." *Which* may also be used to introduce essential clauses.

When referring to people, use *who* or *whom* instead of *that* or *which*.

#### Know the proper use of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes.

(The names *en* and *em* refer to the width of the dash: the en dash is roughly the width of the letter n, and the em dash is roughly the width of the letter m.)

Hyphens (-): Use to create compound words.

En dashes (–): Use an en dash in place of the word *to* to link two figures that represent a continuous sequence. Do not leave a space before or after the en dash.

during the week of May 15–21  
in Articles I–III  
during the years 1987–1997

Do not use the en dash if the sequence is introduced by the word *from* or *between*.

from 1995 to 1998 (not: from 1995–1998)  
between 1994 and 1997 (not: between 1994–1997)

Em dashes (—): Use em dashes in place of a comma, semicolon, colon, or parentheses to create emphasis. There is no space before or after the dash.

At this year's annual banquet, the speakers—and the food—were superb. (In place of commas.)

The job needs to be done—moreover, it needs to be done well. (In place of a semicolon.)

My arrangement with Gina is a simple one—she handles sales and promotion, and I take care of production. (In place of a colon.)

Call Mike Habib—he's with Jax Electronics—and get his opinion. (In place of parentheses.)

**Use toward rather than towards.**

Both forms are correct, but toward is the more common American usage.

**Know the proper use of semicolons versus colons.**

Semicolons. When a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, or nor*) is omitted between two independent clauses, use a semicolon—not a comma—to separate the clauses. If you prefer, you can treat the second clause as a separate sentence.

Most of the stockholders favored the sale; the management did not. (Not: Most of the stockholders favored the sale, the management did not.)

Use a semicolon in place of a comma between independent clauses where more emphasis is desired, or to increase readability.

Many people are convinced that they could personally solve the problem if given the authority to do so; but no one will come forward with a clear-cut plan that we can evaluate. (emphasis)

I sent you an order for copier paper, computer paper, and envelopes; and shipping tags, cardboard cartons, stapler wire, and binding tape were sent to me instead. (clarity)

Colons. Use a colon between two independent clauses when the second clause explains or illustrates the first clause and there is no coordinating conjunction or transitional expression linking the two clauses. If you aren't sure whether to use a

semicolon or a colon between two independent clauses, you can always treat each clause as a separate sentence and use a period at the end of each.

I have a special fondness for the Maine coast: it reminds me of the many happy summers we spent there before our children went off to college.

I have two major hurdles to clear before I get my Ph.D.: pass the oral exam and write a dissertation.

Place a colon before such expressions as *for example*, *namely*, and *that is* when they introduce words, phrases, or a series of clauses anticipated earlier in the sentence.

The company provides a number of benefits not commonly offered in this area: for example, free dental insurance, low-cost term insurance, and personal financial counseling services.

When a clause contains an anticipatory expression (such as *the following*, *as follows*, *thus*, and *these*) and directs attention to a series of explanatory words, phrases, or clauses, use a colon between the clause and the series.

These are some of the new features in this year's models: a fuel economy indicator, a new rear suspension, and a three-year limited warranty.

The following staff members have been selected to attend the national sales conference in Honolulu:

Frances Berkowitz

Thomas Gomez

Thomas Miscina

Use a colon even if the anticipatory expression is only implied.

The house has attractive features: cross ventilation in every room, a two-story living room, and two terraces.

Do not capitalize after a colon if the material that follows cannot stand alone as a complete sentence.

I must countersign all cash advances, with one exception: when the amount is less than \$50.

Use semicolons to separate complex lists; use commas to separate simple lists (one-word items).

**Check usage of your and you're.**

*Your.* Possessive.

*You're.* Contraction for you are.

**Check usage of their, there, and they're.**

*Their.* Possessive.

*There.* Location.

*They're.* Contraction of they are.

**Use i.e. and e.g. correctly.**

i.e. = that is, to be precise, specifically

e.g. = for example

**Use affect and effect correctly.**

Effect as a noun = result or consequence

Effect as a verb = to achieve or appear

Effective = effectual, real, operative

Affect = to have an effect on, distress, assume

Affecting = emotional, moving, touching

**Check position of punctuation marks in relation to closing quotations.**

Periods and commas = inside closing quotation

Semicolons and colons = outside closing quotation

Question marks, exclamation points, dashes, and parentheses = depends on use.

**Do not confuse possessive pronouns with contractions.**

*It's* (It is or: it has) It's time to take stock of our achievements.

*Its* (Possessive) The company must protect its assets.



**Use *ensure*, *insure*, and *assure* correctly.**

*Ensure* = to make certain

*Insure* = to protect against loss

*Assure* = to give confidence to someone

**Use *preventive* instead of *preventative*.**

Although these words have the same meaning, *preventive* is preferred because it is the shorter form and the one more commonly used.

**Use *invasive* and *evasive* correctly.**

*Invasive* = A medical procedure which penetrates or breaks the skin or a body cavity:

The doctor will perform an *invasive* procedure on the patient.

*Evasive* = Tending or seeking to evade; characterized by evasion: an *evasive* answer.

**Use *comprise* and *compose* correctly.**

*Comprise* = to contain, to consist of.

*Compose* = to make up.

The parts *compose* (make up) the whole; the whole *comprises* (contains) the parts; the whole is *composed of* (not: is *comprised of*) the parts.

The parent corporation *comprises* (consists of) three major divisions.

Three major divisions *compose* (make up) the parent corporation.

Do not use *comprise* and *include* as synonyms. *Include* implies that what follows represents some but not all of the parts. *Comprise* implies that what follows embraces all the parts.