

# Our Style





# Writing to style

This is the Moray Council's style guide for producing content for the website and for documents or publications for the public. It does not cover technical reports but is generally applicable to committee reports. This guide is here to help you. Please use it, but remember it's a guide, not a diktat. It is designed to set a framework within which you can feel confident to write in your own style.

Moray Council produces a huge amount of material on many platforms and in a variety of formats. Much of this material is produced for public consumption, but the styles and standards of this material can vary hugely.

This style guide has been developed to help with the creation of a consistent style and standard across the council. One of the main difficulties in implementing a writing style guide, particularly when many people are originating content, is that people's age and experiences in education affect how they organise their writing.

Their background influences detailed decisions which may seem quite straightforward to agree on (for example about use of capital letters, abbreviations, formatting, numbers and so on). While variation in language use is common, most people think that their way of doing things is the right one. In such circumstances introducing a style guide:

- **makes better use of writers' and editors' time:** a style guide provides quick answers to format, style and accuracy questions.
- **helps readers by being consistent:** readers are not jarred by the varying, personal stylistic choices of different writers. Clear, pithy writing shows respect for your reader.
- **conveys the right 'look and feel':** a style guide can help organisations enhance their external image by articulating a style that reflects its values.
- **saves money:** a style guide reduces time spent writing, reviewing and correcting documents.

# Starting with the basics

To keep content understandable, concise and relevant, it should be:

- specific
- informative
- clear and concise
- brisk but not terse
- serious but not pompous
- incisive (over-friendliness can lead to a lack of precision and unnecessary words) – but remain human (not a faceless machine)
- emotionless – adjectives can be subjective and make the text sound more emotive, like spin

There are some fundamental principles of good written communication:

- **use plain English:** avoid long or complicated words when short or easy ones are available. Use 'buy' instead of 'purchase', 'help' instead of 'assist', 'about' instead of 'approximately' and 'like' instead of 'such as'.
- **use short sentences:** usually no longer than 25 words, without multiple sub-clauses.
- **use active language, not passive:** it is usually clearer, more direct, more concise and doesn't 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 – even then, use it with care. We lose trust from people if we write local government buzzwords and jargon. Often these words are too general and vague and can lead to misinterpretation or empty, meaningless text. We can do without these words.

You can usually remove a third to a half of what you write in a first draft.

- **Write conversationally:** picture your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-to-one but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

If at all possible get someone to check what you've written, particularly if it will be read outside government. Another good discipline is to 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's best to write as you would speak.

## **Addressing the reader**

Address the reader as 'you' where possible. This is particularly so for creating content on our website when we often make direct appeals to residents and businesses to get involved or take action, eg 'You can contact the council by phone and email' or 'Please pay your council tax'.

## **Gender-neutral text**

Make sure text is gender neutral wherever possible. Use 'them', 'their', 'they' etc.

## **Contractions**

Use contractions, eg can't, you'll. Some organisations are reluctant to use them but when testing with users we've never encountered a problem with understanding.

Sometimes, lots of 'cannot', 'should not' etc can seem archaic and formal. That's a tone we can move away from without jeopardising the overall tone of information coming from local government.

## **Links**

In online writing, describe what a weblink is with the relevant terms and make them active and specific. For example, 'To book a room click here:' Always link to online services first. Offer offline alternatives afterwards (where possible).

## Capitalisation

One of the gradual changes in the ‘look and feel’ of documents, both on paper and online, has been reduction in the use of capital letters. This gives pages an uncluttered feel, as well as supporting informality.

Capitals should be used with discretion. There is a tendency to capitalise nouns in government communications – often, it seems, to arbitrarily confer importance or status. Try to avoid this.

Use lower case as much as possible. Company names may feature unusual capitalisation (or lack of capitalisation, such as sportscotland, iPhone); try to follow the company’s convention, even if it looks ridiculous.

Use sentence case in headlines: ‘Teachers from state schools learn how Cambridge really works’, not ‘Teachers from State Schools Learn how Cambridge Really Works’. In text use a capital first letter if the noun is specific: ‘the Cambridge Faculty of Education’, but use lower case letters in general use, eg ‘Cambridge has a number of education faculties’.

Capital letters are used for titles such as Moray Community Planning Board, but not when referring to it the body of the text. This should be lower case, eg the community planning board, as there is more than one in existence.

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’.

Most importantly, DON’T USE BLOCK CAPITALS FOR LARGE AMOUNTS OF TEXT. IT’S HARD TO READ, AND I FEEL YOU’RE SHOUTING AT ME.

## Numbers

Always explain what your date range represents, eg 'tax year 2013 to 2014' or 'September 2013 to July 2014'. Date ranges can be the academic year, calendar year or tax year. This is why date ranges must be very, very clear.

The correct rule for sequences of numbers is either to use 'from... to...', or to use dashes '26–8'. The use of 'from...to...' is clearer:

from 10 November to 21 December

from 10.00am to 11.00am

For simple dates our style is:

Date 13 February 2013

Time 4.30

For the 24-hour clock use a colon (14:30)

Numbers from one to nine within text should be written in full (one, two, etc). Numbers 10 upwards should be numerals (11,12,13). If used as part of a sequence (26-8) numerals are best. Sentences should not start with a number, but if unavoidable this should be written in full, eg 'Twelve hundred competitors...' 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...'

## Commas

Commas tend to be used excessively. They should only be used to clarify and avoid ambiguity. Their use between adjectives depends on whether they aid understanding or create unnecessary pauses. E.g. ‘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 discipline is to read the sentence aloud and hear where the natural pauses fall (if you need to take more than one breath, the sentence is too long!)

## Dashes & En Rules

Dashes – can be overused, and are often a sign of sloppy writing. If you use them for emphasis or parenthesis, use the ‘en’ dash. En dashes are longer than a hyphen and can be a substitute for versus, range, or a pairing where both parts are equal. For example: the Obama–McCain debate, 40–50 people, the Smith–Jones paper.

## Hyphens

Hyphens should be used between an adjective or participle and noun when both are used as an adjective, for example ‘fast-stream civil servant’, ‘user-focused services’, ‘high-achieving press officer’, ‘top-quality writing’.

They are not necessary between an adverb and an adjective or verb qualifying a noun, e.g. totally enclosed system, specially designed program, rigorously enforced spending controls.

Do not use hyphens for parenthesis (see Dashes).



## **Acronyms – or not**

People use the term ‘acronym’ to describe anything made up of initial letters, but it’s not so. NATO is an acronym (because it’s pronounced as a word) but IRA is an initialism. CMT is an initialism, COSLA an acronym.

Acronyms should be used sparingly and always with consideration to the reader’s understanding of them.

There’s no need for full stops between letters of acronyms like H.M.R.C. If the short version’s more familiar than the full one, like BBC, FBI or FAQs, you don’t need to write it out. If it’s not, or if you aren’t sure how well known it is, put it in full the first time you use it, then use just the short version from then on, eg, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But avoid using it at all if you can – so you’d call the IAEA the agency.

## **When to use ‘we’**

In any introduction to the council, try to lead with ‘we’ – it will be very obvious who the ‘we’ is in the context of a council publication or letter.

In policy documents ‘we’ is also used. For example: ‘We announced our intention to do x as part of the partnership agreement.’

However, it’s not obvious who ‘we’ is in all contexts. For example, in a publication or detailed guide on the web, users might start reading the content in the middle of a page. They could arrive at a heading from the navigation bar on the side, or skim read from the top until they find the section they want.

Using ‘we’ is fine, as long as you’re making it clear where appropriate who the ‘we’ is. Don’t assume the audience will know. Each time you use ‘we’, make sure you’ve already used the full name of the department or agency in that specific section.

## Writing about disability

Not everyone will agree on everything but there is general agreement on some basic guidelines.

The word 'disabled' is a description not a group of people. Use 'disabled people' not 'the disabled' as the collective term.

However, many deaf people whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) consider themselves part of 'the deaf community'. They may describe themselves as 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' to emphasise their deaf identity.

Avoid medical labels. They say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce stereotypes of disabled people as 'patients' or 'unwell'.

Don't automatically refer to 'disabled people' in all communications – many people who need disability benefits and services don't identify with this term. Consider using 'people with health conditions or impairments' if it seems more appropriate. Full guidance on this area of communication and style is available from the council's Equal Opportunities Officer.

### Differentiating text: *italics*, **bold** & "quotation marks"

In printed documents italic is used for *book*, *film* and *play titles*, and for *stressed* or *foreign words*. Following this convention doesn't disrupt people's reading.

Section sub-heads work well in **bold** because the type contrasts with that used for the body type.

The UK convention is for single quotation marks for 'quoted material' with double quotation marks for a direct "quote."

Using an additional space after a full stop (usually a double word space) is a dated typing convention. This is not used in printed documents or on web sites because it introduces variation in horizontal spacing.

## The dreaded apostrophe

The one area of punctuation that's most likely to confuse is the use of the apostrophe. This needn't be the case as there is just one basic rule to follow: use the apostrophe when letters are missing. Here are some examples:

In full	Letters missing	Shortened form
do not	o	don't
can not	no	can't
could not	o	couldn't
let us	u	let's
that is	i	that's
would not	o	wouldn't
they are	a	they're
they had	ha	they'd
you would	woul	you'd
we had	ha	we'd
you are	a	you're
I am	a	I'm
was not	o	wasn't
it is	i	it's
it has	ha	it's
what is	i	what's
my car is there	i	my car's there
the coat is on the peg	i	the coat's on the peg
Tom is going out.	i	Tom's going out.

It's is short for it is or it has. Its means 'belonging to it'.

For example: 'The planet has probably spun off its axis by now.'

If you are uncertain which to use, say it in full:

'The planet has probably spun off it is axis by now.'

This is plainly silly, so it's its rather than it's.

## **Possessives**

For proper nouns ending in s, add 's, eg St James's Park. Do not confuse with plurals, especially when referring to ages or decades:

under-16s (plural)

under-16's (possessive)

Take care with plural nouns: use women's not womens'; children's not childrens'; people's not peoples'. Avoid the common error of adding an apostrophe when making a word or abbreviation plural, as this makes it possessive:

DVDs not DVD's;

1990s not 1990's

## A-Z of common queries, your quick check list

Query	Quick Check
About	should be used only with numbers rounded-off to tens or hundreds. Do not say 'about 132'.
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 (i.e. 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 (&)	to be used only as part of a formal title – Department for Work & Pensions, Health & Safety Executive, Tyne & Wear – and not instead of 'and'.
Amongst	sounds archaic. Use 'among'.
Billion	in the UK, means 'thousand million'. Spell it out.
Bullet points	always use a lead-in sentence before bullet points, which should make sense running on from that sentence, preceded by a colon. Use lower case at the start of a bullet. Don't use <u>or</u> or <u>and</u> at the end of bullets. Don't put a full stop at the end of the last bullet in the series.
But	You can start a sentence with 'but', and with 'and'. They give pace and pulse to your writing. But don't do it too often.
Colons	Used to provide a pause before introducing related information, while the semicolon is just a break in a sentence that is stronger than a comma but not as final as a full stop.  when used to refer the reader to following text it should not be followed by a hyphen or dash, '-:'.
Co-operate and co-ordinate	take hyphens, but email, infrared, printout, readout, reopen, reuse and worldwide do not.
Department	normally takes a lower case 'd' unless a specific department is being given its official title, e.g. 'the Department for Transport', but 'the policy of the department is...'
Due to	is an expression to be employed with care. 'Because' is often better.
Fewer / fewer than	Use 'fewer' for numbers, but 'less' for quantity, e.g. fewer than 50 special advisers, fewer government websites than in 2012; but less than 75%, less than 50 tonnes.
Government	normally takes a lower case 'g' unless a specific government is being referred to, e.g. 'the Scottish Government', but 'successive governments', 'government data', 'the workings of government'.

Query	Quick Check
Headlines	use sentence case in bold type.
However	it is fine to start a sentence with 'however'. However, if used as a connector, providing a link with the previous sentence, it should be followed by a comma. If used to modify a clause, no comma is necessary. However much you argue, there will always be those who disagree.
Initials	when those of a person, are followed by full stops, and with a space before the surname. Don't use stops when initials are part of an acronym: PCSU, GDS or MCO.
Less / less than	is for amounts/quantity/units of measurement ('less investment', 'less than 75%'; 'less than 40 miles away').
Long / short term	are hyphenated if used as an adjective. For example, 'short-term benefit'. Long Term Economic Plan is an exception.
Midlands	and other regions take lower case, e.g. midlands, south west, north east, scotland.
Minister	use upper case for a full title, e.g. Minister for Environment, or when used with a name, such as Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead. When referring non-specifically to "a minister" or 'ministers', use all lower case.
Multi	as in 'multidisciplinary' or 'multinational', doesn't need to be followed by a hyphen.
Onto	is one word, except when it means 'onwards and towards', e.g. 'let's move on to the next point', or 'apprentices can go on to full-time employment'.
Parliament	takes a capital 'P', but 'parliamentary' is all lower case.
Per cent	use 'per cent' not 'percent'. Use the symbol '%' with a number.
Program	this spelling is only correct when used in connection with computing – 'computer program', 'software program'.
Punctuation for quotes	<p>use double quotation marks for "direct quotations". Use single quotation marks within 'quotes', and for 'unusual terms' and words used in an 'unusual way': "The framework allows organisations to 'purchase' a digital delivery team".</p> <p>In quotes running to two or more paragraphs, open quotes for each new paragraph, but close quotes only at the end of the quote.</p> <p>The comma or full stop always comes <b>after</b> 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."</p>
Seasons	spring, summer, autumn, winter (no initial capital letter).
Semicolons	used to break up a list of categories. For example: postgraduate studies; nursing; midwifery and auxiliary medical studies; health-management studies – or to connect two sentences.

Query	Quick Check
Spaces	insert a single space after a full stop, not two or more.
Spelling	avoid American spelling (verbs ending in 'ise' or 'yse', like 'revise' and 'analyse', should not be spelt 'ize' or 'yze').
That / which	<p>As a general rule, 'that' is used to introduce a clause that gives information essential to the meaning of sentence; 'which' is used to introduce a clause not essential in identifying the thing being discussed.</p> <p>Changing that to which or vice versa can completely change the meaning of a sentence. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the service that is digital is quick and easy to use</li> <li>• the service, which is digital, is quick and easy to use</li> </ul> <p>The first sentence, using that, suggests a comparison with non-digital services. The second, using which, simply informs you that the service is digital and easy to use, not that it is this that makes the service better. We can remove the clause without losing any essential information: 'the service is very fast and easy to use'.</p>
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.
Under way	is two words, e.g. 'the project is under way'.
Verbs	sentences usually, but not always, need verbs.
While	should be used to indicate that something is happening at the same time as something else, not as an alternative to 'and'.
Whilst	sounds archaic. You would never say it in normal conversation, so don't use it in writing. Use 'while'.

There's lots more spelling and grammar help available online, just Google it. Guidance on use of the council brand, fonts, etc, and design aspects of how we communicate is contained in the branding guidelines. If you are still unsure about any of these issues contact the communications section, who will be happy to assist.

