



English Language Style Guide

A guide designed for advancement professionals to establish a consistent standard for communications with external audiences

Prepared and distributed by the Canadian Council for the Advancement of Education

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Plain Language](#)

[Hints for Clear Writing](#)

[Equity in Communication](#)

[General Style Guidelines](#)

Acronyms

Alumna, Alumnus

Capitalization

Contractions

Italics

Numbers, Dates and Times

Pronouns

Who and Whom

[Acknowledgement](#)

That, Which

Punctuation

Quotations

Split Infinitives

Titles

Words and Phrases to Avoid

Common Errors

Spelling



INTRODUCTION

Language is often an emotion-charged issue. The purpose of this style guide is not to prescribe spellings and usage in all advancement contexts. It is simply designed to establish a consistent standard for communications with external audiences. Other guides will be more appropriate for academic writing. This guide is designed for use with the Canadian Press Stylebook and the Concise Oxford Dictionary, two reference works we suggest you keep on your desk and refer to regularly. Primarily, we note exceptions to Canadian Press and Oxford, which are considered appropriate to the advancement environment. The CCAE English Language Style Guide is experimental in nature. We have designed it so that changes can be made quickly and inexpensively. We expect it to grow and change as it is used by Communicators across the country. CCAE is committed to investigating the possibility of a style guide for the French language. Contact a member of the Communications Committee or the CCAE Board with your suggestions for either guide.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

As communicators, our role is to convey information and ideas to our readers. Generally, readers understand plain language best. Jargon and bureaucratese are often frustrating and confusing. When we use simple, direct language, our message is more likely to be read and understood. In a university or college environment we often have to convey complex information about research subjects to a general audience. We should make every effort to find simple, familiar words and everyday examples to convey our meaning. It is important to keep our audience in mind: we are not writing for the researcher's colleagues, but for the general reader. However, we must be careful not to over-simplify or trivialize the subject. The following are a few basic principles of plain language.



HINTS FOR CLEAR WRITING

1. Write naturally – the way you talk, but with better grammar.
2. Organize your thoughts before you start. Put one idea in each paragraph.
3. In long publications, break the information up into manageable bites. Use lots of headings.
4. Keep your sentences short. Avoid using a lot of secondary clauses. If you have a related point, use another sentence.
5. Use the active voice wherever you can.
6. Use familiar, everyday words instead of jargon whenever you can. Choose a simple word over a long one.
7. Cut out unnecessary words. Never use three where one will do.
8. Avoid or explain technical words.
9. Avoid ambiguity. Watch the placement of pronouns, adjectives and adverbs.
10. Where it is appropriate, address your readers directly. Use you, I, we, us and our to make your document more personal.
11. Illustrate your points with carefully-chosen examples and draw useful comparisons.
12. Avoid clichés. They make your writing dull as dish water.
13. Do not overuse adjectives and adverbs.
14. Have other people read what you write and tell you what they think it means.



EQUALITY IN COMMUNICATION

The following recommendations were developed in consultation with the Department of Equity Services at The University of Western Ontario to help members of the university community avoid language that stereotypes, discriminates or demeans individuals belonging to specific groups. For more detail and specific recommendations seek out a similar document at your institution.

1. When talking about members of racial minorities, make reference to their ethnic or racial origins only if it is relevant.
2. If you are uncertain what term to use, ask the individual what he or she prefers. The following are acceptable terms in current use:
 - Black or African Canadian; – Asian or South Asian (as opposed to Oriental), though the specific country of origin is preferable. South Asian may be preferred by some to describe individuals from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
3. Do not assume that a member of a racial minority is also an immigrant.
4. In reference to native/aboriginal peoples, use the band or group to which the individual or group belongs if you know it. If not, use Native, First Nations or Aboriginal and capitalize these words. Avoid Indian unless the individual specifically requests it.
5. Nation, band or people are preferred to describe any settlement or community of Aboriginal people. Territory or reserve are preferred to reservation.
6. When talking about people with disabilities, mention the disability only if it is relevant. If uncertain what term to use, ask the individual his or her preference.
7. Avoid the use of emotional descriptives, such as "afflicted," "stricken" and "confined."
8. Use "people with disabilities" or "person with a disability," not the disabled or the handicapped.
9. Use the following suggestions for gender neutral language:
 - humanity or people, instead of man or mankind; – staffing instead of manning; – chair instead of chairman.



Note: all staff, faculty and students are adults: – women instead of ladies; – women instead of girls or gals; – men instead of gentlemen; – men instead of boys or guys.

10. Do not use the words he, him or his as a generic pronoun. There are several alternatives.

The first four options listed below are preferred. Use the other suggestions only when nothing else will work.

- a. Make the sentence plural. *Retired officers are not generally referred to by their rank.*
- b. Change his to the. *The doctor should listen carefully to the patient.*
- c. Change the construction of the sentence. *When referring to retired officers, ranks aren't generally necessary.*
- d. Alternate between he and she, but watch for sex-typed examples. *The employee dashing to the day-care centre is not necessarily a she.*
- e. Use he or she (but never s/he, (s)he, he/she). *Each student will bring his or her lunch.*
- f. Use they. *Each student will bring their lunch.*

This usage is still controversial and is only appropriate in the most informal written communication. To avoid having your knuckles rapped by your local grammar expert, find another way to say it. For other suggestions about gender neutral language, you may also consult guidebooks such as *Words That Count Women In*, Ontario Women's Directorate, 1993, or a similar publication in your province.



GENERAL STYLE GUIDELINES

ACRONYMS:

Always spell out the full title in the first reference and indicate the commonly-used acronym in parentheses. In second and subsequent references, you can use the acronym. It is preferable, however, to use an appropriate "nickname" that reflects the meaning more clearly. For example, the Senate Committee on University Planning could be referred to as SCUP in second references, but the "planning committee" would be preferable. If the article is long, and especially if you are using more than one acronym, refer back to full titles periodically. The guide here is readability. Don't lose your readers in an alphabet jungle.

ALUMNA, ALUMNUS

alumna: a female graduate
alumnus: a male graduate
alumnae: more than one female graduate
alumni: more than one male graduate, but also used to refer to a group of male and female graduates
Professor, retired male professor (granted emeritus: special status by the university)
Professor, retired female professor (granted emerita: special status by the university)
Alma Mater: note use of caps

CAPITALIZATION

1. Capitalize universities and colleges and their faculties, departments, libraries, schools and centres. Capitalization is not required in second references.
2. Capitalize the Board of Governors, the Senate, the University and the College in all first and subsequent references.
3. Do not capitalize the names of disciplines unless it is in the first reference to a specific department (see #1 above), or unless they are proper nouns. For example: English and French, but geography and bioengineering.
4. For films, books, plays, poems, works of music and the like, capitalize all principal words. For academic papers with long titles, capitalize only the first word. For suggestions regarding titles, see the Titles section of this guide. For more examples, consult the Canadian Press Stylebook.



CONTRACTIONS

In non-academic writing, contractions are acceptable and may help to make the writing more accessible to a general audience. Reported speech should always retain its contractions.

ITALICS

1. Use italics for the titles of plays, films, books, short stories, poems, newspapers, magazines, dance works, records, works of music, videos, TV and radio shows and conferences.
2. Use quotation marks around the titles of articles and book chapter titles.
3. Use italics for non-English words, unless they have become part of the English language.
4. Use quotation marks around the title of an academic paper.

NUMBERS, DATES AND TIMES

Refer to the Canadian Press Stylebook for a full discussion of this topic. Specific points to remember:

1. Spell out all numbers under 10; use figures for any number 10 or over, unless it begins a sentence.
2. Follow the same rule for ordinals, (e.g. first, second, third).
3. Always use figures with per cent and spell out the words "per cent."
4. For decades, use '80s or 1980s.
5. Don't use the term "per" in a sentence. Instead of "Forty students per year graduated," use "Every year 40 students graduated." "Per" can be used with another Latin word, as in "per diem."
6. Don't abbreviate the months of the year when used in text.
7. Do not include "nd" or "st" after dates. (For example, June 1st.)
8. Write 10 a.m., instead of 10:00 a.m.
9. Avoid using redundancies as "8 p.m. Monday night."
10. For 12 p.m. or 12 a.m., use midnight or noon. It's redundant to write 12 midnight or 12 noon.
11. Consider using the 24 hour clock to avoid ambiguities and confusion.



12. Don't use over and under to describe numbers. Over and under indicate physical locations. Use more than and less than.

13. When referring to amounts of money, use the singular. For example: Five million dollars was raised for the special fund for unemployed communicators.

14. For phone and fax numbers, set off area code in parentheses and list the extension as shown: (519) 679-211 ext.8467

PRONOUNS

1. Simple rule: There must be a principal (a noun or name) for which the pronoun stands. The principal should be close by the pronoun. There shouldn't be any other noun or name the reader might mistake for the correct principal. The pronoun seldom comes before the noun. Avoid: Guards seized John after the official at the border post. Preferred: Guards seized John after he arrived at the border post. If the pronoun is too far away from its principal, the meaning may be confused. Wrong: As the man of the hour, I am writing to invite you to a special reception in your honor. Right: I am writing to invite you, the man of the hour, to a special reception in your honor.

2. A company, college or university is not a person. Don't use they or who when referring to an institution.

WHO AND WHOM

Simple rule: If you substitute he, she or they for the He is a man who we know is honest. (we know he is honest.) He is a man whom we know well. (we know him well) But at the start of a sentence, who is standard idiom; whom often sounds pedantic. Who do you call? (you call him.)

1. Use whom when the pronoun follows the verb preposition. *To whom shall we place the call?*

2. Use who and whom to refer to people and animals that have names. *Casey is the dog who likes apples. The dog whom he saw was a handsome Shetland Sheepdog.*



THAT, WHICH

1. In introductory clauses, the use of that and which often presents a problem. The difference is simple: If the clause is essential to the meaning of the sentence, use that. If the clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentences, use which, and set off the clause with commas. **THAT:** The book that contained the formula was missing. (It is essential that the formula be in the missing book.) **WHICH:** The book, which contained the formula, was missing. (It is essential only that the book is missing.) (Taken from REA's Handbook of English Grammar, Style, and Writing. Piscataway, New Jersey: Research and Education Association, 1992.)
2. Use "that" and "which" to refer to inanimate objects and to animals that do not have names. Eric saw the moose that walked through the streets. The moose, which walked through the streets, was looking bewildered.

PUNCTUATION

1. Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks; colons and semi-colons outside. The question mark and exclamation mark go inside the quotation marks when they apply to the quoted matter only, outside when they apply to the entire sentence.
Examples: *The writer said, "This is the end."* *Her brother said, "I don't know why she said 'This is the end.'"* *I am looking forward to chapter two entitled "Using Commas," which I will read tonight.* *The Speaker said, "What was the question?"* *Did the prime minister say "fuddle duddle"?*
2. Don't use a comma before the conjunction in a list when there are fewer than three items in the list. He brought apples, oranges and lemons.
3. If there are more than three items, or an element in the list has its own punctuation or conjunction, then use semi-colons to separate the elements. Sally went to the market and bought fruit; vegetables; bread and butter; and wine.
4. Use a colon to introduce a list. Use semi-colons at the end of each item on the list. If listing items, one to a line, you might also use a "bullet" before each item for clarity and emphasis.



5. Use quotation marks to set off significant, ironic or unfamiliar words and phrases. The "friendly" game of hockey resulted in two players in the hospital. See the Canadian Press Stylebook for other rules of punctuation.

QUOTATIONS

1. When quoting directly from an interview, correct major errors of grammar and edit out the "ums" and "ahs." Be careful not to over-edit so that you lose the freshness of spoken language.
2. If you're leaving out a significant part of a quotation, indicate the omission with an ellipsis (three dots separated by a space "...").
3. If you aren't sure about a direct quote, or only have part of it in your notes, don't guess. Use the part you have and paraphrase the rest.
4. Note: A quotation is a noun and to quote is a verb. While you quote someone, you repeat the quotation.

SPLIT INFINITIVES

– A split infinitive is defined by OED as "a phrase consisting of an infinitive with an adverb inserted between to and the verb." (e.g. to boldly go) (With apologies to all Trekkies.) – In good writing, the infinitive should never be split. However, the split infinitive is not considered absolutely wrong in informal writing. If you wish your writing to appear sophisticated and stylish, attempt always to keep your infinitive together. If you feel that a phrase sounds awkward (e.g. in order better to meet your needs), find another way to construct the phrase to avoid the infinitive problem.

TITLES

1. Capitalize titles only when used before the name. *President and Vice-Chancellor Jill Smith*. When placing titles following a name, use a down style. *Jill Smith, president and vice-chancellor of University ABC*.
2. In a first reference, give an individual's full appropriate title. In the second and subsequent references, use his or her surname only. *Professor John Brown said "I don't understand." Brown later contradicted his statement.*



3. Use Dr. before the name of an individual with a PhD in a first reference. Although most newspapers do not use this title, we, as representatives of degree granting institutions, should continue to put it forward.
4. Use the term lecturer if appropriate, but don't distinguish between assistant, associate and full professor, unless it is relevant to your story. Do use assistant dean and associate dean.
5. When deciding whether to use a short form (Jim White) or full name (James D. White), find out the individual's preference. Generally the form used most commonly is best.

WORDS AND PHRASES TO AVOID

– At this point in time, currently (why not now?) – Etc. (Complete the list or use a partial list introduced by "including".) – Frat- use fraternity – Implement, liaise as verbs – Past experience, new initiative, advance planning - redundant (and over-used) – towards - use toward instead, it is almost always correct – underdeveloped - "developing countries" is preferred as the opposite of "developed countries" – world-class, state-of-the-art, stakeholder, critical mass, top-notch, leading edge, feedback, input (all exhausted from over-use)

COMMON ERRORS

– Affect means to influence, change or produce an effect; effect means to accomplish, complete, cause or carry out. – The words can and could refer to ability; would and may refer to willingness. "Can I please speak with John?" should be written as "May I please speak with John?" – Data is a plural noun and takes a plural verb; datum is singular. – Hyphenate day care when using as an adjectival phrase: day-care centre, day-care legislation – Discreet means circumspect of speech or action. Discrete means individually distinct or separate. – Disinterested means impartial; uninterested means lacking interest. – To ensure is to make certain. To insure is to secure against loss. – The words fund raiser should be used as a noun. Fundraising is an adjective. (Don't use "to fund raise" as a verb, "to raise funds" is preferable.) – Hyphenate high school when using as an adjectival phrase: *The high-school liaison program is very active.* – Historic



means important; historical means something that happened in the past. –
Imply means to suggest or indicate indirectly; infer means to conclude or
decide from something known or assumed. – If the sentence makes sense
when you say it is, use it's. Otherwise, use its. – Lay means to place or
deposit and requires an object; lie means to recline or be situated and does
not take an object. *You lie down for a rest, but you lay down your burden.* –
Media is a plural noun and takes a plural verb. – Nauseous means "causing
nausea"; nauseated means "affected with nausea." – Regardless is correct,
not irregardless. questionnaire some day (two
words) straightforward raucous stratum (s.) recommend somebody strata
(pl.) ROM (read only memory - as in CD-
ROM) somehow teenage someone teammate at some time (two
words) theatre rumor under way (two words) seat belt
(two words) sometime well-being set-up (v.), setup (n.) worldwide



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The CCAE Communications Committee gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Carole Stinson and the assistance of the External Communications Committee at the University of Western Ontario, in the preparation of this guide.

CCAЕ Communications Committee Chuck Bridges, Saint Mary's University, Nova Scotia Randi Duke, Capilano College, B.C. John Hart, Mt. Royal College, Calgary Alberta Neil Howard (Chair), British Columbia Institute of Technology Julie Mikuska, University of Manitoba Jacline Nyman, University of Ottawa, Ontario Arthur Stephen, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario Carole Stinson, University of Western Ontario
*Prepared by the CCAE Communications Committee with the assistance of the External Communications Committee at The University of Western Ontario
Produced by BCIT Information & Community Relations: January, 1996par
Lucie Legault, traductrice.*