

## Ministry of Justice – style guide

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## A

### **Abbreviations and acronyms**

Although in general you should avoid abbreviations and acronyms (words formed from initial letters of other words), if an organisation's name or a particular term appears frequently in a piece of text, you should refer to it in full the first time followed by its initials in brackets, for example Human Rights Act (HRA) and from then on by just the letters. Repeat the full name only if the abbreviation comes much earlier in the document and you need to refresh the reader's memory.

Everyday abbreviations (such as BBC, DNA and IT) and acronyms such as laser and radar do not need their full names. The spelling of acronyms referring to certain international organisations can be tricky, so it is worthwhile checking in a dictionary how they should appear. For example, Nato has an upper-case initial letter and the rest in lower case; UNESCO uses all capital letters. Neither needs to be spelt out in full.

Do not put full stops in abbreviations or acronyms.

### **Addresses**

If possible, give addresses on separate lines without commas as follows.

Ministry of Justice

102 Petty France

London

SW1H 9AJ

If you have to write an address along one line, use commas as follows.

Ministry of Justice, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ. Note there is no comma between the town (or county) in the last line of the address and the postcode. Spell out road, street, avenue and county names in full.

### **Affect/effect**

To affect means 'to have an influence on'. For example, 'the meeting affected the minister's decision'.

To effect means 'to bring about'. For example, 'the minister's decision effected a change in the law'.

The word 'effect' can also be used as a noun when its meaning mirrors that of the verb. For example, 'the effect of the minister's decision was to change the law.'

### **Ages**

Use hyphens when talking about an age group or groups (for example, '18-year-olds' or '16- to 24-year-olds'). Do not use hyphens when referring to ages (for example, '10 years old' or '10 to 17 years old'). Do not use dashes when referring to an age range (for example, '10 to 17').

Write '40s' not 'forties', and do not include an apostrophe after the figure ('40's').

## Adjectives (compound)

Compound adjectives are strings of words, joined by hyphens, that describe something. For example, 'a five-year programme' or 'the soon-to-be-published white paper'.

Take care when the string of words relates to a verb, in which case no hyphens are used. For example, 'this is an up-to-date file' (compound adjective) but 'this file is up to date' (modifies the verb). Similarly 'the MP asked a round-robin question' (compound adjective) but 'the MP's question was a round robin' (object of the verb).

## Apostrophes

You use apostrophes:

- to show that something 'belongs' to someone or something (for example, 'the government's regional policy')
- to show that one or more letters are missing from a word (for example, 'shouldn't').

Never use an apostrophe before the 's' to show that a word is plural. Retail signage often incorrectly reads 'ex-chart CD's', 'digital TV's' or 'sale of hi-fi's'.

Here are some guidelines on how to use apostrophes correctly to show possession.

- With singular nouns and most personal names, the apostrophe comes before the possessive 's'. For example, 'the minister's car'; 'Jack's office'.
- With personal names that end in 's', add an apostrophe and another 's' when you would pronounce the resulting form with that extra 's'. For example, 'Sir Gus's advice'; 'in Dickens's time'. Note that there are some exceptions to this rule, especially in established place names. For example, 'St Thomas' Hospital' (but compare this with 'St James's Park'). It is always worth checking in a dictionary, street atlas or style guide if you are in doubt.
- With personal names that end in 's' but are not spoken with an extra 's', just add an apostrophe after the 's'. For example, 'Socrates' discussion of justice'.
- With singular nouns already ending in an 's', add an apostrophe then another 's'. For example, 'the bus's driver'; 'my boss's diary'.
- With plural nouns that end in 's', the apostrophe comes after the 's'. For example, 'magistrates' court'; 'judges' robes'.
- With plural nouns that do not end with 's', add an apostrophe and an 's'. For example, 'meeting children's needs', 'listening to people's opinions'.
- With abbreviations, if they are singular add an apostrophe then 's' (for example, 'an MP's constituency'). If they are plural, add the apostrophe after the 's' (for example, 'MPs' salaries').

Some expressions contain a double possessive. These are formed of nouns that relate to people or with personal names. For example, you can say 'he's a colleague of Gordon's' or 'he's a colleague of Gordon', without the apostrophe. Both are correct. The double possessive is not used with nouns referring to an organisation. For example, you should say 'he's an employee of the Supreme Court', not 'he's an employee of the Supreme Court's'.

Do not use an apostrophe with 'hers', 'its', 'ours', 'theirs' or 'yours'. For example, 'that advice was hers', 'every decision has its consequence' or 'yours is the draft she preferred'. Remember 'its' means 'belonging to it', but 'it's' (with an apostrophe) is short for 'it is' or 'it has'. Always think what meaning you want before writing these words.

Here are some further examples where an apostrophe is used to show that letters or numbers have been omitted.

- I'm (I am)
- he'd ('he should' or 'he would')
- we'll ('we will')
- can't ('cannot')
- wasn't ('was not')
- won't ('will not')
- rock 'n' roll
- the summer of '69

There are some special plurals where, to make your meaning clear, you should use an apostrophe. Here are some examples.

- To show the plurals of letters or numbers. For example, 'there are two 'm's' in accommodation'; 'highlight all the number 8's'.
- To show the plurals of some very short words, especially when they end with a vowel. For example, 'the vote resulted in more no's than yeses'.

## **B**

### **Bold**

Use bold typeface only very occasionally. The most appropriate time to write something in bold is when it is a heading or a particularly important word in the text. Do not put website addresses in bold.

### **Bullet points**

Sometimes you will want to break up a large piece of text into shorter chunks so that the reader can understand it more easily. However, bullet points can lose their effect if you use them too often, so make sure you keep your bullet-point lists quite short and try not to write more than one sentence in each point.

Here are some Ministry of Justice house style rules about punctuation when using bullet-point lists.

Treat each point as if it were part of an ordinary unbroken paragraph.

If the first phrase is a complete sentence, each bullet point should also be a complete sentence (following the pattern shown in this example).

- Do not use semi-colons to separate the items in the list.
- Begin each bullet point with a capital letter.
- End each bullet point with a full stop.

However, if the lead phrase is part of a continuous sentence that does not end with a full stop or question mark (like the one in this example):

- use a colon at the end of the lead phrase
- do not use semi-colons to separate the items in the list
- use a lower-case letter at the beginning of each bullet point

- if appropriate, use 'and' or 'or' preceded by a comma at the end of the line after the second to last bullet point, and
- use a full stop right at the end.

If a bullet point runs to more than one line, indent each line so the first word of the new line comes under the first word of the previous one.

## C

### Capitals versus lower-case letters

Modern English writing style uses capital letters sparingly. If you are in doubt, stick to lower-case letters, but here are some guidelines that you need to follow.

#### Personal titles

You should use upper-case initial letters in titles that are followed by a person's name, but lower-case letters throughout when simply referring to their role. For example:

- 'Justice Minister John Deed said ...', but 'the minister added ...'
- 'Judge Deed summed up the case ...', but 'the judge sentenced him to five years ...'

Exceptions to this rule are the Permanent Secretary, the Secretary of State, the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Queen.

#### Job titles

All generic job titles are in lower case. For example:

- court manager
- legal adviser
- personnel officer
- chief executive
- cabinet minister

#### Organisations

Organisations, ministries, departments, agencies and advisory groups take an upper-case initial letter when their full name is used, but are in lower case when referred to generically. For example:

- the Ministry of Justice – the ministry (or, preferably, the department)
- the Department of Health – the department
- the European Commission – the commission
- the Criminal Procedure Rule Committee – the committee

#### Bills and Acts

These take an upper-case initial letter both as part of the publication's title and when used generically. For example:

- the Draft Coroners Bill – the draft Bill (Note: lower-case initial letter for 'draft' when the full title is not used)
- the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill – the Bill

- the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 – the Act (Note: full titles of Acts should always include the year in which they received royal assent)

### **Courts**

Use an initial capital letter for the full name of courts or tribunals. For example:

- Stratford Magistrates' Court – but 'the magistrates' court' in subsequent text
- Maidstone County Court – but 'the county court' in subsequent text
- Manchester Crown Court
- the Crown Court
- the High Court
- the Central Criminal Court
- the Royal Courts of Justice
- the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal – but 'the tribunal' in subsequent text

### **Internal structure**

Use lower-case letters for parts of the department. For example:

- private office
- departmental management board
- human resources
- staff welfare
- press office
- web team

### **Some examples that cause confusion**

- the government (Note: lower-case initial letter)
- central government
- regional government
- local government
- government policy
- non-governmental organisations
- other government departments
- the department
- departmental practice
- Parliament (Note: upper-case initial letter), but lower-case in the context of the administration of other countries (for example, the French parliament)
- parliamentary duties
- ministers
- cabinet ministers
- the civil service
- the judiciary
- green paper
- white paper

### **Collective nouns**

Collective nouns can be singular or plural. You need to decide which they are so that you can use the correct form of the verb with them consistently.

If the emphasis is on the collective noun as a group, treat it as a singular noun. For example, 'the judiciary consists of judges, magistrates and tribunal members', 'the committee meets on Thursday'.

If the emphasis is on the individuals in a group rather than the group as a whole, treat it as a plural noun. For example, 'the French have a different system of government from the British', 'the team are working hard to meet the deadline'.

You need to take special care with the word 'number'. 'The number of ... ' is singular but 'a number of ... ' is plural. So you should write 'the number of offences has risen' but 'a number of crimes were reported'.

## Colons

Colons have three main purposes: to introduce a vertical or running-text list; to act as a marker which leads the reader from one idea to its consequence or logical continuation; to separate two sharply contrasting and parallel statements.

In all these, the colon will usually follow a statement that could be a complete sentence. After the colon the sentence will usually continue with a lower-case letter.

Do not use a colon followed by a dash ( :- ).

## Commas

Do not use too many commas in a sentence. It is often better to break a long sentence into two or more shorter sentences.

## D

### Dates

For specific dates, write the day first in figures (without 'st', 'nd', 'rd' or 'th') followed by the month and the year in full. Do not separate the parts of the date by commas (for example, write '1 January 2008').

For general dates, you need to include 'st', 'nd', 'rd' or 'th' to make the meaning clear. For example, 'Team meetings are held on the 12th of the month.'

Write decades out as, for example, 'the early 90s' or 'the 1930s'. Do not use an apostrophe before the 's'. When referring to centuries, the word 'century' begins with a lower case 'c'. Abbreviations for the ordinal numbers should not be in superscript.

So write '1st' instead of '1<sup>st</sup>', '2nd' instead of '2<sup>nd</sup>', '3rd' instead of '3<sup>rd</sup>' and so on.

## F

### Full stops

Only use full stops at the end of a sentence, not in abbreviations or with initials representing names. For example:

- BBC, USA, OBE
- 8am, 9pm
- Mr C Dickens
- Dr C L Dodgson
- Prof J R R Tolkien

## G

### Geography

Compass directions are all in lower case: north, south, east, west, northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest.

Regions of the UK begin with an upper-case letter, for example, the Northeast, the Northwest, the Southeast, the Southwest. They are single, non-hyphenated words.

Take care if you are specifically referring to the official names of administrative areas in England that form part of the network of Government Offices for the English Regions. These are:

- East Midlands
- East of England
- London
- North East
- North West
- South East
- South West
- West Midlands
- Yorkshire and The Humber

Here are some other spellings to note.

- the West (geopolitics)
- the Middle East
- the Far East
- the Orient
- North America
- the Third World

## I

### internet and intranet

Use a lower-case initial letter for 'internet' and 'intranet', unless the word comes at the beginning of a sentence or heading.

### Italics

Do not use italics anywhere in your writing. Some style guides say that titles of publications and broadcast productions should be in italics, but the Ministry of Justice house style does not endorse this. Instead, leave the title in roman font and put single quotation marks round it. For example, 'The Independent', 'Daily Mail', the 'Today Programme', 'News at Ten'.

Do not put the titles of Bills, Acts, green or white papers in italics.

## M

### Measurements

Use digits for measurements, money and weight. 10kg or 10lb (never kgs or lbs) or 10ft 10in (but it was 10 feet long; it was six feet high; he fell 30 feet; it was a 30ft tree).

## N

### Numbers

Here are some basic rules to bear in mind when you use numbers.

- Spell out in full the numbers one to nine.
- For 10 and over, use figures.
- Use a comma when a number reaches four or more digits, but not when giving a calendar year.
  - 1,001
  - 10,001
  - 100,001
  - 1,100,001
  - October 2010.

However:

- write out a number in full when it is the first word of a sentence or first word in a heading
- use words and hyphens when spelling out fractions (for example, 'three-quarters', 'seven-eighths')
- do not use roman numerals, either in lower or upper case (for example, 'iv', 'IV').

## Q

### Question marks

Use a question mark after direct questions. There is no need to use one if the question is really a polite demand. For example, 'Will you please let me have your reply by 6pm today'.

### Quotation marks

Use double quotation marks for reporting direct speech.

Use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations or to highlight a word or phrase that you are discussing or defining. For example, in quotations such as: She said: "The reorganisation will result in 'radical changes' to the way we do things in this directorate."

## T

### Telephone numbers

Do not include hyphens ( - ) or dashes ( – ) in telephone numbers, but use spaces between the city and local exchange instead. Here are examples of the different formats you should use.

01273 800 900 (national)

020 7450 4000 (London)

020 8678 3456 (London)

020 3334 3000 (London)

0800 890 567 (toll free)

0845 123 456 (local tariff)

07771 900 900 (mobile)

+44 (0)1273 800 900 (international designation for a UK national number)

+44 (0)20 7450 4000 (international designation for a London number)

Here is how you should describe the type of telecommunication equipment you are referring to. Note that each one is followed by a colon.

Phone:

Fax:

Mobile:

Pager:

## W

### Web

Web addresses should not include http//: but simply begin with www.

Do not put a full stop after quoting a website address in your text.

Do not put website addresses in bold.

## Difficult words

Here are some words that people often have difficulty spelling.

- accommodation has two c's and two m's
- connection not 'connexion'
- definite not 'definate'
- led is the past tense of 'to lead'
- liaise, liaison have a letter i after the a
- necessary has one c and two s's
- organise not organize
- possess has two double s's
- benefited, benefiting / focused, focusing / targeted, targeting do not have a double letter before the 'ed' or 'ing'

If you are not sure how to spell a word, look a dictionary, don't just rely on your spellchecker.

Different dictionaries can vary, so always use the same one.

The Ministry of Justice's preferred writing style is based on the 'Oxford English Dictionary'. These are the main reference books we use.

'Oxford Dictionary of English' – Second edition, Oxford University Press, 2003

'New Oxford Thesaurus of English'. Oxford University Press, 2000

'The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors' – Second edition, Oxford University Press 2000

'The Oxford Guide to Style'. Oxford University Press, 2002.

An online edition of the dictionary is available through Library and Information Services on the intranet at <http://intranet.justice.gsi.gov.uk/justice/working-in-moj/information/library-services/library/online-resources.htm>

## Computer terms

- email has a lower-case letter 'e' (unless at the beginning of a sentence or heading) and does not include a hyphen
- home page is two words
- internet has a lower-case letter 'i'
- intranet has a lower-case letter 'i'
- online is one word, without a hyphen and with a lower-case 'o' (unless at the beginning of a sentence or heading)

- program ends in a single 'm' when referring to computing, but is spelt 'programme' in all other cases
- web page is two words
- website is one word without a hyphen

## Spellcheckers

Spellcheckers are useful, but do not rely on them too heavily. Some allow American spellings, so it is important that you set yours to British English. It is also important that you read through your completed document thoroughly, even after you have spellchecked it. A correctly spelt word may be used in the wrong context (for example, 'to' instead of 'too') and the computer cannot tell the difference.

## Foreign words

You should avoid using foreign words in your writing.

Use English spellings for foreign places and words unless they are part of a standing title. For example, write 'Majorca' instead of 'Mallorca', but 'the US Department of Defense' not 'the US Department of Defence'.

## Latin expressions

Avoid Latin expressions and try to use their English equivalent instead.

Here are some common examples and their meanings. Even though you may see it done elsewhere, do not put any of these terms in italics or use full stops.

- ad hoc – one-off, for this purpose
- cf – compare with
- e.g. – for example
- et al – and other people
- etc. – and so on
- ex gratia – voluntarily
- ex officio – because of his or her official position
- i.e. – that is
- NB – take note of what follows
- viz – namely

## **Format**

### **Annexes and appendices**

The difference between an annex and an appendix is that you can attach annexes to sections within a document, while appendices always come right at the end.

The normal rule is that if there are two or more annexes, you should give them letters (A, B, C and so on) rather than numbers. You should also use the word 'Annex' in their titles.

### **Paragraphs**

Write paragraphs that are concise, logical and start with a sentence that says what the paragraph is about. Paragraphs should not be longer than six lines.

Do not write paragraphs that consist of only one sentence and try not to use long sentences. (You should aim for sentences of between 15 and 20 words.)

You do not usually need to number paragraphs but if you have to, the paragraph numbering should begin 1, 2, 3, with subparagraphs labelled a, b, c and subclauses of subparagraphs i, ii, iii and so on.

### **Spacing**

Use single spacing between lines and a line gap between paragraphs.

### **Superscript**

Write '1st', '2nd', '3rd', '4th' not 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>.

### **Underlining**

Do not underline words in your text as they may be mistaken for hyperlinks to web pages. If you need to emphasise something, use bold instead.

# Grammar

## Active verbs

Where possible, use active rather than passive verbs. Active sentences are more direct and easier to understand. They are also shorter and sound less formal.

The following example shows you how you can turn a passive sentence into an active one.

- They will be fought by us on the beaches. (passive)
- We will fight them on the beaches. (active)

Although you should use active sentences where you can, there are times when you might want to use a passive. Here are some examples.

- To make something less hostile. 'The book has not been returned' (passive) is softer than 'you have not returned the book' (active).
- To avoid taking the blame. 'A mistake was made' (passive) rather than 'we made a mistake' (active).
- When you do not know who or what is doing the action. 'A Bill team has been established' (passive).
- Because it simply sounds better.

Plain English Campaign says you should aim to make about 80% to 90% of your verbs active.

## Consistency

When readers scan quickly from page to page through a publication or on a website, it is easy for them to spot inconsistencies. This makes the information less credible.

You must be consistent in the way you present your writing, so make sure that your spellings and your use of capital letters and abbreviations do not vary in different parts of your document.

## Sentences

Short and simple sentences are easier to read and easier to write than long ones. So do not cram too much information into a single sentence. Stick to one main idea or statement, with no more than one or two supporting points. Cutting out unnecessary words also makes the important facts more memorable.

## Splitting infinitives

You 'split the infinitive' when you put other words between 'to' and its verb (for example, 'to boldly go', 'he used to often say'). Some people believe it is always wrong to split an infinitive and so avoid it by moving the relevant word to somewhere else (for example, 'to go boldly', 'often he used to say'). However, this can make sentences clumsy.

Plain English Campaign points out that you can choose to use a split infinitive as this does not break a rule of English grammar and can make a sentence flow better.

# Language

## Old-fashioned words

You will often see old-fashioned words in minutes and official documents, but avoid using them yourself when you are drafting a document. Here are some examples.

amongst – write 'among'

persons – write 'people'

per capita – write 'each (and every) person'

per annum – write 'each (and every) year'

whilst – write 'while'

thence, whence – do not use these words at all

## Jargon

Jargon is technical language that is familiar only to certain groups of people doing similar types of work. A wider audience usually finds jargon difficult to understand, so you should avoid it where possible. If you need to include specialist terms in your draft, explain them where they appear or in an annex or appendix.

## Myself, himself, yourselves

These words are called 'reflexive pronouns'. It is bad English to use them in place of personal pronouns (for example, 'I', 'we', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it', 'they', 'me', 'us'). So write 'the minister wanted to see Tom, Dick and me' and not 'the minister wanted to see Tom, Dick and myself'.

Similarly, never write 'I'll send a copy to yourselves' instead of 'I'll send a copy to you'.

# Numbers

## Money

Here are some examples of how to refer to money.

- '30p', not '30 pence'
- '£7', not '£7.00' or '7 pounds'
- '£4 million to £5 million', not '£4 to £5m'
- '£7 billion to £8 billion', not '£7 to 8 billion'
- For thousands, in internal communications you can use a lower-case letter 'k'. For example, 'the budget for this project is '£250k'. However, if you are writing for the general public do not use 'k'. Write the number out in full. For example, 'His salary is £40,000'.

Currencies do not use capital letters when they are spelt out, for example, 'pound', 'dollar', 'euro'.

The plural of 'euro' does not end in the letter 's'. If you are not using the euro sign, write 'a 10-euro note' or 'a 3,000-euro budget'.

## Percentages, decimals and fractions

Use the percentage symbol (%) throughout your text.

You must use percentages, decimals and fractions consistently within a sentence or paragraph. For example, write 'one-third of all men and one-quarter of all women', rather than 'one-third of men and 25% of women'.

Do not use too many different fractions because it is difficult for the reader to compare them easily. Avoid unusual fractions such as 'seven-sixteenths' and redraft using an approximation instead – in this case 'nearly a half'.

## Times

Use this format when showing times. '8am', '9.30am', '12 noon', '3pm', '10.45pm', '12 midnight'.

Note that there is no space between the number and 'am' or 'pm', and that whole hours do not show minutes as zeros. For example, write '5pm' not '5.00pm'.

Note also that the Ministry of Justice house style does not use the 24-hour clock, so write '7pm' not '19.00' or '1900hrs'.

## Plain English

Plain English Campaign defines plain English as 'a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice that is clear and concise'.

Here are some important points to think about whenever you are writing.

- Before you decide what to write, ask yourself who your audience is and what they want to know. You need to be clear about who you are talking to before you decide what information to include and what tone to use.
- Always use language that everyone can understand. Plain English is good English, not 'dumbed down' English.
- Use common, everyday words and avoid technical jargon or formal words.
- Use short sentences (ideally 15 to 20 words).
- Avoid using too many acronyms and abbreviations. If you do use one, always give the name in full at first, followed by the acronym or abbreviation in brackets. After that, you can use the acronym or abbreviation only.
- Use active rather than passive verbs.
- Try to use 'we' and 'you' where appropriate. It makes your tone much more friendly and it also helps to make the meaning of your text clearer.
- If possible, get a colleague to read your text through before you publish it. If your colleague cannot understand what it means, try to rewrite it until they can.

## **Publishing in other languages**

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 places a duty on specified public authorities (which includes government departments) to work towards the elimination of unlawful discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial groups.

However, there is currently no statutory or legal requirement in the UK to translate or provide public information in ethnic minority languages.

Even so, it is recognised good practice for departments to consider, case by case, whether the information they are making available to the public needs to be produced in languages other than English to reach specific groups within the community.

## **Content and level of language used in translation**

Translated information should focus on the actual rather than the perceived needs of non-English language users. People often assume too high a level of linguistic knowledge in the reader or simply provide a translation of an existing English text without considering if it is appropriate for the reader's needs.

Any communication where the original is not written in plain English is clearly not appropriate for translation.

Public information documents in English that are long or complex are also not suitable for full translation, because they run the risk of being misunderstood or losing subtle shades of meaning. In such cases it is often best to produce a summary translation, using straightforward language that picks out key points and signposts to further available information.

It is also very important to make sure that the mother tongue translation is in the correct dialect and pitched at the right level to be easily understood by its target audience. Translators are often highly educated academics and the versions of the language they produce may differ from that spoken within the community.

## **Design and layout**

Although the following points generally apply to all published material, they are particularly important when communicating to minority ethnic audiences.

- Produce documents that are short and expressed in straightforward language.
- Use clear typography and uncluttered layout to help make documents easy to read and understand.
- Appropriate photographs, illustrations and graphics provide a visual cue for people who have limited literacy in their mother tongue. An inviting appearance can offer a route into the document for those who are not confident with written material.
- Bullet points and summaries are more effective in communicating key messages than translating the original English text in its entirety.

## **Publishing in Welsh**

The Welsh Language Act 1993 requires public bodies to prepare a Welsh Language Scheme (when given notice to do so by the Welsh Language Board) if they:

- provide services to the public in Wales
- exercise statutory functions in relation to the provision by other public bodies of services to the public in Wales.

Although this duty does not extend to government departments, the government has given an undertaking that departments having direct dealings with the public in Wales will prepare Welsh language schemes. In doing so, they must take into account guidelines issued by the Welsh Language Board.

The Ministry of Justice's position, therefore, is to look at each public information project on its own merit and make a judgement as to whether it is necessary to make material available in Welsh. In general, the most likely time that this will occur is when the department is consulting on proposals that directly impact on Welsh citizens.

# Punctuation

## Brackets

You should use round brackets ( ) to separate a word, or group of words, from the rest of the sentence (and when you add extra information). If the text inside the brackets is a complete sentence, the final full stop should also be inside the brackets. If the text within the brackets is not a complete sentence, the final full stop should be outside the closing bracket. Do not overuse brackets in your writing and always remember to close them once you have opened them.

## Hyphens

Hyphens link words and parts of words together to clarify a word or meaning. Unlike a dash, hyphens do not have spaces between them and the words or letters they join together.

Here are some guidelines on using hyphens.

- You should use a hyphen to separate a prefix from the main word if there is a possibility of a misunderstanding. For example, 'recover' and 're-cover', 'resign' and 're-sign'.
- Use hyphens when placing a compound adjective before a noun to describe it (for example, 'the well-known man'), but not when using the same words after a noun to describe it (for example, 'the man was well known').

If you are not sure whether a particular term is one word or hyphenated, check in a dictionary. As there are some variations between dictionaries, make sure you always refer to the same one. This writing style guide is based on the Oxford English Dictionary, which is also available online.

## Dashes

Dashes are longer than hyphens and they are used for different purposes.

- You can use two dashes – but only in the middle of a sentence – (like this) in the same way that you can use brackets.
- You can use a single dash in the same way as a colon – (like this) to break up text. Make sure you have a space either side of a dash.

Use dashes, not hyphens, for the following.

- To replace the word 'to' when showing a range with numbers in. For example, '10am – 2pm' or '1939 – 1945'.
- To break up a sentence or add an extra piece of information.

## Exclamation marks

In writing, an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence follows something that, in speech, you would say loudly or forcefully. You should not use it for emphasis, but it may be appropriate if you want to warn the reader about something. Do not use exclamation marks too often and never follow one with a full stop.

## **Missing text**

When a sentence, or part of a sentence, is missing from your text, show this by adding three full stops ( ... ), with a space after the last word and before the next one. For example, 'not only ... but also'. This punctuation mark is called 'an ellipsis'. Do not include any more than three dots.

## **Style**

### **Ampersand (&)**

It is better to write 'and' wherever possible, but there may be times when you need to use less space (such as in a table or diagram) or where using an ampersand is correct (such as in some department names, for example the Foreign & Commonwealth Office).

### **Gender neutral words**

If words can relate to either men or women (for example, minister, press officer, prison governor), use the plural 'they' as the pronoun. For example, 'When a press officer is on duty during the weekend, they could be on the phone many times.'

### **Months and days**

Write the names of months out in full within text. If you have to abbreviate them in tables or diagrams where space is tight, use only the first three letters (Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr, May, Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep, Oct, Nov, Dec) and do not end with a full stop.

The same rule applies to days of the week. If you need to abbreviate them because of lack of space, use only the first three letters (Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat, Sun) and do not end with a full stop.

### **Seasons**

The first letter of the seasons must be in lower case unless it is at the beginning of a sentence (spring, summer, autumn, winter).

### **Page breaks**

Avoid page breaks where the first line of a paragraph appears by itself at the bottom of a page or the last line or word of a paragraph appears by itself at the top of a new page. (Sometimes this is called 'widows and orphans'.) You can often avoid it by adjusting the line spacing in the document or editing earlier sentences or paragraphs to make them shorter.

## **Tone of voice**

The tone of voice used in an organisation's written work reflects the values it represents and defines its underlying style. All printed documents and the content of the Ministry of Justice's websites should therefore incorporate the following editorial qualities.

## **Authority**

Users need to be reassured that information is authoritative. To help achieve this, you should make sure that your information is clear, accurate, complete and up to date.

## **Impartiality**

As a public sector organisation, the department must reflect civil service impartiality. Your wording should therefore be factual rather than emotive and it should not express opinions.

## **Inclusivity**

Content must not alienate any individual or group of individuals, based on their age, sex, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or education. This means using appropriate terminology, ensuring that what you write will not cause offence and presenting information in a way that is easily understood by all users.

## **Accessibility**

The department's editorial policy explains that using plain English in your writing helps everyone understand you more easily. But it is particularly important for you to make your text clear when writing for people who have visual impairments or other disabilities. By bearing this in mind when you begin to write, you may also reduce your design, print, storage and translation costs. Remember that, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, departments have a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' so that people with disabilities have access to printed information. It is therefore good practice to consider whether documents should be made available in large print, Braille, on disk or in other formats.

## **Type size and legibility**

Pay particular attention to the following.

- Use the simple, clear typeface Arial.
- Use a text size of 11 point, although we recommend 14-point if you want to reach more people with sight impairments. Estimates show that 75% of visually impaired people can read 14-point text.
- Make sure you have adequate line spacing.
- Use simple layout and avoid text in columns.
- Think about what colour to use for the text and the contrast it has with the background colour. The best combination is dark-coloured text on a light background. For example, most people will find 11 point black type on a white or yellow background easier to read than 8 point white type on a pale pink background.
- Avoid placing text over a patterned background or images, because again this can be difficult to read.
- Use a matt finish for your publication. Glossy finishes create reflections and are therefore more difficult to read.
- Justify the text on the left-hand side only, with evenly-spaced wording.

You should also:

- make sure your headings are easy to see
- use bullet points and small 'chunks' of text. Lines that are too long or too short can be difficult to read, are tiring for the eyes and will put the reader off
- try to include people with disabilities in your photos and illustrations (for example, a member of staff with hearing difficulties using British Sign Language)
- try to make your illustrations and diagrams as simple as possible. Visual elements can also be described in words if this is more effective.

## **Presenting information/application forms in alternative formats**

So that information and application forms are as accessible as possible, you should make them available in large print or Braille, on disk or audiocassette, by email or on the internet, or adapt them for people with learning difficulties (sometimes known as EasyRead versions).