

Mr B's Style Guide

I'm unleashing the prescriptivist that lurks inside. Don't let anyone tell you that there aren't rules in English. Here are some style rules used by journalists which I find most helpful. My main source is the Guardian's excellent *How to Write*, but I've also referred to Simon Heffer's *Strictly English* and Bill Bryson's *Troublesome Words*.

Punctuation

Capital letters: for start of sentences and names of people and places. At other times, when in doubt use lower case: prime minister, secretary of state, headteacher, french fries, brussels sprouts

Semi-colon (;) an elegant compromise between a full stop (too much) and a comma (too little)

Hyphens: avoid using them where possible. Many everyday words were once hyphenated (wire-less, down-stairs). Use the where they clarify meaning: two-tonne vessel, stand-up comedian, black-cab drivers

The Oxford comma goes before "and" where it clarifies meaning – compare:
I dedicate this book to my parents, Malcolm Gladwell and JK Rowling (suggests the parents are Malcolm Gladwell and JK Rowling)
I dedicate this book to my parents, Malcolm Gladwell, and JK Rowling (suggests parents are not Malcolm Gladwell and JK Rowling)

Style & usage

- Acronym = words made from initials (Nato, Aids, Unesco); abbreviations are shortened forms (UK, UN, EU)
- Affect/effect – affect is a verb relating to emotion or pretentiousness/affectation ("The man affects an American accent"; "he was genuinely affected by the music"); effect is usually a noun ("His arrival had a big effect") but can be used as a verb meaning to change: "She effected changes as soon as she was appointed")
- A lot, not a lot
- All sorts, not alsorts
- Basically: This word is unnecessary in most contexts
- Biannual = twice a year; biennial = every two years
- Burned (past tense of verb – he burned the cakes); burnt (adjective – the cakes were burnt)
- Continuous/continual – a continuous noise never stops; a continual noise is frequent but with interruptions
- Compliment/complement – compliment is what we pay to someone we admire; complement is something that adds to a a group of people or objects: "His review was very complimentary"; "Her arrival complemented an already happy group")
- Comprise or consists of (but not "comprises of")

- Deceased – dead; diseased – ill
- Dependant/dependent: a dependant is a noun (“he looked after his dependants”); dependent is an adjective (“they were dependent upon him”) Different from, not different than
- Discreet = modest/restrained; discrete = separate
- Disinterested = neutral/objective; uninterested = not interested
- Due to = say because of
- Every day = noun and adverb (“it happens every day”); everyday = adjective (“an everyday remark”)
- Fed up with, not fed up of
- Forensic – means relating to the law, not detailed
- Formally – being formal; formerly – in the past
- Forego – go ahead; forgo – go without
- Fraction – use with care: Saying “he only produced a fraction of the necessary work” isn’t the same as saying “a small fraction” since 9/10 is a fraction
- Grisly – gruesome; grizzly bear
- Hanged – past tense of to hang (someone)
- Hoard of treasure; horde of tourists
- Homogeneous – of the same kind; homogenous – of common descent
- Imply/infer – I imply that you are mad; you infer that I am being rude
- Into – precedes being in a place and exists as a word; see “onto”
- It’s (=it is/it has); its (= the cat licked its paws)
- Like – use ‘as if’ – it looks as if he will be late
- Led – past tense of to lead; lead – rope for a dog and heavy element
- Lend – verb (I lend); loan – noun (thanks for the loan)
- Less / fewer: less for quantities (I’ll have less water) ; fewer than for items that can be individually counted (fewer than 10 bottles)
- Literally – use with care, not “He literally jumped out of his skin”
- Meet – not meet with
- Momentarily – “he stopped momentarily”, not the Americanism “I’ll be there momentarily”
- More than – better than over (it cost more than £27)
- No one, not no-one
- Onto – doesn’t exist. The phrase is on to
- Prevaricate – to lie or deceive; procrastinate – to put something off
- Principal – head of a school; principle/principles = beliefs
- Program – runs on a computer; programme – something we watch on television or buy at a theatre
- Proved, not proven
- Public schools – call them private schools
- Queueing, not queuing
- Re-/re: use re- before vowels e and u (re-use, re-examine); use re before others (rearrange, rearm). Exceptions for clarity: reform (change for the better) v re-form (to form again), resign (give up) and re-sign (put new signs up).
- Still life (singular); still lifes (plural)
- Roof (singular); roofs (plural)
- Swap, not swop
- Thank you = verb and pronoun (“Thank you); thankyou = noun (“a big thankyou”)
- Theirs (no apostrophe)
- Try to, not try and

- Under way, not underway
- Until, not up until
- Upcoming – avoid
- While, not whilst
- Yours (no apostrophe)
- On to, not onto
- Outside, not outside of

Other things ...

Clichés:

These are ready-made words and phrases that are best avoided. They include: fit for purpose, elephant in the room, back burner, key, going forward, bottom line, not rocket science ...

Numbers:

Spell out numbers from one to nine; use numerals from 10 to 999,999

Newspaper headlines:

- Max 7 words, usually fewer
- Use active verbs (avoid is/was)
- Avoid clichés (tabloid): bid, brand, dub, slam; (broadsheets): insist, signal, target

Words not to overuse:

- Was/is/are
- I
- And/but/so

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