



An A-Z of writing hints & tips



This guide is primarily aimed at people interested in writing for online sources, although many of the hints and tips also apply more generally. This initial PDF version has just one entry for each letter of the alphabet. Revised versions will be issued occasionally as more entries are added and will be available at doodlydog.wales.

A

Apostrophe

An apostrophe is usually used to show either the omission of one or more letters or to indicate possession.

Examples of standing in for a missing letter or letters include: ‘it’s’ for ‘it is’, ‘she’s’ for ‘she is’ or ‘she has’, ‘can’t’ for ‘cannot’, ‘pic ‘n’ mix’ for ‘pick and mix’.

When showing possession, the apostrophe is used in examples such as: ‘Eric’s list’, ‘the dog’s toy’, and ‘the Prime Minister’s speech’.

Note that in phrases such as ‘all the apples were green’, ‘the areas were well marked’ and ‘we sell videos’ no apostrophe is needed and it would therefore be wrong to use ‘apple’s’, ‘area’s’ or ‘video’s’.

As a further illustration, consider: ‘When the markets opened, Apple’s shares fell’ and ‘After the gale the apples were scattered on the ground’.

For further advice on using the apostrophe, see the Lexico.com entry at <https://bit.ly/3jpYN2O>.

B

Brackets

Of the various types of bracket, the two forms most likely to be encountered are round and square: () and [].

Round brackets are used to provide additional information in a sentence, such as an explanation or clarification. Importantly, the sentence should still make sense even if the words in parentheses were removed.

For example: ‘The date given for entry into force is “exit day” (currently scheduled for 29 March 2019)’ and ‘He thought it unlikely he’d win the race, as he was still recovering from an operation on his right knee (to mend a torn cartilage) earlier in the year.’

(Note that if you write a full sentence in parentheses, then the full stop should be within them – like this.)

(It should not be outside them – like this).

Square brackets should be used when adding extra words within a quotation so that it makes sense out of context.

In the following extract, for example, it is not clear which countries are concerned: ‘The agreement will help to boost trade between the two and is estimated to increase UK GDP by up to £3 billion in the longer term.’

Clarification can be achieved by using square brackets to insert additional information: ‘The agreement will help to boost trade between the [UK and Japan] and is estimated to increase UK GDP by up to £3 billion in the longer term.’

Similarly, ‘He argued that the country [England] had changed beyond all recognition since he was a child’ removes any uncertainty or ambiguity from the quote.

Other forms of brackets are angle and curly (also known as braces), which look like this: < > and { }.



Colon / semi-colon

These are not interchangeable; don’t use them unless you know which one is appropriate. Try thinking of them in this way: a colon introduces something; a semi-colon divides.



Dash

Defined by Oxford Dictionaries as ‘A horizontal stroke in writing or printing to mark a pause or break in sense or to represent omitted letters or words’, the dash is not as simple as it looks.

For one thing, it comes in two distinct forms (short and long); for another, it is not the same as a hyphen.

A short dash (-) is also known as the en dash or en rule (from the idea that it should be about the width of a capital N).

It can be used in place of the word ‘to’ (as in 1914-18, 2010-2015, Monday-Friday), as well as to avoid the use of commas - like this - and to connect parts of a sentence in a less formal way than by using a colon, semicolon or round brackets.

In the UK, the short dash is generally preferred to the long version (—) which is also known as the em dash or em rule, as it should be the width of a capital M.

A hyphen (-) is used to link words that should be read together (e.g. oven-ready chips, fifty-odd people, decision-making body) or to split a word at the end of a line (as in this rather random ex-ample).

On a standard keyboard, the hyphen should be located to the right of the 0 on the top line of numbers.

Read more about the dash and the hyphen in these articles by Full Proof (<https://bit.ly/2OKu8zb>), the University of Sussex (<https://bit.ly/2AuYQpg>) and author Karl Drinkwater (<https://bit.ly/2TwJhVf>).

E

Ellipsis

This punctuation mark comprises a series of three dots (...) and is used either to show that a word or words have been left out of a direct quote, or that a sentence (or thought) is unfinished ...

Note that it is **three** full stops, not two, five, 12 or any other random number!

F

For example (e.g. and i.e.)

Despite the abbreviations 'e.g.' and 'i.e.' having different meanings, they are often used interchangeably.

Both are abbreviations of Latin terms, with e.g. being short for 'exempli gratia' ('for example') and i.e. being short for 'id est' ('that is to say').

Although to many of us it is second nature to use the terms correctly, they seem to give a lot of people a lot of trouble.

If you're confused by them, try thinking of them this way: the abbreviation e.g. should be used to introduce one or more examples of something (e.g. a list of football teams), while i.e. is used to introduce a clarification (i.e. only Premier League teams).

Alternatively, using them in their full rather than abbreviated forms might help clarify which is appropriate in a specific situation.



Gender

‘Sexist language is language which excludes one sex or the other, or which suggests that one sex is superior to the other’ states the Cambridge Dictionary in an article on sexist language (<https://bit.ly/2VyE69e>).

Although the pronouns ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘his’ have traditionally been used to refer to both males and females, it is now generally considered that such usage is sexist and should be avoided.

Instead, the use of ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘their’ and ‘theirs’ to refer to both sexes at the same time is becoming increasingly acceptable, simultaneously reducing the chance of causing offence and removing the need to use ‘he or she’, ‘s/he’, ‘his/hers’ etc.

For its part, Lexico.com points out that the use of plural pronouns dates from the 16th century and its revival is now widely accepted both in speech and in writing (see <https://bit.ly/2ZKlrLw>).



Homograph

The Lexico.com website defines the term homograph as:

‘Each of two or more words spelled the same but not necessarily pronounced the same and having different meanings and origins.’ (See <https://bit.ly/2BhpFAT>.)

Examples include:

bass/bass

bow/bow

entrance/entrance

moped/moped

row/row

sewer/sewer

wound/wound



I

Italic

Italic text slopes to the right.

It is used for emphasis (notably to highlight foreign words and phrases) and will be more appropriate at times than other options for emphasising text, which are: **bold**, **CAPITALS**, **highlight** and the underline.

To *italicise* text means to write or print it in *italics*.

J

Judgment

Do you use judgment or judgement? It's not really a question of preference, but rather of convention. The former - judgment without an 'e' - is generally used in legal contexts (e.g. 'a County Court judgment') while the latter - judgement with an 'e' - is used elsewhere (e.g. 'I told her that in my judgement, it would be better to accept the job').

It should be noted, however, that 'judgment' is also the preferred spelling in North American English, whatever the context.

K

Know-how

A term used to denote practical ability, knowledge or skill, especially of or in something technical or practical.

Note that the term is hyphenated (it's not 'know how' or 'knowhow').

L

Less

Less is not the same as fewer - as this article on the Lexico.com website explains: <https://bit.ly/39iTptC>.

M

Metaphor

If you say that someone is drowning in debt or their hair is a bird's nest, then you're using a metaphor - a figure of speech in which 'a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable' (Lexico.com - see <https://bit.ly/30MINAT>).

According to the Young Writers website, a metaphor creates 'an even stronger image in the reader's head by describing a place, subject or object as something unlikely' (as in 'he was a speeding bullet', 'her eyes were glistening jewels' and 'the world is a stage'; <https://bit.ly/2AAHzLm>).

A metaphor is not the same as a simile, which is a figure of speech that compares one thing to another, typically using the words 'as' or 'like' (e.g. 'he turned as white as a sheet', 'she ran like the wind').

N

Numerals

'The numbers from one to ten should always be written in full' states *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

I have worked, however, for many organisations which prefer one to nine to be written in full, then 10 and above to be expressed as numerals (and, indeed, worked for some that have no policy at all).

An authoritative source, *Fowler's* also advises that, in descriptive matter, 'numbers under 100 should be in words; but write 90 to 100, not ninety to 100'.

But should it be 2500 or 2,500? As with many other questions of style (such as use of the Oxford comma and 'z or s'), consistency should be the aim.

It is therefore worth checking to see if any organisation you work for has a preference for one or the other - ideally set out in its own style guide. If not - or you're working alone - then think about creating your own guide.

(Although quite lengthy and detailed, the entries concerning numerals in *Fowler's* are as nothing compared to those in *New Hart's Rules: The Oxford Style Guide* which devotes a whole chapter to the topic of numbers and dates. Details of both publications can be found at <https://bit.ly/2SM9Rd0>.)



Oxford comma

Is it robin, blackbird, sparrow and starling?

Or robin, blackbird, sparrow, and starling?

You're probably not bothered, but might like to know - if you don't already - that in the second example the comma after sparrow is what's known as an Oxford comma.

Also called the serial comma and Harvard comma, it's the one used before the word 'and' or 'or' at the end of a list.

Although long associated with the house style of Oxford University Press, it is widely used by many people as standard practice and by others as and when they need it for clarification.

Disliked by many as a sign of over-punctuation, the Oxford comma is nevertheless essential on occasion to clarify the meaning of sentences such as: 'This film is dedicated to my parents, Jeremy Paxman and Theresa May' which makes far more sense when written as 'This film is dedicated to my parents, Jeremy Paxman, and Theresa May'.

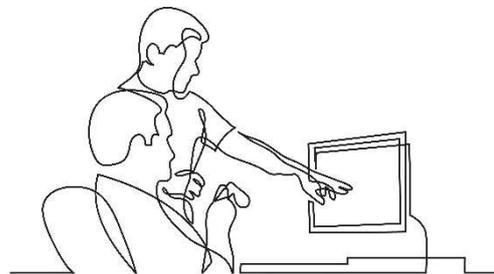
Garden birds and questionable parentage aside, the presence or absence of a comma can have serious legal consequences, as a US court determined in 2017 when ruling in a case concerning delivery drivers and overtime pay (read about in The Guardian online at <https://bit.ly/2se46cm>).



Parentheses

(If you write a full sentence in parentheses (round brackets), then the full stop should be within them - like this.)

(It should not be outside them - like this).





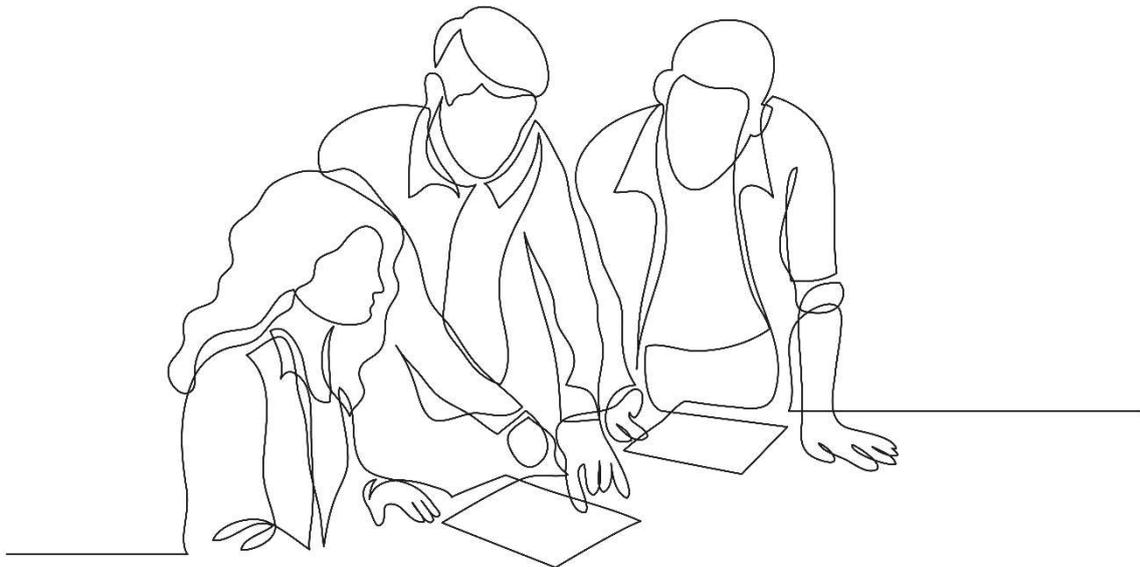
Quotation marks

Should you use ‘single’ quotation marks or “double” ones?

Also known as inverted commas, quotes and speech marks, these essential elements of punctuation serve two main purposes: to denote the start and finish of direct speech, and to highlight a particular word or phrase.

Direct speech is defined in Collins Dictionary (<https://bit.ly/2Rkpage>) as ‘reporting of what someone has said or written by quoting his or her exact words’. (By putting the definition in quotation marks, I am making it clear that the words are taken from the source - which should, of course, always be acknowledged.)

According to the Lexico.com article on ‘Inverted commas/Quotation marks’ at <https://bit.ly/3hm5yRp>, single marks are used more frequently than the double variety for direct speech in British English, with double quotation marks the rule in American English.



The second use of inverted commas - to highlight a particular word or phrase - can be illustrated thus: the terms ‘trail running’ and ‘fell running’ mean different things to different people.

Two other considerations when using quotation marks are what to do about direct speech within direct speech, and where to place commas and other punctuation marks.

Both are illustrated in this example: ‘The terms “trail running” and “fell running” mean different things to different people,’ argued guest speaker Rob Runner.

Note that single and double marks are used to distinguish what the speaker is saying and what he is quoting.

Also note that different organisations will favour the use of single or double marks as standard. For instance, one organisation I write for would want the above example presented as: “The terms ‘trail running’ and ‘fell running’ mean different things to different people,” - with the marks switched over.

As in so many situations, it is important to establish which style is preferred by a particular organisation.

Preference plays no part, however, in the placing of a comma, full stop, question mark or exclamation mark at the end of a passage of direct speech.

The rule is that any such mark is placed inside the closing quotation mark, as in: “‘You’re right,’ he said’ and also in “‘Can I come in?’ he asked.’ - both of which are examples given in the Lexico.com article at <https://bit.ly/3eNjnH8>.

R

Repetition

Over the years, I have seen press releases, reports and other materials from high-profile organisations - including government departments - in which words, phrases, sentences and even whole paragraphs have been inadvertently repeated inadvertently repeated.

It not only reflects badly on the author and/or organisation concerned, but can make texts harder to read and understand.

Repetition can sometimes be attributed to the ‘cut & paste’ approach which most of us now use; whatever the cause the best way to avoid it is to proofread text before submitting it, publishing it, posting it on social media etc.

If you’re not great at checking your own writing, then consider finding someone who can do the job for you.

S

Simile

A figure of speech that compares one thing to another, typically using the words ‘as’ or ‘like’ (e.g. ‘he turned as white as a sheet’, ‘she ran like the wind’). Learn

more from Collins Dictionary (<https://bit.ly/2LTEhau>) and the Cambridge Dictionary (<https://bit.ly/2FdXYcx>).

A simile is different from a metaphor, which is a figure of speech in which ‘a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable’ (Lexico.com - see <https://bit.ly/2sdVfrd>), such as ‘he was drowning in debt’ or ‘her hair is a bird’s nest’.



Their / there / they’re

This is another clutch of confusion-causing words, with errors spotted daily, especially on social media posts (written, I suspect, by people in a hurry who either can’t spot errors or don’t care about them).

‘Their’ is what’s formally known as a possessive determiner and is used to indicate that something belongs or relates to a group of people, animals or things that are being talked about (as in ‘that’s their business’, ‘their family home was enormous’, ‘they tried to upgrade their tickets’).

‘There’ is an adverb which is used:

- to indicate a place or position (‘it rained, so we stayed there for hours’, ‘there he is - behind the car’, ‘there’s nowhere as romantic as Paris’);
- to attract someone’s attention or to call attention to someone or something (‘hi there!’, ‘there goes the full-time whistle’); or
- to indicate the fact or existence of something (‘there is a filling station nearby’, ‘there was a quiet corner where she could study’, ‘rising costs and falling sales mean there’s little room for manoeuvre’).

In addition, ‘there’ is also used as an exclamation, as in ‘there, I told you she wouldn’t mind!’ where it’s used to focus attention on something, and in ‘there, there, you must take all of this philosophically’ where it’s used to comfort someone (definitions and examples taken from Lexico.com: <https://bit.ly/2OGGQ23>).

More simply, the word ‘they’re’ is just an abbreviation of ‘they are’ (e.g. ‘they’re walking on the wrong side of the road’, ‘it’s just that they’re so unfriendly’). Easy.

To summarise: ‘The problem is that **their** social media posts make it look as though **there** is nothing wrong with all the mistakes **they’re** making’.



Underline

Although it can be a useful method for emphasising something on the printed page, underlining is often confusing in the online world, where it is more usually used to denote a hyperlink.

Rather than annoy people online (who think you're giving them links and then don't understand why they don't work), it's best when writing for an online audience to avoid the underline and use some other form of emphasis such as CAPITALS, **highlight**, *italic* or **bold**.



Vice versa

This Latin phrase is used to indicate that the reverse of what someone has said is also true or, to put it another way, that something is also true in the opposite order to that in which it has just been stated.

Examples include: 'she doesn't believe me and vice versa', 'you can choose to walk the route either from Land's End to John O'Groats or vice versa' and 'the children chased the dog - and vice versa'.



While / whilst

When used as conjunctions, these two words have the same meaning and can both be used with a clear conscience in British English - although 'while' is the most common form and sounds more modern.

So both 'I managed to send some emails **while** waiting for her' and 'I managed to send some emails **whilst** waiting for her' are generally acceptable.

However, as in other cases (such as the Oxford comma and 'z or s'), it is worth checking to see if any organisation you work for has a preference for one or the other.

There's more in the Cambridge Dictionary at <https://bit.ly/3hngl8F>.



Xenophobia

Note that this word begins with an x (as do the associated xenophobic and xenophobe) although it is sometimes seen wrongly as zenophobia with a z.

Xenophobia is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as ‘dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries’ and by Collins English Dictionary as ‘strong and unreasonable dislike or fear of people from other countries’.

(Amusingly, the Urban Dictionary defines zenophobia as the fear of Zen; see <https://bit.ly/2CZqv3j>.)



Your / you're

Another couple of words with different meaning but which people too often think are interchangeable.

‘Your’ is a possessive determiner and indicates that something belongs to, or is associated with, either the person or people that the speaker is addressing - or to any person in general.

Lexico.com cites numerous examples for both cases, including for the former ‘what is your name?’ and for the latter ‘the sight is enough to break your heart’ (see <https://bit.ly/2E6sEgH>).

This word is also used when addressing the holder of certain titles, such as in ‘your Majesty’.

By contrast, the word ‘you’re’ is short for ‘you are’ - something so different that there should be no question of confusing the two.

In summary: ‘**Your** ability to use these two words correctly shows that **you’re** really quite clever!’



Zero

Be careful not to mistake the number 0 (zero) for the capital letter O, when either reading or writing. In some fonts and sizes they can look all too similar.

Where it is particularly important to distinguish between the two, the symbol Ø ('slashed zero') can be used. (Those using MS Word can access it using 'insert', 'symbol' and then entering the code 00D8 for Unicode & ASCII hex or 216 for ASCII decimal.)

I have decades of experience working with words.

If your business would benefit from having my keen eye cast over your online or printed texts, then feel free to get in touch to discuss how we can work together.

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