

Mr B's Style Guide

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 'alot'
- 'All sorts', not 'alsorts'
- 'Any more' v 'anymore': 'we do not want any more errors in the newspaper'; 'we will not put up with this anymore'
- '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' v 'continual' – a continuous noise never stops; a continual noise is frequent but with interruptions
- 'Compliment' v 'complement' – compliment is what we pay to someone we admire; complement is something that adds to 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 v 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' v '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 a heavy element
- Lend – verb ('I lend'); loan – noun ('thanks for the loan')
- 'Less' v '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 - ie 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' is 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 v 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 for the present'); 'thankyou' = noun ('a big thankyou for the present')
- 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

Words not to overuse:

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

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