



choices

Editorial style guide

Document Author -	<i>Barry Bolton</i>
Created Date -	<i>04/02/08</i>
Current Issue Date -	<i>26/02/10</i>
Version Number -	<i>V2.1</i>

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1. Introduction

This style guide is intended to inform decisions on the use of English across NHS Choices. Its purpose is to provide a framework for achieving a coherent use of language that will give our users material that is clear and consistent.

English offers many options in terms of tone and grammar, punctuation and spelling. Setting ourselves a standard by which we use the language is as essential to our identity as are the design of our logo, the look and feel of the pages, or the choice of our typeface.

If we talk, say, of an x-ray in one place, an X-Ray in another and an X-ray* in yet another, readers will lose confidence in our competence; such inconsistency sends out a message of sloppiness that raises questions about the quality of *what* we are saying as well as how we are saying it.

The aim of this guide is to provide the tools to ensure that we all use the same yardstick when measuring our words. It cannot, and does not attempt to, cover every eventuality. While it does set out some rules, its main purpose is to offer broad tenets on which to base your decisions about the use of language on NHS Choices.

* use this option, by the way.

2. General principles

Writing for a website requires a different approach from writing for print. It is more difficult to read text from a screen than from a printed page, and people tend to visit web pages to “get information” rather than to spend time reading. They will not linger if they don’t rapidly find what they want.

This section offers some guidance for creating concise, accessible, appealing content that will keep people reading beyond the first few lines.

Write plain English. This sounds obvious, but to achieve it requires rigour and discipline. Aim to keep everything short and simple. Avoid using more words than are needed to say what you mean. Don’t use a long word if a short one will do the job. Avoid medical jargon and technical terms as far as possible - and if you must use them, explain them.

Construct simple sentences, with subclauses kept to a minimum. Put your punchy sentences into short paragraphs.

Avoid excessive amounts of text. Make use of sub-headings and bullet points to help readers find what they want.

Write in a way that involves the readers with the content, tells them clearly what they can do, and encourages them to act. Use inclusive language and do not discriminate against individuals or groups; avoid promoting stereotypes or using language commonly considered offensive.

Avoid subjective concepts such as “good” and “bad”. For example, what is meant by “a good chance of recovery”? Use evidence to quantify the likelihood of recovery (“four out of five people recover fully in a week”). Similarly, avoid adverbs such as hopefully, frankly, happily, honestly, mercifully and so on – they are laden with opinion.

We aim to give high-quality, evidence-based information, so beware of vague phrases such as “a glass of wine contains [so-and-so]...”, “a slice of cheese contains [such-and-such]”. Ask how big is the glass? How strong is the wine? How heavy is the slice? And then tell the reader. Ensure factual accuracy in everything that you write.

As a maxim for your Choices writing, adopt KISS – Keep It Short and Simple.

Further reading

The rest of this guide, so you know what it covers.

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>

Fowler, A (2006) *How to Write* Oxford University Press.

McGovern, G and Norton, M (2001) *Content Critical* Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Truss, L (2004) *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* Profile Books.

3. Punctuation

Apostrophes – used to denote omitted letters (rock'n'roll) and possessives (Paul's house, a boy's house, a girl's house, but if there's more than one girl or boy it's a boys' house and a girls' house).

One area of difficulty is possessives on names that sound plural - James, Jones and so on. Prefer "Dr Jones' surgery" to "Dr Jones's surgery", "James' illness" to "James's illness" but in a few instances you must be guided by pronunciation and convention so you would include the final "s" in "St James's Palace".

Note that contractions (don't, can't, you'll, what's and so on) are fine in less formal articles to let copy flow and give a conversational tone. They can, for example, be used throughout Live Well. **But avoid** contractions in authoritative information areas – for example Health A-Z topics (except Real Stories) and Behind the Headlines. In all cases, however, contractions should be preserved in quotes.

Bulleted lists - can break up information into easily readable chunks. Lists should be introduced with a colon.

Where the bulleted items are fragments of sentences or single words, use no other punctuation and start each point with a lower-case letter. Use no final punctuation. So ...

The symptoms of asthma include:

- coughing (this is more common in children than adults)
- feeling out of breath
- tightness in your chest
- wheezing (a whistling sound that happens when you breathe)

If the bullet points are sentences that make complete sense when read in isolation, then capitalise the first word and end each with a full stop. (If you are tempted to do this, ask yourself whether the bullet points are really appropriate or whether you are simply writing a series of punchy sentences/paragraphs.)

Do not mix fragments and complete sentences in the same list.

Colons – use when introducing a complete quote. (So-and-so said: "This is all becoming clear.") However, for a quote within a quote use a comma (Whatsisname said: "The man shouted, 'Come and get me!' ").

Except when the colon introduces a fully independent sentence, as in the quotes above, it is followed by l/c. So in a headline – "Diana: countdown to disaster". But "Burnham: Make GPs work harder".

Use a colon to introduce a bulleted list.

Commas – use to guide readers through a sentence, for example, to separate independent clauses joined with a conjunction – "I wanted to stay up all night, but I felt too tired." (But note that although conjunctions – and, but, so – can link two independent clauses with a comma, conjunctive adverbs such as "however", "hence" and "moreover" can do so only with a semi-colon, thus - "The man tipped the scales at 16 stone; however, his doctor was not alarmed.")

A frequent error is to use one comma when an appositive phrase requires two, one before and one after – "Tremor, which normally begins in one hand or arm is a symptom of Parkinson's disease" is wrong. You need a comma after "arm".

You can use a comma to imply missing words: "Tim had blue eyes; David, brown."

Not every clause beginning with "who" needs commas. The following are correct without them: "The man in Whitehall who makes the decisions is X." "The mothers who exposed his sexist bias were praised." "Women who wear makeup are prone to acne."

Insert commas into figures over 999, for example 1,250, 1,500.

Note: it is not always wrong to have a comma before "and" – indeed, you often need it to make your meaning clear. Take, for example, the well-known "eats shoots and leaves":

a) Eats shoots and leaves = describes something that eats green veggie stuff.

- b) Eats, shoots, and leaves = Subject eats (something), opens fire and then goes away.
- c) Eats shoots, and leaves = subject eats green veggie stuff, then goes away.

Dots and dashes – are sometimes justified but more often misused. **Dots (ellipses)** should denote missing words, as in a sentence that tails off, or a phrase ... omitted from a quote. There should be three dots with a space before and after. If you do omit some words ... from a quote, ensure the core meaning is not altered. **Dashes** should be used to isolate subsidiary clauses – like this – or to indicate a grammatical pause. Commas usually do the job less irritatingly.

Exclamation marks, aka screamers – are almost (note, almost) always unnecessary!

Hyphens – hyphenate prepositional adjectives – high-street shop, five-mile-wide gap, multimillion-pound project, trade-union militancy, 14-year-old girl.

Adjectives after the noun should not be hyphenated – “The boy was 14 years old”, “the gap was five miles wide”. Nor should there be hyphens between adverb and participle – poorly written prose, highly charged drama, badly sung verse (but well-chosen words).

As English evolves, compound adjectives often become single words – bloodstained, overblown, underdone, redheaded, halfhearted. This is also true of compound nouns – steam ship became steam-ship became steamship; machine gun became machine-gun, and now is machinegun. In general, favour the hyphenless form. It is neater and punchier.

Avoid clashes of letter (redeye, but blue-eyed). Do not hyphenate words with the prefix re, except to avoid a clashing e (re-elect) or a visual snare (re-ignite), or to distinguish two meanings (reform, re-form; re-creation, recreation). Hyphenate co-operate, co-ordinate, etc, but, note, uncooperative, uncoordinated.

The prefixes “over”, “sub” and “under” seldom need hyphens (overabundance, overstress, substandard, underpayment).

Obliques (/) – Avoid obliques in text, for example, "from/to", "and/or", "he/she" – in every case, recast the sentence to render the oblique unnecessary.

Parentheses – use sparingly, and primarily to give an explanatory term (alternative word) or abbreviation. When brackets contain a whole sentence, final punctuation falls within the brackets, otherwise it's outside. Use square brackets to denote words inserted into a quote for clarification ("It [the cat] sat on the mat.")

Quotation marks – generally double, but single for quotes within quotes, headlines, captions, standfirsts, crossheads, large-type quotes, and so forth. Confusion often arises over the punctuation of quoted matter. Note the examples below.

Dr John Smith said: "This book makes everything easy."

Dr Jane Smith said this book "makes everything easy".

Dr John Smith said this book "makes everything easy. I recommend it on that basis".

In the last two examples, the full point comes after the quotation marks because the quote is a fragment; it is clearly incomplete because it starts in mid-sentence. It matters not that the portion quoted in example three contains, afterwards, a complete sentence. How the quote begins is the key.

Semi-colons – helpful in lists that include commas: "He had appeared in several West End productions, including The Mousetrap and Run for Your Wife; in films such as Carry On Up the Khyber; and in a range of television programmes, from EastEnders to The Bill."

Otherwise, use sparingly. Often two thoughts yoked together with a semi-colon will be more effective as separate sentences.

Full stops – no full stops at the end of text in box-outs

4. Spelling

Use British English spellings throughout. That sounds simple enough but there are many pitfalls. Often dictionaries will offer equally weighted alternative spellings for the same word. In such cases we should take the most commonly used option.

Where words can end in “ise” or “ize” (or “isation” or “ization”) use the “s” version. Note, however, that some words, for example capsise, are spelt only with the “z”. Traditionally, fertilize and tranquillize have retained the “z” but this is fast becoming obsolete and we should move to the “s” – which is how these words are mostly spelt on NHS Choices at present and is in line with bodies such as the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority.

Wide use of American and International English on the internet means many people no longer know whether they are looking at a British or American spelling. The following table gives a rough guide to help you spot the difference.

British  ✓	American  ✗
-ise, isation <i>eg organise</i>	-ize, -ization <i>eg organize</i>
-ll- <i>eg jeweller</i>	-l- <i>eg jeweler</i>
final -l <i>eg instal</i>	final -ll <i>eg install</i>
-ae- <i>eg haemorrhage</i>	-e- <i>eg hemorrhage</i>
-oe- <i>eg foetus</i>	-e- <i>eg fetus</i>
-our <i>eg colour</i>	-or <i>eg color</i>
-gramme <i>eg programme</i>	-gram <i>eg program</i>
-logue <i>eg dialogue</i>	-log <i>eg dialog</i>
-ence <i>eg defence</i>	-ense <i>eg defense</i>
-tre <i>eg litre</i>	-ter <i>eg liter</i>

Note that American (or other “foreign English”) spellings should be retained in proper nouns, so Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization are correct.

For all conditions and treatments, follow the spellings used in Health A-Z.

The reference work for all medicines spellings is the British National Formulary (www.bnf.org). You have to register but it is free. There are paper copies in the office. It is also useful for checking that a medicine is being appropriately referred to in copy. Generally use the generic (scientific name) first followed by the brand name in brackets, for example: atorvastatin (Lipitor). For more on this see **Medicines** in the Alphabetical listing.

5. Links

All link phrases should be descriptive so that they tell the readers as clearly as possible where they are going. The test is to divorce the link from the material in which it appears and ask yourself how informative it is. For example, if on the Treatment page for asthma there were a link saying “see Symptoms” the context would tell a sighted user that the link goes to a page on asthma symptoms. But this is not good enough for a visually impaired user and will cause the website to fail accessibility assessments.

With accessibility software, which reads out the page to a visually impaired user, it is possible to list all the links separately from the text. In that case, the user would be offered a link to “symptoms”. But symptoms of what? Such a link should say “see Asthma - Symptoms” to make clear where it goes. For a sighted user (and editor) this might seem unnecessary but we are required to achieve a prescribed accessibility standard. Making the destinations of links crystal clear with the link phrases is in any case best practice and helps all users.

Links phrases like “More” or “Further information” are also inadequate. In the asthma example, they would have to say “More about asthma” and “Further information about asthma”.

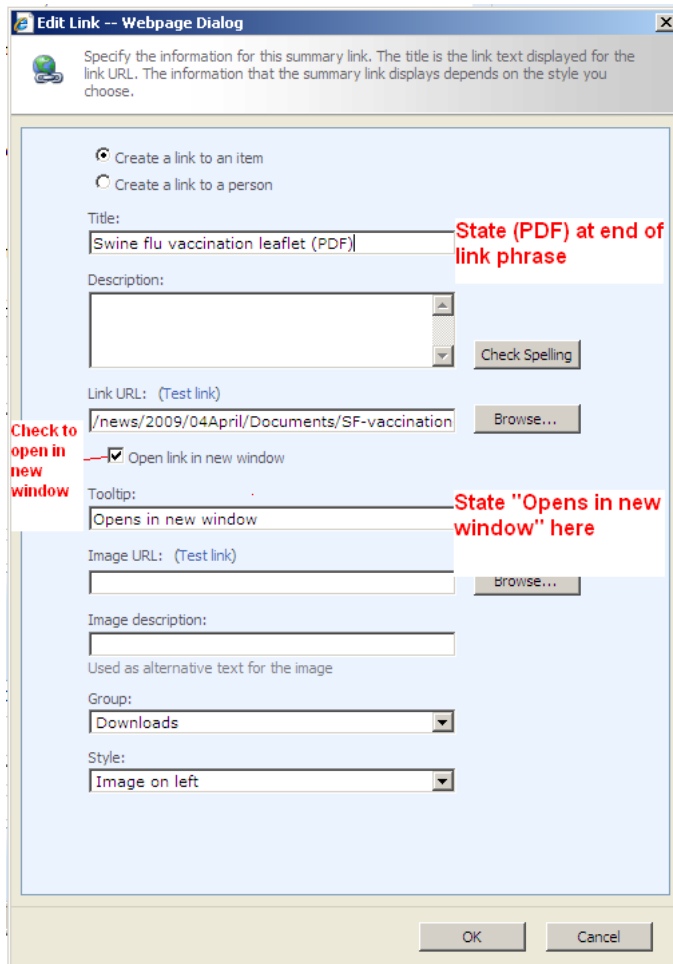
It is OK – though not desirable – to have more than one link on a page going to the same place so long as they use different link phrases. If you do this the url you give must be rendered identically: one link to /CarersDirect and another to /carersdirect will fail on accessibility even though both will end up at the same place.

It is **NOT OK** to use the *same* link phrase on a page for two links going to different places.

Do not set links to open web pages in a new window.

DO set links to open documents (PDFs and so forth) in a new window. At the end of the link phrase add PDF in parentheses and write in the “Tooltip” field: “Opens in new window”:

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6. Alphabetical listing

A

Abbreviations

Omit all full points (NHS, 9am, W G Grace). Acronyms are u/l (Nato, Cat scan, Unison) except where confusion might arise (the WHO, AIDS). The first time a name is used, put its abbreviation in brackets after it, for example, "the British Medical Association (BMA) . . ." Do not give the abbreviation if there will be no further mention of the name.

If initials are unquestionably familiar – NHS, DNA, RAF, BBC, TUC, and so on – use them throughout, but avoid littering a piece with initials.

The plural of MP, VC, etc is MPs, VCs, etc (no apostrophe). Abbreviations of weights and measures take the singular form – 4lb, 40mm, 10cc, 3in, 5ft. Avoid numerals where they spoil the flow – "The man drank two pints", not "2pt".

acronyms are u/l (Nato, Cat scan, Unison) except where confusion might arise (the WHO, AIDS)

act (parliamentary) – l/c except when citing the full name – the Police and Criminal Evidence Act; the police act

advisers not advisors. But note, advisers act in an advisory capacity

affect/effect – usually things are affected by actions or events that have an effect but – beware – both can be used as nouns and verbs in certain contexts. If unsure, check

ageing not aging

Ages

Ages are given between commas – John Smith, 32, a doctor (not "aged 32")

fertilised egg = from conception to 14 days

embryo = from 2-9 weeks

unborn baby = from week 10 to birth

baby = 0-12 months

infant = < 2 years

toddler = 1-3 years

child = 1-12 years

teenager, young person = 13-19 years – don't use pubescent or adolescent

Older people = 60-70 years – don't use old age pensioner, pensioner or OAP

Elderly people = over 70 years

AIDS – acquired immune deficiency syndrome

all right – not alright

Alzheimer's disease – not alzheimers disease

American – in general prefer to US in such phrases as an American company, American policy

Americanisms – eg, sidewalk; trash, etc – do not use

American spellings – do not use except in proper nouns (Centers for Disease Control, Pearl Harbor)

amid – not amidst

among – not amongst

ampersand (&) – use only in accepted abbreviations (eg, A&E) or in organisation names if the organisation uses it, eg, Marks & Spencer.

NB. The ampersand serves to denote the start of some character codes in HTML and can cause problems if simply typed in. It should be entered within HTML as & so A&E becomes A&E, which renders as A&E

and also – do not use

antenatal – no hyphen

any more – two words

Apostrophes – used to denote omitted letters (rock'n'roll) and possessives (Paul's house, a boy's house, a girl's house, but if there's more than one girl or boy it's a boys' house and a girls' house).

Note, that contractions (don't, can't, you'll, what's and so on) are fine to let copy flow.

B

bacteria – plural; a bacterium is one of them

BBC1, BBC2 and so on

bail out – to scoop out water or secure release on bail

bale out – to escape

bank holiday – l/c

benefits – caps when you give the full name, eg Income Support

best practice – not practise

beta-blocker – hyphen

bill (parliamentary) – see act

billion = 1,000m – use 1 billion, 15 billion. In lists, tables, headings you can use 1bn, 15bn. These large numbers start with a figure, not a word. We use words for numbers up to nine and these are clearly above nine, so start with a figure and use the word “billion” instead of a string of 0s

bi-monthly – ambiguous, so avoid. Can mean twice a month or once every two months, so spell out which; ditto bi-weekly

birthdays – people have birthdays, events have anniversaries

black (people) – l/c; do not use non-white, coloured and so forth

boats, ships and so on – “it”, not “she” after first instance

bold type – don’t bold odd words for emphasis in the middle of copy

brackets – see parentheses

Braille – cap first letter

breastfeeding – one word

breast milk – two words

Britain or Great Britain – is the island that is divided into England, Wales and Scotland.

United Kingdom – is Britain plus Northern Ireland.

British Isles – is the United Kingdom plus the Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands (and loads of other little isles, several thousand in all).

Note that NHS Choices is a service for **England** only.

BSE – (see "mad cow" disease, CJD, vCJD) bovine spongiform encephalopathy

C

caesarean – /c and -ean

Capitalisation: keep it to a minimum

Official bodies – House of Lords/Commons; US Congress, Senate, Foreign Office, Treasury, Department of Health (but health department), Manpower Services Commission, and so on.

Lower-case for parliament, government, politburo, cabinet, opposition, the state, the church, the department, the commission, civil service. In NHS trusts, cap the word "trust" only in full name (Grimethorpe Primary Care Trust). For local councils, cap only the name of the place.

Titles, ranks, offices – caps only when the title comes before the name as an integral part, Dr McWhinnie, Professor Gingell, Prince Charles, Earl Harcourt, King Hussein, the Archbishop of Canterbury, (/c for mentions thereafter as

/more

Capitalisation – continued

the doctor, the professor, the prince, the earl, the king, the archbishop).

Any political post not used as an integral part of the name is l/c – the prime minister, the health secretary. Same goes for every chief executive, chairman, managing director, secretary-general and so on.

Geographical terms – l/c for words that are merely compass directions and not part of the place-name (southern Africa, north London, west Wales, but East Anglia, West Midlands). A few exceptions require caps for the sake of clarity – the West (in world politics; adjective western), Middle East, Far East, Deep South, Midwest (US), East End, West End (London).

Terms derived from proper names – long use generally renders them l/c. Our principle is to make borderline cases l/c – so bordeaux wine, champagne, burgundy and cognac. Ditto french fries, french windows, german measles.

Adjectives derived from people – much depends on how close the connection is still felt to be – Christian, Hitlerite, Stalinist, Marxist, Calvinist, but chauvinist, quixotic, caesarean.

Titles of websites – use the capitalisation as the website does, even if this is contrary to our capitalisation rules (Best Treatments, Understanding Arthritis).

Conditions – are lower-case except where they start with a name – so cancer of the colon, multiple sclerosis, but Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease. Follow spellings and style used in Health A-Z.

Medicines – generic (scientific) medicines names are lower-case; brand names are capped.

In headings – generally cap only the first letter, so:
Snappy heading like this, **not** Snappy Heading Like This.

carer – an unpaid family member, partner or friend who helps a disabled or frail person with the activities of daily living. Do not use it to describe someone who works in a caring job or profession

center – preserve in American names, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Apart from proper nouns, use British English spelling

chair – something you sit on, not an abbreviation for chairman, chairwoman

childcare

ChildLine – note cap L

Christmas Day/Eve – also New Year's Day/Eve/resolution and so on, but the new year, when meaning “early next year”

Citizens Advice Bureau – no apostrophe

civil service

CJD – refer to variant CJD (vCJD) as the human form of BSE, but not the human form of “mad cow disease”. Use full name at first mention – Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease

Colon – use when introducing a complete quote. (So-and-so said: "This is all becoming clear.") However, for a quote within a quote use a comma (Whatsisname said: "The man shouted, 'Come and get me!' ").

Except when the colon introduces a fully independent sentence, as in the quotes above, it is followed by I/c. So in a headline – "Diana: countdown to disaster". But “Burnham: Make GPs work harder”.

Use a colon to introduce bulleted lists.

Commas – use to guide readers through a sentence, for example, to separate independent clauses joined with a conjunction – "I wanted to stay up all night, but I felt too tired." (But note that although conjunctions – and, but, so – can link two clauses with a comma, conjunctive adverbs such as "however", "hence" and "moreover" can do so only with a semi-colon, thus – "The man tipped the scales at 16 stone; however, his doctor was not alarmed.")

A frequent error is to use one comma when an appositive phrase requires two, one before and one after – "Tremor, which normally begins in one hand or arm is a symptom of Parkinson's disease" is wrong. You need a comma after "arm".

You can use a comma to imply missing words: "Tim had blue eyes; David, brown."

Not every clause beginning with "who" needs commas. The following are correct without them: "The man in Whitehall who makes the decisions is X."

"The mothers who exposed his sexist bias were praised." "Women who wear makeup are prone to acne."

Insert commas into figures over 999, for example 1,250, 1,500.

Note: it is not wrong to have a comma before "and" – indeed, you often need it to make your meaning clear. Take, for example, "eats shoots and leaves", which illustrates lots of comma usage.

- a) Eats shoots and leaves = describes something that eats green veggie stuff.
- b) Eats, shoots, and leaves = subject eats (something), opens fire and then goes away.
- c) Eats shoots, and leaves = subject eats green veggie stuff, then goes away.

common sense is a noun; adjectives are commonsense, commonsensical

companies – singular (the company is, the firm is); however, orchestras, theatre and ballet companies may be considered plural when the individuals within the larger group are of prime concern ("The Berlin Philharmonic have

perfected their playing skills"). Same applies in sports – Manchester United is a company; Manchester United are a great team (allegedly)

comparisons – “compare to” when likenesses are the point; “compare with” for differences

compass points – north, south, east, west, northeast, southeast

conditions are lower-case except where they start with a name – so cancer of the colon, multiple sclerosis, but Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease. Follow Health A-Z

continuous – without intermission. **continual** – frequently recurring throughout. (A speech is a continuous flow of words that may be subject to continual interruption)

contractions – contractions (don't, can't, you'll, what's and so on) are fine in less formal articles to let copy flow and give a conversational tone. They can, for example, be used throughout Live Well. Avoid them in Health A-Z topics and Behind the Headlines. In all cases they should be preserved in quotes

co-operate, co-ordinate but uncoordinated and so on

council – /c in local authority names

CT scan – computerised tomography scan (CT scan), then use “CT scan” for subsequent mentions. NB – aka Cat scan – computerised axial tomography

currency – use currency signs (£, \$) and normally give amounts in sterling

czar – use for drug czar and any other invention, meaning capo; reserve tsar for the Russian one

D

dashes – see dots and dashes

data – are plural

Dates

Thus: Thursday April 15 2010, May 20 2010, April 2010 (no commas).

When citing periods, use minimum figures – 1904-7, 1920-21, 1926-35. Do not write "between 1926-35." Make it "during 1926-35", "from 1926 to 1935" or "between 1926 and 1935". Note that, strictly, "between" excludes the years at either end of the range (the numbers *between* 6 and 10 are 7, 8 and 9).

Bear in mind that on a website, copy can persist for years. Avoid saying "this year", "last month" and so on. Prefer "by 2008", "in February 2008", "by late 2007" and so forth. If you must refer to weeks, they start on a Monday.

21st century.

day – cap in Christmas Day, Easter Day, Thanksgiving Day

degrees (temperature) – centigrade/Celsius, as 16C, -4C (if appropriate, give Fahrenheit equivalent in brackets, 54F)

Department of Health (DH) – not DoH. Refer to the Department of Health, the department, or DH, in the singular

dependent / dependant – dependent is an adjective describing something depends on something else or is contingent on, or conditioned by, the existence of something else; dependant is a noun meaning a person who depends on another for support (your dependants are dependent on you)

diagnostic – as an adjective; serving to identify a particular disease. As a noun; the practice of medical diagnosis or a technique used in diagnosis

dietitian – not dietician

differ *from*, different *from* – never different *to* or different *than*

Disability

Always use positive language about disability. Do not use outdated terms that stereotype, stigmatise, label or depersonalise.

Avoid: afflicted by, sufferer, suffering from, victim of, struck down by.

Prefer: people living with, people with, person with ...

Avoid: handicapped, invalid, spastic, cripple, sufferer.

Prefer: disabled person, person with an impairment, person with a mental health problem, person with a learning difficulty.

Disease, sickness, illness are OK, but prefer condition.

Avoid: sick person, the sick, the ill, diseased, disease carrier.

Avoid: special need(s).

Prefer: specific need(s), individual need(s).

disc – as in a slipped one; **disk**, in a computer

DNA – OK to use abbreviation without spelling out deoxyribonucleic acid

doctor – generally use GP, not doctor, for general practitioner. Keep doctor for hospital doctors / consultants, or use their job title with an explanation if necessary, eg paediatrician (a specialist child health doctor)

dots and dashes – are sometimes justified but more often misused. **Dots** (ellipses) should denote missing words, as in a sentence that tails off, or a phrase ... omitted from a quote. There should be three dots with a space before and after. If you do omit some words ... from a quote, ensure the core

meaning is not altered. **Dashes** should be used to isolate subsidiary clauses – like this – or to indicate a grammatical pause – commas usually do the job less irritatingly

drugs – see **medicines**. When you talk about drugs, ensure the context makes clear whether you mean legal or illegal ones

due to – must be attached to a noun. "His absence was due to illness" is correct; "He was absent due to illness" is wrong

due to the fact that – no. Use "because"

E

eardrops

eardrum

earlobe

earwax

eg – see **ie**, etc (avoid all these)

ellipses (...) see **dots and dashes** – use only sparingly and with a space before ... and after

email

England – do not use if you mean Britain or the UK

enormity – is enormously misused; its primary meaning is dreadful wickedness. So "the enormity of Shipman's crimes" is fine but "the enormity of the problem" is not

ensure – against risk; insure – life; assure – to make certain

etc – avoid in copy. Say “and so on”, “and the like”. Better still, be specific

ever – prefer “yet”; ever can refer to both the past and the future. So we can't know that something is the biggest/fastest/deadliest/most contagious “ever” because a bigger/faster/deadlier/more contagious one might be along tomorrow. See also **first ever**

exclamation marks, aka **screamers** – are almost (note, almost) always unnecessary!

F

feelgood – where this is the feelgood factor, one word. But if you keep yourself healthy you'll feel good, two words

fertilise, fertilisation

fewer – (used with “count nouns”), “fewer people came this year”; “the birds are fewer this year”; “fewer trains were late”. Fewer patients, goals, difficulties, but **less**, of “mass nouns”: less trouble, less formality, less treatment, less importance, less time

first – serves as an adverb; avoid firstly (likewise secondly, thirdly and so on)

first ever – no; say first

5 A DAY – is the name of the campaign that encourages you to eat five portions of fruit and veg a day

firstly – no; say first (and see first)

flu – no apostrophe

focused

following – do not use as a ready synonym for after (a man dies after, not following, an accident)

forego – to go before; **forgo** – to abstain from

fractions – spell out phrases such as two-and-a-half, three-quarters

G

government – l/c including the British government

GP – use GP not doctor for general practitioner. Prefer doctor for hospital doctors / consultants, or use their job title with an explanation if necessary, for example “paediatrician (a specialist child health doctor)”

gram – not gramme. **kilogram** – not kilogramme – and can be **kilo**

grandad – but granddaughter

green paper – (governmental), l/c

H

healthcare

healthcare acquired infection (HCAI) or **healthcare associated infection (HAI)**

health professionals, healthcare professionals – people who work in identifying, preventing or treating illness or disability. Avoid where possible and instead use a term that describes what the people do – doctors, nurses and so on

hiccup – not hiccough

homosexual – OK, but prefer “gay men” or “lesbian”; in this context "straight" is OK for heterosexual

hospitals – a, not an, hospital. Use “taken to hospital”, never “rushed into hospital”. Only cap the “H” in the full name of a hospital

Hyphen – (see – dots and dashes; see Punctuation).

Hyphenate prepositional adjectives – high-street shop, five-mile-wide gap, multimillion-pound project, 14-year-old girl.

Adjectives after the noun should not be hyphenated – “The boy was 14 years old”, “the gap was five miles wide”. Nor should there be hyphens between adverb and participle – poorly written prose, highly charged drama, badly sung verse (but well-chosen words).

As English evolves compound adjectives often become single words – bloodstained, overblown, underdone, redheaded, halfhearted. This is also true of compound nouns – steam ship became steam-ship became steamship; machine gun became machine-gun, and now is machinegun. In general, favour the hyphenless form. It is neater and punchier.

Avoid clashes of letter (redeye, but blue-eyed). Do not hyphenate words with the prefix re, except to avoid a clashing e (re-elect) or a visual snare (re-ignite), or to distinguish two meanings (reform, re-form; re-creation, recreation). Hyphenate co-operate, co-ordinate, etc, but, note, uncooperative, uncoordinated.

The prefixes “over”, “sub” and “under” seldom need hyphens (overabundance, overstress, substandard, underpayment).



ie, eg, etc – avoid. Say for instance, for example, and so on

incurable – incurable refers to a condition that cannot be cured but where treatment is usually offered in the hope of prolonging life or controlling symptoms; **terminal** is used when the condition has failed to respond to these treatments and will be fatal

in order to – no. Almost always simply “to”

inpatient – and **outpatient**

instal – not install

-ise, -isation – not –ize, ization (except in the few cases that are always spelt with -ize, eg, capsized)



Legionnaires' disease – note legionella is a bacterium

licence – noun

license – verb

life cycle – two words

lifelike

lifelong

lifespan

Links

All link phrases should be descriptive so that they tell the readers clearly where they are going. The test is to divorce the link from the material in which it appears and ask yourself how informative it is. For example, if on the Treatment page for asthma there were a link saying “see Symptoms” the context would tell a sighted user that the link goes to a page on asthma symptoms. But this is not good enough for a visually impaired user and will cause the website to fail accessibility assessments.

With accessibility software, which reads out the page to a visually impaired user, it is possible to list all the links separately from the text. In that case, the user would be offered a link to “symptoms”. But symptoms of what? Such a link should say “see Asthma - Symptoms” to make clear where it goes. For a sighted user (and editor) this might seem unnecessary but we are required to achieve a certain level of accessibility. Making the destinations of links crystal clear with the link phrases is in any case best practice and helps all users.

Remember that website visitors are often scanning rapidly rather than reading in detail, and clear signposting will help them find what they want.

Links phrases like “More” or “Further information” are also inadequate. In the asthma example, they would have to say “More about asthma” and “Further information about asthma”.

Endeavour to keep link phrases on a single line; however, do not force them onto a single line at the expense of their descriptiveness.

It is OK – though not desirable – to have more than one link on a page going to the same place so long as they use different link phrases. If you do this the url you give must be rendered identically: one link to /CarersDirect and another to /carersdirect will fail on accessibility even though both will end up at the same place.

It is **NOT OK** to use the *same* link phrase on a page for two links going to different places.

/more

Links – continued

Do not set links to open web pages in a new window.

Do set links to open documents (PDFs and so forth) in a new window. At the end of the link phrase add PDF in parentheses and write in the “Tooltip” field: “Opens in new window”.

litre – abbreviation l

M

“mad cow” disease – no. See CJD

major – don't use as a synonym for big or important. It is best reserved as a comparator to minor

majority of – usually reads better as “most”

Medicines – The reference for all medicines spellings is the British National Formulary (www.bnf.org). There are paper copies around the office. It is also useful for checking that a medicine is being appropriately referred to in copy. Generally use the generic (scientific name) first followed by the brand name with an initial cap and in brackets, for example: atorvastatin (Lipitor).

Once medicines have lost their patent protection, there may be rival branded generics that have a brand name, and ordinary generics that use just the generic name. So in some cases there may be several brand names. For example the asthma drug salbutamol has Airomir, Asmasal. Salamol Easi-Breathe, Salbulin Novolizer and Ventolin brand names as well as the generic

/more

Medicines – continued

name. In cases such as this give the best-known brand name, but indicate there are several – salbutamol (brand names include Ventolin).

Some medicines have no brand names in use – examples include warfarin and hydrocortisone.

A handful of medicines that are so well known by their brand names that it would be perverse to refer to them first by their generic name. The best known example of this is probably Viagra. In such cases give the generic term in brackets – Viagra (sildenafil).

Metric or imperial? In a country that uses litres of petrol to do miles an hour and sells pints of beer alongside wine measured in millilitres, this is always going to be tricky. Generally use metric followed by imperial in brackets, for example, 2m (6ft 6in). However, this is an area that requires judgement so consider the context – it's fine, for example, to describe someone who's 183cm tall as a "six-footer". And since all our road signs give speed limits in mph and distances in miles it makes no sense to say, for example, that Reading is 64km from London; 40 miles will do.

mental health – (See Disability) – don't use: mental handicap, mentally ill, madness, backward, retarded, victim of, suffering from, afflicted by, slow and other outdated terms. Prefer "a person with mental health problems", "people with learning difficulties", "mental illness". For more guidance in this area see <http://www.shift.org.uk/~media/handbook.html>

million – preceded by a figure, because the number is bigger than nine. So, 1 million, 3 million. Can be "m" in lists, headings and so forth

minister – l/c; minister of health etc

more than – see fewer – use in preference to "over" in matters of quantity

morning-after pill – OK, and can be “emergency contraception”

mortality rate – prefer ‘death rate’

MRI scan – (magnetic resonance imaging scan)

MRSA – methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (OK to use MRSA at first mention)

multiracial

Muslim – not Moslem

N

Names

People – Do not use Mr/Mrs and so on except within direct quotes. When a person's name is prefixed by a title or rank, give it at first mention, but thereafter use surname only. So Lord Stockton becomes Stockton, Lady Kimberley Darke becomes Darke, President Obama becomes Obama (or the president), Dr John Robinson becomes Robinson (or the doctor). First names, however, are fine in less formal features, so Rob Finch can become, Rob, and Jane Eastwood can become Jane.

Geographical – In names of rivers, mountains, valleys and other topographical features, cap the lot if you must use it (Yellow River, Loire Valley, Mount McKinley) but bear in mind that the designations can often be omitted (Everest, the Thames, the Amazon) in which case, omit them.

Use the English spellings of foreign place names – for example, Lyon is the French word for the place we call Lyons; Marseille is French for Marseilles.

National Health Service – u/c, but health service, l/c, thereafter, and can be NHS at first mention

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) – note the "Health and"

nevertheless – one word

new year – as in "I'll do it in the new year", is lower-case. Caps for New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, New Year's resolution

newspaper and journals – italics for titles; cap "The" if it is part of the masthead. Note that when a paper's name is used adjectivally, "the" is always l/c, eg, "praise for the Telegraph report"

NHS – the National Health Service can be NHS at first mention and health service, l/c, thereafter

NHS Choices – a service that provides comprehensive health information via a website *and* a growing range of other channels (for example, mobile phones)

NICE – National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence – note the "Health and" and keep as all caps

Nics – National Insurance contributions

none – both singular and plural (see *The Complete Plain Words* by Gowers and Fraser – "With the phrase more than one, the pull of one is so strong that the singular is always used [more than one question was asked]", but owing to the pull of the plural in such a sentence as none of the questions were answered", none has come to be used indifferently with a singular or a plural verb.") See also OED, Fowler, Chambers, Webster

nonetheless – used to be three words, now it is one

no one, no-one – prefer nobody

northeast, northwest, northeasterly – l/c, no hyphens

notifiable diseases – for explanation and list see:

http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/noids/noidlist.htm

Numerals

Use words for numbers from one to nine – though with such obvious exceptions as children's ages (Mark, 6), dates, percentages, temperatures, times, scores, votes, weights and measures. Commas should be inserted into figures over 999, for example 1,250, 1,500.

For millions, say 8 million, 10.6 million, 56 million. In lists, tables, headings you can use 8m, 10.6m, 56m. For billions (1,000m = 1bn) use 1 billion, 15 billion. In lists, tables, headings you can use 1bn, 15bn. These large numbers start with a figure, not a word. We use words for numbers up to nine and these are clearly above nine, so start with a figure and use the word “million” or “billion” instead of a string of 0s.

Common sense sometimes calls for a word instead of a figure – “I've told you a hundred times”, “You look like a million dollars”. Conversely, figures sometimes take precedence to avoid a distracting mix (children are tested at ages 5, 7 and 11, not five, seven and 11). Apply this also to ranges: 7 to 14, not seven to 14.

With figures such as 1,684,810, round off to 1.7 million unless the context requires precision.

Percentages thus – 98.5%, 2%, 0.5% (note %, not words. Also, note, if something rises from 10% to 12%, it does not rise 2% but two percentage points, or two points). Decimal fractions smaller than one take a zero before the point – 0.25. Spell out ordinals from first to ninth, otherwise use figures (20th anniversary). Use figures for centuries (5th century) and military units (3rd Battalion).

\more

Numerals – continued

When giving ranges, say “from 26 to 35” or “between 26 and 35” note that, strictly speaking, “between” excludes the numbers at either end of the range (the numbers *between* 16 and 20 are 17, 18 and 19). You can say “from four to seven” but if the higher number is above nine, use figures, so “7 to 14”, not “seven to 14”.

Don't start a sentence with a numeral.

obliques (/) – Avoid obliques within text, for example, “from/to”, “and/or”, “he/she” – in every case, recast the sentence to render the oblique unnecessary

OK – not okay and not O.K. or ok, or Ok, or any other variant. Just OK

ongoing – prefer continuing

online

on to, onto – both are correct depending on context, for example: “He travelled on to Manchester from London”; “She jumped onto the roof”

outpatient – and **inpatient**

overweight

P

paragraphs – text should contain plenty of paragraph breaks. Keep paragraphs short: aim for no more than three sentences. New paragraphs don't have to be for new subject matter, and it's OK to have a one-line, one-sentence paragraph

parentheses – use sparingly, and primarily to give an explanatory term (alternative word) or abbreviation. When brackets contain a whole sentence, final punctuation falls within the brackets, otherwise it's outside. Use square brackets to denote words inserted into a quote for clarification ("It [the cat] sat on the mat.")

Peking – OK for duck and opera, but the city is Beijing

per – avoid, as in £100 per week, 12 times per year. Say £100 a week, 12 times a year

per cent – (see percentage) use "%", but note that if something rises from 10% to 12%, it does not rise 2% but two percentage points, or two points. (In that example the actual increase is 20%)

Pet scan – positron emission tomography scan

Pill, the – cap for the regularly taken contraceptive pill

postnatal

Plural or singular?

Businesses, governments, official bodies, working parties, institutions, local authorities and so on are treated as singular.

Certain bodies, however, may be treated as plural in contexts when the individuals within the larger group are of prime importance, for example, "The Royal Shakespeare Company has made a profit", but "The Royal Shakespeare Company have learnt their lines."

Sports teams are plural, though in some contexts a sports club may be singular when the emphasis is on the institution rather than on the team, for example, "Manchester United is a company" but "Manchester United have won the cup".

Plurals – generally prefer an "s" to Latin or Greek forms (so stadiums, not stadia) though with obvious exceptions dictated by common use – data, media.

practice – is the noun

practise – is the verb

presently – means soon, not at present (prefer 'now' for that)

primary care trust – lower-case unless given as part of the full name. Can be PCT at second mention

prognosis – prefer "outlook"

program – computer-related (use despite its American origin), but programme, as in "get with the" or one you saw on the television

Quotation marks – generally double, but single for quotes within quotes, headlines, captions, standfirsts, crossheads, large-type quotes, and so forth. Confusion often arises over the punctuation of quoted matter. Note the examples below.

Dr John Smith said: "This book makes everything easy."

Dr Jane Smith said this book "makes everything easy".

Dr John Smith said this book "makes everything easy. I recommend it on that basis".

In the last two examples, the full point comes after the quotation marks because the quote is a fragment; it is clearly incomplete because it starts in mid-sentence. It matters not that the portion quoted in example three contains, afterwards, a complete sentence. How the quote begins is the key.

race – do not mention a person's colour, country of birth, ethnicity, religion and so forth unless it is vital to the story (for example when a condition is more prevalent in a particular ethnic group). Avoid offensive and stereotyping words such as coloured, half-caste and so forth

radiographer, radiologist – radiographers take X-rays, radiologists read them

S

said – use in preference to explained, discussed, told, exclaimed, claimed, added, and so on

St John ambulance – not St John's

seasons – always l/c spring, summer, and so on

self care – but a **self-care service**

Semi-colon – helpful in lists that include commas: "He had appeared in several West End productions, including The Mousetrap and Run for Your Wife; in films such as Carry On Up the Khyber; and in a range of television programmes, from Eastenders to The Bill."

Otherwise, use sparingly. Often two thoughts yoked together with a semi-colon will be more effective as separate sentences.

sentences – use short, concise sentences, and keep sub-clauses to a minimum: The more ideas you try to force into a sentence, the harder it is to say what you mean. Generally, limit paragraphs to no more than three sentences

side effects

some – do not use to mean about (as in, "some 6,000 people")

southeast, southwest, southeasterly – l/c, no hyphens

Spect scan – single-photon-emission computerised tomography scan

statistics – don't clutter the text with figures. "Almost a fifth" is generally more accessible than 19%

STD – no. Call them STIs or name the specific sexually transmitted *infection*

STI – "a" sexually transmitted infection, but "an" STI (Don't use sexually transmitted disease or STD)

I

takeaway

telephone numbers – break after area code and then into groups of three and/or four, thus – 0161 834 1234, 01727 123 456, 020 7234 5678, 020 8234 5678 (note London code is 020, not 0207 or 0208). Some helplines and campaigns will have phone numbers intended to be memorable and trip off the tongue, for example 08457 48 49 50 (National Rail) or 08457 90 90 90 (The Samaritans) – it would be daft to make these 08457 484 950 and 08457 909 090, so leave them as advertised

temperatures – thus: 21C (69.8F)

terminal and incurable – incurable refers to a condition that cannot be cured but where treatment is usually offered in the hope of prolonging life or controlling symptoms. Terminal is used when the condition has failed to respond to these treatments and will be fatal

that – is almost always better than "which" in a defining clause (The train that I take stops at Slough), leaving "which" for clauses between commas (The train that I take, which leaves at 5.30pm, stops at Slough)

time – use 1am, 6.30pm, rather than the 24-hour clock. Use a stop rather than a colon to separate hours and minutes

trademarks – avoid using trademarks unless absolutely necessary, use a generic term instead. If you do use a trademark make sure that, a) the product is the one you mean (don't say Hoover if you mean Dyson), and, b) render the name exactly as the trademark

tranquillise, tranquilliser

try to – not try and ("I'll try and be healthier" means I will try (*what?*) and I will be healthier; "I'll try to be healthier" means what it says)

trusts – use lower-case to talk about trusts generally, and use capitals only in the full name of a specific organisation, such as Anytown Primary Care Trust

tsar – for the Russian monarchy; czar for invented positions (the drug czar)

U

ultrasound scan – not just "an ultrasound"

under way – two words

uterus – prefer "womb"

V

vice-president, vice-chairman etc

very – almost always adds very nearly nothing

W

walk-in centre – not Walk-In Centre or walk in centre

website – one wwword

week – our week starts on Monday, but beware of terms like last week, last month; such phrases rapidly become out of date

Weights and measures – In a country that uses litres of petrol to do miles an hour and sells pints of beer alongside wine measured in millilitres, this is always going to be tricky. Generally use metric followed by imperial in brackets, for example, 2m (6ft 6in). However, this is an area that requires judgement so consider the context – it's fine, for example, to describe someone who's 183cm tall as a "six-footer". Abbreviations of weights and measures take the singular form – 8st 4lb, 6oz, 12kg, 22g, 40mm, 10cc, 3in, 5ft. Avoid numerals where they spoil the flow – "The man drank two pints", not "2pt".

And since all our road signs give speed limits in mph and distances in miles it makes no sense to say, for example, that Reading is 64km from London; 40 miles will do.

Beware of phrases such as "a glass of wine contains...", "a slice of cheese contains" ... How big is the glass? How strong is the wine? How heavy is the slice?

which – see that

while – not whilst

white paper – l/c for governmental

whom – has become virtually obsolete; just use “who” (and in many cases you can use “that” – see **that**)

X

X-ray – capital X

Y

yoghurt – not yogurt

Z

Zimmer frame – what you get at the end of your Choices career. Capital Z, but prefer “walking frame”