Editorial style guide

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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 is in two parts: first, a brief discussion of general principles; second, an alphabetical listing that addresses specific points of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

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 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 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.

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".

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 specific contexts. If unsure, check.

ageing not aging.

Ages

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

fertilized egg = from conception to 14 days (and “z” is right in this word)
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 = 12-19 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.

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

bill (parliamentary) – see act

billion = 1,000m – use 1bn, 15bn

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.

Brackets – see parenthesis.

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

United Kingdom – correct, but is Britain plus Northern Ireland.

British Isles – correct, but is the United Kingdom plus the Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands (and loads of other little isles, about 4,000 in all).

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

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

C

caesarean – l/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; and, in

Capitalisation (contd)

naming municipal councils, cap only the place name (Grimethorpe district council, West Midlands county council). In NHS trusts, cap the word “trust” only in full name (Grimethorpe Primary Care Trust).

Titles, ranks, offices – caps only when the title comes before the name as an integral part, Prince Charles, Earl Harcourt, King Hussein, the Archbishop of Canterbury, (l/c for mentions thereafter as the prince, the earl, the king, the archbishop, etc). Any political post not used as an integral part of the name is l/c – the prime minister, the lord chancellor, 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, alsatian dogs.

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 website links – 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.

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; don't 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.

Christmas Day/Eve – also New Year's Day/Eve and so on, but the new year.

church – cap only in formal names such as Church of England, St James's Church, but otherwise l/c (church and state).

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 l/c. So in a headline - "Diana: countdown to disaster". But "Johnson: How I'll make GPs work harder".

Avoid quotes within quotes within quotes.

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 -

Commas (contd)

"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."

When several adjectives precede a noun, they do not always need commas. You can say (with grammatical, but not legal, impunity): "Jasper Winterbottom-Smythe is a mean twisted snivelling cowardly plagiarist."

Insert commas into figures over 999, eg 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 collective nouns if business enterprises (the company is, the firm is); however, orchestras, theatre and ballet companies may be considered plural in some contexts, 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.

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

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

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

council – l/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 ones.

D

dashes – see dots and dashes

data – are plural

Dates

Thus: April 15 2008, April 2008 (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".

Bear in mind that on a website, copy can persist for years. Avoid saying "this year", "this month", "last 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 – l/c, but 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.

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

dictionaries – follow Collins English Dictionary (though this guide takes precedence).

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 de-personalise.

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. 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.

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

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”.

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

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 – 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.

grandad – but granddaughter.

green paper – (governmental), l/c.

H

healthcare.

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

Health professionals – people who help in identifying, preventing or treating illness or disability.

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, multi-million-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).

Hyphen (contd)

It is the nature of English that 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).

I

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.

install – not instal.

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

L

Legionnaires' disease – note legionella is a bacterium.

licence – noun.

license – verb.

Lists

Bulleted lists can break up information into easily-readable chunks. Lists should be formatted with a comma at the end of each bullet point, and a full stop after the last point. Each bulleted item should begin with a lower case letter. Use "and" or "or" between the penultimate and final points.

The symptoms of asthma include:

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

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

litre – abbreviation l.

M

“mad cow” disease – No. See CJD.

major – don't use as a synonym for big or important.

majority of – usually reads better as “most”.

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/~mediahandbook.html

million – shorten to "m" when quoting figures, eg, 20m people.

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, Sir Cuthbert Twistleton becomes Twistleton, President Bush becomes Bush (or the president), Dr Sam Smith becomes Smith (or the doctor). First names are also fine in less formal features, so John Brown can become, John, and Jane Smith 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 Yangtze, the Zambezi) in which case, omit them.

Use the English spellings of foreign place names – 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/Eve.

Newspaper & 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.

Numerals (cont'd)

Commas should be inserted into figures over 999, for example 1,500. For millions, the style is 8m, l0.6m, 56m; for billions, 5bn, 56bn (note that 1,000m = 1bn)

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 7 to fourteen.

With figures such as 1,684,810, round off to 1 .7m 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).

Don't start a sentence with a number.

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.

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"

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.

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

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).

program – computer-related, but programme, as in "get with the" or one you saw on the television.

PUNCTUATION – see: colon – comma – dots and dashes – hyphen – quotation marks – parenthesis – semi-colon.

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 ethic 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, an so on.

St John – ambulance, not St John's.

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

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.

some – do not use to mean about (as in, "about 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).

T

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)

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.

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.

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

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.

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 on a website.

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”. 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? What sort of cheese?

which – see that.

white paper – l/c for governmental.

whiz-kid.

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

X

X-ray – capital X

Z

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