

Common Difficulties with Written English

Abbreviations

Acronyms and Initials

When the letters representing a word or series of words in a name or term are pronounced individually, such as ‘NRE’ (Natural Resources and Environment), they are capitalised and known as **initials**. When they are pronounced as a word, such as ‘radar’ (Radio Detection and Ranging), they are known as an **acronym**. If an acronym is commonly used, it may be written in lower case, as above. Otherwise an acronym is normally capitalised, as in ‘CALM’ (Conservation and Land Management). Often words in this second group of acronyms are **proper nouns**, for example, names of organisations or countries. Follow the usage in reputable publications or consult a dictionary. In modern usage, initials and acronyms are usually written without intervening full stops: ‘NSW’ is preferred to ‘N.S.W.’

Contractions

These are abbreviations for commonly used words. When written using the first and last letters of a word, (Dr, Mr, Rd, St,) they may finish with a full stop or not. Contractions that involve the first few letters of a word, such as ‘Prof’ and ‘Feb’, usually end with a full stop. In both types of situation, this can be considered a matter of taste. The full stops are not omitted if this may lead to confusion. Plural abbreviations have a lower case ‘s’, as in ‘TVs’ and ‘Drs’. An apostrophe is not used before the ‘s’.

Abbreviated Word Combinations

Two words may be shortened and become one, with an apostrophe (’) indicating the break. Remember to include the apostrophe to avoid confusion with similar words.

Examples:

can’t (can not) may be confused with **cant** (jargon).

won’t (will not) may be confused with **wont** (custom or habit).

you’re (you are) may be confused with **your** (belonging to you).

who’s (who is) may be confused with **whose** (possessive pronoun or adjective, as in: ‘Whose book is this?’)

When to Avoid Abbreviations

Try not to abbreviate words or terms which may not be known by readers, or where the abbreviation is colloquial (slang or not standard English). Thus, use:

Sebastopol, not **Sebas**.

practical, not **prac.**

laboratory, not **lab.**

usually, not **usu.**

advertisement, not **ad.**

paragraph, not **para.**

species, not **sp.** (singular) or **spp.** (plural), when used as a stand-alone word not linked to the name of a taxonomic category (usually a genus)*

(* A sentence such as: 'The fungus was identified as *Fomes* sp.' is acceptable, since 'sp.' is an adjective linked to the scientific name '*Fomes*'. Sentences such as: 'We found a new sp. of fungus' (or 'several new spp. of fungi') are not acceptable because they are not associated with a generic name.)

with and **without**, not **w.** and **w/out** (or **w/o**)

You may require some technical abbreviations or symbols (SI units, \pm , $<$, and so forth) but explain these if necessary. In addition, ed. (editor), eds. (editors), Fig. (figure), vol. (volume), p. (page, in the singular) and pp. (pages) are widely used and accepted. Some abbreviations have developed into generally accepted words and may be used that way. Examples include 'monocot' (monocotyledon), 'dicot' (dicotyledon) and 'phone' (telephone).

Standard abbreviations exist for journal titles. If you choose to abbreviate these titles, and some referencing styles avoid doing this, follow the style used by the journal itself. Note this down with other publication details while you are consulting the paper in question. Difficulties may be resolved by checking bibliographies in related journals, or by seeking listings of journal abbreviations from library staff.

Abbreviated Sentences

Some sentences are deliberately written in an abbreviated form which is still readily understood even though some words (often the subject and part of the verb) are missing. This is a convenient shorthand when taking notes or dashing off a letter. In addition, brief statements on labels, instructions and advertisements often take this form.

Examples: 'Wish you were here.'
'See you soon.'
'Recharge if necessary.'
'Contains no xylene or similar solvents.'

Unless you are otherwise instructed, avoid abbreviated sentences in scientific reports, with the possible exception of verbless sentences. Although many believe that the Materials and Methods can be efficiently expressed as a series of brief instructions in point form, you should write this section out using complete sentences. (See also **Sentences [Verbless Sentences]**.)

Aboriginal / Aborigine / Koori(e) and other Regional Names

Aboriginal and **Aborigine** should be capitalised when they specifically refer to the original inhabitants of Australia, since they are being used to describe a specific group

of people. (Likewise, **Koori(e)** and similar terms should begin with a capital.) The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies prefers to use **Aborigine(s)** as the noun, although others, including some Aboriginal communities, prefer **Aboriginal(s)**. The adjective is **Aboriginal**. If writing about original or early inhabitants of an area in a more general sense, use **aboriginal** or **aborigine** without an initial capital.

Koori (or **Koorie**) means ‘our people’. The first spelling is recommended by Oxford Modern Australian Usage. This term is used in eastern Australia, whereas **Murri** is used in Queensland and Northern New South Wales, **Yolngu** in the Northern Territory, **Aranda** in central Australia, **Nyunga** in Western Australia and **Nungga** in South Australia. (These terms all have alternative spellings.) Other, more local names may also be used.

Koori, and other terms which apply regionally, are increasingly being used as synonyms for **Aboriginal / Aborigine**. (The ABC, for instance, treats **Koori** as if it meant **Aboriginal**.) Terms such as **Koori** are often used to avoid what is seen as a label imposed by whites, or to avoid a generic term that could be used to refer to original inhabitants anywhere. Use the term **Koori** with caution when meaning original Australians generally. It may be offensive to **Aboriginals** from other parts of Australia to be called **Kooris**, just as Scots or Welsh people may not appreciate being called English. **Koori** has never meant **Aboriginal** as opposed to non-Aboriginal.

Avoid terms with patronising or other offensive connotations. **Native** and **Black** are held to be patronising, and so is **tribe**. **Clan** and **language group** are sometimes used as alternatives to **tribe**, although the first has Scottish connotations and the second sounds somewhat antiseptic or insipid. If possible, seek appropriate advice from the people concerned.

Accept / Except / Expect

You can remember the difference between **accept** and **except** by observing that the word referring to leaving things out (**except**) has an ‘x’. If you **accept** something you agree to receive it. **Except** is sometimes mistyped as **expect**.

Active and Passive Voice

Active vs. Passive Voice

In **active voice**, the subject of the verb performs the action:

‘The dog ate the food.’

In **passive voice**, the subject receives the action of the verb:

‘The food was eaten by the dog.’

Authorities on scientific writing have traditionally encouraged the use of passive voice for scientific writing. This has often been recommended to avoid the use of

personal pronouns (I, we, she, me, ...). Active voice is generally brief, direct and readily understood. Its use should be encouraged, although some sentences could be left in passive voice to provide variety in the writing style. Passive voice may also be appropriate where an emphasis needs to be placed on the object of the verb or where this style seems preferable (e.g. to be less direct or to soften a sentence). Be aware that this is a matter of taste. Some scientists will insist on the traditional use of passive voice and the avoidance of personal pronouns.

Impersonal Passive Voice

In **impersonal passive voice**, the passive form is used, but the subject is generalised or impersonal. This includes sentences that begin with:

- ‘It is often thought that ...’
- ‘It is generally believed that ...’
- ‘It is felt that ...’
- ‘It appears that ...’

Impersonal passive voice is useful for statements about general opinion or other broad generalities. It should not be used to cover a lack of facts or precise information, to generalise on very sparse evidence, or to avoid responsibility for your own opinions and conclusions.

Acute / Chronic

An **acute** situation is one needing immediate attention (e.g. an **acute** shortage of bandages).

A **chronic** situation is a lingering condition, not easily overcome (e.g. **chronic** unemployment in a certain region).

Adaption / Adaptation

Adaptation and **adaption** are not completely interchangeable words. **Adaption** is one type of **adaptation**. It should be used only in the context of sociology to describe how individual or community behaviour becomes modified as a result of cultural pressures. Use only **adaptation** for all other situations where something is being modified (including biological processes and organisms).

Adverbs

Adverbs add meaning to a verb by telling how, when, where, why, how often or to what extent the action took place. Many are formed by adding -ly to the adjective (slow / slowly, soft / softly, etc.). By contrast, the following adjectives do not change when they become **adverbs**: better, early, earlier, fast, faster, hard, late, straight. Other adjectives undergo an irregular change to an adverbial form (e.g. ‘good’ becomes ‘well’).

It is not wrong to use an **adjective** instead of an **adverb** when modifying a verb that involves sensations. For instance, we can feel **bad**, look **good** or smell **terrible**!

The correct positioning of adverbs in a sentence is described in detail in the Online English Grammar site listed at the end of this section.

(See also **Only**.)

Adverse / Averse

Adverse means ‘negative, contrary or hostile’ (e.g. an adverse situation).

Averse (to) means ‘opposed or disinclined (to)’.

Advice / Advise

Advice is a noun and **(to) advise** is a verb.

Examples: ‘His **advice** was good.’

‘I would **advise** you not to do that.’

Agreement

Non-sexist Language

‘Each of the students was asked to hand in:	his work.’	(sexist)
	his / her work.’	(clumsy)
	their work.’	(ungrammatical)

None of these options are ideal ways to deal with a sentence that refers to both genders. A further option, where ‘he’ and ‘she’ are alternately used as the personal pronoun, looks odd and leads to confusion. It is becoming increasingly acceptable to solve the problem by using the plural personal pronoun ‘their’ in the singular. This avoids the need to separately refer to both genders. The use of ‘their’ is already widespread in spoken English, and many now consider it equally valid in written English.

The sentence may also be rephrased to avoid the problem altogether:

‘All of the pupils were asked to hand in their work.’

Plural and Singular

Refer to **Plurals**.

Allude (to) / Refer (to)

When you **allude** to something, you suggest it indirectly.
When you **refer** to something, this is a direct and unambiguous statement.
Consequently, you cannot substitute one word for the other.

Allusion / Illusion

An **allusion** is something alluded to (indirectly suggested).
An **illusion** is a false impression, or something that is not real, such as a hallucination or a mirage.

Along with / Together with

These phrases do not govern the verb in a sentence. For instance, you should write ‘Mary, **along with** Greg, **was** (not **were**) questioned.’ The verb here is singular because it is governed by the word ‘Mary’, not by ‘Mary, along with Greg’.

Be careful about the placement of these and similar phrases in a sentence:
‘I ate last night’s leftovers, **along with** my cat.’ Ambiguities such as this can be avoided by more careful placement of words in the sentence, or by the use of alternatives such as: ‘My cat and I ate last night’s leftovers.’

Alternate / Alternative

In British (and Australian) usage:
alternate is the verb, meaning to take turns: ‘We **alternate** between A and B’ and
alternative is the adjective, offering a choice: ‘... an **alternative** explanation’.
(Americans use **alternate** either as a verb or an adjective.)

Americanisms, American Spellings and other Variants on English

Americanisms

Americanisms are American terms (e.g. ‘diapers’) used in place of an acceptable Australian equivalent. **Britishisms (Briticisms)** are British terms (e.g. ‘lorry’) used in the same way, and so on. Where possible, use an accepted Australian term instead of a foreign equivalent unless it is an accepted convention to use the foreign term interchangeably with the local term. An example is presented under the heading **Tracks / Trails / Paths**.

American Spellings

Where there are both American and English spellings of a word, it is preferable to use the English alternative, except where common usage allows either. (Examples of the latter category are indicated on the list below.) In the case of sulfur/sulphur, the international standard chemical name has become 'sulfur'. The 'ph' spelling will now only be used where it has a long-standing application in a non-chemical context (e.g. 'Sulphur-crested Cockatoo').

American	English	
aluminum	aluminium	
ameba	amoeba	
color	colour	[Use either.]
encyclopedia	encyclopaedia	
fetus	foetus	
program	programme	[Use either, although program is becoming the more widely used. (This was the usual spelling until the 19th. century.) Always use program in relation to computers.]
sulfur	sulphur	[See note above.]
tire	tyre	

Consult an Australian English dictionary (e.g. Oxford, Macquarie, Heinemann) if in doubt.

See also **Diphthongs**.

A Number / Range / Variety / Total of ...

The verb used with such expressions should be singular, as the subject of the sentence ('**A range of ...**', etc.) is singular: 'A range of animals **was** (not **were**) studied'.

Among / Amongst / Between

Traditionally, students have been taught that **among** referred to more than two items, while **between** referred to just two. ('**Among** several people ...', '**Between** two trees ...'). Despite this, the use of **between** has been extended to include numbers greater than two since Anglo-Saxon times. Purists may prefer to use **among** in these cases.

Amongst may be used interchangeably with **among**. **Among** is more often used, but **amongst** tends to be substituted where it is easier or more euphonious (pleasant sounding), particularly when it is followed by a vowel. ('**Amongst** us' is more easily said than '**among** us'.) (**While** and **whilst** follow a similar usage.)

And

Do not use ‘plus’ or ‘also’ when you mean **and**.

Avoid using **and** to start a sentence; the word is a conjunction, and its function is to connect two phrases or clauses within a sentence. (Some authorities claim that this is a non-rule, while others disagree. The best option may be to avoid using **and** to begin sentences. The result should offend neither group.)

Avoid using **and/or**. Rephrase the sentence (e.g. ‘Either A or B, or possibly both, ...’)

Examples: ‘I finished my essay, **plus** I started some maths.’ (‘ ... my essay **and** I ...’)

‘Lorikeets eat nectar, **also** pollen.’ (‘ ... nectar **and** pollen.’)

‘Cats eat wildlife. **And** they may spread disease.’ (Make this into one sentence. Alternatively, try:)

‘Cats eat wildlife. They may **also** spread disease.’

Anthropomorphism

People are being anthropomorphic when they attribute human characteristics to non-humans. These characteristics might include human emotions, desires, motivations and personalities. We tend to be anthropomorphic in dealings with our pets, and even with inanimate objects such as cars and computers.

Examples:

‘The bird whistled a **happy** song, **full of the joys of spring**.’

‘The possum, **who** had just climbed the tree, began eating.’ [Use **which**, not **who**.]

‘Funnelweb Spiders rear up on their hind legs when **frightened**’ [?disturbed].

‘The car just **doesn’t want to** start.’

Avoid anthropomorphism in scientific writings, although it may be acceptable in some other contexts. The practice is discouraged because it assumes without justification that a species or object has human attributes. It can distort our perceptions rather than enhancing them.

Auger / Augur

An **auger** is a tool for boring holes in soil, or a woodworking tool for making holes in wood. Note that it ends in ‘-er’.

To augur, ending in ‘-ur’, is to anticipate or forebode (indicate or predict). For example, we may say that something ‘... **augurs** well (or ‘ill’) for the future.’

Biannual / Biennial

Biannual means ‘half-yearly’ (i.e. twice a year), whereas **biennial** means ‘every two years’ or ‘lasting for two years’. Both terms are best avoided where possible because of the frequent confusion about their meanings.

Biased / Biassed

Either spelling is acceptable.

Bought / Brought

Bought means ‘purchased’.

Brought means ‘transported’ or ‘carried’.

Brackets (Parentheses)

()	round	Suitable for most normal uses. Treat the bracketed text as you would a word. Leave a space before the opening bracket and after the closing bracket, but no space between the closing bracket and any following punctuation. You don’t need to separate the bracketed material from either bracket by a space.
[]	square	Used for editorial comment or explanatory interpolations. [The latter are notes inserted to explain something in the text.] If you need to bracket something within another bracketed item, use square brackets as shown: (This sentence is in parentheses [brackets]).
< >	chevron	Used for the restoration of mutilated text. That is, the brackets surround what you believe to be the missing material.
{ }	braces	Used in a mathematical context to indicate sets.

As a rule, bracketed material seem to be less disconnected from the remainder of the sentence by round brackets than it is by square brackets. In some cases brackets may be replaced by even less disruptive punctuation. Dashes are less disruptive than dashes, and commas are the least disruptive punctuation.

Try to keep material within parentheses brief so that the reader doesn’t lose track of the meaning of the sentence in which it is placed.

Material within brackets does not need to be grammatically related to that outside, but it must be relevant.

If an entire sentence is in brackets, the full stop should also be inside the brackets. If the final part of a sentence is bracketed, place the full stop outside the brackets.

Camouflage / Camouflage

Camouflage is the correct spelling.

Can / May

If you **can** do something, you have the ability to do it.

If you **may** do something you have permission to do it.

(Note that the negative of **can** (**cannot**) will sometimes involve permission.)

See also **May and Might / Maybe and May be**.

Capital Letters

Common Names of Species

Rules for this vary between different taxa, and may not have been formulated for some groups. Follow usage in official state, federal or international taxonomic lists where possible. The main sources of information are given in Appendix 2. Where no standard exists, it is suggested that you capitalise the first letter of each independent word, but do not use a capital after a hyphen (e.g. Red-back Spider, Golden Orb-weaver.)

Compass Points

Capitalise the first letter if it is part of a proper noun, such as the name of a country (South Africa), geographical feature (East Alligator River, Western District), or a town (South Morang, West Wyalong). Otherwise, do not begin compass points with a capital (the north-western boundary of the forest, east of Mount Isa, etc.).

Main Words in Reference Titles and Headings

Use **capitals (upper case)** to begin **main words**. Use **lower case** to begin **minor or smaller words**, such as articles (the, a, ...), prepositions (to, above, in, ...) and conjunctions (and, although, but, ...).

Examples: ‘Exotic Species in Australia: their Establishment and Success.’

‘Analysis of Hybridisation between Black-backed and White-backed Magpies in Australia.’

(Note also the heading of this section.)

Months

Begin with a capital letter (January, ...).

Proper Nouns

Begin with a capital letter (Melbourne, Greece, John, Internet, Jupiter, Safeway, ...)

Public and Religious Holidays

Begin with a capital letter (Easter).

Titles

Experiment 5, Day 2, Year 1, Treatment 6, etc.

Capitalise titles placed immediately before a name (**Dr. Smith**), but not titles which do not precede particular names (She is an **associate professor** in the department).

Trademarks

Begin with a capital letter. This does not apply to verbs or other words formed from trademarks. For instance, Xerox, Biro and Polaroid are trademarks, but you might xerox a page, write on it with your biro and take a polaroid of your friends. Owners of trademarks may be concerned if their proprietary names are used in print this way. This is not a concern where words no longer have proprietary status, as with cellophane, linoleum ('lino'), jeep and (except in the UK) thermos. These may be written without an initial capital and treated as generic terms.

Casual / Causal

Casual means 'not formal' (e.g. casual clothes).

Causal means 'acting as a cause' (e.g. causal factors).

Choice / Dilemma / Problem / Problematic / Quandary / Quandry / Questionable

A **choice** becomes a **problem** if it is a difficult question or a **quandary** if there is some uncertainty as to the right course of action. It is **problematic** when it has the appearance of a problem, but not when it is just **questionable** (doubtful in terms of truth, quality, wisdom, etc.).

If the **choice** is between equally unpleasant alternatives, it becomes a **dilemma**. (The selection of an ice-cream flavour is therefore not generally a **dilemma** unless you don't like the alternatives.) **Dilemma** ('two propositions') should only be used for a choice between two options. **Problems** and **quandaries** can sometimes be **dilemmas** (if there are two options, both unpleasant).

Note that **quandary** should not be spelt as **quandry**.

Common / Mutual

Common can be used to describe shared things ('a **common** love of science fiction'). **Mutual** refers to reciprocal relationships ('a **mutual** friendship', 'of **mutual** benefit'). It would therefore be incorrect to speak of people having a '**mutual** love of science fiction' when you mean that they have this interest in **common**.

Compare / Contrast (with / to)

Compare is usually followed by the word **with** (when referring to similar items). When referring to dissimilar items, **compare** should be followed by **to**. Apply the same rules to **contrast**.

Examples:

'Tasmanian climates can be **compared with** those of New Zealand.'

'**Compared to** algae, flowering plants are quite recently evolved.'

'Tasmanian climates can be **contrasted with** those of New Zealand.'

'Flowering plants are quite recently evolved, in **contrast to** algae.'

Consist of / Comprise

To comprise means 'to include or consist of'. Thus, it is redundant to use **of** after **comprise**. By contrast, **consist** must be followed by **of**.

Examples: 'This **consists of** seven steps.' / 'This **comprises** seven steps.'

Continual(ly) / Continuous(ly)

Continually means repeatedly, or 'time and time again': 'she **continually** returned to borrow more books'.

Continuously refers to an unbroken sequence: 'the water level rose **continuously**'. (The level kept rising.)

Criteria / Criterion

The word **criteria** is plural (of **criterion**).

Examples:

'One **criterion** (not **criteria**) for this study is ...'

'The **criteria** are (not 'is') listed below.'

See also **Plurals**.

Data / Datum

The word **data** is plural (of the rarely-used word **datum**). For example, use: ‘The **data were** (not **was**) examined’ and ‘The **data are** (not **is**) shown in Table 2’.

See also **Plurals**.

Dates

Write dates in the form **1 March 1999** (not **1st. March, 1999**, even though it might pronounced that way). Americans use an (illogical) month-day-year system (e.g. **March 1 1999**) which is sometimes accepted in Australia. In preference, use the (English) day-month-year system. It is inadvisable to use all-numeral dates because of the possibility of misinterpretation: **4.2.75** means **4 February 1975** in the English system and **2 April 1975** in the American system. When referring to a whole decade or century, omit the apostrophe (1960s, 1300s).

Sometimes you need to specify a date as being Before Christ (**B.C.**) or after Christ (*Anno Domini* [in the year of Our Lord], or **A.D.**). Use punctuation as shown for these abbreviations and (if you have the facility) small capitals. Although it may seem odd, **B.C.** comes **after** the year, whereas **A.D.** comes **before** it. Geologists use Before Present (**B.P.**) when citing far more distant and approximate dates. In these, the slow shifting of the reference point (the present) should be inconsequential. Write **B.P.** as shown, and place it after the numerals.

Examples: 54 B.C., A.D. 1266, 11500 B.P.

Difficult Spellings

Doubling of Final Letters when a Suffix is Added

Do so if the word ends in a short vowel and then a single letter consonant.

Examples: focus	focussed
gas	gassy
level	levelled
pot	potter
regret	regretting
travel	travelled

Mute ‘e’

There is little agreement about the spelling of words which may or may not have a silent ‘e’: ag(e)ing, blam(e)able, judg(e)ment, lat(e)ish, lik(e)able, mov(e)able, siz(e)able, wholly / wholly.

A good general rule: If the suffix begins with a consonant, retain the mute ‘e’. For example, the suffix ‘-ly’ would be added to ‘like’ to get ‘likely’.

If the suffix begins with a vowel, remove the mute ‘e’. Thus, ‘-ish’ added to ‘blue’ would produce ‘bluish’.

A few exceptions are necessary to avoid confusion, e.g. between ‘singing’ and ‘singeing’, ‘dying’ and ‘dyeing’, ‘holy’ and ‘holey’. By common usage, ‘duly’ and ‘truly’ lose the silent ‘e’.

Single and Double Consonants

abbreviate
acccommodate
acquire
bulrush
committee
dessiccated
disssappear
disssappoint
embbarrass
harrass
innnocuous
innnoculate
instll
instill
skillful
unparalleled

Diphthongs

Diphthongs or gliding vowels were used in Old English and other languages as phonetic symbols. Each is a single sound made up of two vowel sounds. (‘Y’ is sometimes treated as a vowel sounding somewhat like ‘ee’.) The **diphthong** changes quality part way through, starting as one vowel sound and then gliding towards the other. The resultant sound is intermediate between the two components. For example, the diphthong in ‘**day**’ is pronounced ‘ay.ee’. Some **diphthongs** have the gliding sound represented by one vowel (e.g. ‘so’, ‘time’, ‘pure’), and others by two vowels (e.g. ‘weird’, ‘house’, ‘they’).

Many **diphthongs** were formerly represented as a **ligature**, that is, with the component vowels linked together in one piece of type (e.g. **æ** rather than **ae** in the word encyclopædia, written as **Æ** rather than **AE** when in capitals). The combination **oe** was treated similarly. Very few people use **ligatures** today. Typewriters and most computer fonts omit them. There is a legacy of the **ligature** in the double vowel spelling of some words. Spelling reform in America (by Noah Webster, following the American revolution) replaced some **diphthongs** with a single vowel that approximated the **diphthong’s** pronunciation. Examples of English and American

forms of **diphthongs** are given below. Consult a dictionary to find the preferred spellings for Australia.

Where **diphthongs** occur in scientific names, they must be spelt out in full. For instance the Americans spell the word ‘amoeba’ as ‘ameba’ when it is used as a common name. The genus, however, must be spelt ‘*Amoeba*’. The -eae ending of plant family names (e.g. Rutaceae, the citrus family) contains an ‘e’ and an ‘æ’ (sounding like ‘ay.ee’). Together, these vowels should be pronounced ‘ee-ay.ee’.

American	English
ameba	amoeba
cecum	caecum
color	colour
encyclopedia	encyclopaedia
fetus	foetus
mold	mould
odor	odour
savior	saviour

Disinterested / Uninterested

Disinterested means neutral, impartial or objective (‘We should ask a **disinterested** party.’).

Uninterested means bored or not interested (‘I am **uninterested** in politics.’).

Dominant / Dominate / Predominant / Predominate

Dominant and **predominant** are the adjectival forms of the nouns ‘dominance’ and ‘predominance’ respectively. (‘Eucalypts are **dominant** in many Australian forests.’ ‘This is the **predominant** soil type in our region.’).

Dominate and **predominate** are participles of the verbs ‘to dominate’ and ‘to predominate’ respectively. (‘They **dominated** the conversation.’ ‘Grasses such as *Themeda* **predominate** on volcanic plains.’)

Use **dominant** or **predominant** when you are describing a quality or property of something, and **dominate** or **predominate** when you are describing an action or a process.

To dominate is to have a strong (or the main) influence over something, to be conspicuous or (of heights) to overlook or stand above something.

To predominate is to be superior, to have control over something, or to preponderate (be greater in number or quantity than something else).

Note the following.

- **Predominate** describes a stronger influence than **dominate**, and similarly

- **predominant** describes a stronger influence than **dominant**.
- If you are writing about something being relatively numerous (a more abundant species, a larger quantity or proportion of something, ...) you should use **predominant/predominate**. In other words, **dominant/dominate** can't be used as an alternative to 'numerous', 'common' or 'abundant' unless you are also implying that something strongly affects its surroundings or is very conspicuous.
- **Dominant** can be used if you are describing something that is taller than its surrounds or placed above them.

Example: 'Eucalypts **dominate** the forest' or 'Eucalypts are the **dominant** plants in the forest.' These statements may mean that eucalypts are taller than the other forest plants, visually prominent, have a strong influence on the other plants, or a mixture of these. Neither should be used to mean that they are common in the forest.

Double Negatives

Avoid the use of **double negatives** such as 'not unlike', 'without hardly a ...', 'unlikely not to go ahead'.

Due to

Don't use **due to** when you mean 'because of', 'owing to' or 'through'. **Due to** should only be used as an adjective. That is, it should refer to a noun, not a verb.

Example: 'She was late **due to** an accident' is incorrect. **Due to** here refers to the verb **was late**. Substitute **because of** for **due to**. Alternatively, the sentence can be reworked so that **due to** refers to a noun: 'Her late **arrival** (noun) was **due to** an accident.'

You can use **due to** in the predicate of a sentence, or in the modifier of a noun. (A predicate is the part of a sentence that explains the subject. Modifiers add to or otherwise change the meaning of something.)

Each / Every

Both of these words are used with a singular noun.

Use **each** when thinking of the members of a group as individuals: ('**Each** member of a Kookaburra family assists in defending the territory.')

Use **every** when thinking of the whole group, which includes all individuals: ('**Every** plant needs water.')

Effect / Affect

Effect as a verb means to bring about (e.g. 'to **effect** a change in something'). As a noun, it refers to consequences (e.g. 'The **effects** were short-lived.').

Affect is a verb meaning ‘to influence’ (e.g. ‘This **affects** the temperature.’)

Either ... or / Neither ... nor / Both ... and

These words come in pairs as shown. It is not correct to say ‘neither ... or’.

Ellipsis (Plural: Ellipses)

The omission of a word or words necessary to give the complete meaning of a sentence. Where part of a sentence has been deliberately omitted, three dots are used to take its place. The three dot **ellipsis** is treated as a word. There is usually a space before and after an ellipsis, though sometimes punctuation may immediately follow it.

Examples: ‘We suggest the use of Discriminant Analysis ..., although care must be taken not to violate certain assumptions.’

‘Myxobacteria are flexible rod-shaped bacteria ... that glide.’

E-mail / Email

Either abbreviation for **electronic mail** is correct.

Enquire / Inquire

The distinction between these words is not clear-cut, and they are often used interchangeably. Americans tend to only use **inquire**, while some Australian references suggest that we use **enquire** when we mean ‘ask’. In Australia, Royal Commissions are asked to **inquire** into certain situations.

Ensure / Insure

To **ensure** is to make sure or be certain (‘She **ensured** that the door was locked.’)

To **insure** is connected with insurance (‘Are you **insured** against theft?’)

Equable / Equitable

Equable means uniform, even or moderate (e.g. ‘The climate is **equable**.’)

Equitable means fair or just (e.g. ‘The law is **equitable**.’)

Explanation / Explanation

The second spelling is correct.

Farther / Further

These two words are often treated as interchangeable. Many people use just one of these terms, (frequently **further**), for most occasions. Purists will use **farther** for distance and **further** for the amount of time or the degree (extent) of something. People do generally agree that the use of **further** is appropriate when you mean ‘in addition’ or ‘moreover’.

Few, Fewer and Fewest / Little, Less and Least

Few refers to the number of whole items (e.g. a **few** cars).

Little refers to the quantity of an item (a continuous variable) (e.g. a **little** sugar).

The comparative forms of these words are **fewer** and **less**. **Fewer** is used with plural nouns (**fewer** extinctions), and **less** with singular nouns (**less** extinction). The superlative forms of the words are **(the) fewest** and **(the) least** respectively. The opposites of **few** and **little** are **many** and **much** respectively.

Footnotes

Symbols to Use

You may be permitted to use footnotes for tables that show supplementary information. If so, use the symbols which follow, in the order given:

†, ‡, §, #, ¶, ††, ‡‡, etc.

Levels of Statistical Significance

If asterisks are used in a table (to denote levels of statistical significance) they should always come before the above symbols. *, **, and *** are used to denote the 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001 levels of significance respectively. Asterisks shouldn't be used for other footnotes, although it is standard practice to use an asterisk to indicate an exotic (introduced) species.

Foreign Words and Phrases

As a general courtesy to the reader, try to avoid using terms that are not well known. It is better to use a readily understood English equivalent for a foreign term than the foreign term itself. This need not apply to terms that have been anglicised (absorbed into the English language) and are well known. (**Examples:** kindergarten, yacht, junta, garage, bouquet, chassis, cul-de-sac, capuccino, jojoba).

Omit accents on fully anglicised words unless the context relates them to their original culture ('the local cafe' but 'Café de Marseilles'.) Plurals may also be anglicised (capuccinos, etc.). This is acceptable even when the original word is already plural in another language (as in the example).

Retain accents when:

- a word is still clearly a foreign borrowing,
- in the context of its original culture, or
- when necessary as a guide to an unusual pronunciation (château, cliché, soupçon, raison d'être, fiancé, fiancée, voilà).

In words which have not been fully anglicised, the foreign plural forms are often retained (coups d'état, châteaux). For other such words an anglicised plural is preferred or optional (cul-de-sacs, plateaux or plateaus). Indeed, we treat some foreign plurals as if they were singular in English (concerto, gelati, graffiti, hors d'oeuvres) and then try to pluralise them (concertos, etc.). If in doubt, consult a dictionary.

Foreign words and phrases which are embedded in English text are generally only italicised if they are obviously derived from another language and may not be widely used ('The French refer to the Moorhen as *poule d'eau* because ...'). Many phrases fall in this category.

Forever / For Ever

Forever means 'continually': 'The bird was **forever** preening itself'.

For ever means 'for all time': 'That memory will stay with you **for ever**'.

Foul Swoop / Fell Swoop

Fell swoop is correct. ('In one **fell swoop** all of their problems were solved'). (**Fell** means ruthless or destructive.)

Foreward / Forward / Foreword

A **foreword** is an introduction to a book, whereas **forward** means onwards or towards the front. **Foreword** is often misspelt as **foreward**.

Forward / Forwards, Toward / Towards

All of these are correct. The forms without the 's' are a little more formal.

From the Beginning of Time ...

Avoid this phrase, and alternative phrases ('Since time began ...', 'Since time immemorial ...') unless you literally mean them. Such expressions are often sloppy preambles aimed at impressing the reader in a general way with a large stretch of time. They are often inaccurate or vague exaggerations.

Gauge / Guage

Gauge is the correct spelling.

(a / an) Historic / Historical

Historic means famous or important in history ('**historic** battles', '**historic** speeches', '**historic** buildings', etc.). Don't apply **historic** to any of these if you just mean 'old'. **Historic** tends to be overused by those trying to inflate the significance of something from the past.

Historical means belonging to the past or being old, and generally applies to events or items from before the generation of the speaker's parents. **Historical** is the adjectival form of the word 'history' ('... of **historical** interest').

Use **an** in front of words beginning with 'h' only if you don't pronounce the 'h' ('an honest mistake', but 'a hearty breakfast'). The 'h' is not normally made silent for either **historic** or **historical**, and so **a** is more appropriate than **an**.

If I was / If I were

If I were is an example of a fading entity called the subjunctive mood. It is used for statements about the conditional future: what may happen later under certain circumstances. The subjunctive is sometimes heard in songs ('**If I were** a rich man ...', '**If I were** a carpenter ...') and in prose. It is quite acceptable to use 'were' in place of 'was' for this purpose, although people often do not. **If I was** is by far the more common form.

I / Me / Myself

I should be used in the subject of a sentence, and **me** in the object. **He** and **him** (respectively) are used in the same fashion. We would not say '**He** hasn't told **he** yet', or '**Him** hasn't told **him** yet' or '**Him** hasn't told **he** yet'. Neither should we say '**I** haven't told them about **I** yet' or '**Me** haven't told them about **me** yet' or '**Me** haven't told them about **I** yet'.

All of this sounds quite sensible, but what about the sentence 'She invited Gary and **me**'? Should it be '... Gary and **I**'? Perhaps you could substitute **myself** to cover up the problem altogether? In this sentence, the verb is 'invited'. The subject of the verb (which performs the action) is 'she' and the object (the receiver of the action) is 'Gary

and **I/me**'. Since **I/me** belongs in the object of the sentence, the correct alternative is **me**. People are often uncomfortable with this, feeling that it sounds common, inelegant or just plain wrong. It doesn't help much that **I** would be correct if it occupied the subject of a sentence ('Claire and **I** are eating a cake').

Don't use **myself** to camouflage your uncertainty. This word is not an all-purpose substitute for the other two words. Save the word **myself** for situations where you have already used **I** earlier in the sentence ('**I** found **myself** lost for words').

Intensifiers

Intensifiers are adverbs or adjectives that add weight to the words they accompany. Common examples are **absolutely**, **incredibly**, **really**, **terrifically**, **fantastically**, **unbelievable** and **very**. Many of these words are imprecise, and most are unnecessary in scientific writing. They have been (?**incredibly**) overused in popular writing and everyday speech, so that their effectiveness is diminished. Use **very** with great caution.

Avoiding intensifiers may also prevent you from unintentionally saying something absurd. The original meanings of intensifiers are often quite different from the intended meanings: **terrific** (terrifying), **incredible** (not credible, not believable), **fabulous** (as if from a fable) **awful** (creating a sense of awe or wonder), **fantastic** (as if in a fantasy), etc. An **incredible** explanation for a phenomenon is therefore not what you might think!

If you select the most appropriate verb for a sentence you should seldom need to use an adverb (whether it is an intensifier or not.)

Intense / Intensive / Extensive

Intense refers to a strong effect or attention to something at a particular time. It usually relates to an individual event (**intense** heat from a bushfire), including individual behaviour (**intense** concentration).

Intensive refers to sustained and constant effects (or attention to something) over a given period. It is often used for organisational and institutional activities (**intensive** search, **intensive** agriculture). (By contrast, **extensive** means large, far-reaching or comprehensive.)

I Personally / I Myself

Omit the word **personally**. It is redundant. Likewise, **myself** is unnecessary after **I**.

-ise / -ize

Use either suffix with: computerise/ize, economise/ize, finalise/ize, modernise/ize, organise/ize, realise/ize, theorise/ize.

Use only -ise with: advertise, advise, comprise, despise, exercise, revise, supervise, televise.

Its / It's

Its means 'belonging to it'. ('The dog licked **its** fur.')

It's is short for 'it is' or 'it has'. ('**It's** hot today.' '**It's** been hot since Tuesday.')

Latin Tags

Latin tags were always *italicised* in the past. This is not the usual procedure these days, unless they are seldom used and relatively poorly known.

Examples: (Use full stops as shown).

i.e.	that is (<i>id est</i>)
e.g.	for example (<i>exempli gratia</i>) (This is often confused with 'i.e.')
viz.	namely, that is to say (<i>videlicet</i> , where the 'z' is an ending to the abbreviation).
(sic)	so (The passage referred to is quoted as written or spoken. This tag often signals an awareness by the person quoting that there is an incorrect usage or spelling in the original text. Alternatively, (sic) may highlight unusual words or spelling. These may be archaic, colloquial or culturally specific.)
etc.	and so on (<i>etcetera</i>). Commonly misspelt as 'ect'.
n.b.	note well (<i>nota bene</i>)
a.m.	before noon (<i>ante meridiem</i>)
p.m.	after noon (<i>post meridiem</i>)
ad hoc	impromptu, improvised, spur of the moment, (literally: 'to this')
ad lib	improvised, as one pleases, to any desired extent (<i>ad libitum</i> , 'according to pleasure')
de facto	as a matter of fact
de jure	as a matter of law
et al.	and others (people or things) (<i>et alii</i> and <i>et alia</i> respectively.) (See also Multiple authors of Cited Articles .)
et seq.	and the following (<i>et sequens</i>)
ibid. (or ib.)	in the same place (<i>ibidem</i>). Used when citing a reference or other source that has already been cited immediately above. This shows that you are continuing to refer to the source already credited. Ibid. may be bracketed and follow the author's name: 'Smith (ibid.) also describes the ...'. Alternatively, ibid. can be substituted for both the author's name and the year of publication: 'Smith (1998) describes the

influence of periodic wildfires on the species composition of grassland floras. ...[more text] ... This is often observed in equivalent habitats outside Australia, for example in southern African veldt (**ibid.**).

Lead / Led

Lead as a noun means the heavy metal substance.

Lead (when pronounced 'lead') is the present participle of the verb **to lead**. The past participle is **led**. It is correct to write 'I **lead** the current popularity stakes' (present tense) or 'I **will lead** an excursion tomorrow' (future tense), but incorrect to use **lead** for past tense.

Examples: 'Last night they **led** [not **lead**] their friends to the new house.'
'I **have led** the procession many times before.'
'May I **lead** you to the car?'
'Who will **lead** us to victory?'

Licence / License

Spell the noun with a 'c' and the verb with an 's'.

Examples: 'I have a mammal trapping **licence**.'
'She is **licensed** to collect plants.'

Like / As / As if

Don't use **like** as a substitute for **as if**. **Like** can be used in place of **as** before a noun, providing the noun is not followed by a verb or a suppressed verb.

Examples:
'The bird flew **like** it was being pursued.' (Replace **like** with **as if**.)
'It swam **like** a fish.' (This is correct. 'Fish' is a noun.)

List / Listing

Listing is not synonymous with **list**. A **listing** is an entry in a **list**. (The telephone book is a **list** of names and numbers. Each entry in the book is a **listing**.)

Literally

The word **literally** is often misused as an intensifier ('She **literally** blew her top.') The word should be used to distinguish between the figurative and literal senses of a

phrase or word. That is, **literally** should be used to indicate that something should be interpreted just as written (or spoken) rather than as a figure of speech or a metaphor. In the incorrect example above, **literally** has wrongly been applied to a figure of speech, presumably to add weight to (or intensify) the statement. (See **Intensifiers**.)

Literally should not be used as a substitute for ‘actually’ or ‘really’, and is often unnecessary. If the word **literally** can be omitted without greatly changing the sentence, then leave it out. This could be done with the following sentence: ‘The tree [**literally**] fell apart when hit by lightning’.

May and Might / Maybe and May be

In general, **may** refers to the present or future, whereas **might** refers to the past:

‘If it is fine tomorrow we **may** play cricket.’

‘It **may** be correct.’

‘Last night we thought we **might** go out.’

Might can also be used to express greater uncertainty about the present or future:

‘**Might** I have another apple?’

‘I **might** be wrong.’

These sentences are more tentative and less formal than:

‘**May** I have another apple?’

‘I **may** be wrong.’

Might have can be used for possibilities that no longer exist:

‘If not for my injury, I **might have** been able to go.’

May have is often treated as an equivalent to **might have**, despite objections from linguists.

Sentences with **may** or **might** do not need the words ‘possible’ (or ‘possibly’) or ‘perhaps’. (See also **Tautology**.)

Maybe is an adverb meaning ‘perhaps’ or ‘possibly’. If you do not intend this to be the meaning, you probably need to use **may be**. Use **may be** if a verb is needed.

Examples:

‘**Maybe** I should leave now.’

‘I think that **maybe** it is true.’

‘That **may be** true.’

‘Medical attention **may be** necessary.’

See also **Can / May**.

Meter / Metre

A **metre** is a unit of length, whereas a **meter** is a measuring instrument (e.g. water meter).

Method / Methodology

Methodology is not a more impressive substitute for the word **method**. Rather, **methodology** is a body or system of methods, or the science of methods.

Modifier, Misplacement of

A **modifier** is a word or a group of words that modifies the meaning of something. It may add meaning to a noun, verb, or other parts of a sentence. Modifiers are most often adjectives (e.g. **red** car) or adverbs (e.g. to walk **quickly**). In these simple examples the **modifier** is adjacent to that which is being modified. Writers should at least place the **modifier** close to the word(s) being modified to reduce the potential for ambiguity. This potential is shown by the more complex example below. In these sentences the **modifier** is ‘while walking home from school’ and the word (pronoun) being modified is ‘I’. (The unmodified sentence would read ‘I saw a car accident.’)

Example: ‘I saw a car accident walking home from school.’ (Incorrect)
‘While walking home from school I saw a car accident.’ (Correct)

More / Most Important(ly)

More / most important is usually correct. Use the ‘-ly’ form only if these words are adverbial; that is, if they refer to a verb.

Multiple Authors of Cited Articles

Is the Citation Singular or Plural?

References with multiple authors are sometimes treated as singular when cited in text, since a single work is the focus. This is the better option when your context is the work itself. For example, ‘A recent paper (Smith and Brown, 1996) describes ...’ has a subject (the paper) which is singular. When the authors are the subject, it is better to treat the reference as plural, because you are actually discussing the opinions of a group of people: ‘Smith and Brown (1996) describe ...’ (rather than ‘... describes ...’). This is effectively saying ‘They describe ...’.

Use of ‘et al.’

Some authorities (such as the Australian Government Publishing Service) recommend the use of **et al.** when a cited reference has more than three authors. Other authorities

opt for using **et al.** when there are more than two authors. We recommend that you use the second system. Thus, Smith, Jones and Brown (1996) becomes Smith et al. (1996) when cited in the text. The **et al.** is typically not placed in italics or underlined in modern works. You should write out in full all of the names in the bibliography or references. Don't use **et al.** in either of these lists.

None / no one

None is often plural, despite the common misconception. It is derived from an older English word 'nan' (not one), and is not a contraction of 'no one'. **None** should be treated as plural when the word it refers to is plural, and singular when it refers to a word that is singular.

'**No one**' is singular. It should be written as two separate words, unlike 'anyone' and 'someone'.

Examples: '**None** of us **are** ready.'
'**None** of the money **was** recovered.'
'**No one** was present when I arrived.'

Noun Strings

Noun strings such as 'biodegradable product development research' tend to make a sentence difficult to read. If your text has long strings of nouns, try breaking the strings up, for example by converting some nouns into verbs. 'This company's research includes the development of biodegradable products' is preferable to 'This company's activities include biodegradable product development research'.

Numbers

Billion / Trillion

One **billion** is one thousand million (10^9), while a **trillion** is one million million (10^{12}). (The old British and German use of a **billion** as a million million is now outdated.)

Commas and Spaces in Numbers

Ordinary text should follow the convention of grouping the numerals of large numbers into threes, using commas (e.g. 274,108.73021). When using SI units, insert a space rather than a comma to group numerals into threes. Do this both to the left and the right of the decimal place (e.g. 274 108.730 21). The space is optional in four digit numbers.

Double Entry of Numbers

Sometimes you will see numbers written as both numerals and words, e.g. ‘You have five (5) days to reply.’ This originated long ago in hand-copied legal documents as a way of preventing the alteration (and thus falsification) of figures. This is outdated in typed documents. Some people still use it in text to make their work look more official or precise, or to emphasise an important number. Avoid this convention; it is nonsensical and potentially offensive to the reader.

Five Times More / Five Times Less

While the first statement may be sound mathematically, the second is not. What does it mean? Five percent? One fifth as much? (The second is generally the intended meaning, but the two statements are not equivalent.)

Levels of Precision for Measurements

When citing measurements, nominate the level of precision, for example, to within 3% or to within 0.1g.

Lining up Numbers in Columns

Ensure that the decimal points, as well as the units, tens, hundreds, tenths, etc. are each lined up in their own column.

Up to 120 or More (!)

Both ‘Up to 120’ and ‘120 or more’ make sense, but the above statement is nonsensical.

Use of Numerals or Words when Writing Numbers

Small numbers in the text are generally spelled out, while larger numbers are written as numerals. There is no standard rule. Different publishers and authorities each have their own ‘in-house’ rules. We suggest that you write numbers up to, and including, ten as words. Use numerals for larger numbers.

Examples: Five, ten, 12, 89.

Use numerals for time, page numbers, dates, percentages, numbers that follow capitalised nouns (Chapter 2, Table 1) or which follow units of measurement (6 g, 8 s).

Ordinal numbers- those indicating position- should be treated in the same way as cardinal numbers: third, eighth, 45th, 132nd, etc., except in references (5th ed., 3rd annual conference, etc.)

Use common sense when citing a group of numbers of similar value. For instance, it may be better to say ‘from ten to twelve species’ or ‘from 10 to 12 species’ rather than a mixture of the two forms.

‘Of’ Instead of ‘Have’

Careless pronunciation sometimes leads to people writing ‘**would of**’, ‘**should of**’, ‘**ought to of**’ and so forth. These should take **have** instead of **of**, and be followed by a verb (‘**should have** eaten ...’, etc.)

‘Only’- Position in Sentences

Only can be placed in many parts of a sentence, thanks to the flexibility of the English language. Despite this, your sentence often gains more precise meaning if you place **only** near the word or phrase it modifies. (This can be taken too far. People who zealously arbitrate on the placement of **only** were once described as friends from whom the English language may well pray to be saved!) Treat other adverbs of frequency (‘never’, ‘occasionally’, ‘always’, ‘seldom’, etc.) similarly.

Example: ‘I **only** visit the park on Sundays.’ (This is ambiguous: is the park the **only** place you visit on Sundays or do you visit the park on Sundays **only**?)

Orient / Orientate, Disorient / Disorientate, Interpret / Interpretate

Orientate, **disorientate** and **interpretate** are the incorrect versions of these verbs. They have been mistakenly constructed from the nouns **orientation**, **disorientation** and **interpretation**.

Overuse of Upper Case

Avoid overusing upper case. For example, do not capitalise the first letter of words unless they are proper nouns or belong in a reference title. (See **Capital Letters**.) Do not write whole sentences or paragraphs in upper case (for emphasis or other reasons) unless this is unavoidable.

Overworked Words

Try to avoid the excessive use of overworked words such as ‘do’, ‘got’ and ‘occur’. A thesaurus is recommended: it will both increase your vocabulary and enable you to make your written work more varied and interesting.

Padding

Writers sometimes resort to padding (and overuse of technical jargon) to impress their readers. Science students may do this with the intention of making their written work look ‘more scientific’. Despite such sentiments, padding is frequently obvious and a source of irritation to the reader. Verbosity makes the text lengthy and reduces its clarity. Common instances of padding include the following.

Long Words or Phrases

(This is known as **ploddery**, and is associated with Mr. Plod, the police witness in a law court, who used elaborate words and phrases to impress and sound more official.)

‘a percentage of cases’ (some); ‘the greater portion’ (most); ‘in that eventuality’ (if so); ‘utilise’ (use); ‘to occasion’ (to cause); ‘simplistic’ (simple).

It is quite acceptable to use longer words if shorter or more commonly used equivalents are unavailable, or would lack precision, alter the precise meaning, lead to ambiguities, or cause other difficulties.

See also **Method / Methodology** and **Use / Us(e)age**.

Unnecessary Words or Phrases

If words or phrases can be removed without significantly altering the meaning of a sentence, then this should be done. (See also **Tautology**.)

‘They are **both** identical’ [**Both** is unnecessary.];

in fact; actually; overall; really;

‘The road bisects the area **in two**.’ [‘Bisects’ already implies a division into two parts.]

[Quite often:] **very**, e.g. ‘It took a **very** long time to ...’ [‘It took a long time to ...’];

‘The soil was **literally** saturated ...’ [Omit **literally**. See also the entry on **Literally**.]

‘This study **was conducted in order to** evaluate ...’ [‘This experiment evaluated ...’];

‘**It is a very interesting fact that** ...’ [Omit];

‘The site is **located** near ...’ [‘The site is near ...’];

‘Heat may be **an important factor** in ...’ [‘Heat may be important in ...’];

‘**In this report we will** demonstrate the correlation between A and B.’ [‘We demonstrate the correlation between A and B.’];

‘**We would like to ...**’ / ‘**We wish to ...**’ [Omit];

‘**... higher in comparison to ...**’ [‘... greater than ...’];

‘**... in the absence of ...**’ [‘... without ...’];

‘After careful analysis of the results we ...’ [Omit. We presume that the analysis was careful. What would you analyse other than results?].

Paragraph Construction

All material in a paragraph should relate to a single idea or to a connected set of ideas. This should promote **unity** because of a single focus. This is easier if the paragraph has **coherence** (holds together well). You may do so by using various logical or verbal bridges that link the components of the paragraph. It is advisable to have a **topic sentence** early in each paragraph. This indicates in a broad way the focus of the paragraph.

When beginning a fresh topic, start a new paragraph. Ensure that each paragraph is long enough to **adequately develop the topic**, but not so long that it strays onto other topics. Leave one or two blank lines between paragraphs.

Past Tense

‘Seen’ and ‘done’ must be used with verbs such as ‘to have’ or ‘to be’. Thus, ‘I seen the animal’ should be ‘I saw the animal’, and ‘I done my work’ should be ‘I did my work’.

The various forms of past tense are not completely interchangeable. ‘I saw the animal’ has a different meaning to ‘I have seen the animal’. The first indicates a definite event in the past, whereas the second places the sighting in the past but does not refer to a specific event. Similarly, there are distinctions in meaning between other forms of past tense: the aorist past (I walked), the imperfect or continuous past (I was walking), the past perfect (I have walked) the pluperfect (I had walked) and the emphatic past (I did walk). Choose the form most appropriate to the situation. Distinctions between these forms of past tense are discussed more fully in the references listed below under such headings as ‘Modal Auxiliaries’, ‘Tense’ and ‘Irregular Verbs’.

The past tenses of some verbs frequently cause difficulties:

did / done (‘I did my homework’ / ‘I have done my homework’)
brought / brang / brung (‘I brought the food’ / ‘I have brought the food’)
hung / hanged (Use ‘hung’ except in the case of capital punishment. Use either with or without ‘have/had’.)
swam / swum (‘She swam in the creek’ / ‘She has swum in the creek’)
drove / driven (‘They drove’ / ‘They have driven’)
sawed / sawn (‘I sawed’ / ‘I have sawn’)
burned / burnt (Interchangeable: ‘I burned [or burnt]’ / ‘I have burned [or burnt]’)
learned / learnt (As for burned/burnt.)
took / taken (‘I took’ / ‘I have taken’)

See the references below for a more comprehensive listing of past tenses and past participles.

Phenomena / Phenomenon

The word **phenomena** is plural. Use **phenomenon** when referring to a single item. Don't use either form unnecessarily in a sentence just to impress the reader.

Examples:

'This is an unusual **phenomenon** (not **phenomena**).'

'These **phenomena** occur regularly in some parts of the west coast.'

See also **Plurals**.

Plurals

Agreement of Singular and Plural

The following examples are incorrect.

'**Dandelions** [plural] are common weeds. **It** [singular] is a species introduced to Australia during the nineteenth century.'

'**Amoebas** [plural] are eucaryotes, and therefore **it** [singular] has a nucleus.'

Ensure that you are consistent with your use of either singular or plural within a sentence or a paragraph.

Apostrophes in Plurals and Possessive Words

Plural words do not require an apostrophe unless they are possessive.

Examples:

The **dogs** lay under the **trees**, watching the **hens**. [Not **dog's**, **tree's** or **hen's**.]

I returned **Joe's** books. He **needs** them for his study.

The **boys' appetites** had all returned by supper.

Joe's gets an apostrophe because it is possessive: he owns the books. The word **books** is just a straight plural, and does not need an apostrophe. **Needs** is the third person singular of the verb **to need**. It is not plural, even though it ends in 's', and is not possessive. It should not be given an apostrophe.

Boys' is the possessive form of the plural **boys**: the boys possess **appetites**. The final apostrophe on **boys'** indicates a word that is both plural and possessive. (Consult one of the references at the end of this section if you are unsure of how to deal with irregular plurals.) The word **appetites** lacks an apostrophe because it is plural but not possessive. Note that **its** can be possessive, but should not be given an apostrophe. The cat licked **its** paws. Reserve **it's** as an abbreviation for **it is**.

Singular possessive words have an apostrophe before the 's', as in the word **Joe's** above.

(Refer to **Plurals: Irregular Plurals** and **Punctuation: Apostrophes**.)

Commas and Spaces in Numbers

In ordinary text you should follow the convention of grouping numerals within large numbers into threes using commas (e.g. 274,108.73021). When using SI units, insert a space rather than a comma to group numerals into threes. Do this both to the left and the right of the decimal place (e.g. 274 108.730 21). The space is optional in four digit numbers.

Compound Nouns or Noun Phrases

Examples: court martial, governor-general, mother-in-law.

Find the **core noun** and pluralise it. Leave the remainder (the **trailer**) unpluralised. The final word is usually rendered plural if there is no noun (e.g. forget-me-not) or if the noun is not core (e.g. fly-by-night).

Examples: courts martial, forget-me-nots, governors-general, Lords Mayor, mothers-in-law.

Irregular Plurals

-a / -ae alga / algae formula / formulae lacuna / lacunae	-eau / -eaux † bureau / bureaux (-eaus) plateau / plateaux (-eaus)	-ex / -exes or -ices apex / apexes or apices index / indices (-ixes) ‡ vortex / vortices or -exes
-ion / -ia criterion / criteria #	-is / -es analysis / analyses basis / bases crisis / crises metamorphosis / -es thesis / theses	-ium / -ia cranium / crania millennium / millennia
-ix / -ices appendix / appendices (or appendixes §) cortex / cortices helix / helices matrix / matrices (or matrixes in non- mathematical senses.)	-on / -a phenomenon / phenomena #	-um / -a bacterium / bacteria # datum / data # quantum / quanta maximum / maxima medium / media minimum / minima stratum / strata #
-us / -era genus / genera	-us / -i bacillus / bacilli fungus / fungi locus / loci	

Some words seem to be potentially irregular but are not. ‘Genius’ becomes ‘geniuses’, ‘platypus’ becomes ‘platypuses’, ‘rhinoceros’ becomes ‘rhinoceroses’, ‘octopus’ becomes ‘octopuses’, ‘album’ becomes ‘albums’, and ‘museum’ becomes ‘museums’.

† The anglicised ending is optional on words ending in -eau. Likewise, the plural of ‘aquarium’ may be either ‘aquaria’ or ‘aquariums’, and the plural of ‘stadium’ may be ‘stadia’ or ‘stadiums’. If in doubt, consult a dictionary.

‡ ‘Indexes’ are the compilations at the backs of books, while ‘indices’ are mathematical (e.g. indices of abundance).

§ ‘Appendixes’ are body organs. ‘Appendices’ are supplements to reports or books.

Some words are so widely used in the plural that they are not recognised as being plural. There is a tendency to treat ‘phenomena’, ‘strata’, ‘criteria’ and ‘data’ as singular, and so to invent plurals of these (e.g. ‘stratas’) or to use singular forms of verbs with them (‘The data is ...’) These practices are incorrect. ‘Phenomenon’, ‘stratum’, ‘criterion’ and ‘datum’ are the singular forms of the above words. ‘The data are ...’ should be used rather than ‘the data is ...’. There can be one ‘criterion’ or a number of ‘criteria’, but not one ‘criteria’.

Lack of Singular or Plural Forms

‘Kudos’ and ‘exuviae’ (the cast-off exoskeleton of an arthropod) are plural nouns that have no singular version.

Some words exist only as plurals, and the use of ‘a pair of’ / ‘pairs of’ is optional: forceps, pliers, scissors, trousers, etc.

For some words, the plural form is identical to the singular form. (Strangely enough, these are often animals that are hunted!) **Examples:** cod, deer, grouse, sheep, trout. ‘Fish’ may be pluralised as either ‘fish’ or ‘fishes’.

Nouns of Measurement

These are not given in the plural (e.g. ‘six dozen eggs’, but ‘five metres wide’.)

Words Ending in -f

Most become plural by substituting ‘-ves’ for ‘-f’: calves, loaves, selves. There are a few exceptions, notably ‘reefs’ and ‘roofs’. Some of these words can take either ending; hoof, wharf, dwarf, etc. If in doubt, consult a dictionary.

Words Ending in -o

Monosyllabic (one syllable) words: use ‘-oes’, e.g. go / goes

Where a word is abbreviated to an ‘-o’ ending: use ‘os’, e.g. photo / photos, dynamo / dynamos.

Proper nouns (names of people, cities, countries, etc. that begin with a capital letter): use ‘-os’, e.g. Romeos.

Most multisyllabic words ending in ‘-o’ take ‘oes’ in the plural: cargoes, dingoes, flamingoes, potatoes, tomatoes. (Note that ‘Gecko / geckos’ is an exception.)

Plus / And / Also

Do not use **plus** when you mean **and** or **also** in normal text: (‘The food is very good, **plus** it’s cheap.’) Reserve **plus** for mathematical uses.

Also is an adverb (‘... it **also** flew ...’) and should not be used in place of **and**, which is a conjunction. (‘Apples are cheap, **also** very tasty.’)

Practically / Virtually

Don’t use **practically** to mean ‘almost’.

Practically means ‘in practice’ or ‘to all practical purposes’.

Virtually means ‘almost’ or ‘in effect’.

Practice / Practise

Practice is a noun and **practise** is a verb.

Examples: ‘That **practice** is forbidden here.’
‘You must **practise** your plant identification.’

Precede / Proceed

Spell these as shown. To **precede** is to come before something. To **proceed** is to move along, adopt a course of action or continue it (keep going).

‘A flash of lightning **precedes** the clap of thunder.’
‘We **proceeded** slowly because of the rain.’
‘Do you wish to **proceed** with your application?’

Precision or Accuracy?

Despite what some dictionaries say, these terms are not interchangeable. **Precision** is when you achieve similar results from repeated efforts. **Accuracy** is when you come close to a predetermined benchmark or reference point. To illustrate the distinction, many darts hitting close to the centre of a dartboard would be **accurate and precise**. A single dart hitting the centre of the board would be **accurate**. Many darts forming a close pattern to one side on the dartboard would be **precise but not accurate**.

Prepositions

Prepositions are often very short words. They govern (influence or refer to) nouns and pronouns. Examples include: after, at, before, for, in, on, over, to, under, with.

Ending Sentences with Prepositions

An often-quoted grammatical rule requires that you do not end sentences with a preposition. (‘Prepositions are bad words to end sentences **with!**’) The following sentences break this rule:

‘What are they **for?**’
‘This is the phylum they belong **to.**’
‘That depends upon what they were cut **with.**’

As you will recognise, we all break this rule many times every day in our speech. We can afford to be more careful in our writing. The problem can often be avoided by placing the preposition earlier in the sentence, e.g. ‘The person **with whom** I discussed XXX’ rather than ‘The person I discussed XXX **with**’. In other cases rewording is necessary, e.g. ‘What is their purpose?’ rather than ‘What are they **for?**’.

If the alternatives are inelegant, uncomfortable or otherwise awkward, then ignore the rule. For instance, ‘This is something I will not put up **with**’ is preferable to: ‘This is something up **with** which I will not put.’ (Of course, you could say: ‘This is something I will not tolerate.’) Many experts on grammar suggest the total abandonment of the preposition rule. You may do this if you wish, although you will find that this may not be accepted by some referees or other readers.

Omitting Prepositions

Where possible, avoid omitting prepositions: ‘... found (**in**) some place near ...’, ‘I will write (**to**) you about the trip’.

Prescribe / Proscribe

To **prescribe** is to set down as something to be followed (e.g. a **prescribed** textbook). To **proscribe** is to denounce something as dangerous or illegal (e.g. **proscribed** weapons).

Principal / Principle

Principal means the most important, first in rank, a ruler or superior. The word is also used in two other senses: a person for whom someone else acts, and a capital sum of money (as distinct from interest or income).

Principle refers to a fundamental belief, truth, law or code of conduct. It may also be a constituent of a substance that gives it certain properties (e.g. a bitter **principle**).

Pronunciation / Pronunciation

The second spelling is correct. **Pronounce**, though, is spelt with the ‘o’.

Prostate / Prostrate

The **prostate** is a gland near the bladder in male mammals. **Prostrate** means lying flat, facing downwards or (for a plant) growing along the ground.

Punctuation

Apostrophes

Plural nouns do not usually require an apostrophe, although people quite frequently make this mistake (‘Pizza’s for sale’, etc.). Nouns often take an apostrophe when **possessive**. Most singular nouns are given an apostrophe and ‘s’ at the end when they become possessive (e.g. ‘the dog’s tail’). Plural nouns ending in ‘s’ are usually

rendered possessive by adding an apostrophe after the 's' (e.g. 'the lecturers' offices'). Irregular plurals not ending in 's' are often made possessive by adding an apostrophe and then an 's' (e.g. 'the oxen's tails'). This rule may not always be followed for irregular plurals ending in 's', 'x' or 'z' unless the word is one syllable long (e.g. 'the fox's lair'). If in doubt, consult one of the references listed at the end of the style guide.

Apostrophes may also be used to indicate missing (but assumed) information, as in 'The music of the **'60s** changed rapidly'. This applies to abbreviated versions of words, unless the abbreviation has become commonly accepted as a word in its own right. For instance, **'phone** (rather than **telephone**) is commonly written without the apostrophe these days.

When adding an 's' to a number or abbreviation, only use an apostrophe when it is necessary to avoid confusion (e.g. 1920s, ABCs, but MA's).

Commas

Use a comma after 'namely', 'the following', 'to summarise' and similar expressions. It may also be included before 'since' and 'because'. Sometimes it is needed before 'unless' to avoid ambiguity. A comma may be used between adjectives, but not after the last one when it is closely related to the noun. (See also the notes on punctuation in lists).

Do not use a comma in a date that gives only the month and year (e.g. March 1998) or one that gives a particular day (e.g. 26 May 1962).

Use a comma before 'and' or 'or' in a list of three or more items.

Do not place commas after short items in a vertical list.

Examples:

'Submissions need approval by a committee, namely, the Human Ethics Committee.'

'Cloudy nights are warm, because clouds prevent the radiation of heat into space.'

'The trap was placed in a dark, sheltered location.'

(No comma:) 7 and 8. (With comma:) 2, 4, and 9.

Native parrots: 1. Budgerigar

2. Lorikeets

3. Rosellas

4. Ringneck Parrots

5. Grass Parrots

6. Other parrots

Commas are used to delineate portions of a sentence that **can be removed without altering the basic meaning of the sentence**. (Such phrases or clauses are called nonrestrictive.) Don't use commas to separate a main clause from a relative or subordinate clause. (In these cases, removing the clause **would** alter the meaning of the sentence, and even make it nonsensical.)

Examples:

‘The dog, **which came through the back fence**, was shivering.’ (Nonrestrictive.)
‘I do not drink sea water, **which is salty**.’ (Nonrestrictive.)
‘I do not drink water **that is salty**.’ (Restrictive.)

(Note the use of ‘that’ for a restrictive clause and ‘which’ for a nonrestrictive clause.)

Full Stops (Periods)

A full stop should be used at the conclusion of a sentence, providing that it is not a question or an exclamation. If the whole sentence is in brackets, place the full stop inside as well. When only the last portion of a sentence is bracketed, place the full stop outside the brackets. The same procedure applies to quotation marks.

(See **Numbers** for an explanation of the use of full stops in numbers.)

Examples:

We looked intently. (This was the first time we had seen sheoak woodlands.)
Blackberries are a pest in Australia, (although most people enjoy their fruits).
This is truly ‘the lucky country’.

(See also **Abbreviations**.)

Hyphens

Hyphens should be used when their absence would look odd (reenter / re-enter) or when clarifying pronunciation or meaning (re-form, re-sign). Otherwise, write the derivatives of words as a solid block (postgraduate, nonsignificant, prelocked).

Use hyphens for **compound adjectives** when they are followed by the noun they modify (**frost-hardy** plant). Do not use hyphens when the noun comes first. (The plant is **frost hardy**.)

Lists and Punctuation

Introducing a List

Use a **colon (:)** rather than a dash to introduce a list.

Example: ‘The Phylum Echinodermata includes: sea stars (starfish), brittle stars, sea urchins, crinoids and sea cucumbers.’

Separating Items in a List

Use **commas (,)** to separate listed items (as in the example above) unless those items are lengthy or complicated. These latter items should be separated by **semicolons (;)**,

particularly if some items contain commas themselves. A punctuation mark is not needed between the last two listed items if they are linked by words such as ‘and’ or ‘or’.

Example: ‘Nest boxes must be constructed to withstand: the additional weight of animals; the effects of wind, rain and heat; the attentions of vandals; growth of the branch to which they are attached.’

Quotations

Use **single quotation marks** (‘...’) for a quotation and **double quotation marks** (“...”) for a quotation within a quotation. A quotation within a sentence may be introduced by a **colon** (:). If part of a quotation is omitted, it is usual to represent the omitted text by an three dots, called an **ellipsis** (...). (For spacing purposes within the sentence, treat the ellipsis as a word.)

Explanatory material [**interpolations**] may sometimes be inserted in text quoted by an author. This may explain the meaning of a word or term, or provide some completeness to the quotation so that it can be understood. Interpolations are made in square brackets [...] to show that the enclosed material is not part of the original statement and has been added to by the quoting author.

Examples:

The botanist replied: ‘The commonplace view that bushfires are “ecological disasters” is incorrect.’

‘Oömycetes, the so-called “Water Moulds”, are actually protists related to brown algae. Similarities to true fungi, including hyphae, ... are a result of convergence.’

‘Clearing [of *Acacia* open-forests and woodlands] has occurred over large areas, ... and particularly in high rainfall climates.’

‘[Ecologists in Australia] are beginning to investigate marine bacterial communities.’

‘Blue-green algae [cyanobacteria] may be favoured by increased nutrients.’

Semicolons, Colons, Conjunctions and Clause Separation in Sentences

Clauses within a sentence are often separated by **conjunctions** (‘joining words’) such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘yet’, ‘for’ and ‘so’. Sometimes the first clause may be followed by a comma and then a conjunction such as ‘yet’, ‘because’, ‘unless’ or ‘however’. If neither of these two forms is used, the two clauses may be transformed into separate sentences. Alternatively, clauses may be separated by a **colon** (:) or **semicolon** (;). This allows the clauses to maintain a closer association than if they were converted into separate sentences. Use a **colon** if there is a progression or a step forward from the first to the second clause. This may be from a general to a particular statement, a cause to an effect or an introduction to a conclusion. Reserve the **semicolon** for separating two clauses that are approximately equal in importance.

Examples: ‘The soil is poor **but** many plants grow in it.’
‘The soil is poor, **yet** many plants grow in it.’

‘Daddy Long Legs are harmless: their solid fangs lack venom.’
‘Daddy Long Legs are harmless. Their solid fangs lack venom.’
‘Some people arrived at the station; others departed.’

Quiet / Quite

Some people are unsure of the difference between these words, while others will accidentally type one instead of the other. In neither case will a Spellcheck program detect the error. **Quiet** means ‘with little or no sound’. **Quite** means ‘to some extent’, ‘rather’ or ‘completely’.

‘He was asked to be **quiet**.’

‘It is **quite** difficult.’

‘That is **quite** untrue.’

Quoting and Paraphrasing

Exact quotations should be enclosed in quotation marks. (Details are provided under **Punctuation**.) This is done where it is important to know exactly what was said. For most other purposes, it is better to **paraphrase** a quoted passage. Paraphrasing is the recasting of a quotation in your own words. The paraphrased material is not enclosed in quotation marks. Whether quoting or paraphrasing, the source of information needs to be attributed. The AGPS style of citation is recommended for this purpose.

A paraphrased quote is less likely to interrupt the flow of your writing. It should also be more consistent with the writing style you employ in the text. Paraphrasing improves your ability to integrate your material with that from other sources. The citation of the source should ensure that the reader is able to locate the original version. This citation gives people the opportunity to verify that the meaning has not been distorted. Paraphrasing carries with it the responsibility of ensuring that the meaning of your version is true to the original.

Ranges of Measurements

Use **to** as a connecting word, and don’t repeat the units.

Example: -8.5 to 15.6°C

A short dash may be used where the range is given in brackets or placed in a table, but be careful not to be ambiguous. The dash should not be able to be confused with a negative sign.

(The) Reason (why) is Because ...

It is unnecessary to add **why**, **why is because** or **is because** to the word **reason**.

Each of these additions is redundant.

Example: ‘**The reason why** I am late **is because** the bus broke down.’ (Incorrect)
‘**The reason** I am late is that the bus broke down.’ (Correct) or
‘I am late **because** the bus broke down.’ (Correct)

Rebut / Refute

The second of these two words is stronger: to **rebut** is to argue against something, whereas to **refute** something is to prove it wrong.

Redundant Words

Refer to **Literally**, **Padding**, **Tautology** and **(The) Reason (why) is Because**.

Repetition of Words

Try to avoid the frequent reuse of words. (‘We studied this, and we studied that, then we studied something else, after which we studied ...’). A dictionary or a thesaurus should provide suitable alternatives and inject more variety into your writing.

Right / Rite / Wright / Write

Right means (1) ‘correct’, ‘morally proper’, e.g. ‘It is **right** to conserve species.’
(2) the opposite of ‘left’, e.g. ‘Turn **right** at the next intersection.’
(3) ‘directly’ or ‘straight’, e.g. ‘The dog was **right** behind her.’
(4) ‘(to) return to its original position’, e.g. ‘to **right** a boat’.
(5) ‘(to) correct, e.g. ‘to **right** a wrong’.
(6) ‘an entitlement’, e.g. ‘That is my **right**.’

Several other meanings may be found in a dictionary.

Rite means a ‘ceremony’ or ‘procedure’, e.g. ‘a religious rite’.

Wright is a surname (James Wright) or (rarely now) a worker or maker, e.g. ‘shipwright’.

Write means to inscribe or trace symbols (letters, numbers, etc.) onto a surface, e.g. ‘She writes well.’

Scales / Balances

The scientific instruments that measure weight are **balances**. **Scales** are the domestic equivalent.

Scientific Names of Organisms

The **binomial** (name) of an organism consists of the name of the genus and that of the species. The **trinomial** contains the generic, specific and subspecific names. In both cases, type each word in italics. Underline the names instead if italics are not available, or if you are writing the names by hand. Do not continue to underline in the spaces between the words. Neither 'sp.' nor 'spp.' (singular and plural abbreviations, respectively, for 'species') should be italicised or underlined. Only the generic name in a binomial or trinomial should begin with a capital letter: begin specific and subspecific names in lower case.

Names at other taxonomic levels, such as family or order, begin with a capital letter. They should not be italicised, underlined or wholly capitalised.

It is not necessary to place the scientific name in brackets, or between commas, when it follows the common name (or vice-versa). The two types of name are delimited quite adequately by one being in italics (or underlined) and one not.

Examples: *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*

Homo sapiens neanderthalensis [Underline when italics are unavailable.]

Monterey Pine *Pinus radiata* belongs in the family Pinaceae.

Small liverworts *Riccia* spp. form rosettes on intermittently damp ground.

Red Parrot-pea *Dillwynia hispida*. [This is preferred, rather than either Red Parrot-pea (*Dillwynia hispida*) or Red Parrot-pea, *Dillwynia hispida*.]

Sentences

(See also **Abbreviations** [**Abbreviated Sentences**], **Active and Passive Voice**, **Padding**, **Punctuation**.)

Conjunctions at the Start of Sentences

Try not to use conjunctions ('joining words' such as 'and', 'but', 'though', 'yet') to begin a sentence. (Some authorities on grammar claim that this rule is now outmoded, and can be ignored. This may be unfortunate advice if it tends to encourage people to write split sentences.) Conjunctions are better suited for connecting parts within a sentence than for connecting neighbouring sentences. We suggest that, where possible, you minimise the number of sentences starting with a conjunction. If you do choose to begin that way, check that the neighbouring sentences are complete. They should not be merely two 'half-sentences' that have been incorrectly separated.

Delimiting Sentences

Sentences should finish with a full stop unless they are an exclamation or a question. Leave two spaces between adjoining sentences to indicate a longer pause than that between the words in a sentence.

Avoid **comma splices** (separating two neighbouring sentences with a comma), as in the following incorrect example:

‘Reptiles can increase their body temperature by basking in the sun, they can also obtain heat by convection.’

Lengthy or Complex Sentences

Break up **run-on sentences** (excessively long or complex sentences) into shorter, more compact sentences. This will allow the material to be more readily understood. Aim to have most sentences not exceeding 20 words.

Prepositions at the End of Sentences

See **Prepositions**.

Verbless Sentences

Sentences should generally contain one or more verbs. Traditional writers tend not to encourage verbless sentences. Despite this, they are becoming more common in written works. This is probably a consequence of the growing acceptance of verbless sentences in spoken English. When writing, use verbless sentences sparingly, except when exactly quoting spoken English and in the following instances:

Afterthoughts

Examples: ‘This site shows evidence of erosion. **Extensive sheet erosion.**’
‘The gift could cost a hundred dollars. **Possibly more.**’

Dramatic Climax

Example: ‘One group of marsupials is carnivorous. **The dasyurids.**’

Summary Comments, Including the Introduction of Material which Follows

Examples: ‘True, no doubt.’
‘Finally, one small point.’
‘Of course not.’

Verbs - Location in Sentences

Try to keep the verb close to the subject in a sentence so that the sentence is more easily understood.

Example: ‘Nestbox use at three locations in selectively logged habitats in the Wombat State Forest, between the months of February and September, was recorded.’

The subject (‘nestbox use’) and the verb (‘was recorded’) are so widely separated that the sentence is difficult to read. The sentence would be better written: ‘Nestbox use was recorded at three locations ...’

Shall and Will / Should and Would

There are elaborate distinctions between these words. In common usage, there has been a partial exchange of functions between the words, which complicates matters.

Shall and Will

The verb **to will** means to intend, within a person’s power, that something should come about. It is an auxiliary (‘helper’) verb followed by an infinitive (‘to be’, ‘to have’, ‘to die’, etc.) but without the ‘to’.

By contrast, **shall** expresses a plain future (= ‘am going to’). ‘I **shall** eat’ is thus subtly different from ‘I **will** eat’. **Will** suggests intention, volition or choice.

Should and Would

Would is the conditional form of **will**, while **should** is the conditional form of **shall**. (Conditional forms involve the use of conditions or ‘if’. For instance: ‘If I **should** die, ...’; ‘If you wished to conserve the forest, you **would**...’.)

Would and **should** may also have indicative uses, where they are the past tense of **will** and **shall**, or where they mean ‘ought to’ or ‘used to’.

Examples: ‘I doubt that it **will** survive’, and ‘I doubted that it **would** survive’.

‘I **should** go’

‘**Should** I write this down?’

‘When passing the spot, he **would** always look away.’

The distinctions between the above pairs of words are a little hazy, and are often ignored by quite good writers.

Site / Sight / Cite

A **site** is a location, e.g. ‘Web **site**’, ‘The **site** for the new shed is over there.’

Sight has to do with vision, either as a verb or a noun: ‘I hope that I **sight** [verb] a Powerful Owl.’; ‘That is a beautiful **sight** [noun] to behold.’

To **cite** is ‘to mention, refer to, quote or [in legal language] summon to appear in a court’: ‘Don’t forget to **cite** the book’s author in the text.’

Spacing

Leave one space between words and two spaces between sentences. A blank line should be inserted between paragraphs. Material submitted for proofreading should have double-spaced lines to permit the insertion of comments.

Split Infinitives

An infinitive is the ‘**to ...**’ form of a verb (to run, to eat, to have, etc.). Split infinitives have an adverb (or other word) placed between the ‘to’ and the participle.

Examples: ‘To quickly eat’, ‘to really understand’, ‘to often have’.

Split infinitives used to be treated as a crime by English teachers! Today they are at best a very minor crime: the rule to avoid split infinitives is regarded as overly fussy or outdated. It can often be safely ignored. It is better to split infinitives if the alternative is worse (lengthy, clumsy, etc.). For instance, ‘to really understand’ is preferable to ‘really to understand’. Avoid split infinitives if they make the sentence ambiguous or otherwise difficult to understand.

Stationary / Stationery

Stationary means not moving.

Stationery means paper and other writing materials or office supplies.

Supercede / Supersede

Supersede is the correct spelling.

Tautology

In grammar, **tautology** is needless repetition using different words. This may be a result of carelessness, or an attempt to emphasise or pad out a written passage. (See **Padding**.) In each example below, deletion of the words in bold will remove the tautology and simplify the expression.

(For many readers, seeing the list will be *déjà vu* **all over again!**)

‘Examples include A, B, C, **etc.**’ / ‘People such as X, Y, Z, **etc.** ...’

‘**new** innovations’

‘**fellow** colleague’

‘**software** program’

‘link **together**’

‘ask **the question** whether’ (See also **(The) Reason (why) is Because ...**)

‘grouped **together**’
‘in **minute** detail’
‘in **actual** fact’
‘may **possibly** be’
‘disappeared **from sight**’
‘X are limited **only** to ...’
‘revert **back** to’

Legal tautologies include ‘aid and abet’, ‘null and void’ and ‘ways and means’.

Some tautologies take the form of ‘abstract appendages’. These are extra words that don’t add anything useful to the original word(s), even though they don’t fully repeat the thought that has been expressed.

‘blue **in colour**’
‘weather **conditions**’
‘height **levels**’ (Words such as ‘factors’, ‘characteristics’, ‘cases’, ‘features’, ‘instances’, and ‘facts’ can be similarly misused.)
‘small **in size**’
‘**quite** unique’ (Remove any qualifiers to the word ‘unique’, including ‘so’, ‘very’, ‘totally’ and ‘rather’.)

That / Which

Both of these words are pronouns (words that stand in place of a noun) or adjectives. They mean ‘the person or thing observed or indicated’. The plural of **that** is **those** (e.g. **that** person, **those** people), and the plural of **which** is also **which**.

That can be used in defining clauses (e.g. ‘This is a lake **that** dries up in summer.’)

Which is used in non-defining clauses (e.g. ‘This lake, **which** dries up in summer, is very deep.’)

The difference is that the clause in the first sentence (‘**that** dries up in summer’) defines the subject (lake) and cannot be removed from the sentence without destroying the sentence’s meaning. That is, the sentence is incomplete and does not make sense without the clause. (Defining clauses may also be called restrictive clauses because of this.) The clause in the second sentence (‘**which** dries up in summer’) is not essential to the completeness of the sentence. The remainder (‘This lake is very deep’) is complete and makes sense by itself. (Note that in the above examples, the pronouns **that** and **which** are standing in for the noun ‘lake’.)

Another way of considering the difference is to say that **that** identifies something, while **which** describes it.

When referring to a person, the pronoun **whose** is used instead of **which** or **that**.

Which also has other uses, for example as an adjective (‘**Which** book is that?’), while **that** may also be an adverb (‘He knew **that** she was there.’)

Do not use **who** in place of **that** or **which** when referring to a (non-human) species. 'The bird **who** built its nest ...' should be 'The bird **that** (or **which**) built its nest ...'.

Their / There / There're / They're

Their means 'belonging to them', e.g. 'They ate **their** dinner'.

There means 'that place', e.g. 'Go over **there**'. (See a dictionary for other usages.)

There're is short for 'there are', e.g. '**There're** six of them'. Avoid this usage.

They're is short for 'they are', e.g. '**They're** in the garden'. Avoid this usage.

To / Too / Two

To is a preposition meaning 'in the direction of ...' (e.g. 'She went **to** the lake').

Too is an adverb meaning 'as well' (e.g. 'He went there **too**').

Two is the number (a noun).

Tracks / Trails / Paths

Track is the Australian equivalent of the American term **trail**. The British terms are **path** (**bridle path** for horses, **wheelchair path**, **footpath**, **cycle path**, etc.) and **hiking track**. The equivalent New Zealand terms are **walking** and **tramping track**. These terms refer to cross-country walking, horse riding, cycling and similar thoroughfares.

The (originally American) term **nature trail** has become widely used in Australia. Variants that also involve sequences of events, such as **interpretive trail** and **heritage trail**, have been developed. (However, the tracks used by motor cyclists and horse riders have also become known as trails, and the practice is spreading.) Should the term trail be used in Australia? Yes, if there is a distinction in meaning between **tracks** as thoroughfares and **trails** as walks involving a series of encounters or events. This could make the term acceptable in Australia, since no specific local alternative is available. The use of the word **path** should be discouraged: it has the alternative meaning of 'footpath' in Australia and complex connotations in Britain. (Sealed footpaths are called **pavements** in Britain, and other types of paths are as noted above. Many unsealed paths through natural areas are known as **hiking tracks**.)

Try And

Use **try to**. ('I will **try to** visit them tomorrow.') Follow a similar procedure for other verbs, such as **go and / go to**.

Unique

See ‘Tautology’.

Use / Us(e)age / Utilise

Use and **usage** (not **useage**) are not interchangeable words. **Usage** means the habitual or customary method (or system) of use (e.g. the usage of italics, the usage of native plants as sources of medicine).

The verb **to utilise** is often used in place of the verb **to use**. Again, these terms are not interchangeable. The term **utilise** has a suggestion of opportunism, in the sense of refinement, application or adaptation. To **utilise** is to:

- make practical use of (or best use of) something (‘The crushed foliage of Red Ash was traditionally **utilised** as a fish poison’), or to
- apply something not intended for a certain job (‘The knife blade **was utilised** as a screwdriver ...’).

In all other cases, where you just mean ‘to bring into service’ or ‘make use of’, employ the word **use** (‘I learned how to **use** an electric drill’; ‘A pH meter was **used** to measure the ...’).

Use to / Used to, Suppose to / Supposed to

Write **used to** rather than **use to** (‘We **used to** enjoy visiting parks’). The incorrect form may result of not separately pronouncing the two adjoining hard consonants (‘d’ and ‘t’). Similarly, you should write **supposed to** rather than **suppose to**.

Via / Viâ

Via means ‘by way of’. It can be used to indicate the direction of a journey, the route taken or stopovers made. (‘We travelled to Sydney **via** Canberra.’) Some authorities recommend that **via** should not be applied to the means by which a journey was made, or by which something was achieved. ‘We travelled **via** plane to Sydney’ and ‘We communicated **via** letters’ are examples of these uses.

Although **via** (also written as **viâ**) is Latin in origin, it is considered to be fully anglicised (incorporated into the English language). Consequently it need not be written in italics, and the circumflex over the â can be omitted.

Were / Where

Were is the past tense of the verb ‘to be’ (e.g. ‘They **were** late’).

Where indicates a place (e.g. ‘This burrow is **where** the rabbits live’).

Weather / Wether / Whether

Weather is concerned with the atmosphere.

Wether is a castrated ram.

Whether involves possibilities. ('We asked **whether** we could go.')

Whereas / While

Use **whereas** for contrasts and **while** to mean 'during the time that'. **While** can also be used as a substitute for **although** or **but**.

Examples: 'Males are bright orange, **whereas** [not **while**] females are pale brown.'
'The butterfly basked **while** feeding from the flower.'
'**While** foxes are regarded as predators, they do eat some plant matter.'

Who / Whom

Who or Whom?

Whom has been disappearing from spoken English during the past several decades. Despite this, it is still necessary to understand the difference between **who** and **whom** so that the appropriate form can be used in formal writing. **Who** is used when it is the subject of the sentence and **whom** is used when it is the object. For example, consider the sentence 'Jenny interviewed Brian'. 'Jenny' is the subject of the verb ('to interview') and 'Brian' is the object. In other words, Jenny performs the action, and Brian receives it. It would therefore be correct to turn the sentence into either of the following questions: '**Who** interviewed Brian?' and '**Whom** did Jenny interview?' Many people have difficulty in constructing the second question. This is because we are used to sentences beginning with subjects rather than objects. We thus tend to use **who** even if the pronoun concerned is the object. For this reason, **whom** is now seldom used to begin a sentence, although '**with whom**' still seems to be retained.

If you are unsure about which form to use, try converting the sentence so that you use **he/she** (subjects) or **him/her** (objects). Whenever you find that you need to use **he** or **she**, **who** is the correct form to use. If **him** or **her** is appropriate, then **whom** is the correct form to use. Returning to the example, the statement becomes '**She** interviewed **him**'. Thus **who** is the right choice to represent 'Jenny' in a question. **Whom** is the correct substitute for 'Brian' in a question. If you are still in doubt, then use **who**, which has a better chance of being correct.

Using Who / Whom when Referring to Animals

Don't! Instead, use **which** or **that**.

Who's / Whose

Who's is an abbreviation for 'who is' ('**Who's** coming with me?').

In very casual speech we sometimes wrongly use **who's** when referring to something plural, probably because of the difficulty of pronouncing **who're** ('who are'). This should be avoided. It is better not to use either abbreviation in technical reports, although this may be acceptable in other forms of writing.

Whose means 'belonging to whom?' and is a pronoun. It is the possessive form of **who**. ('**Whose** jumper is this?') **Whose** can also be an adjective ('The builder, **whose** name was ...')

You / One

Do not mix **one** and **you** in the same sentence or paragraph.

Avoid using **you** or **one** in Methods sections of a report. Instead of phrasing the methods as a set of instructions, say what was done. Rewrite '**You** need (or '**One** needs') to go and collect the data ...' as 'The data were collected ...' (passive voice) or 'I / We collected the data ...' (active voice).