

Language and spelling

Guidance on grammar, language and spelling.

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A or An

Use “a” and “an” as they would be said.

EXAMPLE

an 18% increase
a NATO paper
a UK organisation
an IT solution

Use “a” for words beginning with “h” when the “h” is pronounced.

EXAMPLE

a historian
an hour

Accept or except

“Accept” means to agree to receive or do.

EXAMPLE

I accept your terms.

“Except” means not including.

EXAMPLE

Bring everything except the tent.

Advice or advise

“Advice” means recommendations about what to do.

EXAMPLE

The advice was very useful.

“Advise” means to recommend something.

EXAMPLE

I advised him to call the police.

Affect or effect

“Affect” means to influence or to adopt.

EXAMPLE

The war affected him greatly.

“Effect” means to accomplish the result of an action.

EXAMPLE

The overall effect was stunning.

Altogether or all together

“Altogether” means completely.

EXAMPLE

There were six altogether.

“All together” means everyone in one place.

EXAMPLE

We were all together in the living room.

Because, due to and since

The words “due to” and “since” shouldn’t be used in place of “because”. “Owing to” can replace “because of”.

It was wet inside owing to the window being open

Not

EXAMPLE

it was due to the rain
it has been wet inside since she opened the window

Due to

“Due to” can be used to mean either “owed to” or “scheduled to”.

EXAMPLE

the money that is due to her from an inheritance
the train is due to arrive at 8:45pm

Since

“Since” is usually used in the past tense.

EXAMPLE

They have known each other since 1982
Mother and I haven’t spoken since the fall of Tobruk

“Since” can be used in the present tense when it refers to the current situation.

EXAMPLE

Since he went to university, he thinks he knows everything

Between or among

Use “between” when referring to two subjects.

EXAMPLE

We divided the money between John and Michael

Use “among” when referring to more than two subjects. Don’t use “amongst”.

Example

EXAMPLE

We shared the sweets among Sarah, Lucy and Clare

Complement or compliment

“Complement” is that which completes or fills up something.

EXAMPLE

A full complement of staff.

“Compliment” is an expression of admiration or praise.

EXAMPLE

He complimented my choice of outfit.

Complementary or complimentary

“Complementary” is completing or making up a whole.

EXAMPLE

The complementary staff.

“Complimentary” means given free of charge.

EXAMPLE

Here are the complimentary peanuts.

Dependant (noun) or dependent (adjective)

“Dependant” means someone who relies on another for support, financial or otherwise.

EXAMPLE

I have six dependants

“Dependent” means depending, relying, contingent or relative.

EXAMPLE

The trip is dependent on the weather

Expenditure

‘The act of spending’ or ‘money spent’. An item cannot have expenditure, it can only have money spent on it.

Fewer or less

Use “less” with nouns that can’t be counted or don’t have a plural.

EXAMPLE

less praise
less rain

In sentences with “than”, use “less” with numbers on their own:

EXAMPLE

The price fell from £18 to less than £12

Use “less” when referring to measurements or time:

EXAMPLE

Companies less than 5 years old are creating jobs
Per capita income is less than \$50 per year
Heath Square is less than 4 miles away

Use “fewer” with nouns in the plural.

EXAMPLE

fewer than 20 employees
fewer people

Don’t use “over” and “under” for quantities. Use less than and fewer than, or more than.

EXAMPLE

more than 6%

Functionality

The capacity to be functional or practical; purpose. Also means ‘a specific application of a computer program’.

Hopefully

“Hopefully” means “full of hope”. Instead, use “it is hoped that” or “we hope”.

However

“However” has two meanings: “nevertheless” and “no matter how”. If you use “however” at the beginning of a sentence to mean “nevertheless”, it must be followed by a comma.

EXAMPLE

The data are usually consistent. However, rounding can cause differences.

If you use “however” to mean “no matter how”, a comma is not required.

EXAMPLE

However many times I write this, it’s never easy.

Don’t use “however” as a substitute for “but”.

EXAMPLE

It’s raining today, however we hope it will be dry tomorrow.

-ise and -ize

Use “-ise”, not “-ize” as a word ending. The Oxford English Dictionary uses “-ize”, please ignore this.

EXAMPLE

organise
prioritise

Illegitimate births

Use “born outside marriage”.

Imply or infer

“Imply” is to insinuate, signify or hint

EXAMPLE

The statistician implied the crime levels had gone down.

“Infer” is to draw a conclusion from something.

EXAMPLE

From the statistics we infer that the crime levels have gone down.

Important or interesting

If something is important or interesting, you should also say why and to whom.

EXAMPLE

The crime statistics are important to the police in each area, as they can use them for employment estimates.

Licence (noun) or license (verb)

“Licence” means being allowed or given leave. A patent or grant of permission.

EXAMPLE

The police asked to see my licence.

“License” means to give permission or allow.

EXAMPLE

The premises is licensed for alcohol.

Like

Use “such as”, not “like”

EXAMPLE

stylistic devices such as bold and italic.

Mitigate

To appease, to make something more easily borne or to lessen the severity, violence or evil of something.

Of, from, with and to

Compared with and compared to

Use “compared with” when pointing out the similarities and differences of subjects.

EXAMPLE

full-time workers in England earned £316 per week compared with only £284 per week in Wales.

Use “compared to” when pointing out similarities.

EXAMPLE

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Use “in comparison with” and never “in comparison to”.

Consists of and comprises

Use “consists of” or “comprises” but never use “comprises of”.

EXAMPLE

The pudding consists of cream, berries and meringue

The pudding comprises cream, berries and meringue

Different from/than/to

Use “different from”, “different to” and “different than”.

Example

EXAMPLE

It is different from the original version
It is different to the original version
It is different than the original version

Similar to

Use “similar to”, and never use “with” or “as”.

EXAMPLE

It is similar to the original version.

Practice (noun) or practise (verb)

“Practice” is the application or use of an idea, belief, or method

EXAMPLE

The practice of hanging was outlawed.

“Practise” means to perform an activity or exercise

EXAMPLE

I am practising my juggling.

Principal or principle

“Principal” means:

- Adjective = taking the first place.
- Noun = the head of a college or university.

EXAMPLE

The principal idea for school closure. The principal closed the school.

“Principle” means a law or premise.

EXAMPLE

The school was closed on principle.

Program or programme

Write “computer program” but every other type uses the extra “-me” spelling.

EXAMPLE

television programme
theatre programme

Stationary or stationery

“Stationary” means not moving

EXAMPLE

The train was stationary.

“Stationery” means writing or office materials

EXAMPLE

The pen is in the stationery cupboard.

That or which

“That” is used for part of a sentence that restricts another part.

EXAMPLE

The statistics that show the decline are invaluable.

“Which” is used for part of a sentence that doesn’t restrict another part.

EXAMPLE

The statistics, which were produced this week, show that there has been a decline.

www, internet and online

“web”, “world wide web”, “www”, “internet” and “online” are always lower case. “Online” is always written as one word.

EXAMPLE

web
world wide web
www
website
homepage
web page

Don't use the following words:

- agenda (unless it is for a meeting)
- advancing
- collaborate (use 'working with')
- combating
- commit/pledge (we're either doing something or we're not)
- countering
- deliver (pizzas, post and services are delivered – not abstract concepts)
- deploy (unless it is military or software)
- dialogue (we speak to people)
- disincentivise (and incentivise)
- empower
- facilitate (instead, say something specific about how you are helping)
- focussing
- foster (unless it is a child)
- impact (as a verb)
- initiate
- key (unless it unlocks something. A subject or thing is probably 'important')
- land (as a verb. Only use if you are writing about aircraft)
- leverage (unless in the financial sense)

- liaise
- overarching
- progress (as a verb. What are you actually doing?)
- promote (unless it concerns an ad campaign or a marketing promotion)
- robust (unless referring to statistical estimates)
- slimming down (processes don't diet – state what's happening)
- streamline
- strengthening (unless it's strengthening bridges or other structures)
- tackling (unless it's rugby, football, or some other sport)
- transforming (explain what you are actually doing to change something)
- utilise (this means to use as something other than its intended purpose)

Remember these points when writing in [plain English](#):

- drive (you can drive vehicles; not schemes or people)
- drive out (unless it is cattle)
- going forward (unlikely we are giving travel directions)
- in order to (don't use it)
- one-stop shop (we are not a retail outlet)
- ring-fencing.

Use abbreviations and acronyms for organisations and terms that appear frequently. Only use them where they are helpful. Never use full stops or italics.

Write the name or term out in full the first time you use it, followed by the abbreviation in brackets. After that, use the abbreviation. Acronyms need to be written out in full again the first instance in each section of your article or page.

EXAMPLE

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a continuous survey. Users of the LFS...

Exception

In text, use UK Statistics Authority the first time and then The Authority. Never use UKSA, as this is the registered trademark of the UK Shareholders Alliance.

You should repeat the full term if you need to refresh the reader's memory, for example at the beginning of

chapters. Be aware that, on GOV.UK, if a user hovers their mouse over an acronym the full term is shown.

Commonly known abbreviations

Where something is commonly known by its abbreviation, only use the abbreviation.

EXAMPLE

UK
EU
US
BBC
IT
NHS
G7
G20

Capitalisation

Abbreviations and acronyms generally use capitals (BBC, NATO), even when the subject may be lower case (initial teacher training = ITT). Sometimes they can be a mixture of upper and lower case (VoIP, DfE). This usually occurs in brand names like PowerPoint, PlayStation, iPhone.

Cross references

If you are referring to something in the same document, use upper case:

EXAMPLE

this is mentioned in Chapter 2
see Table 3
Figure 4 shows this

Pages should always be lower case:

EXAMPLE

page 37
pages 346 to 358

In references, always use lower case:

Example for references and indexes

EXAMPLE

ch 2
table 3
fig 4
p 37
pp 346 to 358<

Make sure that:

- there is a space between “pp” and the figure
- there are no full stops after any abbreviations

Foreign abbreviations

Never italicise these. The following list shows the only foreign abbreviations that should be used.

ad hoc

This means “for this special purpose”. It is never hyphenated, even when used as a compound adjective.

EXAMPLE

ad hoc request

eg

Exempli gratia means “for example”. Use this expression only in tables, where space is limited, and in internal correspondence.

etc

A contraction of “et cetera” which means “and other things”.

ie

This means “that is”. Only use this in tables, where space is limited, and in internal correspondence.

NB

Don’t use this, write ‘Note:’ instead.

Write classifications in full the first time they are mentioned in each section and then use the abbreviation. When numbers or dates are part of the abbreviation, avoid using brackets and give the year in full.

EXAMPLE

Standard Industrial Classification 2007: SIC 2007
Standard Occupational Classification 2010: SOC 2010
National Statistics Socio-economic Classification: NS-SEC
Statistical classification of products by activity 2008: CPA 2008
National Statistics Country Classification: NSCC
Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics: NUTS1, NUTS2, NUTS3

For SIC and SOC, insert “UK” the first time they are mentioned if you need to stress that it is UK-specific. “UK” does not need to be repeated if the meaning is clear.

EXAMPLE

UK SIC 2007

Use ‘data’ as a plural.

EXAMPLE

The data are for 2012 to 2013

When referring to groups of people, use:

- people not persons in text (“persons” can be used in tables)
- adults: men and women
- children up to 16 years old: boys and girls
- a mixture of adults and children: males and females
- children up to 16 years old: “young people” or “under 16s”
- “disabled people” or “people with disabilities” NOT “the disabled” or “the handicapped”
- “homeless people” NOT “the homeless”
- “older people” NOT “the elderly”

Note that common usage changes so be sensitive. If in doubt, ask people for their preference or use the terminology that groups use to refer to themselves.

Nouns such as “committee” and “government” are singular.

EXAMPLE

the committee has reached a decision

The Office for National Statistics is always singular.

Some nouns ending in 's' are always singular.

EXAMPLE

news

Sex is biological (male or female) while gender has connotations of upbringing and choice (feminine or masculine). People can choose which gender to be, irrespective of their biological sex.

Always use the word "sex" except for the following:

- specifically discussing people's gender (social construct) as opposed to their sex (biological)
- you are reporting on a survey that specifically asked about "gender" rather than "sex"
- commonly used and recognised terms, such as "gender pay gap"

EXAMPLE

There are two sexes that children can be born into: male and female.
The "gender pay gap" has decreased over the last 5 years.

Man or men and woman or women

A population made up of only adult males should be described as "men". If it includes children, use "males". If it is only children, use "boys".

EXAMPLE

The over-18 football team was a group of men.
The football team was a group of males.
The under-10s football team was a group of boys.

A population that is made up of adult women only should be described as "women". If it includes children, use "females". If it is children only, use "girls".

EXAMPLE

The over-18 football team was a group of women.
The football team was a group of females.

The under-10s football team was a group of girls.

When there is a need to refer to a person's race or ethnicity, best practice is to refer to specific ethnic groups separately.

EXAMPLE

Pakistani and Chinese

Note the use of initial capitals for ethnic group names and remember that White British is itself an ethnic group.

If it is not possible to use separate groups then broad ethnic group categories may be used.

EXAMPLE

Asian/Asian British

Ethnic minorities

Use terms like "ethnic minority", "ethnic minorities", "ethnic minority population(s)" etc, instead of acronyms such as BME and BAME which are frequently used to refer to all except the White ethnic group. This is to avoid highlighting particular groups above others.

The Ethnic Minority (GB) group includes all ethnic groups other than White British.

Where the White British group is not available, as in Northern Ireland or UK data, the Ethnic Minority (UK) group may be used instead, which includes all ethnic groups other than White. Remember that the White group also includes some minority White ethnic groups.

Ethnic groups vary, so if you do combine different ethnic groups into a single minority group, make sure it is clear who you are talking about and that it is not misleading:

- always make sure you explain what you mean by the term "ethnic minority" or "ethnic minorities"
- use the definition that is most appropriate to your context or data

Further details on how to present ethnic group data can be found in '[Ethnic Group Statistics: a guide for the collection and classification of ethnicity data](#)' (ONS 2011).

Addresses should only use punctuation when written across a line.

EXAMPLE

Government Buildings, Cardiff Road, Newport, South Wales, NP10 8XG
Government Buildings
Cardiff Road
Newport
South Wales
NP10 8XG

Use the plus sign, international dialling code and the area code. Add space between the international dialling code and the rest of the telephone number.

EXAMPLE

+44 (0)20 7273 1234

Releases that are officially designated as National Statistics should display the logo and must include the following text.

“The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registrations Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs
- are well explained and readily accessible
- are produced according to sound methods
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.”

The term “National Statistics” shouldn’t appear in a citation unless it forms part of a title or series name. It also shouldn’t be written in footnotes to a table. The National Statistics quality mark is enough to tell readers that the contents of the document meet National Statistics quality standards.

Contributor or respondent

For ONS surveys, use “respondent”.

Enquiry or inquiry

An enquiry is a question. An inquiry is an investigation.

EXAMPLE

press enquiries
Annual Business Inquiry

For surveys, use “survey”, even when referring to, for example, the Annual Business Inquiry.

Significant

This term has a specific meaning in statistics. Don’t use it in a statistical context unless you have a particular point to make about the statistical significance of an estimate. If you do have a point to be made, always write as “statistically significant”.

Capital letters should always be used for proper nouns, at the beginning of sentences and in acronyms. As capital letters are more difficult to read, don’t use them in any other context.

Proper nouns

Use capital letters for proper nouns, which are names that refer to a specific thing.

EXAMPLE

1991 Census
World Health Organization
National Statistics
Parliament
Ministry for Health
Population (Statistics) Act 1938
Inner London
Output Area
Small Area

Compass directions and regions

Compass directions and regions are always lower case.

EXAMPLE

the south-east (direction)
the north (region)
western counties(direction)

Exceptions

East End
West End (London)
Middle East

Central America, North America, South America

Publications

Use title case for publication titles.

EXAMPLE

Psychology Today

People and jobs

Job titles should be lower case, except when attributed to a person.

EXAMPLE

managing director
chief executive
prime minister
John Pullinger, National Statistician
Prime Minister David Cameron

Capital letters are always used for The Queen.

Lower case

Begin the following words and phrases with a lower case letter:

EXAMPLE

the census information
member state, accession state
section (when referring to an Act)
spring, summer, autumn, winter
local authority, health authority, unitary authority, ward, clinical commissioning groups

Spellings should be checked against the [Oxford English Dictionary](#). The only exception is that we use the “-ise” word ending and not “-ize”. Always use the spellchecker before submitting your content, and make sure that the spellchecker is set to UK rather than US spellings. Always use the facility in your CMS, if possible. Your work must always be proofread too, as correctly spelt words can be used in the wrong context.

EXAMPLE

You have to reap what you sew

Use UK rather than United Kingdom.

- Great Britain is England, Wales and Scotland.
- The UK is Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Use Ireland to refer to both the country and the island.

Use the Republic of Ireland to distinguish between it and Northern Ireland.

EXAMPLE

Ireland is an island to the west of England.
The Republic of Ireland's capital is Dublin, and the capital of Northern Ireland is Belfast.

South Wales is not a defined geographical area. Refer to it as "south Wales" unless it is used as part of a proper noun.

EXAMPLE

South Wales Police has been tackling bicycle crime across south Wales.

The [ONS Geography Guide to Presenting Statistics](#) PDF provides a full list of UK countries and regions (on page 5).