

Style.ONS

Editorial standards for statistics

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This style guide is up-to-date as of **25/03/2015**. These standards are regularly reviewed so please check style.ons.gov.uk for recent updates and replace this version if necessary.

Numbers

Writing numbers

Write all numbers as numerals.

Example

1
10
100
1,000

Write out rankings first to ninth, then use numerals. Don't use superscript for "st", "nd", "rd" and "th".

Example

first
10th

A sequence of numbers should use the same format for both, which should follow the higher number.

Example

6th out of 12

Don't use abbreviations of "numbers", such as "no" or "nos". They can be read incorrectly.

Use commas after every 3 decimal places in numbers of 4 digits or more, and never spaces. Years should have no punctuation.

Example

100,000
2,548
1995

Avoid writing sets of numbers together.

Example

In 1961 just over 2,500 births were recorded

Not

In 1961 2,543 births were recorded

Use a 0 where there's no digit before the decimal point in a number.

Example

0.6%

Don't start a sentence with a numeral. Rearrange the sentence accordingly.

Example

The number of people who drive a car is 52.4 million

Not

52.4 million people drive a car

Generalised numbers

Write out generalised numbers.

Example

hundreds of years
in their thousands

Millions/billions

Write out and use lower case.

Example

2.5 million
148 billion

Don't use "0.xx million" for numbers less than 1 million, unless part of a sequence of numbers

Page numbers

Use the fewest digits possible while remaining clear. Separate them with 'to'.

Example

1 to 4
10 to 18
132 to 148

Plus and minus

In text, when referring to positive and negative numbers, write out "positive" and "negative" in full.

Example

positive 7
negative 3

In a dataset, use the symbols with no space between them and the number.

Example

+7
-3

Fractions

Write out and hyphenate fractions.

Example

two-thirds
three-quarters

Avoid using too many fractions as it can be difficult to compare several together. Also avoid using large denominators.

Example

three-sixteenths

Write out decimal fractions as numerals. Use the same number format for a sequence of fractions and decimals.

Example

0.75 and 0.45

Percentages

Use the symbol with no space between it and the number.

Example

6%

Always write “percentage” and never %age.

Use the same number of decimal places for a sequence of decimal numbers.

Example

6.25% and 7.60%

A percentage point is the difference between percentages. A value of 10% falling by one percentage point becomes 9% (10% has ten percentage points). A fall of 1% would result in a value of 9.9%

Dates

Use the format “[Date] [Month] [Year]” (depending on what information you have) written out with no commas. If the day of the week is relevant, then put it before the date. No “st”, “nd”, “rd” and “th”.

Example

12 March 2014
Monday 3 March 2014

Write out months. If space is limited use the shortened version with no punctuation, but not for June and July.

Example

Jan
Apr
Sept

Date spans

Use the format “[date] to [date]”. If using months, repeat the year after each month if the period spans years.

Example

2009 to 2010
July to September 2014
July 2013 to September 2014

For a period between 2 dates, use the format “between [date] and [date]”.

Example

between 1986 and 2014
between July and September 2014

Decades

Decades should only have an apostrophe when they are a possessive, not a contraction.

Example

a 1960s' child
the 1960s were great

Centuries

Use ordinal numbers.

Example

21st century

Quarters

Use “[Quarter 1]” only. Always explain which months are included in the quarter.

Example

Business Investment, Quarter 1 Jan to Mar 2014 provisional results

Non-calendar years

For non-calendar years, state the type of year and only the ending year in the time span.

Example

financial year ending 2011
academic year ending 2013

Time

Don't use the 24-hour clock. Don't insert spaces between the number and the letters, and don't use any punctuation except as shown.

Example

9am
10:30am
midday
midnight
11:30pm

Use the same number format for time spans.

Example

8:00am to 5:30pm
1pm to 3pm

Ages

Use the format "aged [age] years".

Example

aged 9 years

Use the format "aged [age] to [age] years".

Example

aged 9 to 10 years

Include the months or weeks for ages under a year.

Example

aged 9 weeks

If you refer to ages as “[age]-year-old”, include the hyphens.

Example

24-year-old
16 to 24-year-old men

Write decades as an age as numerals.

Example

women in their 40s

Bottom limits for age restrictions should use “aged[age] and over”. Don’t use the plus sign.

Example

aged 75 and over

Money

Use the major currency unit before the amount. Don’t use decimals unless using smaller units.

Example

£15
\$76.56

In a sequence of numbers, use the same number of decimal places, even if every number doesn’t have a smaller unit.

Example

£10.43 rising to £12.00.

Don’t use “0.xx million” for amounts less than 1 million, unless in a sequence of numbers.

Example

£3.5 million, £6.5 million and £0.9 million

Write out the smaller unit in full.

Example

15 pence

Currency should use lower case.

Example

The euro is stronger than the pound.

Write out currency as “British pounds”, or “American dollars”.

Measurements and units

Use metric units of measurement, except in specific cases where imperial units are still used as standard.

Example

miles
yards
feet and inches
pints (for beer, cider and milk)
acres (for land registration)

Write out measurements at first mention, then abbreviate. If it’s only mentioned once, don’t abbreviate.

Example

12 kilometres per hour (kph)

Abbreviations shouldn’t have full stops and are always singular. Use a space between the number and the abbreviation, except with one-letter abbreviations.

Write out “miles” and “metres” in full.

Example

12 kph
9L
5 metres
10 miles

Language and spelling

Words to watch

Contents:

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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 6 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”.

Example

It was wet inside owing to the window being open

Not

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 2 subjects.

Example

We divided the money between John and Michael

Use “among” when referring to more than 2 subjects. Don’t use “amongst”.

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 2 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".

Wrong 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

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

Words not to use

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
- 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.

Abbreviations

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.

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
BBC
TUC
IT

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 for text

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

Pages should always be lower case:

Example for text

page 37
pages 346 to 358

In references, always use lower case:

Example for references and indexes

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.

Groups

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.

Collective nouns

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

Gender and sex

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 (choice) as opposed to their sex (innate)
- referring to adults in a social context, so that the reader will appreciate that you are talking about adults as they choose to represent themselves
- you are reporting on a survey that specifically asked about 'gender' rather than 'sex'

Example

There are two sexes that children can be born into: male and female.
He identifies with the feminine gender.
In the country, 56% of the population have a male gender.

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 girls, 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.

Race and ethnicity

Do not refer to a person's race or ethnicity unless it is essential information.

Where possible, refer to specific ethnic groups separately.

Example

Pakistani and Chinese people

Ethnic groups vary, so if you do refer to different ethnic minorities as a single group make sure this will not be misleading.

Example

Ethnic minorities are disadvantaged by this.

The terms 'ethnic minority' or 'ethnic minority population(s)' can be used to refer to ethnic groups other than White British, or ethnic groups other than White.

Always make sure you explain what you mean by the term and either:

- use the definition that is most appropriate to your context or data
- if you are not writing about data and neither definition is more appropriate, use the term "ethnic minority" to refer to ethnic groups other than White British

Remember that White minority groups can be described as 'ethnic minorities' and that 'White British' is itself an ethnic group.

When referring to specific ethnic groups, follow the terminology used in ['Ethnic Group Statistics: a guide for the collection and classification of ethnicity data'](#) (ONS 2011).

Note the use of initial capitals for group names.

Addresses and telephone numbers

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

Data

Use 'data' as a plural.

Example

The data are for 2012 to 2013

National Statistics

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.

Statistical language

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".

Using capital letters

Capital letters should always be used for proper nouns, at the beginning of sentences, in acronyms and in publication titles. 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
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, primary care trust

Using spellcheckers

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

UK, Great Britain and Ireland

Use UK rather than United Kingdom.

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

Don't use the term "the British Isles". Use "Britain and Ireland" instead.

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.

Punctuation

Ampersand

Write out “and” at all times. Ampersands should never be used, even in tables, charts and graphs.

Example

distribution, hotels and restaurants sector
HMRC

Ampersands don't simplify reading. A serial comma must be added instead.

Example

distribution, hotels and restaurants, and transport, storage and communication sectors

Not

distribution, hotels & restaurants and transport, storage & communication sectors

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two functions:

- to show possession
- to show letters are missing.

Example

It's always a good idea to follow house style (contraction of “it is”)
Please use Sarah's statistics (showing possession)

Possession

The apostrophe shows that something is owned by someone. For example, the Statistician's Office is the office owned by the Statistician. Depending on who is doing the owning, the apostrophe is used differently.

If the possessor is singular, use an apostrophe followed by “s”.

Example

The report's contents (contents belonging to the report)
The statistician's opinion (opinion belonging to the statistician)

If the possessor is singular and ends in s, use an apostrophe followed by “s”.

Example

James’s driving test
ONS’s web standards

If the possessor is plural and doesn’t end in s, use an apostrophe followed by “s”.

Example

The women’s average salary
The department’s staff

If the possessor is plural and ends in s, use an apostrophe after “s”.

Example

The statistics’ source
The statisticians’ discussion

Contraction

The apostrophe here is used to show where letters are missing in a word. For example: do not › don’t

Contractions should be used. Avoid using ‘should’ve’, ‘could’ve’, ‘would’ve’ though, as these are hard to read.

The most common are:

Word	Contraction
Are not	Aren’t
Cannot	Can’t
Could not	Couldn’t
Did not	Didn’t
Does not	Doesn’t
Do not	Don’t
Had not	Hadn’t
Have not	Haven’t
He had/would	He’d
He will/shall	He’ll

He is/has	He's
I had/would	I'd
I will/shall	I'll
I am	I'm
I have	I've
Is not	Isn't
It is/has	It's
Must not	Mustn't
Shall not	Shan't
She had/would	She'd
She will/shall	She'll
She is/has	She's
Should not	Shouldn't
That is/has	That's
There is/has	There's
They had/would	They'd
They will/shall	They'll
They are	They're
They have	They've
We had/would	We'd
We are	We're
We have	We've
Were not	Weren't
What will/shall	What'll
What are	What're
What is/has	What's
What have	What've
Where is/has	Where's
Who had/would	Who'd

Who will/shall	Who'll
Who are	Who're
Who is/has	Who's
Will not	Won't
Would not	Wouldn't
You had/would	You'd
You will/shall	You'll
You are	You're
You have	You've

Brackets

Avoid using too many brackets in text and make sure they're always closed. If the whole statement is within brackets the final full stop should be inside them.

Use round brackets when adding supplementary information to the text.

Example

The arithmetic was wrong (which is unheard of)
 The Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA)
 (The Authority has the final say on these.)

Use square brackets when adding comments or corrections.

Example

The judge stated: "You [Mr Sykes] have suffered."
 On Twitter she said: "The statistecs [sic] seemed wrong"

Bullet points

Use bullet points to make text easier to read. Make sure that:

- you always use a lead-in line
- always use a space between the lead-in line and the bullet points
- the bullets make sense running on from the lead-in line
- you use lower case at the start of the bullet, unless it starts with a proper noun
- you don't use full stops within bullet points – where possible start another bullet point or use commas, dashes or semicolons to expand
- you don't put 'or', 'and' after the bullets
- there is no punctuation at the end of bullet points
- if you add links they appear within the text and not as the whole bullet
- there is no full stop after the last bullet point

Colons

Use a colon to introduce an idea, list or quotation. The clause before the colon must be a full sentence. If not, don't use a colon.

An idea

Use the colon to introduce an idea that's an explanation or continuation of the one before the colon.

Example

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: they are fascinating.

Start the explanation or continuation with a capital letter if it's a formal quote that's a full sentence, or more than one sentence.

Example

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: They are fascinating and I don't know why anyone would think differently. Truly they have made my life better.

There is one thing you need to know about statistics: "A better thing has never been created," said the Chief Statistician.

A list

Use a colon to introduce a list.

Example

The statistics incorporate varied data: housing, schooling and population information.

Not

The statistics incorporate: housing, schooling and population information.

A quotation

Use a colon to introduce a quotation. The quotation should begin with a capital letter.

Example

The judge stated: "You have suffered."

Commas

There are 3 situations in which to use the comma.

A list

Use a comma to separate 3 or more items in a list.

Example

For breakfast there are sausages, bacon, beans and tomato available.

The comma before "and" is usually removed. However, if the last two items in the list could merge together, it is better to separate them with a serial comma to avoid confusion. This is the only time it should be used.

Example

My favourite ice cream flavours are strawberry, chocolate, banana, and toffee.

This shows that banana is a separate flavour to toffee, so people don't think it is "banana and toffee".

To separate introductory parts

Use a comma to separate the introductory part of a sentence from the main part.

Example

Despite his misgivings, the scientist felt the experiment went well.

Use a comma if the introductory part of the sentence changes the meaning.

Example

Sadly, the numbers showed he had lost the election.

Use a comma if the introductory part of the sentence can merge into the sentence itself.

Example

Inside, his heart was beating fast

Not

Inside his heart was beating fast

The comma can be left out if the introductory part of the sentence is very short and doesn't merge.

Example

Soon the statistics will be on the website.

To separate asides in a sentence

Use a comma to separate anything that is not vital to understanding the meaning of the sentence. There should be a comma at the beginning of the aside and at the end.

Example

The monthly death statistics, not always the most cheerful, were always informative.

Dashes and hyphens

An en dash looks like this: –

A hyphen looks like this: -

Some content management systems, including GOV.UK's Publisher, don't recognise the en dash and will replace it with a hyphen. If in Microsoft Word, use en dashes.

Microsoft Word automatically converts hyphens to en dashes when they are preceded by a space. Elsewhere, you can use "Ctrl" and "-" (minus on the number keypad). Be aware that the minus sign and the hyphen are easily mistaken for each other.

Adding extra information

This is a good device for adding extra information that isn't essential to the rest of the sentence. Be careful: these can make writing difficult to read if overused.

Example

There are some statistics – fascinating ones at that – on the ONS website.

Breaking a sentence

This shows other kinds of break in a sentence where a comma, semicolon, or colon would be traditionally used.

Example

There are some statistics on the website – they are fascinating

For headlines

Example

Consumer Services Price Indices – expected availability

Hyphens must be used for the following situations.

Hyphens have several specific uses. These are for linking, and for compound modifiers.

Linking

Use hyphens as prefixes and suffixes to words, or show that these are required for a word to be understood.

Example

Henri IV betrayed his co-religionists

Hyphens are used for all words with “e” as a prefix, except for “email”.

Example

e-commerce
e-book
e-learning

Hyphens are used for all words with ‘co’ as a prefix.

Example

co-ordinate
co-operate

Hyphens aren't used for words with "re" as a prefix, unless the word afterwards begins with an "e".

Example

replay
re-examine

If in doubt, check using the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

Compound modifiers

Hyphens are used in compound words where component words have a combined meaning or a relationship.

Example

a five-storey building,
a well-explained report
the long-term effects.

However, if you use this after the subject of the sentence, it is not hyphenated.

Example

a report that was well explained

It is best to check if the word is a compound modifier in the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

Ellipsis

An ellipsis is a row of 3 full stops, used to show that words have been left out. How it looks depends on where it is in the sentence:

The beginning of a sentence

There should be no space between the ellipsis and the word.

Example

...We are aware that each country is unique.

In the middle of a sentence

There should be single spaces before and after the ellipsis.

Example

We are aware that each country ... is unique.

The end of a sentence

There should be no space before it and no full stop.

Example

We are aware that each country is unique...

If this is in a quotation, the sentence can be closed by a full stop after the quotation mark

Example

“We are aware that each country is unique...”.

Exclamation mark

Exclamation marks are generally used to show emotion, commands and interjections. Don't use these unless quoting directly.

Full stops

Full stops are used to end sentences. Only use one space after them. Don't use them after initials, or in titles, abbreviations or acronyms. They also shouldn't be used in any heading, subheading, title, date or name that occupies a line to itself. If a sentence's final clause is in brackets, and that clause ends in ? or !, then there must be a full stop outside the brackets. Full stops should also be used to end release calendar summaries as screen readers need this to stop reading.

Example

Mr J A Rank
Miss
etc
BBC
“What do you think it is?”

Question marks

Question marks are used to show the end of a question. The sentence after the question mark always begins with a capital letter.

Example

Where have you put the release?

If it is used in the middle of a sentence, it is followed either by a word starting with a lower case letter or another punctuation mark, such as an en dash.

Example

“Where now?”, they wonder.

A question mark isn’t needed after sentences framed as questions out of politeness or common usage:

Example

May I take this opportunity to thank you for your contribution to this project

When a question takes the form of direct speech, the first letter should be capitalised and the whole question put in quotation marks:

Example

“Why are there discrepancies in the count?” she asked

Quotation marks

Use double quotation marks. Single quotation marks are only for quotations within quotations, and titles of articles in books and journals.

Example

‘A Lesson in Empathy’ in Psychology Today magazine

As a general rule, if a quotation is 35 to 40 words or more, it should be distinguished from the body of the text. This is usually done by indenting it. Don’t use quotation marks.

Semicolon

Use a semicolon to show a link between 2 clauses. This should not be used if it makes a sentence over 25 words.

It is used to show that the second clause of a sentence is dependent on the first – that there is a link between them.

Example

Each person is different; it's what makes life exciting

The fact that each person is different is the thing that makes life exciting. There is nothing else that can make life exciting in this situation, apart from each person being different. The ideas before and after the semicolon must be full sentences that could stand alone if necessary. If not, a semicolon must not be used.

Example

Each person is different
It's what makes life exciting

Slash

The / symbol is usually used to show “or”. Use “or” instead of the slash to avoid confusion. If a slash is needed, there should be no space either side of it.

Example

masculine or feminine or neuter
house name or number

In statistical work, the slash can indicate rates, such as miles/day or input/output.

In computing a forward slash / is used differently to a backslash \ so make sure you use the correct one.

How to write for the web

Plain English

The [UK Statistics Authority standards](#) state plain English should be used:

Include an impartial narrative in plain English that draws out the main messages from the statistics

Avoid: Language that needs to be “translated” by journalists or commentators into simpler English.

Plain English is clear language, with no jargon, that is understood by all readers. This isn’t “dumbing down” information, but opening up statistics and statistical commentary to everyone. Users don’t stop understanding text because it’s written clearly, but they stop understanding when it is complex.

Don’t use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. You can generally avoid this by breaking down what you are actually doing. Where technical terms can’t be avoided, they should be explained in the text, not just in a footnote.

Find out more about [words to watch](#) and [words not to use](#).

To write in plain English, think about the following:

Who’s your audience?

Unless you know otherwise, think of your audience as people who take an interest in your subject but have no detailed knowledge. Use your writing to guide readers through the subject and help them identify what is most important.

What are you going to say?

Think about what your readers want to know. You do not need to tell them everything. Use your opening paragraphs to:

- summarise succinctly what you’re writing about
- tell readers what information they’ll find
- put your research into context.

Do

Be concise

When writing:

- try to limit each paragraph to 1 or 2 short sentences
- be clear
- avoid complicated sentence structures
- stick to 1 idea or theme per paragraph
- break up large blocks of text with subheadings

Be consistent

Be consistent in the way you write in terms of:

- the style
- the tone
- the level of language
- the terminology used and its explanation.

Keep it short and simple (KISS)

KISS stands for 'keep it short and simple'. This is the principle that information is more easily understood if language is kept simple.

Don't use 2 words where 1 plain word will do, and always choose the shortest appropriate words or phrases:

- don't try to cram in too much information
- stick to 1 main idea or statement per sentence, with no more than 1 or 2 supporting clauses
- cut out unnecessary words; it makes the important facts more memorable
- don't start 2 consecutive sentences with 'The', if you can avoid doing so

Avoid phrases such as 'in the event of', 'by virtue of the fact that', 'the question as to whether' and 'if the possibility exists'. Instead, use 'if', 'because', 'whether' and 'if possible'.

Use the active voice

Example

The statistics show...

Not

This is shown by the statistics

Don't

Be ambiguous

Sentences that can be read in several different ways may be misleading.

Example

Vivian worked on the development stage of the project and is now part of the policy group with responsibility for legislation.

The sentence reads as though the policy group is responsible for legislation. In fact, it's Vivian.

It should read:

Example

Vivian worked on the development stage of the project and is now part of the policy group, where she has responsibility for legislation.

Make sure that there's no ambiguity in your writing, and that your meaning is clear.

Use repetition

Avoid using words or phrases more than once in the same sentence (strictly speaking, you shouldn't repeat within paragraphs).

Similarly, don't repeat phrases such as 'the Short-term Output Indicators' throughout a document. You could refer to them as 'the Indicators', or use a standard abbreviation (but try to avoid using too many abbreviations and acronyms).

Also avoid using words that repeat something already implied in the same sentence (otherwise known as tautology).

Example

I might possibly
The Quarterly Report is produced quarterly

Use mismatched words and phrases

This is where a list of items doesn't match the verb used in the sentence.

Example

This book examines the plans, decisions and talks held during the conflict.

The verb “held” refers to “plans, decisions and talks”, but you can’t “hold” a plan or a decision. To solve this problem, split the sentence into 2 parts and add another verb.

Example

This book examines the plans and decisions made, and the talks held...

Use a dangling participle

This is a phrase that qualifies the wrong part of a sentence.

Example

Surrounded by enemies on every shore, Hitler reasoned that the British would soon surrender.

The sentence implies that Hitler was surrounded by enemies, which is incorrect.

The sentence should read: “Hitler reasoned that the British, surrounded by enemies on every shore, would soon surrender.”

Use jargon

Always use [plain English](#) and be wary of any [words to watch](#) or [words not to use](#).

Search engine optimisation

What is search engine optimisation?

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of making a web page show on a search engine’s results. When you search using a search engine, the better optimised the page, the higher up it shows on the list of results. This works for searches within a website, and using a search engine. The 3 most important sections are the keywords, metadata description and titles.

Keywords

These are words or phrases which are relevant to the content. Search engines use these to rank the contents of a page. Check if your website has a synonym list, as this will show words which are related and linked together automatically, such as “GDP” and “gross domestic product”. These words shouldn’t be added in separately.

When writing keywords:

- use a maximum of 5 keywords (too many will push the content further down search results)
- make sure each word or phrase is no more than 30 characters long (including spaces)
- include relevant words or phrases that are in your content
- make sure keywords are specific and unique
- research what search terms people use when looking for your content (sites such as Google Trends are useful here)
- if you are using acronyms, include the acronym and the full name
- check if your website has a synonym list before adding keywords
- use lower case

Keywords shouldn't:

- repeat any words that are in the title of your content
- include the singular and plural of a word, such as "property" and "properties"
- include separate terms from phrases, such as "equality training" and "diversity training" when referring to "equality and diversity training"

Metadata descriptions

The metadata description is the summary of the release content. It is mainly used for search purposes and should be searchable. This can make up the text that appears in search results. Users should be able to immediately understand what the link contains.

The description should:

- be an accurate, concise and clear description of the content
- be "frontloaded", with a summary of the content at the start of the description
- not start with phrases such as "This page provides..."
- have a unique description that is specific to the content, which doesn't repeat the title
- be no more than 160 characters including spaces (search engines ignore any text over this)

Titles

Titles appear in search results and should:

- accurately describe the statistics, using plain English
- include the geographical area and period covered by the content
- be unique
- use sentence case as this is easier to read, for example: "The adventure begins in earnest"

Inverted pyramid

This is the best practice style for web writing. The pyramid means placing information in order of importance. The nub of the story – who, why what, where and when – appears in the first paragraphs. This should be a conclusion of the main facts. Other facts are included in descending order of importance.



Paragraphs

Paragraphs should:

- be tightly written with compact sentences that follow a logical order
- be no more than 6 sentences
- lead with a sentence that introduces the information contained in the paragraph, meaning readers can skim through the information
- draw the reader on by making one paragraph lead naturally into the next
- be able to make complete sense on its own
- cover one subject

If a large chunk of text contains paragraphs on different topics, subdivide the chunk into different sections to make it easier to read.

Sentences

Sentences should be no longer than 25 words. If they are any longer they need to be divided into 2.

A sentence should not start with a figure. The sentence should be restructured.

Example

Left-handed people make up 47% of the UK population.

For avoiding problems in construction see [Don't](#) under Plain English.

Reading age

Half of the UK working population have a reading age of 11-years-old or younger. It's important to present information clearly for users.

Aim for the following statistics:

- an average sentence length of 12 words
- Fleisch-Kincaid reading ease score of 60 and over

The Fleisch-Kincaid score tells you how easily understandable text is to read. If the score is high, the sentence is more readable. To find this in Microsoft Word, see the instructions below.

- Click the Microsoft Office Button, and then click 'Word Options'.
- Click 'Proofing'.
- Make sure 'Check grammar with spelling' is selected.
- Under 'When correcting grammar in Word', select the 'Show readability statistics' check box.

F pattern

Eye-tracking studies have been carried out to analyse which areas of web pages web users viewed the most.

The studies found that there were dramatic differences between how people read online content and print. Whilst reading print content, users tend to read line by line, from left to right in Western languages. For digital content, the studies found the predominant reading pattern formed an [F shape](#). First, users read horizontally across the upper part of the page, then move down the page and read horizontally across. Finally, users scan vertically down the left-hand side.

This means that web content needs to be written differently to print content. The most important information needs to go at the beginning of sentences. Users can then decide if this is what they want to read and continue. The way to do this is to frontload content.

Tone and voice

Use active verbs and not passive verbs. Active verbs are when the sentence's subject does something. Passive verbs are when the sentence's subject has something done to it. In the examples below, the subjects are the policy and the study.

Example

The policy encourages firms to...

Not

Firms are encouraged by the policy to...

Example

The study shows a trend

Not

A trend is shown by the study

However, write "It is expected", rather than "One expects". Using "one" is considered old-fashioned and we refer to ourselves at ONS as "we".

ONS

Don't refer to the Office for National Statistics as ONS or the Office for National Statistics when writing. Always use personal pronouns, unless you are referring to the physical building.

Example

Our statistics

Not

ONS statistics

Example

Our offices in Newport and Titchfield

Not

ONS offices...

Example

The ONS building in Newport has a new lift

Not

Our building in Newport...

The word “the” is not part of the official title but should be included if the term “ONS” is used adjectivally:

Example

the ONS building

Editing and proofreading

Editing

Why edit? To ensure your writing is clear, consistent and concise, and that you are conveying the intended message to your audience.

1. Look at the structure of the piece. Does it flow logically? Are there any jumps in there, assuming the reader knows what you’re talking about? Each sentence should add something to the reader’s understanding, building up in layers. If a sentence doesn’t add anything, be ruthless – and cut it out.
2. Look at the content of the piece. Does it contain repetition? Does it contain information for general interest? Organise the material carefully so that things are covered in one place in the piece of writing. Boil down what you need to say to plain English, for example:

“There has been a rise in employment on a part-time basis” should be “There has been a rise in part-time employment”.

3. Look at the clarity of the piece. Are you saying things that are obvious or extraneous? “The relevant information can be found...” – as opposed to the irrelevant information? Try “Information on this can be found...”.

Is any of the phrasing obscure? Pick the subject of your sentence, what you really want to get across to your audience, and communicate it. If you’ve done this with every sentence then you should be clearly communicating what you want to.

“The national institute in charge of the statistical files of medical personnel in France provided a list of physicians in the Rhone-Alpes region, from which 600 doctors were randomly selected.”

The fact that the 600 doctors from the Rhone-Alpes region were chosen as case studies should be the focus of this sentence, not the national institute. The sentence should be rewritten something like this:

“The case studies were chosen from a list of 600 doctors working in the Rhone-Alpes region. The list was supplied by the national institute in charge of medical personnel in France.”

If you need a quote to spur you on: “Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away”.

- Leave a night between writing and editing
- Read it through first without trying to pick anything up – give yourself a break
- Check the legibility and structure
- The more you look through, the more you find
- Use short sentences
- Don't use the passive voice
- Does every sentence add something? And is it clear what it adds? If not, rip it out.
- Cut before you add anything
- Get someone who isn't an expert to read it to say if they understand it
- Read it slowly so you see what is there – not what you expect to see
- Do it somewhere you can concentrate – quiet rooms are ideal for this work
- Ask your in-house editorial team to have a look through it
- Use consistent terminology, spellings, tone and formatting
- Use a print version if it's easier – you blink less when reading on screen so your eyes dry out

Proofreading

Why proofread? To make sure your work is error-free. This is different to editing. Edit then proofread, never the other way around. The proofread is the final check before you publish something. Some of the advice remains the same for proofing as for editing.

- Leave a night between writing and proofing – never proofread in the afternoon
- Read it through first without trying to pick anything up – give yourself a break
- Comb through for spelling and grammar
- The more you look through, the more you find
- Get someone else to look through it, not the person who wrote it
- Read it out loud
- Read it slowly so you see what is there – not what you expect to see
- Split any data and charts – check one, then the other, then any references in the text to the data
- Check the format – extra line spaces, check how images sit in text, how the paragraphs sit
- Do it somewhere you can concentrate – quiet rooms are ideal for this work
- Ask your in-house editorial team to have a look through it
- Use a print version if it's easier - you blink less when reading on screen so your eyes dry out

Formatting

Italic

Don't use italics. Use single quotation marks to distinguish titles of, for example, books and journals.

Bold

Only use bold in headings.

Underlining

Don't use any underlining.

If you want to create emphasis, you can do this through what you write. If you need help rewriting, contact the [Website Quality and Improvement team](#).

Web accessibility

Website accessibility describes whether a website can be used by people of all abilities. Good accessibility makes it simple for every user to navigate, read and interpret content. These are the main standards for accessibility that should be met.

Text

- Write all content in plain English, and explain all acronyms or jargon
- Include a summary or key points of the main information at the beginning of content
- Make paragraphs no more than 5 or 6 sentences, breaking up the text into short chunks
- Use headings and sub-headings to break up sections of text
- Use bullet points for all lists
- Don't use directional text, like "the list below", which is misleading when using screen readers

Tables

- Titles and sub-titles should describe the content, including data period, geographical area and other units
- Acronyms should be spelt out in full or clearly explained
- Tables should be well spaced out, with clear sections or line breaks after every 5 rows to break up blocks of data
- Tables should have no more than 8 columns
- Column headings in tables should be clearly visible on screen by autofitting the text within each column in Excel
- Avoid using zip files unless spreadsheet files are very large or a number of different file types need to be bundled together

Charts, maps, infographics and other images

- All content in an image (such as axes, keys and other labels) and footnotes must be easy to read for someone with typical eyesight
- If this isn't possible, upload a larger version of the image so users can click on it to enlarge it
- Make sure titles and sub-titles clearly describe the content, including data period, geographical coverage and other units
- Spell out acronyms in full or clearly explain them
- Don't use red and green or blue and yellow together, as it's difficult to distinguish between them.
- Make sure there's clear distinction between different shades or tints of the same colour, including grayscale
- Consider using different line or fill types (in bars) in charts
- Make sure the key box in charts is large enough to clearly show the colours or tints
- Avoid placing text on dark tints as this isn't always legible
- Avoid overlaying lines onto bars of similar colours for the same reason

All images must have alt text. When you hover over the image, a yellow box will appear with a brief, accurate description of the image. This should be around 15 words, and not repeat the image title or content in the text. Screen readers read this out for people with visual disabilities.

PDF content

PDF files are less accessible than web flat pages. Make sure PDFs are altered to meet accessibility standards. The easiest way is to make sure that the source document (if in Word) is made accessible before converting it to PDF. Then check the PDF using the accessibility checker in Adobe Acrobat Pro.

The PDF should have:

- correctly tagged content within Adobe (as headings, text, tables, images, etc)
- the correct reading order within Adobe
- alt text added to all images
- bookmarks for all main headings in the navigation pane and the PDF file set to open this pane automatically
- the language specified (usually English)

Hyperlinks

Don't use directional text, such as "click here" as this is misleading for users with screen readers

When creating hyperlinks, the text containing the link should be a specific description of the destination page.

Example

There's more information about accessibility within GOV.UK content if you're interested.

The full terms and conditions for competitions explain more about this.

Assistive technologies separate out links, so each one should be easy to identify.

Example

accessibility within GOV.UK content

terms and conditions for competitions

Video, audio and interactive content

This can present barriers for some users, but can enhance accessibility for others. Some users may prefer to access data in a non text-based format. When presenting data in an interactive format (for example, SVG or Flash), provide the data being used to create the animation as a download file in CSV or XLS format. Give a description of the main points where possible. When using audio or video content, always provide a transcript. If the content is also on a third-party website, provide it there if possible. For example, on YouTube you should provide a transcript in the comments section.

Accessible formats

Websites should allow users to change viewing schemes, which change the size of text and colour contrast. Users should also be able to use assistive technologies, such as Jaws or Dragon screen reading software, to read content out loud.

GOV.UK release calendar

Release title

A release title should:

- be under 65 characters
- describe the statistics in the release in plain English
- include the coverage and time the statistics relate to
- be in sentence case
- include “experimental” if experimental statistics
- use a colon instead of hyphens or dashes, and a comma if you need a second separator

Example

UK overseas trade statistics: non-EU February 2014

HES-MHMDS data linkage report: August 2015, experimental statistics

A release title should not:

- be excessively long (or it will cut off in the search results)
- contain jargon or technical language
- include abbreviations or acronyms (unless well known, for example, UK or EU)

Example

Cereal use by UK brewers, distillers and maltsters: November 2014 (65 characters)

Not

Cereal usage by brewers, distillers and malters in the UK: November 2014 (73

Summary

A summary should:

- be under 140 characters (including spaces)
- explain what the release is about in plain English
- be a unique description specific to the release
- not repeat the title
- begin with the most important words, so search engines can find the document (not 'This release provides...')
- end in a full stop

Remember: when a release title or summary is displayed in the release calendar or search engine results, users need to see whether this is what they want.

Contact details

The name, business area, email address and telephone number of the responsible statistician must be included.

Group email addresses and telephone numbers are acceptable for the specific statistics team; generic departmental details should be avoided.

Example

Kat Pegler, Business Prices, ppi@ons.gsi.gov.uk, +44 (0)1633 456 468

Email addresses

Write in lower case with an active link. Do not use other words as part of the link.

Example

ppi@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Telephone numbers

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

Dates and numbers

Months

Use the format [Month] [Year]. Shortened months can be used if space is limited, as in titles.

Example

March 2014
Dec 2019

Quarters

Use months instead of quarters. When you can prove that either 'Q1' or 'Quarter 1' are searched for, then follow the term with an explanation of which months are included in the quarter.

Example

Business investment: Jan to Mar 2014 provisional results
Gross domestic product: preliminary estimate Q1 Jan to Mar 2014

Date Spans

Use [date] to [date]. If months are used, repeat the year after each month.

Example

2009 to 2010
July 2014 to September 2014

Non-calendar years

Use the type of year and ending month and year.

Example

financial year ending March 2011
academic year ending July 2013

Ages

Use 'aged [age] to [age] years'. For ages under a year, include months or weeks.

Example

aged 6 to 8 weeks
aged 9 to 10 years

Bottom limits for age restrictions should use 'aged [age] and over', and not a plus sign.

Example

aged 75 and over

Body field

Use this to reassure the user that the release is (or isn't) what they're looking for. The body text should:

- not be longer than 100 words
- describe what the statistics are about and their purpose
- be clear, concise and written in plain English
- provide context if there are other similar statistics
- not repeat the title and summary
- not summarise what the publication says