Online house style guide

The aim of these guidelines is to ensure a consistent level of quality throughout the University of Birmingham websites. If you have any questions about the house style guide please contact web-feedback@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Web copy needs to be concise and carefully targeted to the user’s needs. Information needs to be broken down using headings, bullet points, links, summaries and keywords.

- Abbreviations and acronyms
- Apostrophes
- Brackets
- Bullet points
- Capitalisation
- Contact information
- Dates and times
- Email signature
- General punctuation
- Hyphens and en rules
- Italics and underlining
- Numerals
- Quotations and quotation marks
- Spelling
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Abbreviations and acronyms

Be cautious of using abbreviations and acronyms that might be familiar to you but not necessarily to your reader. Question whether your reader will understand them before you use them, especially if you are considering our international readers. Also make sure that abbreviations and acronyms are not ambiguous, having more than one possible interpretation.

Acronyms: Words formed from the initial letters or syllables taken from a group of words that form the name of a company, organisation, process, product, etc.

Abbreviation: A shortened form of a word or phrase. Abbreviations and acronyms should be written in full at first mention, and bracketed if they are to be used again, for example:

- Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES)
- The University Executive Board (UEB)
• Higher Education institution (HEI)

Exceptions to this rule include academic awards (GSCE, BA etc) and well known acronyms (BBC, UCAS etc)

Full stops should not be used with acronyms or abbreviations, including academic awards and degrees and titles, for example:

- BA, MA, MPhil(B), BPhil, EngD, EdD, PhD, PGDip, AdCert

We do not abbreviate Professor to Prof.

A rule of thumb for when to use ‘e.g.’ and ‘i.e.’ is to think of ‘e.g.’ as ‘example given’ and ‘i.e.’ as ‘in effect’.

An over-use of acronyms can look awkward and clutter up the text with initials. Where such terms frequently recur, consider using an alternative part of the term (ie, the Agency). In some cases it may be appropriate to write out the term in full again.

Apostrophes

Use apostrophes to indicate the following:

- The omission of a letter or letters ie, don’t, it’s, didn’t, can’t, they’re
- Singular possession or ownership ie, the tutor’s work, the student’s books, one day’s leave
- Plural possession or ownership ie, the tutors’ work, the students’ books, two days’ leave

Please note the following common mistakes:

Students

- Students means a number of students
- Student's means belonging to one student
- Students’ means belonging to more than one student
- The correct form is Students’ Union

It’s

- It’s is short for it is: It’s a five minute walk to the centre of campus
- Its means belonging to it: The University has its own railway station

They’re

- They’re is short for ‘they are’: They’re planning an event
- There is an adverb: The event is over there
- There is also a noun: Over 200 people are going there
• Their is possessive: The event demonstrated their skills

You’re

• You’re is short for ‘you are’: Make sure you’re registered
• Your is possessive: Please register your details

**Numbers, dates, letters and abbreviations**

We do not use apostrophes in the plural form of numbers, dates, letters or abbreviations; for example:

• He got four As and two Bs
• This programme began in the 1960s
• We have ten PhDs in our department
• We have done well in all RAEs

**Time and money**

We do use apostrophes in time references, as in:

• We will meet in one hour’s time
• I am taking a week’s holiday
• The Selly Oak Campus is about one mile’s drive from the main campus

**Companies, organisations and institutions**

Knowing whether or not to use an apostrophe when referring to commercial companies, organisations or institutions and their belongings can be tricky, as some choose not to use it

If in doubt check on their respective websites to see what they do.

**Brackets**

Round brackets are used in the following ways:

• As a means of definition, explanation, reference, or translation e.g., Parentheses (round brackets), Machtpolitik (power politics)
• To supply ancillary information such as abbreviations, references, cross-references and variants e.g., Animal Biology (see page 230), Times Literary Supplement
• When using reference figures or letters within text, such as (a), (b), (c) (TLS)

In normal running text, try to avoid brackets within brackets: where this is inevitable, double parentheses are preferable to square brackets.

**Bullet points**
Bullet points are very important in web writing to break large chunks of text into easily readable lists. Bullet points should be fairly short and punchy in style, for example:

We offer:

- intensive care
- day care and obstetric anaesthesia
- clinical measurement
- cardiac anaesthesia

Bullet points begin with a capital letter if they start a new sentence, otherwise they should start with a lower case letter. They should have no full stop at the end. If the bullet point is lengthy you can use a semi colon, or consider splitting it into separate bullet points.

The introductory text must agree grammatically with each bullet; always check that this is the case by reading your text aloud. For example, the following is grammatically incorrect:

The University of Birmingham has:

- we have our own railway station
- first class facilities are available
- internet access is provided in all rooms

The correct agreement is as follows:

The University of Birmingham has:

- its own railway station
- first class facilities
- internet access in all rooms

**Capitalisation**

University names and titles

We use an upper case initial ‘U’ for ‘the University’ when directly referring to ‘the University of Birmingham’ and the words ‘of Birmingham’ have been omitted, for example:

- The University of Birmingham’s global impact
- Travelling to the University of Birmingham
- The University of Birmingham is situated in Edgbaston

If the words ‘of Birmingham’ do not follow ‘university’ then you use a lowercase ‘u’, for example:

- The global impact of our university
- We are a global university
• Students choosing this university

We use a lower case ‘u’ when referring to universities in general, for example:

• Students came from a range of universities
• Applying to university

Initial capitals should be used when writing the full names of colleges, schools and departments (e.g., College of Arts and Law, School of Education, Department of Music) and names of committees and Corporate Services (e.g., Research Committee, Finance Office).

These can be shortened to ‘the School’, ‘the College’, ‘the Department’, ‘the Committee’ but should still be capitalised. There is no need to use capitals if referring to generic rather than specific colleges, schools or departments, for example:

• Every department has its own website
• A number of schools participated

The following always take initial capital letters:

• Titles of government departments - the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Home Office, Ministry of Defence
• Titles of courtesy, honour and rank - Her Royal Highness, Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Vice-Principal, Professor
• Titles of degree programmes, modules and courses of study - the MA in Modern European Cultures comprises six modules including Ideas of Europe and Nations and their Neighbours
• Titles of books and other publications, poems or songs (also usually italicised) - A Tale of Two Cities, Woman’s Own, The Four Quartets, and My Way

In general, higher education and open days are not capitalised unless referring to a title. This is the same for undergraduate and postgraduate:

• We have a number of open days
• Find out more about the September Open Day
• Teaching in higher education
• The Higher Education Academy
• Postgraduate Certificate of Education
• Postgraduate Prospectus 2011
• She has completed her undergraduate studies
• We are ready to publish our next postgraduate prospectus

**Academic subjects**

Capitalise the names of academic subjects only in the context of programmes, courses and examinations e.g., he received a degree in Chemistry, but he enjoyed chemistry above all other subjects.
Organisations and bodies
When organisations, government departments, official bodies and office-holders are referred to by anything other than their precise title, lower case should be used. For example:

- The Minister of State for Health (but the health minister)

Generic versus specific
Initial capital letters makes a word specific in its reference: distinguishing for instance, between ‘the white house’ (a house painted white) and ‘the White House’ (the official residence of the President of the USA).

Titles should be in initial capitals when referring to specific individuals or institutions but lower case when used generally.

In the context of the University, we write about ‘heads of schools and departments’ (all lower case) but capitalise specific examples such as ‘Professor I Moore, Head of the School of Metaphysics.’ Similarly, we capitalise ‘the School of Chemistry’, ‘the Department of Economics’, but in general reference we write about the University’s academic schools, departments, divisions and institutes.

Internet
There is no need to capitalise the initial letter of internet, website unless the word starts a sentence. All email addresses and web addresses should be written in lowercase.

Web page headings
Headlines, headings and sub-headings within web pages should be treated in the same way as sentences; there is no need to use initial capital letters for any words other than the first word and any proper nouns. For example:

- Using our facilities
- Student life at Birmingham

Contact information
Addresses
We do not use commas or other punctuation at the end of each address line. We do not use ‘the’ for University of Birmingham.

Email addresses
We use lower case letters throughout in all email addresses, for example:

- j.smith@bham.ac.uk
We always express email as one word (no hyphen) with a lowercase initial ‘e’, unless at the beginning of a sentence.

Telephone numbers

We do not use hyphens within telephone numbers. The formatting of a telephone number should be expressed as follows:

- +44 (0)121 414 2536

**Dates and times**

**Dates**

Dates should only be written in one of the following formats:

- Tuesday 1 February 2011
- 1 February 2011
- 1 February

In news and events dates are abbreviated to six figures, for example 01/02/11

When referring to centuries you can use ‘th’, ‘st’ and ‘nd’ and a lowercase ‘c’ for example:

- 20th century
- 21st century
- 2nd century

**Time of day**

We use the 24-hour clock (eg, 09:00, 15:45). Midday is expressed as 12 noon and midnight as 12 midnight. When using live streaming from the website it is important that we make the user aware that we are using times which are Greenwich Mean Time. This can be expressed by adding ‘GMT’ after the times in brackets e.g. 09:00-13:00 (GMT) or indeed (GMT+1) if it is British Summer Time.

**Periods of time**

When expressing periods of time we use a hyphen, for example:

- 2005-08

A range of dates within the same month should be expressed as:

- 2-17 November

A range of dates within different months should be expressed as:

- 28 August-3 September
General punctuation

Ampersand (&)

Only use the ampersand if:

- It is used as part of a company’s name eg, Procter & Gamble, Pickering & Chatto
- When writing references, in which case you must use the ampersand if it appears in the original work
- You need to make a distinction, as in the School of English, Drama, American & Canadian Studies, where the ampersand links ‘American and Canadian’ together and distinguishes them from the other subject areas.

Colon

A colon separates two clauses that are logically related, fulfilling the same function as the following words and phrases:

- As
- As follows
- Because
- For example
- Namely
- Such as
- That is
- Therefore

It is principally used:

- when the first part of the sentence is complete in both sense and construction, and the following part naturally arises form it in sense, though not in construction, as in: ‘The professor had given lectures all over the world: I should like to be a professor’.
- to lead from introduction to main theme, as in ‘The question is one of universal interest: what is the secret of a long and happy life?’
- to lead from cause to effect, as in ‘It started to rain: the match was abandoned.’
- to lead from a general statement to an example, as in ‘Birmingham has some excellent restaurants: Simpson’s in Edgbaston has two Michelin stars’
- to introduce a list of items, especially after such expressions as ‘for example’ and ‘including’

Comma

The comma is used in a wide range of ways to structure sentences and clarify meaning; for example:

- to separate clauses within a sentence
- between adjectives that qualify a noun in the same way
• when a phrase would mean something completely different without it; for example: ‘He drove a light red car’ as opposed to ‘he drove a light, red car’
• to separate items in a list of more than two items
• to mark the beginning and end of a parenthetical word or phrase; for example: ‘Edward Elgar, Peyton Professor of Music, was appointed in March 1905’
• before a quotation, although a colon can be used for increased weight of sentence
• in numbers of four or more figures, as in 4,500

Ellipsis

This is the omission of words and consists of three full stops (...) used to mark that omission. When used at the end of an incomplete sentence, a fourth full stop is not required.

Full stop

Full stops are not needed in headings but may be used in sub-headings, bullet points or captions.

Paragraphs

We denote paragraphs with a single line break and do not indent the initial word.

Start a new paragraph as often as possible to present your reader with manageable chunks of information.

Consider adding subheadings (using key words) to denote a change in theme.

Semi-colon

A semi-colon separates those parts of a sentence between which there is a more distinct break than would call for a comma, but which are too closely connected to be made into separate sentences.

It should separate clauses or phrases that are similar in importance or grammatical construction, for example:

• I know the city well; I’ve lived there all my life

In a list which any of the elements contain commas, semi-colons are used to clarify the relationship of the components, for example:

• I should like to thank staff at Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge; Kings College, London; and the School of Medicine, University of Birmingham

Single spacing

Use a single space following a full stop.
Italics and underlining

Italics

Italics are hard to read on screen and should not be used for full sentences or for headings.

Italics are used:

- for the titles of books, newspapers, magazines and other publications
- for the titles of plays, films, TV and radio series, and CDs
- for the titles of paintings, sculptures and other works of art
- for the individual names of ships, trains, aircraft, spacecraft, and other means of transport
- for foreign words or phrases that are not naturalised (e.g., arriviste)
- as a method of emphasising or distinguishing words (e.g., The weather was so cold last winter)

Underlining

When writing for an online audience, never use underlining for emphasis. Your words will be mistaken for hyperlinks.

Numerals

We use words for numbers from one to ten (inclusive) and figures for all numbers over ten.

Where fractions are used with whole numbers in this range, they are also spelt out and not hyphenated (e.g., three and a half).

Where fractions are used with whole numbers in this range, figures should also be used (e.g., ½).

Figures are also used for decimal fractions, percentages, and in sets linking more than two numerals where some are higher and some lower than ten (e.g., Deaths from this cause in the past three years were 14, 9 and 6).

Do not start a sentence with a figure; write the number in words instead (e.g., Eighty-six places will be available on this programme in 2011).

In textual matter simple fractions should be spelt out in words and hyphenated, even when figures are higher than ten (e.g., two-thirds, five-eighths, one-twentieth).

In statistical material, fractions are written numerically (e.g., ½, ⅓).

Million and billion are spelt out as words, whether referring to people, objects or sums of money (e.g., five million people, five million donations, £5 million).
When one figure is greater than another we always use the expression ‘more than’ or ‘more’ rather than ‘over’ (e.g. There are 500 more students than last year or We hosted 5 events more than previous years)

The following are expressed in figures only:

- Dates (e.g., Tuesday 1 February)
- Degrees of heat (e.g., It is 32C in the shade)
- Money (e.g., £5.50, £25)
- Races (both distance and time)
- Scores in games and matches
- Specific gravity
- Statistics
- Time of the day
- Numbers of votes
- Weights when abbreviated units, such as grams or kilograms, are given
- Page numbers (note: in non-academic texts page ranges should be expressed as pages 21-30 rather than pp 21-30)

**Quotations and quotation marks**

**Quotations**

Make sure you give the source of your quotations. All extracts in the exact words of the original have quotation marks:

- at the beginning
- at the start of each paragraph
- at the end of the extract

Punctuation within the extract should be exactly as the original and the concluding full stop goes within the quotation marks when it is part of the original quotation.

When a whole sentence is a quotation, full stops, commas and other punctuation marks are placed inside the quotation marks; if the quoted matter forms only part of the sentence, and the punctuation mark is not part of the quote, it comes outside the quotation marks (e.g., The report praised the ‘tireless efforts of the dedicated and hard-working staff’.)
Quotation marks

There are two types of quotation marks, or inverted commas: single (‘’) and double (“ “). We follow standard British practice, enclosing quoted matter between single quotation marks.

Single quotes and roman (regular) type are used when citing the titles of articles in magazines, chapters of books, essays and songs. They may also be used to enclose an unfamiliar term, or one being used in a specific technical sense. Usually this is only necessary for the first occurrence of the word or phrase.

Quotations within quotations

These are indicated by the use of double quotation marks within single e.g., ‘When I say “immediately”, I mean some time before April’, said the spokesman

Preferred spellings

- Adviser not advisor
- Email is always spelt as one word
- Focused, focusing not focussed, focussing
- Homepage is always spelt as one word
- Liaise, liaison not liase, liason
- Login is always spelt as one word
- Online is always spelt as one word
- Targeted not targetted
- Web page is always spelt as two words
- Website is always spelt as one word

Common misspellings

- Accommodation not acommodation or accomodation
- Advice/advise - advice is a noun: give or receive advice; advise is a verb: to advise someone
- Definitely not definately
- Dependent/dependant - dependent means depending on or subject to; dependant means someone who depends on someone else
- Enquiry/inquiry - enquiry is asking a question; inquiry is a formal investigation
- Licence/license - licence is a noun: driving licence; license is a verb: to authorise or permit something
- Practice/practise - practice is a noun: best practice; practise is a verb: practise the violin
- Principal/principle - principal means first or most important: college principal, principal theme; Principle is a fundamental truth or a personal code of conduct
- Separate not separate
- Stationary/stationery - stationary means to not move; stationery means office supplies

**Spellcheckers**

While it is a good idea to run a spelling and grammar check on your documents, please be aware that spellcheckers do not spot all the errors and may even be responsible for creating some.

Make sure your spell checker is programmed for UK English.

**Split infinitives**

It is the University’s preference to avoid split infinitives if you can do so without distorting the sentence.

The **infinitive** is the base form of a verb; one that describes an action or occurrence. There are two types of infinitive:

- the to-infinitive, as in They decided to go
- the base-infinitive, which is without the word ‘to’, as in We saw him go

To split the infinitive is to insert one or more words (usually **adverbs** - words that describe or qualify the action) between the infinitive-marker or base-marker and the verb that follows, for example:

- *they decided to quickly go* rather than *They decided to go quickly*
- *we saw him swiftly go* rather than *We saw him go swiftly*

An example of a well-known split infinitive is: *To boldly go where no man has gone before.*

Here the word ‘boldly’ splits the to-infinitive ‘to go’. It should be ‘to go boldly’ - but it doesn’t have as much impact and it shifts the emphasis or stress from ‘boldly’ (the word they intended to emphasise) to ‘go’ (the word they didn’t want to emphasise so much). So, in this instance, the infinitive was split for deliberate effect.

Examples of split infinitives we might use at the University include:

- we aim to successfully find you a course
• the University will try to generally improve its position in the league tables
• we wish to carefully consider issues of equality and diversity on campus
• our responsibility is to gently support you through your degree programme
• historically, the University has tried to systematically push forward the boundaries of knowledge
• new ideas and research are to always be carried forward

These would need to be re-written as:

• We aim successfully to find you a course
• The University will generally try to improve its position in the league tables
• We wish carefully to consider issues of equality and diversity on campus (Note that the meaning has now been changed: are we ‘carefully wishing’ or ‘carefully considering’? This one would have to be changed to avoid having to make the split; the easiest way is to remove the adverb ‘carefully’)
• Our responsibility is gently to support you through your degree programme
• Historically, the University has systematically tried to push forward the boundaries of knowledge
• New ideas and research are always to be carried forward

If not splitting the infinitive alters your intended meaning, or sounds awkward and ambiguous (has more than one meaning) you need to rewrite your sentence.

**That and which**

Any phrase involving the word ‘which’ should have commas around it (e.g. The University of Birmingham, which is based in Edgbaston, is also...)

Phrases with ‘that’ in them do not require commas.

**Vice-Chancellor**

When referring to the Vice-Chancellor by name, the first reference must be to Professor Sir David Eastwood. Thereafter he may be referred to as Sir David.

**Web links**

• Link text should clearly describe the link destination, for example: For more information visit the Media Centre website
• Avoid using non-descriptive links such as ‘click here’ or ‘more information’ as they will not be meaningful if viewed out of context of the page

• When linking to a PDF or any other non web page document, always specify the file type and size, for example: Edgbaston campus map (PDF - 3MB)

• Email addresses are written in lowercase in the full form: j.smith@bham.ac.uk

• Web addresses should be written without the ‘http://’ prefix e.g., www.birmingham.ac.uk

• If a link is at the end of a sentence ensure the full stop is outside the link

• Links should always open in the same window - whether to external sites or to University of Birmingham sites; links opening in new browser windows can be confusing for users, as the ‘back’ button in the new window no longer lets them navigate back