Editing and Proofreading

A Practical Guide to Good Writing

Scribe Consulting

Tim North, Scribe Consulting

www.scribe.com.au

Table of contents

Preface

Ask yourself these questions:

- How should you punctuate a bulleted list?

- When should you use commas?

- Should every word in a heading have a capital or just the first one?

- Is it okay to 'split an infinitive'? (And just what *is* an infinitive anyway?)

- Was it okay to start the previous sentence with *and*?

It's hard enough making these decisions when you're editing your *own* work. If you're responsible for editing the work of others, it can be a nightmare. Everyone you ask will have opinions. Often, though, no one will be able to justify these opinions with anything more convincing than 'Well, when *I* was at school my teacher said …'.

This course will provide you with two very important things:

- You'll have the knowledge with which to provide good and justifiable answers to these (and similar) questions.

- You'll have the skills with which to apply this knowledge to practical situations in your workplace.

Regards,

Tim North

info@scribe.com.au

Outcomes

After completing this course, you'll be able to:

- Justify to others the editing decisions you make.

- Explain and follow contemporary guidelines for punctuation, capitalisation and hyphenation.

- Distinguish between and correctly use abbreviations, contractions, symbols and acronyms.

- Use numbered and bulleted lists correctly.

- Decide when to write numbers as words.

- Correctly use many commonly confused word pairs and much more.

If you write anything criticising editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written.

Muphry's law

Rationale

- You may be asked to edit or proofread a document without knowing what's involved in these activities.

- Editing or proofreading another person's document can be a sensitive activity. Not all people take well to correction.

- You may find it hard to justify or explain your edits if they're challenged.

- You may not know what sources of information and advice you can rely on.

- Your editing practice may be inconsistent from one document to another.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Provide a checklist of activities to follow during the various stages of editing and proof-reading.

- Identify some of the difficulties involved in editing other people's work.

- Distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive editing.

- Identify a suitable style manual to guide your editing.

- Use a style sheet to attain consistency when editing.

- Identify a suitable dictionary to assist with your editing.

1.1   Why it's not easy being an editor

Let's put these activities in a real-world context with a quick test containing some practical problems encountered by editors and proofreaders.

1. You receive reports from four colleagues. Each capitalises their headings in a different style as shown here:

    - This is the heading style used by Rachel.

    - This Is The Heading Style Used By Tom.

    - This is the Heading Style Used by Karen.

    - THIS IS THE HEADING STYLE USED BY JO.

    Are all of these styles equally acceptable? Is one clearly preferable? If you were asked to create a style guide for your department, what would you recommend regarding the capitalisation of headings?

2. You receive a report from a senior manager. Throughout, she spells *co-operate* with a hyphen but *coordinate* without. Do you:

    - Remove the hyphen from co-operate because it seems consistent to do so.

    - Add a hyphen to coordinate for the same reason.

    - Leave it because you know she'll be irritable if you change her work.

3. One of your managers asks you to edit a report containing the following bulleted list:

    Training contributes to organisational effectiveness through:

    - correcting skill deficiencies;

    - developing a flexible and adaptable workforce

    - It increases employee commitment and job satisfaction.

    - increasing productivity. This can lead to greater profit.

    - increasing adaptability; and

    - providing competitive advantage.

    Fixing this list will be a lot of work. (See chapter 5 to discover why.) Is it realistic to try to explain to your manager what's wrong so he'll do a better job next time? Is this just asking for trouble? Might it be resented or appreciated?

4. A colleague submits a ten-page report in which one or two sentences start with joining words like *and* or *however.* You let these sentences pass without change, but your boss insists they're wrong and hauls you over the coals.

    Do you just take it on the chin, or should you try to explain why you think it's okay? Is it your job to train the boss, or are you there to enforce your boss's opinions?

Punctuation

2

Rationale

- Properly used, punctuation can aid the clarity of what we write. Omitted, our writing can be ambiguous.

- There are accepted conventions for how to punctuate. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

- In legal documents and technical specifications, poor punctuation can have serious ramifications.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Employ widely followed conventions for correct punctuation.

- Use punctuation to avoid ambiguity.

Further reading

THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

Table 2.1:   A summary of the ways to join sentences.

	Joining words	Punctuation	Example
1.	[none]	Sentence. Sentence.	Today is Friday. Tomorrow is Saturday.
2.	[none]	Sentence; sentence.	Today is Friday; tomorrow is Saturday.
3.	accordingly consequently for example furthermore however moreover namely nevertheless otherwise therefore that is thus	Sentence; joining-word, sentence.	Group three succeeded; however, group four did not. I like it; nevertheless, I won't be buying it. It's very expensive; nevertheless, it's worth it.
4.	for and nor but or yet so	Sentence, joining-word sentence.	Group three finished, but they took a long time. I like it very much, and I think you will too.
5.	because as if then	Sentence joining-word sentence.	Complete this work then fax it to me. He is happy because he got a promotion.

✏🗓 Exercises

Punctuate these sentences:

1. Sally likes this and would like to buy it.

2. Sally likes this and I would like to buy it for her.

3. Johnson is a good team member but he may lack initiative.

4. Johnson is a good team member but lacks initiative.

5. Finish this work then meet me down at the bar.

6. I admire her because she's a hard worker.

Capitalisation

3

Capitalisation is the difference between 'I had to help my Uncle Jack off a horse' and 'I had to help my uncle jack off a horse'.

UrbanDictionary.com

Rationale

- There are accepted conventions for when to use (and not to use) a capital letter at the start of a word. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

- Contemporary usage employs fewer capital letters than in the past.

- As the quotation above demonstrates, incorrect capitalisation can even change the meaning of a sentence.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Explain why it is unwise to overuse full capitals;

- Choose a suitable style for capitalising headings and titles.

- Identify when to use an initial capital letter and when not to.

Further reading

THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

45

ascenders and no descenders. The characters all tend to blend in and look the same, so we have to work harder to decipher what we see.

Authors sometimes use full capitals for words or whole sentences in order to emphasise the text. For example:

REPORT ON LAND-USE PATTERNS IN THE EASTERN SUBURBS

Arguably, the desired emphasis brought about by the use of full capitals may be outweighed by the loss of readability.

3.5   Headings and titles

Ways of capitalising headings and titles

Four capitalisation styles are in common use:

1.   THIS LINE IS IN *FULL CAPITALS.*

2.   This Line Has A Capital For Every Word.

3.   This Line is in *Title Case.*

4.   This line is in *sentence case*.

There is no clear agreement on how to capitalise headings and titles within a document. Some authors consistently use their preferred style. A considerable number use several, often in the same document.

The use of full capitals for headings and titles is inadvisable as this can be associated with a loss of readability as outlined in the previous section. Similarly, using a capital letter for every word has traditionally been frowned upon. This leaves us with two common choices.

In *sentence case* one uses a capital for the first word of a heading or title. Other words start with a lower-case letter unless they would normally receive a capital; for example, a person's name. The biggest advantage of sentence case is simplicity. Authors don't have to ponder which words to capitalise and which not to.

In *title case* most words are written with an initial capital. Certain small words are not capitalised, though. While title case is commonly used, its biggest drawback is that most authors are unsure as to which words should not be capitalised. This leads to inconsistency.

If you decide to use title case, it is common not to capitalise these classes of words:

- conjunctions (*and, or, but*);

- prepositions (*in, of, by, for)*;

- articles (*a, an, the)*; and

- any form of the verb *to be* (*is, are, am*).

Shortened forms

The good writing of any age has always been the product of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.

William Styron, *WRITERS AT WORK*, 1958.

Rationale

- There are accepted conventions for how to use abbreviations, contractions, acronyms and symbols correctly. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

- The correct use of the metric system of units is the subject of much confusion.

- The overuse of acronyms can lead to a loss of clarity.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Distinguish between abbreviations, contractions, acronyms and symbols.

- Know when to use capital letters and full stops in these shortened forms and when not to.

- Correctly write numbers and units using the metric system.

- Employ strategies to prevent the overuse of acronyms.

Further reading

THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

4.3   Symbols and units of measurement

Introduction

Units of measurement include such quantities as metres, feet, seconds, litres, pints, ounces, watts and volts. Units each have a shortened form called a *symbol*. For example:

Table 4.1: Some metric units and their symbols

Unit	Symbol
ampere	A
degrees Celsius	°C
kilogram	kg
metre	m
second	s
watt (*not* Watt)	W

Note that the *full* names of most units of measurement are written entirely in lower case; (Celsius is the notable metric exception.[20]) Some metric symbols are written in lower case, while others are written in upper case. This is discussed further on page 57.

Symbols are not followed by a full stop (except at the end of a sentence); thus, we write:

> It's 48 m long and 14 m wide.

not:

> It's 48 m. long and 14 m. wide.

Symbols do not take an *s* to make their plural form. For example, we write:

27 m	*not*	27 ms [21]
12.4 kg	*not*	12.4 kgs

Spaces before symbols

Numbers are separated from a symbol by a space in order to make them easier to read.[22] For example, we write:

15 kg	not	15kg
17.4 mm	not	17.4mm

---

[20]   Technically, since the name of the unit is *degree Celsius,* it does start with a lower-case letter like all the other units. If this seems overly pedantic, blame the French. It's their mess. ☺

[21]   Here the addition of an erroneous *s* has had the disastrous effect of changing the symbol from metres to milliseconds.

[22]   Section 5.3.3 of the metric standard says clearly that there must always be a space between a number and the metric symbol that follows it: "The numerical value always precedes the unit, and a space is always used to separate the unit from the number". (www.bipm.org/en/publications/si-brochure/)

Bulleted and numbered lists 5

I have a little list.
Gilbert and Sullivan, THE MIKADO, 1885.

Rationale

- Bulleted and numbered lists can be confusing if worded poorly.

- There are accepted conventions for how to present bulleted and numbered lists. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Format bulleted and numbered lists for maximum clarity.

- Punctuate bulleted and numbered lists correctly.

- Employ what is known as *parallel structure*.

- Decide when to use bullets and when to use numbers.

Further reading

THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

5.1   How should I format a list?

When the items in a list are written one per line, we call this a *bulleted* or *numbered list.* When they're not, we call this a *run-in list*. The punctuation of run-in lists is covered in chapter 2. The following pages will discuss how to format and punctuate bulleted and numbered lists. Let's start by looking at line spacing.

Line spacing

Consider the line spacing of the following bulleted list:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit:

- ut wisis enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exerci tution ullamcorper suscipit lobortis nisl ut aliquip;

- ex ea commodo consequat duis te feugifacilisi;

- duis autem dolor in hendrerit in vulputate velit;

- esse molestie consequat.
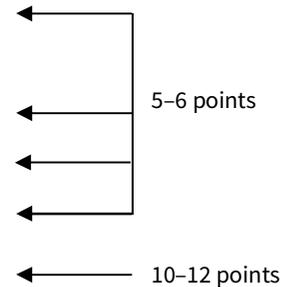
Vel illum dolore eu feugiat nulla facilisis at vero eros et accumsan et iusto odio dignissim.

5–6 points

10–12 points

I normally leave around 10–12 points between the paragraphs of a document. Within a bulleted list, though, I tend to 'tighten things up' in order to give the list the appearance of being a single object, rather than a series of separate points. I do this by reducing the spacing after each paragraph to around half its normal value: say five or six points.

The effect is a subtle one, and you might not feel that it's worthwhile. Experiment with a list of your own and see. Use less space between the paragraphs within the list than you normally do. Do you feel that it looks a little better this way?

Hanging indents

Notice that way that bulleted and numbered lists are indented. We write:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit:

- ut wisis enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exerci   tution ullamcorper suscipit lobortis nisl ut aliquip;

- ex ea commodo consequat duis te feugifacilisi duis autem dolor in hendrerit in vulputate velit esse molestie consequat.

The bullets are aligned with the text above, and the second (and subsequent) line of each list element is indented to the same position as the first line. This is called a **hanging indent**. This has the advantage of making the bullets or numbers more visible.

Hyphenation

We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.
Ernest Hemmingway, 1899–1961

Rationale

- Properly used, hyphens can aid the clarity of what we write. Omitted, our writing can be ambiguous.

- There are accepted conventions for how to use hyphens. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to use hyphens appropriately to aid clarity.

6.1   Overview

> There are few firm rules dealing with the use of hyphens, and dictionaries are often in disagreement. In general, British dictionaries are more inclined to hyphenate words than their American counterparts; the Macquarie and Australian Oxford dictionaries lie somewhere between the two. This divergence in practice means that there are no simple rights and wrongs in this aspect of word punctuation.
>
> THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn), p. 88

Hyphens (-) are used in many situations:

- They are used to separate some prefixes from the main word; for example, ex-employee, co-opt.

- They are used in some compound nouns; for example, cross-reference, dry-cleaning.

- They are used in some compound adjectives; for example, a customer-focussed attitude.

- They are still occasionally used in the numbers twenty-one through ninety-nine.

- They are still sometimes used to break long words that occur at the end of a line.

The guidelines that follow will help you decide when to use a hyphen.

6.2   Hyphenating prefixes

Hyphens are sometimes used to separate a prefix from the word it's attached to; for example, self-confidence. *In general, though, most prefixes don't need a hyphen. If in doubt, leave it out.* There are a number of common exceptions to this guideline, though.

- The prefix *self-* is usually hyphenated; for example, self-esteem, self-image, self-conscious.

- When the prefix *ex-* is used to mean former, it is usually hyphenated. For example: ex-wife, ex-premier, ex-treasurer.

- If the main word has an initial capital or is a number then use a hyphen after the prefix. For example: post-2001, un-Australian, mid-90s.

- Hyphens are sometimes used when a prefix would cause the doubling of a vowel; for example, co-opt or pre-empt. Modern usage is slowly eliminating some such hyphens though. For example, most modern dictionaries spell *cooperate* and *coordinate* without hyphens.

- Use a hyphen after the prefix if the main word has a hyphen of its own; for example, 'He had a non-customer-focussed attitude'.

- We sometimes see a hyphen after the prefix if the main word is only one syllable; for example, infra-red. This is applied inconsistently, though, and dictionaries vary in their

Writing numbers

Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts.

Larry L King, 1929–2012

Rationale

- There are conventions for writing numbers. If you're unaware of them, your work may appear less professional.

- Poor formatting of numbers and spans can make them confusing. Conversely, correct formatting can make them clearer.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Use commas to group large numbers into groups of three digits.

- Avoid confusion when using the words *billion* and *trillion*.

- Neatly format numbers presented in scientific notation.

- Write spans of numbers clearly and in the commonly accepted fashion.

- Write dates and times correctly and unambiguously.

- Write numbers as words in appropriate situations.

- Some writers include full stops in *a.m.* and *p.m.*; many omit them. (It is now becoming more common to omit them.) Some writers put *a.m.* and *p.m.* in lower case, others in upper case. Pick a style and be consistent.

- Leaving a space prior to *a.m.* or *p.m.* will aid readability and is thus preferred.

- Times written in the 24-hour-clock system always use four digits. THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS (6th edn, p. 173) suggests writing them without punctuation like so:

    1245   0730   2359

    THE MICROSOFT MANUAL OF STYLE (4th edn, pp.153–4) suggests using a colon:

    12:45   07:30   23:59

    A more detailed treatment of written time can be found in ISO standard 8601:

    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO_8601

🗣 Discussion

What is your preferred style for writing times?

7.5   Writing numbers as words

When do we use digits?

Numbers can be written using digits (37) or using words (thirty-seven). The choice depends on which writing style we're employing: *literary style* or *business style.*

In literary works, such as novels and poetry, all numbers (no matter how large or small) are written using words. For example:

Smith stared at her — all six foot two of her.

Smith shivered. It was down to eleven degrees.

Smith sighed. He'd be sixty soon.

Smith staggered. He'd just won two million dollars!

In business and technical writing, numbers are *sometimes* written using words and sometimes using digits. For example:

Our sales have increased by 12% this quarter.

Bob, page two is missing.

The police found 500 grams of cocaine.

So, in business and technical works, when should we write numbers using words? Here are three conventions that are commonly followed:

Common confusions

Clarity is the politeness of the man of letters.
Jules Renard, JOURNAL, 1892.

Rationale

- Certain pairs of words are commonly confused with each other. Their use (correctly or otherwise) can lead to confusion for the reader. It may thus be necessary to avoid or clarify them.

- Certain 'rules' of English that have been handed down over the generations are not rules at all and may be disregarded in contemporary writing.

- If we are unaware of correct use, our writing can look less professional.

- As discussed in Section 1.2, though, we need not be unnecessarily pedantic about the meaning of words. A better goal is to maximise clarity.

Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to distinguish between many commonly confused word pairs.

The Better Writing Skills Newsletter

Much of the content of this chapter is extracted from articles taken from my free newsletter. You can subscribe or browse recent back issues here:

www.scribe.com.au/newsletter.html

8.7 'Boldly go' or 'go boldly'?

(An edited extract from the December 2003 *Better Writing Skills newsletter*)

> Space, the final frontier.
> These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise.
> It's five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds,
> to seek out new life and new civilizations,
> *to boldly go* where no man has gone before!

Thus starts the famous voice-over to Star Trek. Quite apart from the 1960s sexism, it raises the burning question that has probably long been gnawing at you: should Captain Kirk have said *to boldly go* or *to go boldly*?

To put it in linguistic geek speak: Are split infinitives really a tool of the devil?

Just in case the issue *hasn't* been gnawing at you, let's start with a quick review: what is a **split infinitive**? Well it's quite simple. An **infinitive** is a form of a verb (a doing word) that (usually) starts with the word *to*. For example, *to run*, *to go* and *to laugh* are all infinitives.

When we put another word between *to* and the verb, we are said to have *split* the infinitive. For example: *to unsteadily run*, *to boldly go* or *to quietly laugh*.

Are these grammatically naughty?

Short answer: no.

The traditional 'rule' that one should not split infinitives stems from the fact that it is not done in Latin. Purists argue (incorrectly in my opinion) that because Latin doesn't do it, English shouldn't.

In his wonderful book *The Mother Tongue*, prolific author Bill Bryson provides the following simple rebuttal:

> I can think of two very good reasons for not splitting an infinitive.
>
> 1. Because you feel that the rules of English ought to conform to the grammatical precepts of a language that died a thousand years ago.
>
> 2. Because you wish to cling to a pointless affectation of usage that is without the support of any recognized authority of the last 200 years, even at the cost of composing sentences that are ambiguous, inelegant, and patently contorted.

Nicely said, Bill.

If you're still doing your holiday shopping (or, like me, haven't started) you can pick up Bill Bryson's entertaining book from good bookstores. Here's a link to Amazon.com:

> www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0380715430/

Answers to the exercises

Chapter 2: Punctuation

2.2: A before-and-after test

Don't worry if you're uncertain about these answers. You'll learn all you need to know in the coming chapters.

Punctuate the following sentences:

1. John, that's an exciting proposal.

2. The prize has been awarded to divisions 3, 4 and 6. *[US English would also have a comma after the '4'.]*

3. Bill is new here; he's from Canada. *[Either of these is okay.]*

   Bill is new here. He's from Canada.

4. There's only one way to a man's heart: his stomach.

5. The accountants' offices are being repainted this morning. *[If two or more accountants]*

   The accountant's offices are being repainted this morning. *[If one accountant with two offices]*

6. The team members — John, Mike and Helen — will join you tomorrow. *[Em dashes]*

7. We need the following items: paper, toner, staples and pins. *[US English would also have a comma after 'staples'.]*

8. I'm here on Tuesdays; you're here on Thursdays.

   I'm here on Tuesdays. You're here on Thursdays.

9. I'm here on Tuesdays, and you're here on Thursdays.

10. If you're ready, let's begin our training.

11. Let's begin our training if you're ready.

12. The three-time winner is Mary Johnson.

13. I prefer to use more hyphens, not less.

14. We're open 9–5. *[En dash]*

Downloadable e-books from Scribe

The following e-books (PDF files) are also available for immediate download from Scribe Consulting's web site for just $12.95:

REPORT WRITING

In *REPORT WRITING*, you'll discover how to prepare and write reports in a manner that is clear, concise and compelling. You'll learn to develop reader-centric reports that reflect well on you and provide your readers with exactly what they need.

PROPOSAL WRITING

You put your credibility and reputation on the line every time you sit down to write.

In *PROPOSAL WRITING* you'll discover how to write proposals that not only succeed but which will build you a reputation as a credible and trusted colleague.

ONLINE WRITING

ONLINE WRITING is an easy-to-follow manual aimed at anyone who needs to create or edit electronic content that will be published on the web, on an intranet or by email.

You'll discover how to create clear, concise content that is tailored to the specific (and rather demanding) needs of online readers.

www.scribe.com.au

All of Scribe's e-books come with a no-questions-asked, money-back guarantee.