

Business Writing

STYLE GUIDE

YOUR WRITING COMPANION

Business Writing Style Guide

BRITISH ENGLISH VERSION

First edition

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The **introduction** answers the question ‘Why am I writing this email?’ The very first thing you want to write is the email’s communication purpose statement or **reason for writing** the document. Before you can write the purpose, you need to know the document’s **theme**. Once you have written your purpose, you can change the **wording** of the statement to improve readability.

WORDS

Word punctuation

Apostrophes

POSSESSION

Use an apostrophe to show possession.

✓ **The manager's report**

X The managers report

✓ **The team's proposal**

X The teams proposal

CONTRACTIONS

Use an apostrophe to show an omission.

✓ **Joel doesn't** (does not) **live here anymore.**

✓ **I just can't** (cannot) **understand you.**

✓ **You could've** (could *have*, not could *of*) **let me know you weren't** (were not) **available.**

SIMPLE PLURALS

When you're thinking of putting an apostrophe in a noun that ends in *s*, ask yourself whether you're merely showing that there's more than one thing. If so, it's a simple plural and you don't need an apostrophe.

✓ **There are many vehicles in the parking area.**

X There are many vehicle's in the parking area.

X There are many vehicles' in the parking area.

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

When a possessive pronoun (including *my*, *mine*, *our/s*, *your/s*, *his*, *her/s*, *their/s*) is used as an adjective, no apostrophe is needed.

✓ **This is their idea. The idea is theirs.**

✓ **We filed our flight plan. The flight plan is ours.**

✓ **This writing guide must be yours.**

WORDS

LOWER CASE PLURALS

Apostrophes are used to form the plural of letters that appear in lower case. To form the plural of a lower case letter, place 's after the letter.

✓ **Three p's**

X Three ps

TIME AND MONEY

Words showing periods of time or amounts of money need apostrophes when they are used as possessive adjectives.

✓ **day's pay**

✓ **morning's work**

✓ **two cents' (plural) worth**

✓ **a pound's (singular) worth**

PLURAL LETTERS, ABBREVIATIONS AND YEARS

There is no need for apostrophes to indicate a plural of capitalised letters, numbers, years, symbols or abbreviations.

✓ **KPIs**

✓ **1990s**

X KPI's

X 1980's

You do use an apostrophe to show missing numbers.

✓ **'90s**

IT'S AND ITS

It's is a shortened form of *it is* and of *it has*.

✓ **It's raining today.**

✓ **It's been a long time.**

Its is the possessive form of *it*. This is the only case when a possessive doesn't need an apostrophe.

✓ **Its name is Fido.**

✓ **I liked its structure.**

WORDS

COLLECTIVE NOUNS – SINGULAR or PLURAL?

Collective nouns can sometimes fool us into thinking they're plural when they're actually singular. Collective nouns, eg staff, audience, team, family, group and committee, are singular as we think of them as single groups or as one entity. When collective nouns are pluralised, they're considered plural and require a plural verb and a plural pronoun.

✓ **The committee is going to present its findings on Friday morning.**

In the above sentence, the collective noun *committee* is singular and therefore uses the singular verb *is* and the singular pronoun *its*.

X The committee are going to present its findings on Friday morning.

In the above sentence, the collective noun *committee* is seen as singular (one entity and not individuals in the group) and using the plural verb *are* is considered to be incorrect. Using the singular verb *is* and singular pronoun *its* would be correct.

✓ **The committee members are going to present their findings on Friday morning.**

In the above sentence, using *committee members* (which is plural) would ensure the plural verb *are* is correct. Using the plural pronoun *their* is also correct.

✓ **The committees I represent are going to present their findings on Friday morning.**

In the above sentence, the writer is referring to many *committees*. Therefore the plural verb *are* is correct, as is the plural pronoun *their*.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

MNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

WXYZ

abcdefghijklm

nopqrstuvwxyz

CASE

When not to capitalise

Do not use capitalisation with a title's generic word or element (unless it is at the beginning of a sentence). A generic element occurs when specific titles or terms are used or referred to generically, ie when they are not written out in full. In this sense, the word is essentially a common noun.

✓ Proper noun or title

Oxford University

British Management Committee

British Memorial

As can be seen in Table 1 ...

Please refer to Appendix 3 ...

✓ Generic word, term or element

The university ...

The committee will ...

The memorial ...

In the table ...

In the appendix ...

Do not use capitalisation with common nouns. A common noun is a word that names people, places, things or ideas. Common nouns are not the names of a single person, place or thing.

People: man, team member, manager, leader, minister

Animals: cat, dog, lion

Things: document, book, telephone, government, appendix, table, committee

Places: town, city, shop

Ideas: love, hate, idea, pride

NUMBERS

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
one two three four five
six seven eight nine 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17
18 19 20 21 22 23 24

NUMBERS

Dates

Consistently use the date written in full when there are no space limitations. Do not use extra words and suffixes in the date.

When using the day, it is not necessary to use a comma after the day of the week.

✓ ... on **3 September 2008**

X ... on the 3rd of September 2008

✓ ... on **Tuesday 18 October 2009**

X ... on Tuesday, the 18th October 2009

Use the abbreviated or numeral-only forms when there are space limitations.

Abbreviated form

Use the first three letters of the month and only two numerals for the year when abbreviating the month.

| | | |
|------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 1 Jan 08 | 2 Feb 08 | X 3 Sept 08 |
| 3 Mar 08 | 4 Apr 08 | X 4 July 08 |
| 5 May 08 | 6 Jun 08 | |
| 7 Jul 08 | 8 Aug 08 | |
| 9 Sep 08 | 10 Oct 08 | |
| 11 Nov 08 | 12 Dec 08 | |

Numeral-only form

Use six digits when using the numeral-only form (separated by forward slashes) for the date.

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| ✓ 09/08/09 | X 9/8/09 | X 9.8.09 |
| ✓ 10/02/08 | X 10/2/08 | X 10.02.08 |