Style and formatting guide

**Scottish Information Commissioner
Corporate guidance**

Scottish Information
Commissioner

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Overview

Introduction

1. This is a guide to drafting documents to ensure that we both achieve consistency across the organisation and have sufficient latitude to tailor the style and content of communications to the needs of the target audience.

2. The document is set out in stand-alone sections, in alphabetical order. It makes extensive use of headings so that it is easier to navigate from the contents page.

3. The content and level of detail is random in that it is based on a combination of what we have collectively asked for and what is useful or important to include. It includes a lot of detail about some things (like apostrophes) and very little about others, like how to write in plain English.

4. This is not an exhaustive guide to grammar and punctuation. For that, go to one of the books in the office library or to a reputable on-line source such as the OED http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/grammar/

It belongs to all of us

5. It is intended that this is a **living document we all own**. If you think it would helpful to add to it, remove content, or provide additional guidance on a particular issue, you are encouraged to draft new content following the procedures in the Key Documents Handbook.

Guiding principles

6. The watchwords are proportionality and reasonableness, following these five principles:

   (i) Accept differences. Guidance may not match your individual standards or beliefs (or even that text book you've had since school), but that doesn't make it wrong.

   (ii) This guidance should be the norm, but good communication is more important than rigid rules; it is better to adapt your approach to meet the needs of the reader and/ or content, than to stick to guidance for the sake of it.

   (iii) Some instructions are given in the Investigations Handbook (e.g. naming conventions in decisions). The instructions in the Investigations Handbook take precedence and **must** be followed.

   (iv) Be consistent *between* types of document (e.g. use the same conventions in all documents of a type, such as exemptions guidance)

   (v) Be consistent *within* a document. If you comment on a document someone else has drafted, use the same conventions they have.

Content

Abbreviations and Acronyms

7. An abbreviation is a word or symbol used to represent a longer word or phrase. An acronym is a word formed from the first letters of a group of words and pronounced as spelt. Either:

    (i) spell them out in full in the first instance with the short version in brackets, and use the short version thereafter, or

    (ii) include the short version in a glossary.

8. Don't spell out obvious ones that are likely to be widely known (e.g. USA).

9. If you are using an abbreviation or acronym to refer to multiple things, set them out in a footnote, endnote or glossary. A good example is we often use phrases like "FOI law" to refer to FOISA, EIRS and INSPIRE collectively.

10. Abbreviations of Latin phrases should have full stops, e.g. not eg

11. Abbreviations formed from the first letter of each word don't usually have full stops after them.

12. If in doubt, check what others such as the organisation or "owner" of the abbreviation use.

13. Ampersands should generally not be used in text instead of "and". Examples of when it might be used:

    (i) in a business name such as B&Q

    (ii) in a table where space is tight

    (iii) in non-formal communications

Active and passive voices

14. Plain English gurus will tell you to use the active rather than the passive voice. Most of them then go on to explain this in terms that are far from plain! For more detail go the Oxford Guide to Plain English.

The active voice

15. When the subject of a sentence is "doing" the action of the verb, and object of a sentence is "receiving" the action.

16. The "doer" usually comes before the verb.

    For example: the **Commissioner** (the subject, the doer) appointed (the verb) five new officers

The passive voice

17. When the subject of a sentence is receiving the action of the verb, and the object is performing it.

18. The "doer" usually follows the verb.

19.   For example: *Five new officers were <u>appointed</u> by the **Commissioner***

Quick test

20.   The sentence is likely to be in the passive voice if the verb is formed using:

    (i)   part of the verb "to be" (e.g. am, is, am being, was, were, have been, had been, will be, shall be), *and*

    (ii)   a past participle (e.g., decided, went, enjoyed, looked, seen, lost)

21.   In the example above: *Five new officers were <u>appointed</u> by the **Commissioner**,* the verb is formed by "were" and "appointed".

22.   To convert it to the active voice "were" is dropped and the verb (appointed) is placed after the subject (the Commissioner).

Apostrophes

23.   The three main uses of apostrophes are:

    (i)   Possession: to form the possessive form of nouns to show ownership if you want to be technical.

    (ii)   Contraction: it represents letters that have been omitted.

    (iii)   Plural forms: rare but can happen.

Possession

24.   There are two forms of possessive apostrophes

    (i)   possession of a singular noun -- **'s**

    (ii)   possession of a plural noun -- **s'**

25.   Approach:

    (i)   identify the possessor (i.e. the "noun")

    (ii)   put an apostrophe immediately after the possessor

    (iii)   add an "S" for the singular noun or if you need to

26.   Examples

Singular	Plural
• Hamish's cow	• Footballers' Ferraris
• Deirdre's ducks	• MSPs' expenses
• Cameron's chicken	• Officers' duties
• Gillian's goat	• Councillors' responsibilities

Singular words ending in s, ss, x

27. A word that ends in *ss* takes **'s** e.g. The boss's parking space

28. A word that ends in *x* takes **'s** e.g. The fox's cubs

29. A word that is singular and ends in "s", in theory, can use both forms but the commonly accepted form is **s'**.

30. **s'** is our preferred style e.g. Ronnie Biggs' conviction.

Plural words that do not end in s

31. If the plural of a word ends in any letter other than an "s" **'s** is used e.g. women's story, people's rights, children's education.

More than one possessive in a sentence

32. The same approach applies: find the possessor, add the apostrophe (s) before what is possessed. How you place apostrophes can change the meaning of a sentence.

    (i) *The judge's verdict was given to the defendant's solicitor.* (one judge, gave one verdict to the solicitor of one defendant)

    (ii) *The judges' verdict was given to the defendants' solicitor.* (several judges, gave one verdict to one solicitor who represented several defendants)

    (iii) *The judge's verdict was given to the defendants' solicitors.* (one judge gave one verdict to several solicitors who each represented a defendant)

Pronouns

33. Pronouns do not need apostrophes to indicate possession e.g., his, hers, ours, yours, theirs, its.

Contractions

34. This is simply apostrophes in place of missing letters. Wasn't instead of was not. It's instead of it is.

35. Be careful and use these sparingly. Although they appear friendly and more accessible, they can be more difficult for some readers to understand, particularly those with low literacy levels or whose first language is not English (a point made by the Plain English Commission).

Plurals

36. Apostrophes are used to create a plural where simply adding an "s" would be confusing. The most usual are making a single letter plural: e.g. dotting the i's and crossing the t's.

Bullet points and numbered lists: how to write them

Lists of items

37. Don't punctuate the end of bullet points which are a list of items. Capitalise them only if the word would be capitalised. Two examples.

38. Popular cakes:

    (i)   Victoria sponge

    (ii)   hummingbird cake

    (iii)   anything chocolate

    (iv)   fresh cream gateau

39. Towns and villages in North-east Fife:

    • Anstruther

    • Pittenweem

    • Kingsbarns

    • St Andrews

Complete sentences with preceding text

40. If the bullet points each form a complete sentence with preceding text, the last one should end with a full stop (or question mark). Only capitalise, if the word would normally be capitalised.

41. Colleagues told me their favourite cake is:

    (i)   Victoria sponge

    (ii)   hummingbird cake

    (iii)   anything chocolate

    (iv)   fresh cream gateau.

42. There is a railway station with a car park in:

    (i)   Leuchars

    (ii)   Cupar

    (iii)   Dunfermline.

43. If you need to use "or" or "and" it should be preceded by a comma.

44. If you needed to drive to the station, you could park at:

    (i)   Leuchars

    (ii)   Kirkcaldy, or

    (iii)   Cupar.

Each bulleted item would form a complete sentence in its own right

45.   This is where it gets more complicated, depending on what sort of document you are writing.

46.   If each of the bulleted items would form a complete sentence (independent of the preceding text) then you should take the appropriate approach.

General reports and documents

47.   In short, anything that is not a Decision Notice, legal document or Enforcement Notice.

48.   Each point should start with a capital letter and end with a full stop (or question mark). For example.

49.   The following are good reasons for missing the ASM:

    (i)   You are absent as a result of illness.

    (ii)   You are unable to get to work because of problems with public transport.

    (iii)   There is something more interesting happening elsewhere which you would rather attend.

Decision Notices, Enforcement Notices and legal documents

50.   This approach follows the advice of the Plain English Commission in relation to legal documents.

51.   If the bulleted items would each form a complete sentence (independent of the preceding text) then the approach in legal documents is:

    (i)   start each point with a lower case letter;

    (ii)   add a semicolon to the end of each point;

    (iii)   add 'or' or 'and' (depending on the sense of your sentence) to the end of the penultimate (and other relevant) point; and

    (iv)   finish the final point with a full stop.

52.   The following are good reasons for missing the ASM:

    (i)   you are absent as a result of illness;

    (ii)   you are unable to get to work because of problems with public transport; or

    (iii)   there is something more interesting happening elsewhere which you would rather attend.

Bullets and numbered lists: how to use the templates and style

53.   Templates in VC (and your "normal" template, i.e. blank document) are set up with pre-determined styles for headings and numbering. It is important to use them for consistency, ease of reference by other users and as part of the document automation.

54.   You should start a new document with new template and cut and paste into it. Do not simply keep re-saving an old report or decision with a new name as you may not be using the latest version.

55. Take care that when you cut and paste you retain the style of the new template and do not import the old.

56. This is not a comprehensive guide as it only covers the basics. If you would like training, speak to your line manager or OMT.

57. If your computer does not give you the options set out here, speak to OMT.

Headings

58. Break text up and group it under headings that make it easier to follow. It is good practice to use headings in long letters as well as in reports, briefings, decisions and other documents.

59. To apply a heading style:

    (i)   place the cursor at the start of the text, or

    (ii)   highlight the relevant text, and

.

    (iii)   click on the appropriate style from the box that looks like this.

            (if you can't see it and don't know how to make it visible, ask OMT)
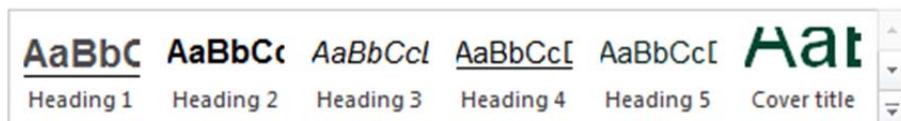
Bullets and numbering

60. The norm is to use bullets and numbering in documents (including long letters).

61. Numbering your paragraphs and points is especially important if the document is for discussion, likely to be referred to by another person, or is long and would benefit from being broken-up into easier to follow chunks.

Do I use numbers or bullet points?

62. This is the **first level**, used to number the paragraphs

    (i)   This is the **first indent, numbered.** This makes it easy to refer to a specific piece of text. It should be used to number a general or finite list (e.g. there were three factors, the tests that must be applied are).

    •   This is the **first indent with a bullet point**. Use your judgement about when you use bullets points rather than numbers. Some examples of when you might use bullet points are: If there are only two points and you think it looks better, for an infinite or incomplete list (e.g., the factors included...) or to suit the tone and style of a communication.

            (a)   This is the **second indent, numbered.** Same principle applies as first numbered indent.

                •   This is the **second indent, with a bullet point.** Same principle applies as first numbered indent.

How do I apply the numbering style?

63.   The first thing to check is whether the numbering is turned on, and what style is being used.

<u>Checking if numbering is on and what style it is</u>

64.   You need to be familiar with these two buttons:

    (i)   This one tells you whether numbering is switched on. If the numbering is switched on the button will be yellow.

    (ii)   This one tells you what style of numbering is switched on.
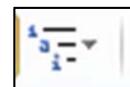
    (iii)   To check what "style" of numbering you have, click on the arrow.
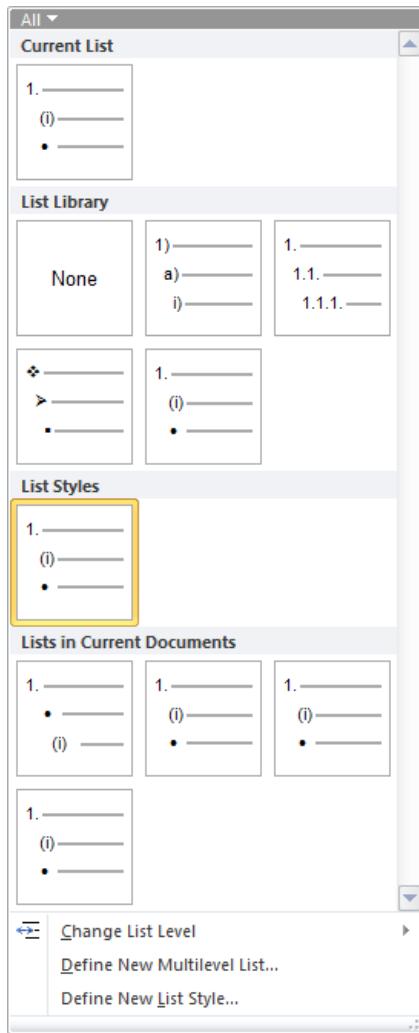
This should open this dialogue box.

The two important things are the "current list" and the "list style". You can see here that the current list is the style highlighted with a yellow border.

You can also see that they are the same as the one used in this document.

If you get something different, speak to OMT as you may not have your styles set up properly.

65.   If there is already numbering in the document you can check to see it is the right style. If the current style is different to the list style, simply click on the corporate "list style" (i.e. the same as the one here.

66.   Templates should be set up with the correct numbering style.

How to turn on the numbering

67.   If there is no numbering. You need to turn the numbering on. Click on this button and then on the little arrow

 you should see something like the dialogue box to the right.

68.   Simply click on the correct style in the list styles (circled red).
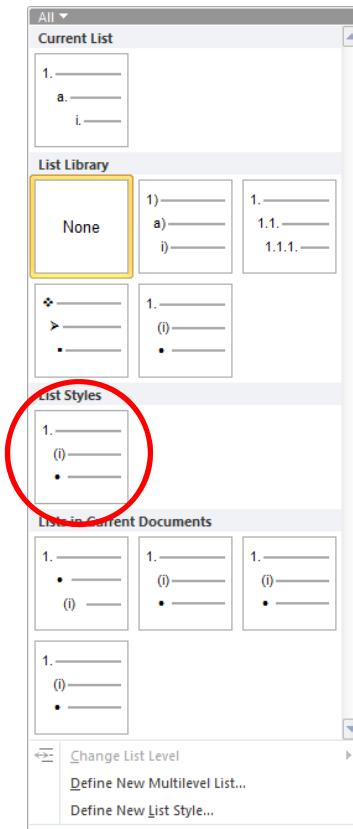
How to use the numbering style

69. It is all done with the tab key or indent button. Assume the numbering is on and you have typed text into a numbered paragraph (like this one). Hit the enter key. This will start a new numbered paragraph. From this point follow the instructions about using the tab or indent.

(i) This is the **first indent, numbered.** To show this, use the tab button, or click on the indent button.

• This is the **first indent with a bullet point**. To show this, use the tab button, or click on the indent button AGAIN. . In other words you need to click on the tab/indent twice.

(a) This is the **second indent, numbered.** To show this, use the tab button, or click on the indent button AGAIN. . In other words you need to click on the tab/indent three times.

• This is the **second indent, with a bullet point.** To show this, use the tab button, or click on the indent button AGAIN. . In other words you need to click on the tab/indent four times.

i. You should have the idea by now.

Dates

70. Easy, use this format **4 March 2016** in most communications.

71. When you might take a different approach:

(i) In lists. For example:

• using a leading zero for the day so that dates can be sorted: 04 March, 14 March

• changing the order so the year comes first and using numbers to enable sorting: 2015/03/04, 2015 03 14

(ii) In tables and spreadsheets: for example 04/03/15, to take up less space, or 2015 03 04 to enable sorting.

Equality in writing

72. Language develops over time so rather than try to stick to a list, be guided by the principles of:

(i) Respect for the status and identity of individuals. If you think something will offend your readership in terms of the protected characteristics, don't use it: find an alternative.

(ii)   Avoid language that is specific in terms of the protected characteristics. For example, "first name" instead of "Christian name" and "If a person walks on the grass, he/ she will be fined" instead of "If a person walks on the grass, he will be fined". "They" could be used instead of he/ she but our preferred style is he/ she

(iii)   Avoid language that highlights a characteristic. For example, use actor for both male and female performers, not actor and actress. The title Ombudsman is an exception to this as the term is used for both male and female ombudsmen.

73.   You might find this presentation useful. http://www.slideshare.net/fullscreen/KittyKarthika/non-discriminatory-in-writing/1

Exclamation marks

74.   The exclamation mark turns a sentence into an exclamation. Exclamation marks are used to express a strong emotion such as surprise, anger, excitement or a raised voice.

(i)   Turn a statement into an exclamation: *There's a huge spider in the bath!*

(ii)   Add voice to a command: *Don't move; the ice is cracking!*

(iii)   Turn a word (or short statement) into an interjection: *Help!*

(iv)   Add emphasis to an interruption in brackets: *The response (thankfully!) went out four minutes before midnight on the 20th working day.*

75.   Use exclamation marks sparingly, especially in formal writing. If in doubt, leave it out and use a full stop.

Inverted commas (quotation marks)

Speech

76.   The Commissioner said, "The usual grammatical rules apply to the use of speech marks". She went on to say, "In this office, that means using 'double' inverted commas to enclose speech".

Emphasis

Unusual words

77.   Use "double" inverted commas for emphasis in most text.

78.   If emphasising something within a quote, use '**single**' inverted commas.

For effect or other reasons

79.   We often emphasise text for other reasons: to make it stand out, because it contains a link or to make a point.

80.   If simply highlighting a word to make it stand out, use the VI guidelines on bold, colour, underline and italics. The main point is to aid the reader or make the text easier to navigate.

81.   There may also be times where we are quoting someone and want to add emphasis, but make sure it is clear it is our emphasis and not the author's.

"*Be clear,*" wrote the Commissioner*, "what I am most interested in is 'good' communication. I appreciate that there have to be rules for consistency, and that we have to ensure that legal conventions and requirements are followed, but conveying our message **clearly** [my emphasis] is paramount."*

Titles of short works

82. The titles of short works are highlighted with inverted commas, e.g. "The Investigations Handbook".

83. Longer works are *italicised.*

Quotations

84. Quotations should:

    (i) be in "double" inverted commas

    (ii) be preceded by a colon

    (iii) if longer than four lines, be started on a new line

    (iv) if shorter than four lines, be embedded in the text.

85. Quotations are often *italicised.* Use your judgement but be consistent. If you think it makes the text easier to read, then use italics. If the original quote used italics for all or some, do the same.

Naming public authorities and other organisations or bodies

Decisions, Enforcement Notices, legal documents

86. Follow the guidance in the Investigations Handbook (Particularly the guidance on naming public authorities in decisions section)
http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/nmsruntime/logLink.aspx?linkURL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.itspublicknowledge.info%2fLaw%2fFOISA-EIRsGuidance%2fBriefings.aspx%23procedures

Other communications

87. Follow the **Guiding principles.** Think about the intended readership and the context in which you are writing, and be consistent. For example:

    (i) It might be more appropriate to use common parlance: e.g. NHS Grampian instead of Grampian Health Board. Be mindful about avoiding confusion and think about whether in first use the formal name needs explaining.

    (ii) Are you responding to an enquiry where it would help the person who sent it if you used the same terminology as they did?

    (iii) If the authority or organisation is often referred to by an acronym or abbreviation, do you need to spell it out?

    (iv) How does the authority or organisation refer to itself?

88. Generally, it will be sufficient to refer to the organisation once in full (with the short version in brackets) and the short version in the rest of the document.

Some common pitfalls

89. Use singular pronouns (unless the organisation itself has adopted the plural as a house style). For example:

    (i) "Fife Council is…" not "Fife Council are…"

    (ii) "the authority should submit its scheme" not "the authority should submit their scheme"

90. Partnerships (common for solicitors' offices), are referred to in plural e.g. "Digby Brown Solicitors are… " and "Anderson Strathern are… "

91. The following are always plural (i.e. they, them, their):

    (i) the Scottish Ministers

    (ii) Police Scotland.

Numbers

Text or numerals?

92. Text for numbers from one to nine (or 1—9). Unless:

    (i) You are referring to a numbered item, e.g. paragraph 2.

    (ii) The text uses a lot of numbers such as scientific or technical writing.

    (iii) Referring to a range of numbers such as pages. Then use the first and last numeral separated by a dash (now here's a thing for pedants, in UK English a dash is longer than a hyphen. If you have your language set to UK English, autocorrect will often insert a dash if you type a hyphen twice with no spaces in front of it. E.g. 11-17 is using a hyphen; 11—17 was using a double hyphen autocorrected to a dash).

93. Text at the start of a sentence. E.g., Two thousand decisions were issued in the first nine years. (Think about whether to rewrite the sentence, In the first nine years we issued 2,000 decisions)

94. Numerals for numbers greater than nine, e.g. 10, 23, 142.

Fractions

95. Usually written out as text, but be consistent. If you use "half" in the first half of the document, then also use it in the second half. Don't do half and ½.

Numbers over 1,000

96. Use a comma to separate "000's". This makes it easier to read: e.g. 5,000; 500,999; 1,897,659

Referring to the Commissioner and the office

The Commissioner

97.   Use the following, suitable to the context. All three can be used within a document but must be set out either in the document with first use, or in the table if using the report/ policy templates:

   (i)   The Commissioner

   (ii)   The Scottish Information Commissioner

   (iii)   (The) SIC

   (iv)   Rosemary Agnew, Scottish Information Commissioner

98.   When referring the Commissioner, capitalise the first letter. When referring to commissioners generally, don't (e.g. The Commissioner is of the view that … while other Scottish commissioners take the line that…).

99.   Try to **avoid** using gender specific words such as her/ him, she/ he in guidance documents, on web pages or in other documents that are intended to have a long shelf life. This is so we don't have to do too much updating when there is a change in commissioner.

100. Use her/ him, she/ he in decisions or in opinion pieces where the content is more current, or when representing a particular commissioner's view.

101. If you use the full title in the first instance, use the Commissioner (or the SIC) after that, keeping it in context.

The office

102. Try to avoid OSIC. This is not a legally recognised title and in the wider world can have a more specific meaning than it does here. Don't worry about instances where we already use it, just bear it in mind for new communications.

103. Some suggested alternatives:

   (i)   SIC/ the Commissioner/ the Scottish Information Commissioner

   (ii)   The Commissioner's office

   (iii)   My colleagues

   (iv)   Our/ we

   (v)   Staff/ the Commissioner's team/ staff

   (vi)   Individual names

   (vii)   Titles.

104. As a general rule, communications from the office are presented in the name of the Commissioner rather than the office. For example, say "The Scottish Information Commissioner conducted research", rather than "OSIC conducted research".

Salutations

105. These are the least adaptable of the guidelines, and you are strongly encouraged to simply stick to them. You will note that we do not follow titles with a full stop. This is not a complete list, merely the one we are most likely to use

Who	How
MSPs/ MPs who do not hold office	**General references** Title, first name, surname, MSP/MP E.g. • Mr John Johnson MSP , thereafter Mr Johnson • Mrs Jenny Jenson MP, thereafter Mrs Jenson **Letters** • Open with Dear Mr Johnson (**don't** include MSP/ MP)
Scottish Ministers	**General references** First name, surname, MSP, office held, e.g. • Andrea Andrews MSP, Minister for Administrative Arrangements, thereafter Ms Andrews or the Minister **In an event agenda or similar** Title, first name, surname, MSP office held, e.g. • Ms Andrea Andrews MSP, Minister for Administrative Arrangements, thereafter Ms Andrews or the Minister **Letters** Open with Dear 'title of office held', e.g. • Dear First Minister • Dear Cabinet Secretary • Dear Minister
Elected local government member	**General reference** Councillor, first name, surname, e.g. • Councillor Robert Robertson **Letters** Dear Councillor surname, e.g. • Dear Councillor Robertson
Lords, ladies, knights	**General reference** Title, Surname, of Place, e.g. • Lord Robin of Boldside • Lady Godiva of Coventry **Letters** Dear title, surname • Dear Sir Robin • Dear Lady Godiva
Qualifications/ titles	**In the address** Include qualifications and "titles/ letters after a name" if that is how the person is generally known or refers to themselves. E.g. • Professor Yaffle • Mr James Nesbitt, OBE (equally acceptable is James Nesbitt, OBE) • Dr Johnston, Phd **Letters** Open with Dear Salutation (e.g. Mr Dr) and name, don't include the qualification/ title after the name

Semicolons and colons in sentences

Colons

106. A colon separates parts of a sentence, and indicates that there is a close relationship between them. They have the following main uses (excluding their use in lists). In all but one of these, you will see that the second part of the sentence starts with a lower case letter.

   (i) **To explain**. A colon is used to separate the main clause from an explanation of the main clause.

   (a) They know her secret: she is obsessed with grammar.

   (b) Her flawless skin is no mystery: she stays out of the sun.

   The explanation can be one word, or it could form a sentence in its own right

   (ii) **To add emphasis**. The colon makes the reader pause just a little bit longer than with a comma before reading the next word or part of a sentence.

   (a) She is obsessed about one thing: grammar

   (iii) **Quotes**. A colon is used to introduce quoted text.

   (a) The Commissioner admitted to her office: "I am obsessed with grammar!"

   (iv) **Titles**. If a title is followed by a subtitle, they are often separated by a colon.

   (a) Coming soon to a cinema near you, *Grammar: The Secret Obsession of a Commissioner.*

Semi-colons

107. Semi-colons are also used to separate clauses in a sentence. Their use follows two basic rules:

   (i) the clauses must be capable of standing alone as separate sentences, and

   (ii) the clauses must be closely related and of equal importance.

108. Semi-colons are often less abrupt than full stops so can appear friendlier, but don't over-use them as they can make sentences complex and challenging to read. The clause following the semi-colon always starts with a lower case letter.

109. Some examples:

   (i) *Bergen is very wet; it has the highest rainfall of any Norwegian city*. The second part of the sentence is equal in importance to the first, closely related and the two clauses could stand alone.

   (ii) *Thank you for your letter of 15 June; I am sorry it has taken me more than a week to reply*. The use of the semi-colon makes this less abrupt for the reader.

Times

110. It doesn't matter how you refer to time, just be consistent within a document and clear. Here are some general guidance notes.

    (i)   17:30 (use a colon for 24 hour clock)/ 17:30 hrs

    (ii)   7.30pm/ 7:30p.m. Use am/ pm unless it is blindingly obvious from the context what you mean

    (iii)   Using the phrase **o'clock**. Spell out the number, e.g. seven o'clock

    (iv)   Expressing time in text, in quarters or halves. Spell out the number, e.g. half past seven (avoid ½ past 7)

Tone/ language

Think of the reader

111. The conventions and approaches set out in this document should be your starting point when drafting documents and other communications. In formal documents, such as Decision Notices, the Annual Report and Accounts or correspondence where we are being directive or giving technical guidance, they should be followed.

112. In formal communications you should also follow grammatical rules (unless we have taken a different approach in this document).

113. In other communications, such as on the web site or in information leaflets where technical precision is not so critical, think about the readership and whether departing from strict rules will help the communication.

114. For example: the word data is plural, therefore the correct usage in a sentence is *…data are…* This should be the approach in formal communications. In the press and media, we often see a less precise approach and it is convention to say …*data is…* It may be that when we are writing promotional materials we opt to follow the conventions that the media use.

115. Use your judgement.

Plain English

116. Most of us have received plain English training and so are familiar with the concepts: from simplifying vocabulary through to avoiding overuse of the negative. Many of the principles are already included throughout this document and I don't propose to repeat the book; you can read it for yourself.

117. Sticking with the principle of tailoring communication to the reader, you may find the following helpful.

Sentence length

118. While the 15—20 words recommended by the Plain English Commission is a good target, in some of our more formal communications it is not always possible.

119. The underlying point is keep sentences short, simple and break them up:

    (i)   with bullets and numbering

(ii)   punctuation

(iii)   into new sentences.

We, you and I are great, but …

120.   The Plain English Commission promote the use of we, you and I to make writing more "human". Again, use your judgement:

(i)   Over-use when communicating technical information can come across as patronising.

(ii)   They are great for promotional and public facing content, particularly when referring to our service.

(iii)   They are great for information documents, but not always appropriate for more formal communications where "the Commissioner", "the Head of Enforcement", "the Commissioner's office" are better (even though less accessible).

Contractions

121.   This is simply apostrophes in place of missing letters. Wasn't instead of was not. It's instead of it is.

122.   Be careful and use these sparingly. Although they appear friendly and more accessible, they can be more difficult for some readers to understand, particularly those with low literacy levels or whose first language is not English (a point made by the Plain English Commission).

Vocabulary

123.   Plain English approaches encourage using simpler vocabulary and avoiding jargon. The Plain English Commission publishes a Plain English Lexicon, which gives guidance on alternative words to use.

124.   Use it wisely: as an approach it is encouraged, but if the more complex word is appropriate in a legal or technical context, you should use that to minimise the risk of misinterpretation and challenges to our decisions. If you need to use a word (or phrase) that is unusual or difficult to understand, follow it with a plain language explanation using terms like "put simply", "in everyday language…" and so on.

Don't overuse please

125.   We are a polite office, but don't get carried away. Use please to soften something and use it to be polite. Don't use it when what you are really doing is giving an instruction or direction that would benefit from being succinct.

126.   For example: if you are creating a form:

✓	✗
Full name: …………………………………….	Please write your full name here: …………………………………………………

127.   For example: if you're asking for something to be sent to a specific address:

✓	✗
Please send me the information I have	Send the information to me at

Which or that

128. Should you use which or that? Read grammar books of old and you will get several answers, including it often doesn't matter. It is now more usual to use *that* for restrictive clauses and *which* for non-restrictive clauses.

129. A restrictive clause is vital to the meaning of a sentence and not separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

    (i)   Peter held down the tent **that had broken loose**. *That had broken loose* identified which tent had broken loose (i.e. "the" tent).

    (ii) Take out *that had broken loose* and it changes the overall meaning of the sentence. As it is written here, the fact that the tent had broken loose is an essential part of the sentence because the sentence is about a tent that had broken loose, and the fact that Peter held it down.

130. A non-restrictive clause gives extra, non-essential, information. It is separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

    (i)   Peter held down the tent, **which had broken loose**. *Which had broken loose,* following the comma, is extra information in the sentence

    (ii) Take out *which had broken loose* and the meaning of the sentence does not fundamentally change. The sentence was about Peter holding down the tent.

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