

The
Economist

Style Guide

Eleventh edition

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Introduction

On only two scores can *The Economist* hope to outdo its rivals consistently. One is the quality of its analysis; the other is the quality of its writing. The aim of this book is to give some general advice on writing, to point out some common errors and to set some arbitrary rules.

The first requirement of *The Economist* is that it should be readily understandable. Clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought. So think what you want to say, then say it as simply as possible. Keep in mind George Orwell's six elementary rules:

- 1 Never use a **metaphor**, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print (see **metaphors**).
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do (see **short words**).
- 3 If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out (see **unnecessary words**).
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active (see **grammar and syntax**).
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Readers are primarily interested in what you have to say. By the way in which you say it, you may encourage them either to read on or to give up. If you want them to read on:

Catch the attention of the reader and then get straight into the article. Do not spend several sentences clearing your throat, setting the scene or sketching in the background. Introduce the facts as you tell the story and hold the reader by the way you

unfold the tale and by a fresh but unpretentious use of language.

In starting your article, let your model be the essays of Francis Bacon. He starts "Of Riches" with "I cannot call riches better than the baggage of virtue." "Of Cunning" opens with "We take cunning for a sinister or crooked wisdom." "Of Suspicion" is instantly on the wing with "Suspicious amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight." Each of these beginnings carries implicitly within it an entire essay. Each seizes the reader by the lapels and at once draws him into the subject. No gimmickry is needed, no flowery language, no literary contrivance. Plain words on their own carry enough meaning to provoke an intriguing thought, stir the reader's curiosity and thus make him want to continue.

You must strive for a similar effect. Articles in *The Economist* should be like essays, in that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. They should not be mere bits of information stitched together. Each should be a coherent whole, a series of paragraphs that follow logically in order and, ideally, will suffer if even one sentence is cut out. If the article is a report, the facts must be selected and presented as a story. If it is a leader or more analytical article, it should also have a sense of sequence, so that the reader feels he is progressing from a beginning to a conclusion.

Either way, it is up to you to provide the ideas, analysis and argument that bind the elements of the article together. That is the hard part. Once you have them, though, you need only plain, straightforward words to express them. Do not imagine that you can disguise the absence of thought with long words, stale metaphors or the empty jargon of academics. In moderation, however, you can enliven your writing with a fresh metaphor, an occasional exuberance or an unusual word or phrase that nicely suits your purpose.

Read through your writing several times. Edit it ruthlessly, whether by cutting or polishing or sharpening, on each occasion.

Avoid repetition. Cut out anything superfluous. And resist any temptation to achieve a literary effect by making elliptical remarks or allusions to unexplained people or events. Rather,

hold your reader's attention by keeping the story moving. If the tale begins to flag, or the arguments seem less than convincing, you can rescue it only by the sharpness of your mind. Nothing is to be gained by resorting to orotundities and grandiloquence, still less by calling on clichés and vogue expressions. Unadorned, unfancy prose is usually all you need.

Do not be stuffy. “To write a genuine, familiar or truly English style”, said Hazlitt, “is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command or choice of words or who could discourse with ease, force and perspicuity setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes.”

Use the language of everyday speech, not that of spokesmen, lawyers or bureaucrats (so prefer *let* to *permit*, *people* to *persons*, *buy* to *purchase*, *colleague* to *peer*, *way out* to *exit*, *present* to *gift*, *rich* to *wealthy*, *show* to *demonstrate*, *break* to *violate*). Pomposity and long-windedness tend to obscure meaning, or reveal the lack of it: strip them away in favour of plain words.

Do not be hectoring or arrogant. Those who disagree with you are not necessarily *stupid* or *insane*. Nobody needs to be described as silly: let your analysis show that he is. When you express opinions, do not simply make assertions. The aim is not just to tell readers what you think, but to persuade them; if you use arguments, reasoning and evidence, you may succeed. Go easy on the *oughts* and *shoulds*.

Do not be too pleased with yourself. Don't boast of your own cleverness by telling readers that you correctly predicted something or that you have a scoop. You are more likely to bore or irritate them than to impress them.

Do not be too chatty. *Surprise, surprise* is more irritating than informative. So is *Ho, ho* and, in the middle of a sentence, *wait for it*, etc.

Do not be too didactic. If too many sentences begin *Compare*, *Consider*, *Expect*, *Imagine*, *Look at*, *Note*, *Prepare for*, *Remember* or *Take*, readers will think they are reading a textbook (or, indeed, a

style book). This may not be the way to persuade them to renew their subscriptions.

Do your best to be lucid. (“I see but one rule: to be clear”, Stendhal.)

Simple sentences help. Keep complicated constructions and gimmicks to a minimum, if necessary by remembering the *New Yorker*’s comment: “Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind.”

Mark Twain described how a good writer treats sentences: “At times he may indulge himself with a long one, but he will make sure there are no folds in it, no vaguenesses, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when he has done with it, it won’t be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under the water; it will be a torch-light procession.”

Long paragraphs, like long sentences, can confuse the reader. “The paragraph”, according to Fowler, “is essentially a unit of thought, not of length; it must be homogeneous in subject matter and sequential in treatment.” One-sentence paragraphs should be used only occasionally.

Clear thinking is the key to clear writing. “A scrupulous writer”, observed Orwell, “in every sentence that he writes will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?”

Scrupulous writers will also notice that their copy is edited only lightly and is likely to be used. It may even be read.



a or the see grammar and syntax.

abbreviations

Write words in their full form on first appearance:

Trades Union Congress (not TUC), *Troubled Asset Relief Programme* (not TARP)

unless an abbreviation or acronym is so familiar that it is used more often in full:

AIDS BBC CIA EU FBI HIV IMF NATO NGO OECD UNESCO

or unless the full form would provide little illumination –

AWACS, DNA. If in doubt about its familiarity, explain what the organisation is or does. After the first mention, try not to repeat the abbreviation too often; so write *the agency* rather than the *IAEA*, *the party* rather than the *KMT*, to avoid spattering the page with capital letters. And prefer *chief executive*, *boss* or *manager* to *CEO*.

There is no need to give the initials of an organisation if it is not referred to again. This clutters both the page and the brain.

Do not use spatterings of abbreviations and acronyms simply in order to cram more words in; you will end up irritating readers rather than informing them. An article in a recent issue of *The Economist* contained the following:

CIA DCI DNI DOD DVD FBI NCTC NSA

Some of these are well known to most readers and can readily be held in the mind. But unfamiliar abbreviations may oblige the reader to constantly refer back to the first use.

ampersands should be used:

- 1 when they are part of the name of a company:
Procter & Gamble Pratt & Whitney
- 2 for such things as constituencies, where two names are linked to form one unit:
The rest of Brighouse & Spenborough joins with the Batley part of Batley & Morley to form Batley & Spen.
The area thus became the Pakistani province of Kashmir and the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir.
- 3 in *R&D* and *S&I*.

definite article If an abbreviation can be pronounced – *COSATU*, *NATO*, *UNESCO* – it does not generally require the definite article. Other organisations, except companies, should usually be preceded by the:

the BBC the KGB the NHS the NIESR the UNHCR

elements do not take small caps when abbreviated:

carbon dioxide is CO₂

lead is Pb

methane is CH₄

However:

chlorofluorocarbons are CFCs

the oxides of nitrogen are generally NO_x

Different isotopes of the same element are distinguished by raised (superscript) prefixes:

carbon-14 is ¹⁴C

helium-3 is ³He

Do not sprinkle chemical symbols unnecessarily: they may put readers off. But common abbreviations such as CO₂ may sometimes be used for variety.

headings, cross-heads, captions, etc In headings, rubrics, cross-heads, footnotes, captions, tables, charts (including sources), use ordinary caps, not small caps.

initials in people's and companies' names take points (with a

space between initials and name, but not between initials). In general, follow the practice preferred by people, companies and organisations in writing their own names, for example:

I.M. Pei J.C. Penney J. Sainsbury A.N. Wilson

junior and senior Spell out in full (and lower case) junior and senior after a name:

George Bush junior George Bush senior

lower case Abbreviate:

kilograms (not kilogrammes) to kg (or kilos)

kilometres per hour to kph

kilometres to km

miles per hour to mph

Use lower case for *kg, km, lb* (never *lbs*), *mph* and other measures, and for *ie, eg*; *ie* should be followed by a comma.

When used with figures, these lower-case abbreviations should follow immediately, with no space:

11am 4.30pm 15kg 35mm 100mph 78rpm

Two abbreviations together, however, must be separated: *60m b/d*. Use *b/d* not *bpd* as an abbreviation for *barrels per day*.

MPS Except in British contexts, use **MP** only after first spelling out member of Parliament in full (in many places an **MP** is a military policeman).

Members of the *European Parliament* are **MEPs** (not Euro-MPs).

Members of the *Scottish Parliament* are **MSPs**.

Members of the *Welsh Assembly* are **AMs** (Assembly Members).

organisations

EFTA is the European Free Trade Association.

The **FAO** is the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

The **FDA** is the Food and Drug Administration.

The **IDA** is the International Development Association.

NAFTA is the North American Free-Trade Agreement.

The **PLO** is the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

pronounceable abbreviations

Abbreviations that can be pronounced and are composed of bits of words rather than just initials should be spelt out in upper and lower case:

Cocom	Mercosur	Unicef
Frelimo	Nepad	Unisom
Kfor	Renamo	Unprofor
Legco	Sfor	

There is generally no need for more than one initial capital letter, unless the word is a name: *ConsGold, KwaZulu, McKay, MiG*.

ranks and titles Do not use *Prof, Sen, Col*, etc. *Lieut-Colonel* and *Lieut-Commander* are permissible. So is *Rev*, but it must be preceded by *the* and followed by a Christian name or initial: *the Rev Jesse Jackson* (thereafter *Mr Jackson*).

scientific units named after individuals Scientific units, except those of temperature, that are named after individuals are not capitalised when written out in full: *watt, joule*, etc. When abbreviated these units should be set in small capitals, though any attachments denoting multiples go in lower case:

watt is *w*
 kilowatt, 1,000 watts, is *kw*
 milliwatt, one-thousandth of a watt, is *mw*
 megawatt, 1m watts, is *MW*
 gigawatt, 1 billion (10^9) watts, is *GW*
 terawatt, 1 trillion (10^{12}) watts, is *TW*
 petawatt, 1 quadrillion (10^{15}) watts, is *PW*
 megahertz is *MHZ*

small caps usage

In body text, use small capitals for abbreviations, acronyms and proper names spelt in capitals, whether they can be pronounced as words or not, with no points:

CIF EU FOB GDP IKEA NATO

Single letters, when attached by hyphens to words, should also generally be set in small caps:

A-level B-grade T-shirt U-turn X-ray Y chromosome

Abbreviations that include upper-case and lower-case letters must be set in a mixture of small capitals and lower case: *BPhil*, *BskyB*, *PhD*. The same rule applies if an abbreviation is linked to a number: *AK-47*, *MiG-25*, *M1*, *SALT-2*.

Brackets, apostrophes and all other typographical furniture accompanying small capitals, including the plural and genitive s, are not set in small capitals: *IOUs*, *MPS' salaries*, *SDRS*, etc.

Do not use small caps for:

the elements of the periodic table, eg *H*, *Pb*, *Sn*, *NaCl*

degrees of temperature, eg °C, °F, °R

currencies, eg *NKr*, *SFr*

roman numerals, eg *C*, *D*, *I*, *L*, *M*, *V*, *X*. So *Richard III*, *Louis XIV*, *Pope John XXIII* and so on. But do not adorn popes, monarchs, etc, with numerical postscripts unless they are needed to differentiate, for example, *Benedict XVI* from *Benedict XV*, or *Elizabeth II* from her 16th-century namesake.

anything in captions, charts (including sources), footnotes, headings, rubrics or tables

writing out upper-case abbreviations Most upper-case abbreviations are shortenings of proper names with initial capital letters. The *LSO* is the *London Symphony Orchestra*.

However, there are exceptions:

CAP *but* common agricultural policy

EMU *but* economic and monetary union

GDP *but* gross domestic product

PSBR *but* public-sector borrowing requirement

VLSI *but* very large-scale integration

miscellaneous Spell out:

page *pages* *hectares* *miles*

Remember, too, that the *v* of *HIV* stands for virus, so do not write *HIV virus*.

See **measures** in Part 3.

absent In Latin *absent* is a verb meaning *they are away*. In English it is either an adjective (*absent friends*) or a verb (*to absent yourself*).

It is not a preposition meaning *in the absence of*.

accents On words now accepted as English, use accents only when they make a crucial difference to pronunciation:

café cliché communiqué éclat exposé façade soupçon

But: *chateau decor elite feted naive*

The main accents and diacritical signs are:

acute	république
grave	grand-mère
circumflex	bête noire
umlaut	Länder, Österreich (Austria)
cedilla	français
tilde	señor, São Paulo

If you use one accent (except the tilde – strictly, a diacritical sign), use all:

émigré mûlée protégé résumé

Put the accents and diacritical signs on French, German, Spanish and Portuguese names and words only:

José Manuel Barroso	cafézinho
Federico Peña	coñac
Françoise de Panafieu	déjeuner
Wolfgang Schäuble	Frühstück

Any foreign word in italics should, however, be given its proper accents. See also **italics**.

acronym A pronounceable word, formed from the initials of other words, like *radar*, *nimby* or *NATO*. It is not a set of initials, like the BBC or the IMF.

actionable means *giving ground for a lawsuit*. Do not use it to mean *susceptible of being put into practice*: prefer *practical* or *practicable*. Do not use *action* as a verb.

adjectives and adverbs see **grammar and syntax, punctuation**.

adjectives of proper nouns see **grammar and syntax, punctuation**.