

# Grammar and punctuation

This page has advice on common grammar and punctuation questions.

If you can't find what you're looking for we recommend the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

**Please note:** this guide does not apply to legal and commercial documents, instruments or drafting. If you are unsure whether you should be applying this advice please contact the [Legal helpdesk](#).

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

Try to avoid acronyms, especially uncommon ones, as they often confuse readers. If you have to use an acronym it should be spelt in full with the acronym in brackets at first mention. After this the acronym can be used on its own. In a very long document that has

several chapters it might be necessary to repeat this in each chapter. Particularly if it is an unfamiliar acronym.

**Example:** Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). Note the preference for our web material is to move to "we" rather than FSANZ.

When pluralising acronyms, don't add an apostrophe.

**Example:** MPs not MP's

We should avoid abbreviations derived from Latin terms. Spell out fully for a better usability experience.

Avoid: i.e., e.g., etc., et al.

**Use:** example, such as, and so on, and so forth, and others.

## Apostrophes

Apostrophes indicate possession—something belonging to something or someone else.

To indicate something belonging to one person, the apostrophe goes before the 's'.

**Example:** "The girl's horse."

To indicate something belonging to more than one person, put the apostrophe after the 's'.

**Example:** "The girls' horse."

Apostrophes are also used to indicate a contracted word. For example, "don't" uses an apostrophe to indicate that the word is missing the "o" from "do not".

Apostrophes are *never* used to make a word plural, even when a word is in number form, as in a date.

## Bi as a prefix

The prefix bi means both two and twice, so bi-monthly can mean either every two months or twice a month.

**Example:** Try to avoid it by using alternatives like twice weekly or fortnightly, twice monthly or every two months.

## Capitalisation

Less is more when it comes to capitals.

Capitalise the word government as part of a formal title as in the Australian Government. Lower case is appropriate for general reference to government: the government proposes to review its policies.

**Example:** General references to state and territory governments should be lower case but the NSW Government will be upper case.

Names of organisations such as Department of Health can in subsequent usage refer simply to the department, with a lower case d.

**Example:** Publication, book and periodical titles should be capitalised and italicised to differentiate them from the surrounding text, as in *The Macquarie Dictionary* and *New Scientist*.

## Colons

A good way to remember how to use the colon is to think of it as meaning 'and here it is':

**Example:** She had two types of socks: white and purple.

The colon usually introduces a list. Colons are sometimes used to precede quoted speech. Avoid multiple punctuation marks.

**Example:** Avoid using "The decision was made for the following reasons:". Instead use "the decision was made because:"

## Commas

Commas are used to indicate a soft pause or smaller break in a sentence. Note there is no comma between the second last item in the list and the AND:

**Example:** Participants came from Sydney, Melbourne, Wellington and Canberra.

Commas are also used to separate names from titles or affiliations.

**Example:** Ms Marika Weinberg, OAM, presented the prizes.

## Cross referencing

When guiding a reader to another page or part of a document, use 'see' rather than 'refer' or 'refer to'.

**Example:** See ..... see also.....

## Currency

Currency abbreviations that come before the number are unspaced if they consist of or end in a symbol.

**Example:** \$123, NZ\$123, €123, and spaced if alphabetic, R 75.

Expressing amounts of money entirely in words is generally used for approximations.

**Example:** This approach is likely to save you thousands of dollars.

NZ\$50 and A\$50 is the preferred FSA NZ style when referencing currency.

## Dashes and hyphens

What's the difference?

What	Description
-	This is a hyphen
–	This is an en dash which represents a number or date range e.g.1967–1968  (Word shortcut: Hold Ctrl and press - (minus sign) on the numerical keypad)
—	This is an em dash which is versatile. It can be used instead of commas, parenthesis, or colons for example 1.3.2—2  <b>Word shortcut:</b> Hold Ctrl and Alt and press - (minus sign) on the numerical keypad

## The hyphen

The hyphen is the most common device for linking words and word fragments.

**Example:** Full-time job, 4-part series, five-and-a-half hours, co-author, de-emphasise.

**Note:** 'cooperate', 'coordinate' and their derivatives are no longer hyphenated.

## The en dash

The en dash is approximately the width of a capital 'N' and acts as a linking device. It is used to:

- show a range between numbers or words
- show a relationship between words that keep their separate identities
- attach a prefix to a group of words.

There is no space on either side of the dash.

**Example:** Your application will take 3–5 days to process. (showing a range)

See pages 213–224. (showing a range)

Asia–Pacific region. (showing a relationship)

Do not use an en dash with the words 'from' and 'between'.

**Example:** Applications are open from 1 April–6 May.

## The em dash

An em dash is roughly the width of a capital M and acts as a separation device. It can be used to:

- amplify or explain
- show an abrupt change
- set a phrase apart (like brackets).

There is no space on either side of the dash.

Sally rang to say that she wouldn't be coming in because she was sick—she said she couldn't even get out of bed.

## Compound words and hyphens

A compound word is two or more words that, together, carry a new meaning. Some formations of this kind start out as two words and with increasing use and recognition, they

move to hyphenated status and finally merge into one word. Hyphens are conventionally retained in some kinds of compounds, especially when both components have more than one syllable.

The Style Guide available in CASE has detailed information about when to use hyphens.

## **Lists—bulleted and numbered**

### **General guidelines**

- If bullets complete a lead-in, they will start with a lower case letter and have closing punctuation on the last bullet.
- If bullets are stand-alone sentences, they will start with a capital letter and have closing punctuation.
- Don't use semicolons to separate bullets.
- Colons should not introduce next-level bullets.
- Only use 'including' to introduce a list when the list is not exhaustive.
- Keep your list to about 7 items—if you exceed this and it is illogical to break the list into sub-bullets, 8 or 9 list items would be OK; however, consider that the average person can hold only 7 items in their short-term memory.

### **Lead-in text and list items that are sentence fragments**

Bike paths make it safer and easier to cycle around. Using bike paths:

- gives you access to facilities like bike shelters
- allows you to choose routes for different purposes, such as exercise or sightseeing
- reduces greenhouse gases and traffic congestion.

Notice that each list item is a sentence fragment. Each item can't function as a 'stand-alone' sentence).

### **Lead-in text and list items that are complete sentences**

If each list item is a complete sentence, punctuate it accordingly—starting with a capital letter and closing with appropriate punctuation, for example full stop, question mark.

All list items should be complete sentences—don't mix fragments and complete sentences.

### **Numbered lists**

Numbered lists should only be used for lists where the order is important—such as for a sequence of steps or a rank order—or when you wish to refer back to points by number. Sometimes there will be lead-in text, other times the lists will stand alone.

## Instructions

1. Fill in the application form using block letters.
2. Sign and date the form in the presence of a witness.
3. Attach certified copies of any documents.
4. Post the form and supporting documents to the address shown at the top.

If you have not received a response within 4 weeks, please contact us.

## 'And' 'or' and dot points

There is no need to add 'and' or 'or' at the end of the second-last dot point unless we are quoting from text which uses this punctuation, such as the FSANZ Act.

A carefully worded lead-in, followed by a colon, is enough.

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## Italics

We use italics when referring to the title of:

- books and periodicals
- films, video and television and radio programs
- legislation and legal cases
- policy guidelines

As well as:

- the scientific names of animals and plants, at the genus, species and lower taxonomic levels
- technical terms and any terms being defined
- letters, words and phrases being cited
- words used in special senses or to which a particular tone or emphasis is being applied.

The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code is not to be italicised. This is because it is not legislation.

## Underlining

We don't underline text to emphasise it – this has become the established way of showing hyperlinks.

## Linking

We'll usually link to other pages on our website for the user to get more information. Don't use words like 'click' or 'select'. Majority of web users are now on mobile devices so it doesn't make sense to use those words. Instead tell them where they're going. Introduce the title of the page or the topic, and link the title. There is no need to spell out the page URL.

**Example:** A food recall is action taken by a food business to remove unsafe food from distribution. Read more about [food recalls](#).

## Linking to an external website

You should reference the name of the page and website to let the user know where they're going.

**Example:** Information for employers about COVID-19 is available at the [Department of Health website](#).

## Numbers

The general rule is to use words for numbers up to nine and numerals from 10 on.

Always spell out a number when it starts a sentence. Alternatively, try rearranging the sentence.

**Example:** Two thousand cows are trapped by floodwater. Or: There are 2000 cows trapped by floodwater.

- Units of measurement are not capitalised when shown in words as in 20 kilograms not 20 Kilograms. However, in abbreviated form, the symbol for litre (L) is capitalised and there is no full stop, as in 20 L.
- Both names and symbols for SI units should have one space between them as in 22 kg not 22kg or 240 mL not 240mL. However, the symbols for degrees (°), percentages (%) and currency (\$) do not take a space as in 180°C, 45% or A\$45.
- Use the word per only with spelt-out names of units of measurement, and use the forward slash that denotes per with symbols as in 50 milligrams per kilogram or 50 mg/kg. Use the abbreviation whenever possible.



- When two sets of numerals appear together in a sentence, separate them with a comma, as in By 2020, 24 million more people will be living in Australia or By 2020, four million more people will be living in Australia.
- Where a number contains up to four numerals, do not use a comma or space between the numerals as in 2000 or 4500. Where the number contains more than five numerals, insert a comma to indicate the thousands as in 35,000 or 245,000 or 2,340,000.
- Use numerals for spans of figures and put an en dash between them as in 2009–10 or ages 18–24. However, do not write between ages 18–25 or between ages 18 to 25. Write instead between ages 18 and 25 or between the ages of 18 and 25. Infants aged 0–3 months. Males aged 18–24 or 18–24 year olds.
- Always insert a zero before a decimal point if the number is less than one as in
- 0.5 not .5.
- Chemical names which include numbers that relate to the positioning of double bonds or carbon chains have no space. Use the prime symbol ('), as in 1'1 dihydro.

## Plurals

Plural nouns are usually denoted by the addition of s to the singular noun. Some preferred exceptions to that rule are shown in the following table.

Singular	Plural
Addendum (preferred)	addenda
Appendix (preferred)	appendices
Crisis (preferred)	crises
Criterion	Criteria (preferred)
datum	Data (preferred)*
Forum (preferred)	Forums/fora
Genus (preferred)	genera
Index (preferred)	Indices/indexes
matrix	Matrices/matrixes (either is acceptable)

### \*Data is/are

In Latin, data is the plural of datum and, historically and in specialised scientific fields, it is also treated as a plural in English, taking a plural verb, as in the data were collected and classified. In modern non-scientific use, however, it is generally not treated as a plural. Instead, it is treated as a mass noun, similar to a word like information, which takes a singular verb. Sentences such as data was collected over a number of years are now widely accepted.

## Symbols

### Prime symbol

The prime symbol (′), double prime symbol (″), triple prime symbol (‴) are used to designate different units, and for various other purposes in science and mathematics.

They should not be confused with the apostrophe, single quotation mark, acute accent or grave accent. These are found on the Insert ribbon under Symbol:

Font: Arial > Subset: General Punctuation > Character code: 2032 (prime) 2033 (double prime) 2034 (triple prime)

Note: Once you use the symbol once, it will appear in the favourites after that.

### Chemical symbols

Should always be spelt out in content intended for the general public (web pages, brochures and general information).

An exception is scientific reports where it can be assumed the reader has a similar level of knowledge and understanding as the author.

Use the word beta not the symbol  $\beta$  for general publications.

### Quotation marks

When quoting direct speech use double quotation marks.

When quoting scientific text from other documents in FSANZ reports, use single quotation marks, as in 'While drawing out the global aspects of climate change, the report sets the discussion firmly in the context of Australasia and the South Pacific and in this respect provides a valuable reference resource', he said.

Quotation marks should be used when referring to:

- the title of an unpublished document
- a chapter in a published work
- an article in a periodical
- a lecture
- a short poem or a song.

**Example:** The chapter entitled 'Management, conflict and challenges' discusses the history of national parks as well as contemporary trends in management.

He delivered his lecture, 'The contribution of the social entrepreneur' clearly and persuasively.

## Semicolon

Semicolons are commonly used in two ways:

- to connect related clauses that could otherwise function as separate sentences
- to punctuate run-on lists (lists in sentence form—as opposed to a bulleted or numbered list) where the list items have their own internal punctuation.

**Example:** I'm late for work; now I'm going to have to skip lunch.

**Example:** The winners of the cake competition were Diana Cakemaker from Sydney; Freida Hazelnut from Canberra; Will Wonker from Brisbane and Louisa Mocha from Perth.

## Time and date

### Time of day

Write the time of day in the 12-hour system, using an un-spaced 'am' or 'pm'. Use a full-stop, not a colon, to separate hours and minutes.

**Example:** 10am or 10.30pm

**Spans of time:** 9–11am, 9am–5pm, 9.30am–5.30pm, Between 8am and 6pm

## Date

When writing dates in full, format them as 'day month year'. Do not punctuate. You can also include the day of the week if it is helpful. Use this format in text.

**Example:** 23 May 2018 or Saturday 23 May 2018

**Spans of time:** From 21 to 25 November there will be... or 2018–19

Be specific when referring to dates.

**Don't say:** The Standard will be gazetted next month.

**Say:** The Standard will be gazetted in March 2018 or gazetted on 9 March 2018

Financial years are written as 2018–2019, and not 2018/2019.

## Names and titles

A person's first name and last name should be used in the first instance in the body of a document but afterwards only the title and last name should be used, as in Mr James Taylor then Mr Taylor.

Use a person's first name and last name in the address block of a letter if the first name is known, but only use their last name in the salutation as in Dear Mr Taylor.

For women, use Ms unless the person in question specifically prefers Miss or Mrs.

Don't use full stops with contractions or title abbreviations as in Mr, Ms, Assoc Prof, Dr...

## Honours

Sometimes in correspondence we need to use post-nominal letters, which are letters placed after the name of a person to indicate that they hold a position, office, or official honour.

Post-nominals are shown without full stops, as in AO, OAM, CNZM, FRACP.

There is a strict order of honours, with the basic rule being that the higher the honour, the nearer it is placed to a person's name as in Dr John Smith AO PhD (university degree)

**Example:** Senator the Hon Bridge McKenzie, Robyn Kruk AM, Dr Andrew McKenzie QSO.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has a listing of all Australian and Imperial honours and how they should be used. Read more about [It's an honour](#).

## Parliamentary requirements

Parliamentary templates are subject to change at short notice so the latest template should always be used, not a copy of an existing document.

The templates, including advice on formatting, content and style are available under templates in Microsoft word.

## Related pages

- [Writing and editing guide home](#)
- [How we write](#)
- [Writing for the web](#)
- [FSANZ specific requirements](#)