

Keeping content consistent – some basics of style

In content, 'style' means a set of rules about how information is presented. Style guides help to keep your content consistent. Various style guides are available in print or online, your organisation may have an inhouse style guide, and you can develop your own guide for specific work or documents. Whatever style decisions you make, be consistent. Style decisions are easier to remember if they are based on logic. Some style basics, based on the Australian Government Style Guide, are presented here.

Element	Style decisions
Capitals	<p>Use minimal capitalisation.</p> <p>Use initial capitals for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> proper nouns and full formal titles of people and organisations Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade King Charles III President Macron geographic terms (e.g. country and city names) scientific terms in some fields (e.g. genus names, soil types). <p>Don't use initial capitals for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> informal names or plurals the department kings and queens of England professions obstetrician electrician expressions whose shortened forms consist of capitals genetically modified organism (GMO) chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
Hyphens	<p>Use minimal hyphenation.</p> <p>Prefixes: set solid wherever possible:</p> <p>antenatal postmortem nongovernment subspecies semipermanent coordinate</p> <p>Exceptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'self' words self-evident self-reported words starting with a capital anti-Australian unfamiliar or awkward double vowels anti-inflammatory where meaning could be confused re-cover versus recover shortened forms non-CNS anti-myc <p>Suffixes: set solid wherever possible:</p> <p>fourfold worldwide airborne</p>

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Hyphenation rules	<p>For many compound adjectives, a hyphen is required when the compound is used immediately before the noun it modifies but not when used after the noun:</p> <p>the long-term estimates but estimates for the long term</p> <p>high-risk enterprises but enterprises that are high risk</p> <p>Do not hyphenate compound verbs, but set the compound solid when used as a noun or an adjective:</p> <p>we will back up the system but the backup will run this afternoon</p> <p>the water will run off to the south but the runoff water is polluted</p> <p>For more hyphenation rules, see our quick guide 'Compound adjectives – to hyphenate or not to hyphenate'.</p>
En and em dashes	<p>En dash (Ctrl+- on numeric keypad; or Alt+0150 on numeric keypad) indicates conjunction. Use for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> number ranges 12–15 km (also see 'Numbers' on the next page) linked terms that are of equal 'weight' <p>Neuman–Keul test Australia–Japan relations public–private partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> minus sign –20 °C <p>Either an en dash or an em dash (Ctrl+Alt+- on numeric keypad; or Alt+0151 on numeric keypad) can be used to set off information in text. The most common forms are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> spaced en dash <p>Two main rivers – the Darling and Murrumbidgee – were surveyed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> unspaced em dash <p>Two main rivers—the Darling and Murrumbidgee—were surveyed</p> <p>The spaced en dash is increasingly recommended, because it causes fewer problems when text is viewed on screen.</p>
Spelling	<p>If the dictionary gives alternatives, the first given is the one used most commonly:</p> <p>focused, focussed</p> <p>Australian Government departments commonly use the <i>Macquarie dictionary</i>.</p> <p>International journals in English generally use either American or British spelling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Merriam-Webster (American) – www.merriam-webster.com Oxford English (British) – www.oed.com.
Abbreviations, initialisms and acronyms	<p>General rule: define at first use in the abstract (or summary) and main part of the document; for longer publications, define at first use in each chapter.</p> <p>Generally require no punctuation: Australian Bureau of Statistics – ABS</p> <p>Exceptions include abbreviated genus names: <i>S. aureus</i></p> <p>Use shortened forms only if the term is used more than a few times.</p>

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i.e. and e.g.	<p>Only use in parentheses and in tables. Spell out in running text:</p> <p>(i.e. mice) but that is, mice</p> <p>(e.g. mice) but for example, mice</p> <p>Do not use a comma after:</p> <p>(e.g. mice) not (e.g., mice)</p> <p>Use a nonbreaking space between the e.g. or i.e. and the following text so that they stay together and don't split over a line.</p>
Numbers	<p>Use numerals rather than words in all cases, especially if writing for the web, except for 'one' when it is acting as an indefinite article:</p> <p>There is one main reason we do this</p> <p>Alternatively, write out one to nine, and use numerals for 10 or higher.</p> <p>Use commas in numbers with more than 3 digits: 2,000</p> <p>Use numerals for quantities expressed with units or as percentages:</p> <p>8 km 200 g 4 days 5%</p> <p>Always spell out numbers at the start of a sentence or recast the sentence:</p> <p>Forty-three businesses were invited to participate</p> <p>We invited 43 businesses to participate</p> <p>Indicating ranges:</p> <p>between 1999 and 2004 from 12 to 18 months</p> <p>not</p> <p>between 1999–2004 from 12–18 months</p>
Units	<p>In technical publications, there is generally no need to define units at first use.</p> <p>In publications for a general audience, define at first use.</p> <p>Always use numerals for abbreviated units:</p> <p>5 mm or 5 millimetres not five millimetres not five mm</p> <p>Spell out units at the start of a sentence or recast the sentence:</p> <p>Ten millilitres was ... A sample of 10 mL was ... [Note use of 'was' – the quantity – whether 'Ten millilitres' or '10 mL' – is always treated as singular]</p> <p>Place a nonbreaking space between the number and the unit:</p> <p>10 mm not 10mm</p>
Bullet point lists	<p>If the bullet points follow on from the lead-in sentence, use lower case for the first word of each point and punctuate only with a stop at the end of the list.</p> <p>If the bullet points are whole sentences, change the lead-in sentence to a whole sentence (ended with a colon), and start each point with a capital letter and end each with a full stop.</p>