

'The' or no 'the' – that is the question for acronyms and initialisms

Is it the WHO or just WHO? How can you tell? This quick guide helps you to work that out.

Whether to include 'the' before abbreviated organisation names is a common question for writers and editors.

For the National Health and Medical Research Council, is it:

The NHMRC has published guidelines on healthy eating.

or

NHMRC has published guidelines on healthy eating.

For the World Health Organization,¹ is it:

The WHO is the leading health agency in the world.

or

WHO is the leading health agency in the world.

How to decide?

The decision tool on the next page will help you decide when to include 'the' before shortened forms. There are some robust rules (e.g. #1 and #3 in the decision tool) but also some grey areas (e.g. #4). Once you have considered the options and made a style choice, the main thing is to be consistent.

Definitions

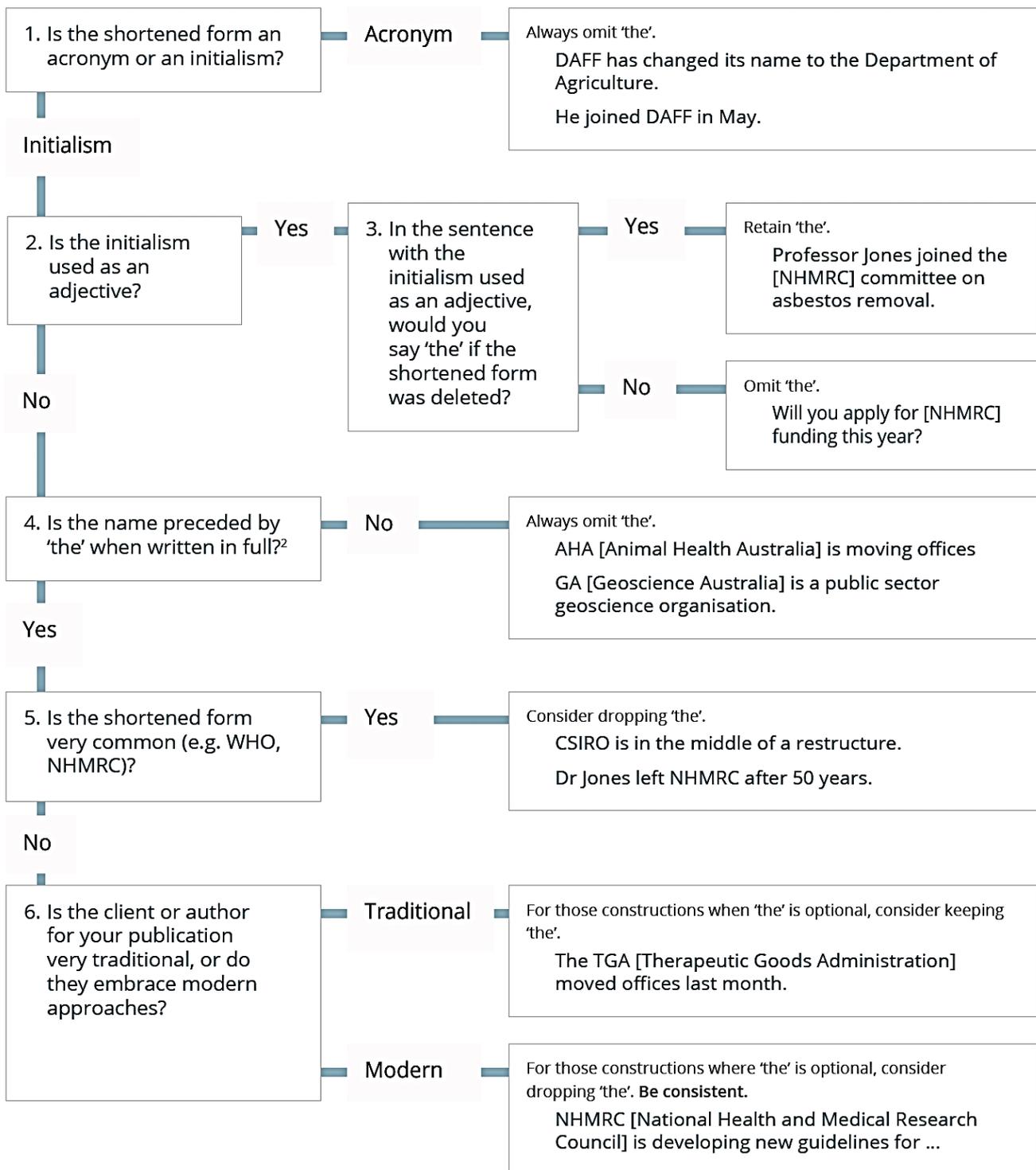
Acronym = a shortened form that you read like a word (e.g. 'DAFF')

Initialism = a shortened form for which you sound each letter (e.g. N-H-M-R-C)

Shortened form = general term for any acronym or initialism

¹ WHO (World Health Organization) is a tricky example because some people say 'W-H-O' (i.e. an initialism), whereas others say 'who' (i.e. an acronym). CSIRO is a similar example. The editor's life was not meant to be easy. Include 'the' if the organisation does. However, if the organisation is inconsistent, make your decision and be consistent!

'The' or no 'the' decision tool²



² Full names that are preceded by 'the' often include a noun that designates an organisational entity (e.g. the World Health Organization, the Bureau of Meteorology). Full names that are not preceded by 'the' are usually names without such a defining entity (e.g. Animal Health Australia, Geoscience Australia, Australian Science Communicators).