

'The' or no 'the' – that is the question for abbreviated organisation names

Is it the WHO or just WHO? 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 example, for the National Health and Medical Research Council, is it:

The NHMRC published healthy eating guidelines.

or

NHMRC published healthy eating guidelines.

Shortened form = general term for any acronym or initialism

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

Initialism = a shortened form you read by sounding each letter (e.g. N-H-M-R-C)

'The' or no 'the' – how to decide

We present some guidelines for using the shortened form as a noun or as an adjective. However, there are no hard rules. **Whatever you decide, record the decision in your style sheet and be consistent.**

Noun

If the shortened name is an acronym (that is, it is pronounced as a word*), omit 'the':

- DAFF has changed its name to the Department of Agriculture.
- He joined DAFF in May.

* But see the next page for [Identifying an acronym](#).

If the name is preceded by 'the' when written in full, then:

- in general, keep 'the'
He joined the FSF [Free Software Foundation].
- but, if the shortened form is very familiar *to your readers*, consider omitting 'the'
RSPCA is in the middle of a restructure.

If the name is not preceded by 'the' when written in full, omit 'the':

- AHA [Animal Health Australia] is moving offices.
- GA [Geoscience Australia] is a public sector geoscience organisation.

Adjective

If the shortened name is used as an adjective (that is, as a descriptor before a noun), then:

- if you would use 'the' (or 'a' or 'an') if the adjective was deleted, keep 'the' (or 'a' or 'an')
Professor Jones joined the DEW committee on catchment management.
Will you apply for an NHMRC grant this year?
- if you would not, then don't
Will you apply for NHMRC funding this year?

Identifying an acronym

It's not always easy to decide whether a shortened form is read like a word. For some shortened forms, different people read them different ways. For the World Health Organization, some people say 'W-H-O' (an initialism), whereas others say 'who' (an acronym).

This changes what you write. Write:

The WHO is the leading health agency in the world.

if it's read as an initialism,

or

WHO is the leading health agency in the world.

if it's read as a word.

CSIRO is a similar example. If it's read as an initialism:

The CSIRO supports innovative science and technology in Australia.

or if it's read as a word ('siro'):

CSIRO supports innovative science and technology in Australia.

You may choose to be guided by which form the organisation prefers, if their preference is clear. However, if each organisation you write about has a different preference, your own document may look inconsistent, so you may choose to impose a consistent style instead.

More guidance on shortened forms

Style guides and consistency

When writing or editing for an organisation, treat shortened forms as their style guide instructs, including use of 'the'. However, if their guide does not specify, make your decisions and be consistent!

Some organisations have special rules for their own name. For example, the Department of Very Big Projects might prefer to call itself 'DVBP' (or 'the DVBP') in public-facing documents but 'the Department' internally.

Spelling out

Before an acronym or initialism is used in the text, give the full title or phrase, followed by the shortened form in parentheses. After this, use the shortened form only, unless there is a good reason to repeat the full title or phrase – for example, if many pages separate one use of the shortened form from the next.

Common terms – like RSPCA and NATO – often need not be spelled out at all. But this will depend on your audience – what is common to one audience may not be common to another.

In general, avoid using shortened forms in headings and captions. But use common sense – some forms are very long when spelled out, or very familiar, so the shortened form may be preferable.

Especially avoid using shortened forms in headings and captions if those headings or captions appear in a table of contents or a list of figures. This avoids the shortened form appearing before it is defined.

As a general rule, if an acronym or initialism is used just once or twice in the text, write the term in full and do not introduce the shortened form.