

Writing and style guide

Introduction

These guidelines aim to unify our communications so we appear as a single professional organisation, with all of us adopting best practice so that our information is as readable and accessible as it can be.

We have drawn on a range of evidence-based, good practice guidance to develop this document, including information from the Plain English Campaign.

This is an evolving aid which will be updated to ensure we follow best practice. This document links to the 'Working better together' project where you can find guidance on communicating clearly and managing emails. See the Corporate support folder on the intranet.

For information specifically about writing papers for board and committee meetings, take a look at the 'Standards for board and committee papers' in the corporate support folder on the intranet.

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General

Abbreviations and acronyms

If an abbreviation or acronym is to be used more than once, write the name in full the first time with the abbreviation after it, e.g. Staff Involvement Group (SIG). Avoid using abbreviations or acronyms if possible, don't assume people will know what you mean.

Please don't create your own short forms of words such as writing hr instead of hour because this abbreviation won't be clear to everyone. Please don't abbreviate days of the week - use Monday not Mon.

Americanisms

Please avoid these. Use 's' instead of 'z', for example, organisations not organizations.

Bold

Large blocks of bold text can be distracting and difficult to read, so please limit its use.

Capital letters

Capital letters can interrupt the flow of a sentence and make text difficult to read, which is why most organisations try not to overuse them. They can also make the tone sound old fashioned.

The general rule nowadays is that capital letters should only be used at the start of a sentence or if the word is a proper noun. For example, 'There are several NHS trusts, and West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust is one of them'. The important point is that it is a specific, official name. The difference can be seen in 'the county of Hertfordshire has a council, and it's one of many'. In this example you can't see the official name, so 'council' stays in lower case.

Aside from starting sentences, use initial capitals for:

- People's names such as Samuel Price.
- Job titles only when used in the same sentence as a name: 'Amanda Palmer, General Practitioner at Elms Surgery' otherwise it's 'general practitioner'.
- Registered brand and trade names such as Marmite, Kellogg's, Heinz.
- The Government when referring to the current UK Government and to specific departments like the Treasury.
- Organisation names i.e. East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust.
- Days of the week and months.
- Historical events such as World War II.

Do not capitalise:

- Job titles in general.
- General terms such as consultancy, best practice, marketing.
- Pound, euro – lower case for all currencies when referring to the currency itself, not the figure.
- Seasons of the year.
- Many IT-related words, such as internet, intranet, home page, website, world wide web, email, e-government, online.
- The first letter of each word in a title.

For information on capitalising full words, see 'Upper case text' below.

Chairs

The person chairing a meeting should be called the chair rather than chairman or chairperson. Where possible, it is better to say 'the meeting was chaired by'.

Contacts

When giving contact details for an individual or organisation please write out phone, fax or email in full. It is usually clear that something is an email address.

Please don't use t: e: or f:

Please use phone, not telephone or tel.

Please use email, not e-mail.

Dates

Please write the date using one of the following formats:

- 24 February 2016
- Wednesday 24 February
- Wednesday 24 February 2016

Use 24 February instead of 24th February.

Emails

Email signatures

Email signatures and outlook out of office messages are important as they present a consistent and professional image to the outside world and to our colleagues.

You can copy and paste the text below and amend to include your own details (or search 'email signature' on the intranet). People working part time should include details of their working pattern eg "Working days: Monday to Thursday"

Please stick to Calibri font for now (although this will change soon when we implement the new NHS identity/branding that came into place recently).

Make sure that you put your full phone number, not just your extension number.

Suggested text:

Rachel Brown

[Job title]

Herts Valleys CCG

01442 898888

07767 862149

@HVCCGtwitterhandle

www.hertsvalleysccg.nhs.uk

Visiting our offices in Hemel Hempstead? [Our travel guide](#) provides you with several options for getting here.

Font

Our corporate font is calibri for heading and body text.

The font size should be 12 for most A4 and A5 documents or web pages, unless you are producing a document for an audience which is likely to have visual impairments. The font size for printed material should be 14 for the elderly and those with learning disabilities, and 20 for people with visual impairments. Text should always be left-aligned unless using a language that reads from the right. Text shouldn't be right-aligned.

Especially when using PowerPoint, use clear backgrounds that give good colour contrast. Avoid writing over an image as this is difficult to read.

Herts Valleys CCG

Write out Herts Valleys CCG instead of using HVCCG. There are times when it is appropriate to use CCG or Herts Valleys, especially in internal communications.

Don't forget that Herts Valleys isn't an area so people don't live in Herts Valleys. They may live in west Hertfordshire or the area covered by Herts Valleys CCG.

Images

Images, when used correctly, make writing easier to understand and more attractive. Use them to support your text and make your message clear at a glance, when appropriate. People prefer coloured images. It is best to stick to one type of image and avoid mixing photographs, line drawings and images.

- Get written permission from people before taking or using their photo, especially from parents or carers when including images of children. You can get a consent form from the Communications Team or find it in the Corporate Documents folder on the intranet.
- Don't use poor quality low resolution pictures.
- Never use pictures that are likely to cause offence.
- Be aware of copyright laws and make sure you have permission to use an image, especially when taken by a third party photographer.

Note:

Clip art (a collection of simple computer images that can be inserted into documents) should not be used as a general rule. It cheapens our brand and looks unprofessional as it is old-fashioned and poor quality.

Language – keeping it simple

Public sector organisations are often guilty of using long, impressive-sounding words or specialised terms. By doing this we make important information hard to understand. If you need to use an unusual word or specialised term, explain it.

Money

If it is a round figure, leave out the zero. So £2, but £2.05.

If you are writing million or billion, no space should be left between the number and the unit of money such as £3million.

Numbers

When writing numbers, one to nine should be in words and 10 upwards in figures. For example, 'nine to 12-year-olds'.

Try to avoid starting a sentence with a figure. If you have to do this write the number in words, but if possible rephrase the sentence to avoid this.

Million should be written out in full in all references unless it is in a table or chart when 'm' can be used.

Use a comma in 1,000 but not in the year e.g. 2000.

Out of office replies

Please change your message when you are out of the office for a few days without access to email or if you are on leave. Let people know when you will back in the office or able to pick up emails and give an alternative contact – making sure that the person you give is (1) in the office and (2) knows you are nominating them as a contact in your absence.

You could say something like: ‘Thank you for your email. I am currently away from the office and will respond when I return on [day, date].

If your email needs an urgent response, please contact [name] [job title] on [email address] or [full telephone number].’

Page numbering

If you are writing a document with multiple pages it is helpful to number the pages.

Paragraph spacing

Paragraphs should have a space of one line between them. They should not be indented.

Phone numbers

Phone numbers have five-figure codes, plus a six figure customer number. This is because most people find it difficult to read a number more than six digits long. So it should be 07765 234567, not 07765234567.

Please don’t put brackets around telephone numbers or put spacing between digits of a phone number - so 272291, not 27 22 91.

Sentences

Please aim to keep sentences short because this avoids confusion and helps the reader focus on your key points. It is best to make just one key point in each sentence.

If a sentence is long and involved, break it up or rephrase the message until it is clear and easy to understand.

It is also better to make sentences active not passive, e.g. ‘We will update the committee next month’ is active; ‘The committee will be updated every month’ is passive.

Spell-checking

If you rely on spellcheck when using Microsoft Word, don’t forget that it does not pick up words that are spelt correctly but used incorrectly – such as ‘they’re’ instead of ‘their’. If you are unsure, it is worth asking a colleague to proofread the text before sending it out.

In addition, Microsoft Word can pick up words as being misspelt even if they are not. Make sure the programme is set to 'English (U.K.)' as default.

Time

Use 12-hour time only. Please avoid the use of the 24-hour clock because the reader has to work it out.

Avoid unnecessary zeros. Do not put 09.00am, just use 9am. Please use noon, midday and midnight instead of 12pm or 12am.

There, their or they're

'There' refers to a place and is the opposite of 'here'. 'Their' shows possession (their friends). 'They're' is short for they are.

Underlining

Please avoid underlining as it makes the text difficult to read.

Upper case text

Please don't write headings or anything else completely in upper case. Most people find reading on a screen more difficult, upper case makes it harder still. Writing words or sentences in uppercase can also give the IMPRESSION OF SHOUTING.

For more information on when to start words with a capital letter, see 'Capital letters' above.

Writing for the web

There are a couple of things to remember when preparing text for publication online. People tend to scan web pages rather than read them. Studies have also shown that some people do not like scrolling down pages. They will usually stop reading rather than scroll down more than once.

Your writing needs to help people find the information they want quickly.

To do this:

- Sum up what you are saying at the top of each page.
- Use headings and sub-headings that describe the content that follows.
- Use bulleted lists.
- Write your message in as few words as you can.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.

Years

Please use 2015/16, not 2015/2016 or 15/16.

Your or you're

Your shows possession; something belongs to you. You're is short for you are and has no other use.

Your Care, Your Future

When writing *Your Care, Your Future*, write it in full instead of YCYF. It should be in italics, each word should start with a capital letter and there should be a comma after the second word.

Punctuation

Ampersands (&)

These should only be used where organisations use them as part of their name. For example: Holland & Barrett.

Apostrophes (')

Apostrophes can be confusing and are one of the most incorrectly used pieces of punctuation in the English language.

Use apostrophes to indicate only one of two things: possession or a missing letter. For example:

- The group's new service – the service belonging to the group.
- The organisations' shared building – the building that is shared between a number of organisations.
- I'm happy – I am happy.
Apostrophes never indicate plural so it should be 'GPs are busy' instead of 'GP's are busy'.

Brackets ()

Brackets should be used sparingly; they are a signal to a reader in a hurry that the words are of secondary importance. Please do not put brackets around telephone numbers or area codes. It makes it harder for people to read.

Bullet points

Bullet points or lists are used for splitting up large chunks of text. They are an effective way of breaking down complicated information.

Bullet points may start with a capital letter and end with a full stop when the bullet point is a full sentence. If the bullet points are a list they may start with a lower case letter and lead onto the next bullet point with a semi colon.

Colons (:)

The colon means 'that is to say' or 'here's what I mean'. The word following a colon doesn't start with a capital letter unless it is a quote or contains two or more sentences.

It is used to introduce an idea that is an explanation or continuation of the one that comes before the colon. Make sure that the sentence on each side of the colon would make sense on its own, e.g. 'You are left with only one option: press on until you have mastered it.'

The second main use of the colon is to introduce a list. Not all lists require a colon; only if the sentence before the list makes sense on its own.

'The potion contained some exotic ingredients: snails' eyes, bats' tongues and garlic.' This colon is used correctly because 'the potion contained some exotic ingredients' makes sense as a stand-alone sentence.

'The magic potion contained sesame seeds, bran flakes and coleslaw.' A colon couldn't be used here because 'the magic potion contained' isn't a full sentence.

Commas (,)

Use commas to create a pause in a sentence or long clauses. In a sequence of items do not put a comma before 'and' unless removing it would lead to ambiguity. A good way to think about whether or not to use a comma is to use it when you would take a breath reading the text.

'The Finance, Communications and Engagement, and Nursing and Quality teams' does need a comma.

'The Finance, Human Resources and Business Intelligence teams' does not need a second comma.

There is no need to use a comma in a short phrase at the start of a sentence. For example 'On 20 June the group revealed...'

Use two commas in sentences such as 'Mr Jones added, however, that St. Albans is a great place'.

Dashes (—)

Dashes are useful for inserting important information - or an aside - into a sentence, as long as the flow of the sentence is not interrupted, e.g. Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust, East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust - but not West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust - are taking part in the project.

Not sure what the difference between dashes and hyphens is?

Dashes are used to go on to explain or paraphrase what was just written e.g. it's only rock and roll – but I like it; to show a range or sequence, replacing the word 'to' e.g. ages 25-34; or in a pair where you might otherwise use brackets e.g. the successful candidate – following much deliberation – was Frank. A dash should have a space before and after it.

Hyphens are used to combine words and shouldn't have spaces before or after it.

See 'hyphens' below for more information.

Exclamation marks (!)

An exclamation mark is used to express surprise, shock or anger. They are hardly ever needed in business writing.

Only use an exclamation mark if you would shout the sentence at someone!

Hyphens (-)

It is best to use one word wherever possible. Hyphens tend to clutter up text. However when you use an adjective that is made up of more than one word (compound adjectives) you should use a hyphen e.g. 17-year-old boy, 24-hour service.

See 'dashes' above for more information.

It's or its

'It's' is always the abbreviation of 'it is' as in: 'It's a nice day, isn't it?'

'Its' is the possessive of 'it' as in: "That is Morton's puppy but I don't know its name."

There are other words where an apostrophe is used to indicate missing letters, such as isn't (is not) or can't (cannot).

However, apostrophes are not needed in abbreviations such as GPs, unless indicating possession, as in GP's surgery, or GPs' surgeries. See the 'Apostrophes' item above for more information.

Decades and centuries, such as 1960s, 1800s, should not have apostrophes.

Quotation marks (“ ”)

Our style is to use double quotes to indicate reported speech, for example words that someone actually said.

Semicolons (;)

A semicolon can be used to connect two independent sentences that could also be connected with a conjunction (e.g. but, and).

An example of this is ‘My manager isn’t working today; she will be back on Friday’.

You can also use semicolons to make a list of items that would otherwise be separated with a comma e.g. The board is made up of David Stuart, Chief Executive; Linda Clarke, Head of Security; and Mark Teesdale, Head of Human Resources.

Branding

It is important that you use logos correctly and consistently across all applications. Always use the logo in accordance with guidelines, and make sure you do not alter the logo in any way. Make sure the logo isn't stretched or poor quality.

When working with the logo you should only use original digital graphic files, which you can get from the Communications Team.

If you have any questions about branding speak to the Communications Team.

NHS branding

The NHS logo can be black and white on a mono document or NHS Blue (Pantone 300) on colour documents. The logo shouldn't be reproduced in tints of NHS Blue or black. The logo should always appear in the top right corner of a document.



If the logo is on a dark background you can use the reversed logo in NHS Blue or black.



Herts Valleys CCG branding

The Herts Valleys CCG coloured bridge should go on the bottom corner of a document with a small gap between the edge of the image and the edge of the page. It can go either side but not in the middle.



The colours of this should always be purple, pink and blue. Other colours used in the Herts Valleys CCG values branding are green, yellow and orange.
The Herts Valleys CCG logo should be used in a similar way to the NHS logo. Use it in the top right corner.



If the logo is on a mono document, use the black and white logo instead of printing the colour logo in black and white. It will look better quality.



If you have any other style, writing or branding queries, let the Communications Team know on enquiries.hvccg@nhs.net or call 01442 284000 (x4000)