

Body of construction quality knowledge - style guide

The following guidance on writing technique has been extracted from the Designing Buildings Wiki website: https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Editorial_policy and https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Writing_technique_in_the_construction_industry

For more extensive and detailed guidance on English usage *The Economist Style Guide* (available from the Economist UK shop: <https://ukshop.economist.com/collections/new-arrivals/products/9781782830917>) is recommended.

Think 'encyclopaedia' not 'magazine'

- Stick to the facts. Adopt a neutral position. Do not express your own opinion.
- You don't need to be 'friendly' - this is not a blog.
- Articles are not an opportunity for self-promotion. You can include as much self-promotion as you like in your 'page about me', but not in your article. To stay impartial, ask yourself what someone else would write about the subject.
- Even if you are writing about your own products or projects, write about them in the third person. You should never need to write 'I' or 'we' in an article.
- Be balanced. If you list the pros, also list the cons.

Make your article accessible.

- Give your article a simple, plain language title. Just say what it is.
- Introduce your subject. What is the background?
- Explain specialist terms and acronyms.
- Avoid long paragraphs. They are difficult to read.
- Use bullet point lists to make information clear and accessible.
- Don't use capital letters unless they are absolutely necessary. Capitalisation makes text difficult to read.
- Keep your formatting as simple as possible: plain text, headings and bulleted lists.

Language

House style should aim to encourage writers to use language that is precise and business like. This means avoiding informal/slang phrases or empty language that can seem pompous. The suggestions below illustrate this, and each organisation will have specific examples from their specialist work.

Wordy version - followed by concise alternative:

- A total of six piles - six piles
- A number of - few / many / several
- To ascertain the location of - to find
- At the present time, at this point in time - now
- By means of - by / with
- Due to the fact that - because
- Fewer in number - fewer
- For the purpose of analysing - analysing
- For the reason that - because
- In excess of - over / more than
- In order to - to
- In the course of - during
- In view of the fact that - because

Punctuation and grammar

Abbreviations

The first time used, spell out the full word followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. After that, use the abbreviation alone. Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). Do not use full stops after each letter, not - R.I.B.A.

A few exceptions have lower case letters - Design for London (DfL).

Acronyms

Some common abbreviations have become words in their own right and need not be listed in full - BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method). Judge your audience's knowledge.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used for two very different purposes:

- To indicate that a letter has been removed - 'do not' becomes 'don't' to show that the letter o has been removed. This is best avoided in formal documents.
- To indicate ownership - 'the building's dimensions are vast'. The apostrophe here shows something is being owned. The apostrophe also shows whether the owning word is singular or plural. 'The buildings' dimensions are vast.' In this case the subject is plural - buildings. To avoid confusion when writing, think of the word doing the owning (building or buildings) and then add the apostrophe.

Apostrophes are only ever used to show ownership of nouns or objects, never for the words that stand in for nouns; they have their own possessive forms (he/his, she/hers, it/its, our/ours, their/theirs). There is a common confusion with 'it's'. The apostrophe in it's can only ever mean a letter is missing (it's raining / it is raining). It is never used to mean owning (The company is well known for its excellence).

Bullet points

Capitalise the start of words after the colon in a simple list. There is no need for commas or full stops.

The project included the following:

- *Difficult ground conditions*
- *Piled foundations*

In a more complex list use capital letters after the colon and full stops to make each point a self-contained sentence. There is no need to add 'and' at the end of the penultimate bullet point.

The project included the following:

- *Piled foundations to counter the difficult ground conditions.*
- *A studio buried into the slope, making the best use of landscape features.*

Capital letters

Too many capital letters can be hard to read, and none at all feels dated. Current usage is to use capitals to start a title in a document and then revert to lower case letters unless there is a proper name:

- *Project report on London's wild species*
- *Client feedback report*

Specific situations:

- If it is a generic term or title, do not capitalise (landscape architect), use capitals when naming a specific person with their title (Jo Smith, Landscape Architect).
- Use capitals in proper names (London Borough of Wandsworth and Wandsworth Council), but not in generics (London's boroughs).
- Points of the compass are generally given initial capital letters when referring to a specific place (the North of England, the North-east, the South-east) but for a more general reference, do not capitalise (northern England, in the south of the site). In London, use capitals for specifics (East End, West End), but not for general areas (west London). Some exceptions have become names (Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and the West).

- Seasons do not require initial capitals (summer, autumn, winter, spring).
- The euro doesn't require a capital letter when written out in full. With figures use its symbol.
- Architectural styles have initial capital letters (Classical, Modernist, Brutalism, Gothic, Post Modernism, Arts and Crafts).
- Formal procedures generally use capitals (Flood Risk Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment, Design and Access Statement).

Captions

Start captions with a capital but do not use a full stop.

Colons and semicolons

Colons and semicolons provide stronger breaks than commas. A colon is like an equals sign in maths and is used to begin lists.

The project's key features:

- *Repair to existing structure*
- *Piling analysis*

A semi colon's main use is to balance out two related but standalone clauses, rather like an equals sign in maths.

The project should take a year to complete; the team has been on site for six months and is half way through the build.

Commas

Commas provide a pause between information and divide lists. No comma required before a final 'and' in a sentence. Commas are used before quotations:

The project's engineer stated, 'We are delighted to have won such a prestigious award.'

Company names

Use the full legal company name including any additions (Ltd, plc, Inc) in the first instance. After this, use the name as used by the company itself (the BBC, Laing O'Rourke - not O'Rourke's, Arup not Arups).

Compound words

Many compound words have become part of common use and do not require a hyphen, for example, landmark, guideline, masterplan, shortlist, housebuilder.

Countries

United Kingdom or UK (comprises England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), Great Britain (comprises England, Scotland, Wales).

Dates

In general text use date, month, year (10 April 2008); in technical documents use numerals (10.08.12). Decades are in numerals (1960s). Centuries don't need a capital (the 19th century, not 19th Century).

Days of the week

Days of the week are best written in full, with initial capitals.

Dimensions

In general text, write dimensions in full (the area of the ground floor is 8,000 square metres). In a technical document, use abbreviations (ground floor 8,000sqm).

Exclamation marks

These are best avoided in professional communication.

Full stops in abbreviations

Use eg, ie, etc; not e.g, i.e. and etc.

Headlines in documents, brochures and bids

Capitalise the first word and proper nouns (Sustainable building report).

Hyphens

The main use for hyphens is in creating modified adjectives before a noun, for example, high-specification materials (exception - don't hyphenate after -ly). However if the describing words come after the noun the hyphen is not needed.

A 20-year-old building; the building is 20 years old.

No hyphen: coordinate, cooperate

Hyphen used: cross-section, cross-fertilise, cross-pollinate, cross-disciplinary.

Numbers

Write one to nine in full, 10 onwards as numbers. In technical documents keep numbers as numerals, for example, a 3m-long handrail, 10 x 5-beams in the roof. If possible, avoid starting a sentence with a numeral.

Measurements

Use metric in the UK. This includes hectare in preference to acre and Celsius in preference to Fahrenheit. Exceptions: golf courses are measured in yards and it is usual to describe speed as miles per hour.

Quotation marks

Use single quotes around the actual words spoken.

'We are delighted with the finished building,' said Gertrude Smith.

Note that even though this is a complete sentence in terms of speech it ends with a comma and the full stop is given to the end of the written sentence.

Spacing

Leave just one keyboard space between sentences. Programs such as Word automatically provide extra breathing space and justified text with too many spaces looks wrong.

They're, their, theirs, there

- **they're** (short for they are, note apostrophe to show missing letter) - They're a strong engineering team.
- **their** (possessive pronoun) - Their understanding of sustainability is impressive.
- **theirs** (possessive pronoun) - The design is theirs.
- **there** (adverb) - The building is over there.

Spelling

The spell-check function on computers today means many problems are eliminated. However some words remain troublesome. Some have confusing homophones (words that sound the same but have different meanings) and US spelling variants.

- **affect and effect:** affect means to influence something, effect is to bring about change, or the result of change (to affect the environment, the effect of water damage).
- **and:** write in full, avoid using & and + unless it forms part of a company name.
- **annex:** verb (to annex), the noun has an extra e (we added an annexe to the building).
- **artefact:** not artifact.
- **brownfield, greenfield and greenbelt:** not brown field, green field, green belt.
- **capitalise not capitalize:** realise not realize, customise not customize.

- **compliment and complement:** to compliment is to offer praise, to complement means to complete, to create harmony or compatibility. The client complimented our work. The colour of the seats complemented the natural wood of the ceiling.
- **discreet, discrete:** discreet means to be tactful or prudent; discrete means separate.
- **disinterested, uninterested:** disinterested means impartial, uninterested means lacking in interest.
- **effectively:** not affectively.
- **ensure, insure:** ensure is to make sure of something, insure is related to insurance.
- **everyday and every day:** an everyday occurrence, we do this every day.
- **focused, focusing:** not focussed and focussing.
- **forward, foreword:** to travel forward, a foreword is introductory text in a book.
- **fulfil:** not fulfill. But infill, not infil.
- **greywater:** not grey water, also blackwater, rainwater.
- **inquiry:** this relates to an event such as a public inquiry. An enquiry is something you make when you ask a question/enquire.

Other common mistakes

- **less and fewer:** less applies to quantities such as volume, mass or area, fewer relates to numbers. Generally you can't count/numerate less, but you can fewer - less water, fewer apples. Note that less/fewer are comparatives and usually require qualification; less or fewer than what?
- **licence and license:** licence is a noun, whereas license is a verb.
- **maybe, may be:** maybe we should consider an alternative; this may be it.
- **none:** a commonly used abbreviation of 'not one' that is treated as a singular.
- **pavilion:** not pavillion.
- **practice and practise:** practice (with c) is a noun, such as an architectural practice. Practise (with s) is a verb or doing word, such as to practise. You can hear the difference with a similar word - to advise and to offer advice.
- **principle and principal:** a principle is a general rule; a principal is a senior manager or the main thing.
- **rainwater or rain:** not rain water.
- **receive, conceive, deceive:** - i before e except after c.
- **recommend:** not recomend.
- **separate:** not seperate.
- **stationery, stationary:** stationery is paper and pens; stationary is to stop still.
- **until:** not 'til or till.
- **would have:** not would of.