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# **Very Generic Copy Style Guide** **That's Ready to Edit and Steal**

# Copy Style

**If in doubt, the Guardian Style Guide is a valuable resource - <https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a>**

## **Abbreviations and acronyms**

Unless established and widely known (for example, DIY), define on the first usage. The only exception is in headlines for the sake of space, where the abbreviation may be used providing it is defined in the first section of body copy. We don't include punctuation between the letters of an acronym.

## **Active voice**

For the most part, aim to write in the active voice – that is, 'Jane bought some widgets' as opposed to 'The widgets were bought by Jane'. A useful test for the passive voice in shorter sentences is adding '...by zombies' to the end. For example, 'Every product is carefully made' can become 'Every product is carefully made by zombies', which is both inaccurate and in the passive voice. 'We carefully make products' or 'We make products with care' are both more accurate and stronger, more impactful sentences.

## **Ampersands**

Avoid unless absolutely necessary in a headline, or you're referring to something that is branded with an ampersand.

## **Apostrophes**

Apostrophes denote a missing letter in a contraction, or possessiveness when a word does not end in an 's' (for example, in 'Men's clothing'). Where a noun ends in an 's', we just add an apostrophe to make it possessive (for example, 'Dogs' clothing'). We also don't use an apostrophe when describing decades (for example, '90s music', not '90's music').

## **Attribution**

Where we need to attribute a source, we directly link to the source in body copy wherever possible. We can also use a smaller typeface below the body copy to reference sources. These should follow the format: Title, Authors, Publication, Web Address, Date (or Date Retrieved).

## **Buttons**

Should describe a specific action. Think verb. So it's not [More], it's [Learn more]. It's not [Free Guide], it's [Get My Guide]. Exceptions happen, usually for the sake of length. One example could be [Security Tips] as opposed to [Discover Our Security Tips].

## **Brackets**

Brackets can be used to add extra information. For example: 'Your recent orders (which you can access after signing into your account)'. Very sparingly, we can also use brackets to add a more personality-driven aside. For example: 'Save your money (and your time)'.

## **Commas**

The most effective way to decide on comma usage is to read the sentence out loud and see whether you take a breath. But commas are also used to add clarity when writing lists, but use judgement. For example, in 'Our expertise crosses customer service, research and development, and sales', the comma before the final item is essential. In 'We sell widgets, thingies and stuff', we can do without it.

## **Capitalisation**

We follow fairly conventional rules on capitalisation. Capitals are used for proper nouns – not to add emphasis or make words feel more important than they are.

## **Contractions**

For the most part, we use contractions like 'Can't', 'Won't', 'Isn't', and so on. The only exceptions are those which are written less frequently, like 'What'll' and 'There're', both of which slow down reading.

## **Companies**

Companies are singular entities – 'MyFirm is the leading engineering company', not 'MyFirm are the leading engineering company'. But talking about ourselves in the third person is infrequent, anyway – see 'Perspective', below.

## **Dashes**

We use dashes to break up sentences that feel long and add extra impact. Ideally, this should be an Em Dash, with no space between the text and the surrounding words (for example, 'We could use an Em Dash—if we wanted to—like this.'). But actually a dash with spaces around it often looks

clear and easier to read, so it's all good. If everything else is so perfect that our biggest concern is which dash to use and how to space it, we're doing great.

### **Date and time**

Wednesday 3rd July 2019, 8am-3:15pm  
03/07/2019

### **ebook, email, ecommerce**

Note that there are no hyphens or surprising capitals with these now widely used and widely recognised words. ebook comes with special consideration – the word has become synonymous with poor content, so 'guide', 'report', 'discussion', 'tips', or even just 'book' may be more compelling alternatives.

### **Email addresses**

Written in all lower case.

### **Emojis**

Used on social media platforms with exceptions made for the subject line of an email, which has a surprisingly big impact on open rates.

### **Exclamation points**

Used on social media platforms and email with a limit of one exclamation point per post/email. These can be particularly effective when used in a call to action - for example 'Let's get started!'. Elsewhere, they're an attempt to make copy feel informal or exciting when it is neither.

### **e.g.**

Avoid. Use 'For example' or even just 'like'.

### **Formatting**

Bold can be used sparingly to add emphasis or make a page more scannable (for example, on the first word of every item in a list, where that word means something to the reader without the rest of the sentence). Italics are to be avoided as much as possible unless they are quoting

speech.

## **Headings**

In almost every instance, headings are written in lower case, not title case. All headings must be benefit-driven or convey a meaningful message to the reader, even if they don't read on. In terms of length, aim for no more than 5 to 8 words.

## **Lists**

Use bullet points unless there is a good reason for the list to be ordered. We don't end list items with a full stop, any other punctuation, or the word 'and'.

## **Log in and login**

Login is an adjective which means a set of credentials you use to log in (which, as a phrase, is a verb). But just use 'Go inside' or 'Check my account' or something more interesting and avoid the whole thing.

## **Numbers**

We write all numbers up to and including ten, with the exception of when we're describing a percentage or time. For bigger numbers, we use commas – for example, '100,000'.

## **Personal Pronouns**

We write as individual human beings speaking to other individual human beings. As a result, we use 'We' and 'You' as part of our language - 'We'll help you get started' rather than the more general 'Customers can get started with our support'.

## **Percentages**

Use the % sign - 25%, not 25 per cent.

## **Phone numbers**

No more than four figures in a row without a space.

### **Rhetorical Questions**

These can be useful, but do consider very carefully. Some rhetorical questions have a tendency to encourage a closed answer and end the conversation you're having with your reader. For example: 'Have you tried it yet?', 'No I haven't, goodbye'. We can manage this by making sure we're offering benefits before we risk the rhetorical question. A page of good copy followed by 'Ready to get started?' has a very different feel. Of course, questions that aren't rhetorical can be very impactful, particular on social.

### **Semicolon**

Avoid – the same effect can often be achieved with a dash, which is cleaner, faster and more modern.

### **Spacing**

A single space after a sentence. No space between the points in an ellipsis.

### **Web addresses**

Always lower case. Where referring to a top-level domain, drop the 'www' (for example, [stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk](http://stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk)). Where including a folder, don't add a trailing slash (for example, [stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk/work](http://stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk/work) not [stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk/work/](http://stephenmarshcopywriter.co.uk/work/)).