

Writing style guide

For print and online

July 2023

EALING COUNCIL

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Introduction

This style guide is intended to improve the consistency and accuracy of all the council's written communications.

When writing for the public, it is important to remember to write in [plain English](#). Keep the content simple and clear – and think, if you do not understand something, who else will?

If you have any questions about this guide, please email:

aroundealing@ealing.gov.uk

Government Digital Service (GDS)

We are following the [GDS style guide](#) which is based on considerable research, with a few exceptions, including:

- team and department names are lower case
- subjects such as council tax, discretionary housing payment should be lower case, unless in a title

Where there are any deviations from the GDS style guide, this Ealing Council style guide should always take precedence.

A few of the rules in our previous guide have changed. Please check the following in the GDS style guide for more information:

- bold – do not use to emphasise text
- bullet points – always use lower case at the start of the bullet, with no full stops
- dates – do not insert commas: Saturday 17 June 2023
- eg, etc and ie are now banned because they are not deemed accessible. Try rewriting your sentence or instead use 'for example' or 'such as' or 'including' – whichever works best in the specific context
- numbers - write all numbers in numerals unless a number starts a sentence
- times:
 - use colon rather than full stop: 5:30pm
 - use midday not 12noon

Quick guide for everyday

- Ealing Council is the name of the organisation. Referred to as Ealing Council (with caps) in the first reference, and then as the council after that (lower case). Never just 'Ealing'. When referring to the council in a general sense then write 'the council', in lower case
- London borough of Ealing is the name of the area governed by Ealing Council; normally, we just refer to this as the borough or our borough. When referring to the whole borough, we should avoid just saying 'Ealing', which can alienate residents of our other six towns. Use alternatives such as 'our seven towns' or 'the borough'
- the council, and all organisations, should be referred to in the singular: the council is, the company has
- organisations, companies, councils are always an it, not a they:
Therefore: the council has declared it is going to plant a million daffodils.
Not: the council have claimed they are going to plant a million daffodils.
- the mayor of Ealing is lower case
- councillor is only upper case when used with a name: Councillor Peter Mason; but the councillor or a councillor is lower case
- the names of departments, teams, committees and services are always written in lower case: children's services, planning committee
- licence is a noun and license is a verb
a licence is issued by a licensing committee, and the property is then licensed
- British English standard spelling: -ise not -ize, programme not program
- contractions: never shorten words to don't, won't unless contained within a person's quote
- quote marks ("double" or 'single') should generally only be used when someone's words, or another written source, is being quoted
[see more below in Quotes: Style](#)
- do not use long sentences – check sentences with more than 25 words to see if you can split them to make them clearer
- address the audience as 'you' where possible – content often makes a direct appeal to citizens and businesses to get involved or take action:
'You can contact the council by phone and email', for example

Banned words and ampersands

When communicating with the public, it is critical to use plain English. Think before you use phrases. If you do not really understand it, who else will?

We also lose trust from people if we write 'buzzwords' and jargon. Often, these words are too general and vague and can lead to misinterpretation or empty, meaningless text.

GDS recommends writing for a reading age of 9 years old, which is the point at which most children have learned the most common words and at which almost all our readers should be able to understand.

The following are in addition to the [GDS guide for words to avoid](#) (which avoids 'delivered'):

- avoid jargon such as rolled out or transportation – use instead 'introduced' and 'transport'
- avoid all other forms of councilese like 'undertake a review' or 'signpost to services'
- buildings are in a street, not on it:
St Mary's Church, in Trout Street
- avoid phrases like 'given the green light' or 'thumbs up', 'get the go-ahead', 'kick-off', 'launched', 'state-of-the-art', 'strutting their stuff', 'major', 'the council delivered'; there is always an alternative
- other clichés to be avoided include miraculous escape, tragic accident, brutal murder
- never use -ize at the end of words. Use -ise instead
- avoid ampersands (&) unless it is unavoidable (such as when it forms part of a company's official name) or desirable (such as part of a campaign name/logo)
- 'in order to' uses unnecessary words; just say 'to'

Text style

- use Verdana or Arial 12 point in Word documents and in emails
- do not underline text as this could be confused with a hyperlink
- do not use italics because they can be hard to read (unless used in quote)
- try not to use a hyphen, dash or forward slash

Capitals

As per the GDS guidelines, capital letters are reputed to be 13% to 18% harder for users to read and they slow down and interrupt reading. So, we avoid them wherever possible.

Use capitals for:

- the first letter of:
 - of a sentence
 - of a headline
- the actual names of people, or the names of organisations and companies:
Taylor Swift, Ealing Council, BBC, Ealing Wildlife Group
- Ealing Council, but 'the council' or 'a council'
- an organisation's full name: Sainsbury's, Taylor Wimpey
- titles of physical works of art – such as a song, book or film: Paint it Black, The Life of Pi
- names of physical places – towns, buildings, cities, countries start with a capital: Acton, Perceval House, London, England, Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, except it is lower case for 'west London'
- names of reports by the council or other organisations: Capital Budget Update Report
- religion names: Christian, Muslim, Catholic
- position titles (constitutional, legal or religious):
 - Prime Minister
 - MP

Capitals continued

- Only when attached to a specific name:
 - councillors: Councillor Peter Mason or Councillor Mason, but otherwise it is the councillor, a councillor, councillors
 - royalty: Prince of Wales, then Prince William, King Charles III, then the King
 - police: PC Stuart Bloggs, Detective Dave Smith
 - judges, coroners and magistrates: Judge Recorder Derek Barr
- religious positions: Father Patrick Dooley, then Father Dooley
- days and months: Monday, March
- specific days of festivals and holidays: Christmas Day, New Year's Day, but it is in the new year, happy new year

Lower case

Use lower case for:

- the mayor of...
- job titles: chief executive, head of marketing, director
- departments: children's services, marketing and communications, safer communities team,
- council services: garden waste collection service
- committees: planning committee
- seasons – winter, spring, summer, autumn
- points of the compass – north, east, south, west (unless it is a town/city/station's actual name, like West Ealing or South Shields)
- council: a council, the council but Ealing Council
- council tax, discretionary housing payment, (unless in a title when you can use upper case)
- the government, central government
- website, email, internet, intranet
- after a bullet point

Full stops

- do not use full stops between initials, for example MP not M.P.
- do not use after abbreviations such as Mr, Ms, Dr, Ltd
- one space after a full stop is sufficient – do not do a double space
- do not use full stops at the end of bullet points (but you can do so if you are explaining a series of 'steps' in a step-by-step process, if that helps readers to better understand)

Paragraphs

Keep short for readability:

- as above, check sentences more than 25 words long to see if you can shorten, or split them to make them clearer
- keep paragraphs to two to three lines, four lines maximum

Sub-headings and crossheads

- use sub-headings or crossheads in your articles and reports to break up the page for the reader – this will depend on the content, but aim for at least every five or six paragraphs

Acronyms

The first time you use any acronym in a story or report, you must explain it in full and then put the acronym in brackets. For example, West London Waste Authority (WLWA). Then you can refer to it using the acronym in the rest of the article or report – but online you should use [acronym markdown](#) so the full explanation is available as hover text on the acronym.

The only exceptions to this rule are if the acronym is well known to the extent that 80% of the population would understand and commonly use it. Examples might include UK, VAT, BBC and MP. Ofsted is also acceptable, if it is explained it is the national body for standards in education.

Do not use full stops in abbreviations: BBC, not B.B.C.

Dates and times

[Follow the GDS style](#)

Apostrophes

These are either used to denote possession, or to replace missing letters in contractions (it's, don't) – if you use an apostrophe for anything else; it is wrong.

- do not use in plural abbreviations (DVDs, GCSEs), or for periods of history (the 70s)
- do use after plurals that do not end in s: children's, people's
- the possessive case is:
 - the councillor's wife (singular)
 - the level of councillors' pay (plural)
 - one girl's balloon (singular)
 - two girls' balloons (plural)
- children's services (because children is a plural), but adults' services because there is more than one adult

Links

External links in online stories or pages on our websites should open in the same web browser window – and not be set up to open in an entirely new window.

Use meaningful text within all links to be descriptive about where the link takes you.

This is an accessibility issue for screen readers to pick up – do not assume the link will be understood in the context of the rest of the story. Never use 'click here' or 'read more'.

For example:

- link within the body of the story where appropriate:
'[Holocaust Memorial Day](#) is the international day of remembrance...'

Links continued

- use 'Have your say in our online consultation on [subject]' rather than 'Click here to have your say'
- do not write out a website address unless you need to specify what the website address is:
 - Website: www.met.police.uk

Instead, use a description and embed the link:

- internal example
'[Visit the recycling pages on the council's website](#) for more information'
- external website example
'For more details, [visit the Metropolitan Police website](#)'

Alt text for images used online

All images need 'alt text' which describes the image to someone with a screen reader.

When writing alt text, imagine you are reading out the content of the page down a telephone. When you get to the image, what would you say about it to help the listener understand what you are seeing?

- bad example: Flooded street in Acton
- good example: Person walking along a flooded street in Acton in wellington boots with water above their ankles, because the pavement in front of houses is submerged

If you use an image that's purely decorative (providing no information or functionality to the reader) you do not need to describe it with alt text. Just mark it as 'decorative'.

Ethnicity

When [writing about ethnicity](#), refer to different ethnic groups individually, rather than as a single group. Where it's absolutely necessary to group people from different ethnic backgrounds, use 'multi-ethnic'.

Ethnicity continued

Do not use the terms BAME (black, Asian and multi-ethnic) and BME (black and multi-ethnic). These terms emphasise certain ethnic groups (Asian and black) and exclude others.

If in doubt, talk with the person or people you are writing about to ask which form of words they would want us to use.

Quotes: Style

Quotation marks only go round the words people have actually used and in the order they used them. Always put quotes in the following order: Barbara Smith said: "I am delighted to be here."

- only use double quotation marks (" ") for quotes. Quote style: Mr Jones said: "I am not happy."
- full stop or comma comes before the final quote mark (as above)
- councillors should be given their full title and portfolio first:
 - Councillor Deirdre Costigan, the council's cabinet member for climate action, said: "...
 - And then just use Councillor Costigan for subsequent quotes – Councillor Costigan said: "...
- the same style applies to the chief executive: 'Ealing Council's chief executive Tony Clements said', then 'Mr Clements said' (or you might use Tony in internal communications)
- if a quote runs over more than one paragraph, do not close the quote until it has completely finished, so you use opening quote marks at the start of each paragraph of the quotation, but only use the closing quote marks once the entire quote has finished – for example:

She said: "I am so excited to be talking about this writing style guide and I would like to tell as many people about it as possible.

"I never thought they would ask me to be in it, so it was brilliant when they did."

Quotes: Style continued

- use single quotation marks in headlines (and pull-quotes, if you are telling a designer) – for example, in a headline that is taken from someone’s quote in the story such as ‘I love being an apprentice’
- use single quote marks for ‘picked out’ phrases in an intro or paragraph: Angry bees denounced a new hive as a ‘disgrace’ and claimed none of them would be happy to live there.
- quotes within quotes are single within double: Mr Smith said: “I could not believe it when she said ‘I do not love you anymore.’ I was so upset.”
- do not use for song titles, films or books – use initial caps for each main word in title: Land of Hope and Glory

Quotes: Accuracy

- quotes must always be accurate; while it is permissible to clear up illiteracies, it is not permissible to alter words or sense
- inevitably, some quotes will include words and formations of words disapproved of by this style guide – such as contractions of words (don’t) or clichés. However, that they are contained within quotation marks makes it clear the words are not ours
- quotes being used in our publications (including online) should be approved by the person who is being quoted

Tables

- try to avoid using tables if the document is to be read online as they can be difficult to navigate on a tablet or mobile device
- do not use tables for layout purposes, only for data
- never merge cells
- always have a header row