

# Editing and Proofreading

*A Practical Guide to Good Writing*



*Scribe Consulting*

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# Preface

Ask yourself these questions:

- How should you punctuate a bulleted list?
- When should you use commas?
- Should every word in a heading have a capital or just the first one?
- Is it okay to ‘split an infinitive’? (And just what *is* an infinitive anyway?)
- Was it okay to start the previous sentence with *and*?

It’s hard enough making these decisions when you’re editing your *own* work. If you’re responsible for editing the work of others, it can be a nightmare. Everyone you ask will have opinions. Often, though, no one will be able to justify these opinions with anything more convincing than ‘Well, when I was at school my teacher said ...’.

This course will provide you with two very important things:

- You’ll have the knowledge with which to provide good and justifiable answers to these (and similar) questions.
- You’ll have the skills with which to apply this knowledge to practical situations in your workplace.

Regards,

*Tim North*

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## Outcomes

After completing this course, you’ll be able to:

- Justify to others the editing decisions you make.
- Explain and follow contemporary guidelines for punctuation, capitalisation and hyphenation.
- Distinguish between and correctly use abbreviations, contractions, symbols and acronyms.
- Use numbered and bulleted lists correctly.
- Decide when to write numbers as words.
- Correctly use many commonly confused word pairs and much more.

# Introduction

1

*If you write anything criticising editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written.*

Muphry's law

## Rationale

- You may be asked to edit or proofread a document without knowing what's involved in these activities.
- Editing or proofreading another person's document can be a sensitive activity. Not all people take well to correction.
- You may find it hard to justify or explain your edits if they're challenged.
- You may not know what sources of information and advice you can rely on.
- Your editing practice may be inconsistent from one document to another.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Provide a checklist of activities to follow during the various stages of editing and proofreading.
- Identify some of the difficulties involved in editing other people's work.
- Distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive editing.
- Identify a suitable style manual to guide your editing.
- Use a style sheet to attain consistency when editing.
- Identify a suitable dictionary to assist with your editing.

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## 1.1 Why it's not easy being an editor

Let's put these activities in a real-world context with a quick test containing some practical problems encountered by editors and proofreaders.

1. You receive reports from four colleagues. Each capitalises their headings in a different style as shown here:
  - This is the heading style used by Rachel.
  - This Is The Heading Style Used By Tom.
  - This is the Heading Style Used by Karen.
  - THIS IS THE HEADING STYLE USED BY JO.

Are all of these styles equally acceptable? Is one clearly preferable? If you were asked to create a style guide for your department, what would you recommend regarding the capitalisation of headings?

2. You receive a report from a senior manager. Throughout, she spells *co-operate* with a hyphen but *coordinate* without. Do you:
  - Remove the hyphen from *co-operate* because it seems consistent to do so.
  - Add a hyphen to *coordinate* for the same reason.
  - Leave it because you know she'll be irritable if you change her work.
3. One of your managers asks you to edit a report containing the following bulleted list:

Training contributes to organisational effectiveness through:

- correcting skill deficiencies;
- developing a flexible and adaptable workforce
- It increases employee commitment and job satisfaction.
- increasing productivity. This can lead to greater profit.
- increasing adaptability; and
- providing competitive advantage.

Fixing this list will be a lot of work. (See chapter 5 to discover why.) Is it realistic to try to explain to your manager what's wrong so he'll do a better job next time? Is this just asking for trouble? Might it be resented or appreciated?

4. A colleague submits a ten-page report in which one or two sentences start with joining words like *and* or *however*. You let these sentences pass without change, but your boss insists they're wrong and hauls you over the coals.

Do you just take it on the chin, or should you try to explain why you think it's okay? Is it your job to train the boss, or are you there to enforce your boss's opinions?

*"I should probably feed my sisters cats."*

[artifice401.blogspot.com/2009/06/importance-of-punctuation.html](http://artifice401.blogspot.com/2009/06/importance-of-punctuation.html)

## Rationale

- Properly used, punctuation can aid the clarity of what we write. Omitted, our writing can be ambiguous.
- There are accepted conventions for how to punctuate. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.
- In legal documents and technical specifications, poor punctuation can have serious ramifications.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Employ widely followed conventions for correct punctuation.
- Use punctuation to avoid ambiguity.

## Further reading

*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

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## 2.1 Why should I care about punctuation?

Punctuation is used to make our meaning clearer. Without punctuation — or with incorrect punctuation — the meaning of what we write can be unclear to our readers. This may cause problems for everyone.

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### Reason to care about punctuation #1:

Imagine that you use your phone to send the following short (and lamentably unpunctuated) message to a loved one during your lunch break:

You know I'm sorry I still love you

You may be expecting to go home to a cooked meal and a bit of a cuddle because *you* think that you sent the heartfelt apology:

You know I'm sorry. I still love you.

To your surprise, you come home to find your clothes on fire in the middle of the lawn! Unfortunately, your partner read the same message as bitter statement of regret:

You know, I'm sorry I still love you.

It's to avoid disastrous confusion like this that we need to know how to punctuate.

---

### Reason to care about punctuation: #2:

Here's another example that also shows how punctuation can change the meaning of a sentence. In this case, though, the change in meaning is quite subtle:

The house which Jack built is over here.<sup>5</sup>

The house, which Jack built, is over here.

The first sentence implies that Jack has built only one house. The second doesn't. You can see that we need to punctuate well in order to avoid subtle distinctions like this.

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### Reason to care about punctuation #3 (the scary one):

In business, missing or improper punctuation (for example, in a contract, tender or specification) has given rise to serious legal and financial problems. For example:

A contract dispute in Canada centers on what's being called a million-dollar comma. Canada's telecommunications regulator has decided that a misplaced comma in a contract concerning telephone poles will allow a company to save an estimated \$2 million (Canadian).

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6383383](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6383383)

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<sup>5</sup> Readers with a sound knowledge of grammar will note that the *subject* of the first sentence (underlined) is different from the subject of the second.



Table 2.1: A summary of the ways to join sentences.

Joining words	Punctuation	Example
1. [none]	Sentence. Sentence.	Today is Friday. Tomorrow is Saturday.
2. [none]	Sentence; sentence.	Today is Friday; tomorrow is Saturday.
3. accordingly consequently for example furthermore however moreover namely nevertheless otherwise therefore that is thus	Sentence; joining-word, sentence.	Group three succeeded; however, group four did not. I like it; nevertheless, I won't be buying it. It's very expensive; nevertheless, it's worth it.
4. for and nor but or yet so	Sentence, joining-word sentence.	Group three finished, but they took a long time. I like it very much, and I think you will too.
5. because as if then	Sentence joining-word sentence.	Complete this work then fax it to me. He is happy because he got a promotion.

### Exercises

Punctuate these sentences:

1. Sally likes this and would like to buy it.
2. Sally likes this and I would like to buy it for her.
3. Johnson is a good team member but he may lack initiative.
4. Johnson is a good team member but lacks initiative.
5. Finish this work then meet me down at the bar.
6. I admire her because she's a hard worker.

# Capitalisation

3

*Capitalisation is the difference between 'I had to help my Uncle Jack off a horse' and 'I had to help my uncle jack off a horse'.*

UrbanDictionary.com

## Rationale

- There are accepted conventions for when to use (and not to use) a capital letter at the start of a word. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.
- Contemporary usage employs fewer capital letters than in the past.
- As the quotation above demonstrates, incorrect capitalisation can even change the meaning of a sentence.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Explain why it is unwise to overuse full capitals;
- Choose a suitable style for capitalising headings and titles.
- Identify when to use an initial capital letter and when not to.

## Further reading

*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

ascenders and no descenders. The characters all tend to blend in and look the same, so we have to work harder to decipher what we see.

Authors sometimes use full capitals for words or whole sentences in order to emphasise the text. For example:

#### REPORT ON LAND-USE PATTERNS IN THE EASTERN SUBURBS

Arguably, the desired emphasis brought about by the use of full capitals may be outweighed by the loss of readability.

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## 3.5 Headings and titles

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### Ways of capitalising headings and titles

Four capitalisation styles are in common use:

1. THIS LINE IS IN *FULL CAPITALS*.
2. This Line Has A Capital For Every Word.
3. This Line is in *Title Case*.
4. This line is in *sentence case*.

There is no clear agreement on how to capitalise headings and titles within a document. Some authors consistently use their preferred style. A considerable number use several, often in the same document.

The use of full capitals for headings and titles is inadvisable as this can be associated with a loss of readability as outlined in the previous section. Similarly, using a capital letter for every word has traditionally been frowned upon. This leaves us with two common choices.

In *sentence case* one uses a capital for the first word of a heading or title. Other words start with a lower-case letter unless they would normally receive a capital; for example, a person's name. The biggest advantage of sentence case is simplicity. Authors don't have to ponder which words to capitalise and which not to.

In *title case* most words are written with an initial capital. Certain small words are not capitalised, though. While title case is commonly used, its biggest drawback is that most authors are unsure as to which words should not be capitalised. This leads to inconsistency.

If you decide to use title case, it is common not to capitalise these classes of words:

- conjunctions (*and, or, but*);
- prepositions (*in, of, by, for*);
- articles (*a, an, the*); and
- any form of the verb *to be* (*is, are, am*).

# Shortened forms

# 4

*The good writing of any age has always been the product of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.*

William Styron, *WRITERS AT WORK*, 1958.

## Rationale

- There are accepted conventions for how to use abbreviations, contractions, acronyms and symbols correctly. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.
- The correct use of the metric system of units is the subject of much confusion.
- The overuse of acronyms can lead to a loss of clarity.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Distinguish between abbreviations, contractions, acronyms and symbols.
- Know when to use capital letters and full stops in these shortened forms and when not to.
- Correctly write numbers and units using the metric system.
- Employ strategies to prevent the overuse of acronyms.

## Further reading

*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

Here are some examples of abbreviations. They all omit the final letter of the full word:

Div.	Division	approx.	approximately
Inc.	Incorporated	Aug.	August
Prof.	Professor	Aust.	Australia
a.m.	anti meridiem <sup>19</sup>	p.m.	post meridiem
i.e.	id est	e.g.	exempli gratia

Abbreviations should be followed by a full stop. You can think of the full stop as being a replacement for the missing final letter.

Note that Latin-based abbreviations like *e.g.* are two separate abbreviations: *e.* for *exempli* and *g.* for *gratia*. There are thus two full stops. Alternatives such as *eg.* or *eg* are not consistent with our principle of following abbreviations with a full stop.

Here are some examples of contractions. They all include the final letter of the full word:

Rd	Road	govt	government
Assn	Association	Revd	Reverend
Mr	Mister	Jr	Junior
Dr	Doctor	Bld	Boulevard
Pty	Proprietary	Ltd	Limited

Contractions should not be followed by a full stop.

### THINGS TO TAKE AWAY

Use a full stop only if you lose the last letter of the full word.

### Exercise

Classify each of these as an abbreviation or a contraction. Also, insert a full stop in the middle column where necessary.

Full form	Shortened form	Abbreviation or contraction?
Academy	Acad	
department	dept	
edition	edn	
established	est	
figure	fig	
Institute	Inst	
hour	hr	
population	pop	
Sergeant	Sgt	

<sup>19</sup> From the Latin *anti* meaning before, *meri* meaning middle and *diem* meaning day.

# Bulleted and numbered lists 5

*I have a little list.*

Gilbert and Sullivan, *THE MIKADO*, 1885.

## Rationale

- Bulleted and numbered lists can be confusing if worded poorly.
- There are accepted conventions for how to present bulleted and numbered lists. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Format bulleted and numbered lists for maximum clarity.
- Punctuate bulleted and numbered lists correctly.
- Employ what is known as *parallel structure*.
- Decide when to use bullets and when to use numbers.

## Further reading

*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6th edn, 2002), John Wiley and Sons.

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## Type 2: Lists of sentences

If the elements of a list are each sentences then they (naturally) each start with a capital letter and end with a full stop. For example:

Training contributes to organisational effectiveness in the following ways:

- Skill deficiencies are corrected.
- A flexible and adaptable workforce is developed.
- Employee commitment and job satisfaction increase.
- Productivity increases.
- Adaptability increases.
- Competitive advantages are provided.

Compare this to the previous example. Instead of being a single very long sentence, it is now several sentences. You readers may find this easier to understand.

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### 5.3 What is parallel structure?

A common error is to create a bulleted or numbered list in which some of the elements are fragments and others are complete sentences. This is a real no-no.

Look at the following malformed list:

Training contributes to organisational effectiveness through:

- correcting skill deficiencies;
- developing a flexible and adaptable workforce;
- It increases employee commitment and job satisfaction.
- increasing productivity. This can lead to greater profit.
- increasing adaptability; and
- providing competitive advantage.

The first two elements are fragments, yet the third is a sentence. The fourth is a strange combination of both. Clearly, we have a problem here with consistency.

There's only one way to fix this type of problem. You should rewrite the list so that all of the elements are fragments or all of them are sentences. It's best not to mix the two.

# Hyphenation

# 6

*We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.*

Ernest Hemmingway, 1899–1961

## **Rationale**

- Properly used, hyphens can aid the clarity of what we write. Omitted, our writing can be ambiguous.
- There are accepted conventions for how to use hyphens. If we are unaware of these, our writing can look less professional.

## **Outcomes**

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to use hyphens appropriately to aid clarity.



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## 6.1 Overview

There are few firm rules dealing with the use of hyphens, and dictionaries are often in disagreement. In general, British dictionaries are more inclined to hyphenate words than their American counterparts; the Macquarie and Australian Oxford dictionaries lie somewhere between the two. This divergence in practice means that there are no simple rights and wrongs in this aspect of word punctuation.

*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6<sup>th</sup> edn), p. 88

Hyphens (-) are used in many situations:

- They are used to separate some prefixes from the main word; for example, ex-employee, co-opt.
- They are used in some compound nouns; for example, cross-reference, dry-cleaning.
- They are used in some compound adjectives; for example, a customer-focussed attitude.
- They are still occasionally used in the numbers twenty-one through ninety-nine.
- They are still sometimes used to break long words that occur at the end of a line.

The guidelines that follow will help you decide when to use a hyphen.

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## 6.2 Hyphenating prefixes

Hyphens are sometimes used to separate a prefix from the word it's attached to; for example, self-confidence. *In general, though, most prefixes don't need a hyphen. If in doubt, leave it out.* There are a number of common exceptions to this guideline, though.

- The prefix *self-* is usually hyphenated; for example, self-esteem, self-image, self-conscious.
- When the prefix *ex-* is used to mean former, it is usually hyphenated. For example: ex-wife, ex-premier, ex-treasurer.
- If the main word has an initial capital or is a number then use a hyphen after the prefix. For example: post-2001, un-Australian, mid-90s.
- Hyphens are sometimes used when a prefix would cause the doubling of a vowel; for example, co-opt or pre-empt. Modern usage is slowly eliminating some such hyphens though. For example, most modern dictionaries spell *cooperate* and *coordinate* without hyphens.
- Use a hyphen after the prefix if the main word has a hyphen of its own; for example, 'He had a non-customer-focussed attitude'.
- We sometimes see a hyphen after the prefix if the main word is only one syllable; for example, infra-red. This is applied inconsistently, though, and dictionaries vary in their

*Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts.*

Larry L King, 1929–2012

## Rationale

- There are conventions for writing numbers. If you're unaware of them, your work may appear less professional.
- Poor formatting of numbers and spans can make them confusing. Conversely, correct formatting can make them clearer.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Use commas to group large numbers into groups of three digits.
- Avoid confusion when using the words *billion* and *trillion*.
- Neatly format numbers presented in scientific notation.
- Write spans of numbers clearly and in the commonly accepted fashion.
- Write dates and times correctly and unambiguously.
- Write numbers as words in appropriate situations.

- Some writers include full stops in *a.m.* and *p.m.*; many omit them. (It is now becoming more common to omit them.) Some writers put *a.m.* and *p.m.* in lower case, others in upper case. Pick a style and be consistent.
- Leaving a space prior to *a.m.* or *p.m.* will aid readability and is thus preferred.
- Times written in the 24-hour-clock system always use four digits. *THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS* (6<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 173) suggests writing them without punctuation like so:

1245                      0730                      2359

*THE MICROSOFT MANUAL OF STYLE* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, pp.153–4) suggests using a colon:

12:45                      07:30                      23:59

A more detailed treatment of written time can be found in ISO standard 8601:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO\\_8601](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO_8601)

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## Discussion

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What is your preferred style for writing times?

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## 7.5 Writing numbers as words

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### When do we use digits?

Numbers can be written using digits (37) or using words (thirty-seven). The choice depends on which writing style we're employing: *literary style* or *business style*.

In literary works, such as novels and poetry, all numbers (no matter how large or small) are written using words. For example:

Smith stared at her — all six foot two of her.

Smith shivered. It was down to eleven degrees.

Smith sighed. He'd be sixty soon.

Smith staggered. He'd just won two million dollars!

In business and technical writing, numbers are *sometimes* written using words and sometimes using digits. For example:

Our sales have increased by 12% this quarter.

Bob, page two is missing.

The police found 500 grams of cocaine.

So, in business and technical works, when should we write numbers using words? Here are three conventions that are commonly followed:

# Common confusions



*Clarity is the politeness of the man of letters.*

Jules Renard, JOURNAL, 1892.

## Rationale

- Certain pairs of words are commonly confused with each other. Their use (correctly or otherwise) can lead to confusion for the reader. It may thus be necessary to avoid or clarify them.
- Certain 'rules' of English that have been handed down over the generations are not rules at all and may be disregarded in contemporary writing.
- If we are unaware of correct use, our writing can look less professional.
- As discussed in Section 1.2, though, we need not be unnecessarily pedantic about the meaning of words. A better goal is to maximise clarity.

## Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to distinguish between many commonly confused word pairs.

## The Better Writing Skills Newsletter

Much of the content of this chapter is extracted from articles taken from my free newsletter. You can subscribe or browse recent back issues here:

[www.scribe.com.au/newsletter.html](http://www.scribe.com.au/newsletter.html)

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## 8.11 Do place names always need a capital letter?

(An edited extract from the February 2009 *BETTER WRITING SKILLS NEWSLETTER*)

My next correspondent, Jodi, writes:

This one has been annoying me for years and I hope you can clarify. [Should I write:

Kings Park is a wonderful park. The Park has many attractions. People love to come to the Park.

or:

Kings Park is a wonderful park. The park has many attractions. People love to come to the park.

These are just dummy sentences of course but I am heartily over ‘Park’ versus ‘park’ and unless I write the name in full — Kings Park — I tend to just drop the caps.

Is this acceptable or do I have to conform?

Let’s generalise from Jodi’s question. When a place name (for example *Rottnest Island*) is reduced to just the general word (*Island* in this case) should we keep the capital letter?

If you guessed that some people keep the capital and some people don’t, you’d be right. You’ll see both *the Island* and *the island* in common use. What’s most important is that you pick a style and stick to it.

Having said that, dropping the capital is the form recommended by my favourite style manual (*THE STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS EDITORS AND PRINTERS*, 6th edn, pp. 127–8). It says:

Names designating particular topographical features — mountains, rivers, bays, islands, and so on — are always capitalised when cited in full. ... When the name is reduced to its generic element, it is usually left uncapitalised:

the Murray River ... the river

So, back to Jodi’s question about *the Park* versus *the park*. Let’s settle on *the park*. This is in accord with the suggestions of the style manual cited above. It is also consistent with the tendency of modern English to use fewer capital letters than in the past.

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## 8.12 ‘I’ or ‘me’?

(An edited extract from the June 2013 *BETTER WRITING SKILLS NEWSLETTER*)

My first correspondent this month, Wesley, asked:

Have you any rules for using ‘I’ and ‘me’ in sentences as I am always correcting my 10 and 14 year old granddaughters?

# Answers to the exercises

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## Chapter 2: Punctuation

### 2.2: A before-and-after test

*Don't worry if you're uncertain about these answers. You'll learn all you need to know in the coming chapters.*

Punctuate the following sentences:

1. John, that's an exciting proposal.
2. The prize has been awarded to divisions 3, 4 and 6. *[US English would also have a comma after the '4'.]*
3. Bill is new here; he's from Canada. *[Either of these is okay.]*  
Bill is new here. He's from Canada.
4. There's only one way to a man's heart: his stomach.
5. The accountants' offices are being repainted this morning. *[If two or more accountants]*  
The accountant's offices are being repainted this morning. *[If one accountant with two offices]*
6. The team members — John, Mike and Helen — will join you tomorrow. *[Em dashes]*
7. We need the following items: paper, toner, staples and pins. *[US English would also have a comma after 'staples'.]*
8. I'm here on Tuesdays; you're here on Thursdays.  
I'm here on Tuesdays. You're here on Thursdays.
9. I'm here on Tuesdays, and you're here on Thursdays.
10. If you're ready, let's begin our training.
11. Let's begin our training if you're ready.
12. The three-time winner is Mary Johnson.
13. I prefer to use more hyphens, not less.
14. We're open 9–5. *[En dash]*

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