



# Style guide for writers and editors

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Every word we publish in brochures, reports, on websites, in emails or on social networks speaks about how we think of ourselves and determines how others see us.

It may be true that substance is more important than style, but without style the substance is likely to remain hidden, so we need both.

Editing documents to resolve formatting and other inconsistencies is boring and a poor use of our resources, so please try to follow these rules.

The health service is full of jargon and the subjects we write about are often technical making clear, straightforward writing more difficult.

This document is a guide for writers and editors of PCC publications. Its purpose is to ensure consistency and clarity of expression – that's all we mean by style.

## Language

Write plain English in short sentences.

Use the active voice (not the passive voice).

Marion sent the email  
(passive: 'the email was sent by Marion')

## Layout

### Formatting

Keep formatting as simple as possible. Produce drafts in Microsoft Word using single line spacing and a line space between paragraphs. Use a single space after the full stop between sentences.

Do not justify text – it makes it harder to read.

### Fonts, type size and type style

Use Arial 11pt.

Do not introduce other fonts, heading sizes or styles.

Do not use colour for any text.

Do not use italics, bold, underlining or capitals for emphasis in text.

Exceptions are headings, which should be bold.

### **Headings and subheadings**

Keep them simple and short. Use sentence case not title case, eg:

Basic rules for termination of primary medical contracts

Not

Basic Rules for Termination of Primary Medical Contracts

Do not centre headings.

Avoid nested subsections and elaborate numbering systems for subsections.

Use bullets for lists, not numbers or letters.

### **Bulleted lists**

Like this:

- The first point you wish to make
- The second point you wish to make
- The third and final point you wish to make.

## **Usage and terminology**

### **Acronyms and abbreviations**

Always spell out an acronym at first use, except where you would expect the average person to know it – GP, MP, A&E and NHS do not need spelling out.

For example:

The General Medical Services (GMS) contract is the contract in most common use for primary medical care contractors such as GPs.

### **-ise and -ize**

Use –ise for word endings, eg:

maximise  
sympathise  
generalise

## Dates, times and numbers

3 December 2011  
6.30pm  
One, two, three...nine  
10, 11, 12...

## Percentages

Use % after numbers and per cent only if a number is expressed in words, but try to avoid the latter.

The report noted a 57% increase in A&E attendance.  
Fifty-seven per cent more people attended A&E, the report noted.

## For example, that is, etc

No full stops or other punctuation required:

eg  
ie  
am/pm  
etc (should be avoided)

## Place

north, south, east, west  
north-east, north-west...and so on

## Singular and plural

Organisations are singular:

NHS England has (not have), PCC is (not are)...

Do not use apostrophes in plurals, eg:

GPs (not GP's)

## Quotations

Use 'single quotes' in headings. Use "quotation marks" in text for reported speech or to cite passages from other documents, not for emphasis.

## Capitalisation

Unnecessary use of capitals is the biggest headache for editors and the main cause of inconsistency in NHS documents.

Capitals are wrongly used for emphasis or to imply legal status.

Only proper nouns (names of people, places and specific organisations) need initial capitals.

If in doubt, use lower case.

The following sections deal with commonly used terms that sometimes catch people out.

### **Job titles**

Always lower case for generic use, eg:

- chief executive
- dentist
- director
- doctor
- general practitioner
- minister
- prime minister

### **Law, legal instruments and regulations**

- act (but Health and Social Care Act 2012)
- breach notice
- control of entry
- directions (but Pharmaceutical Services (Fees for Applications) Directions 2012)
- PMS agreement (not contract, even though it is one)
- premises directions
- regulations (but the National Health Service Pharmaceutical Regulations 2012)
- termination
- variation

Exception: specific contract types including General Medical Services, Personal Medical Services and so on.

### **Organisations**

- clinical commissioning group (CCG after first use)
- foundation trust (FT)
- general practice (try to avoid GP practice)
- local medical committee (LMC)
- accountable care organisation (ACO)
- multispecialty community provider (MCP)

Exceptions: when used as part the name of a specific organisation, for example Milton Keynes Clinical Commissioning Group.

## **Other terms**

board, board of directors  
online  
out of hours  
payment by results (PbR)  
primary care  
policy  
public health  
quality and outcomes framework (QOF)  
single operating model  
social care  
website

## **Document management**

### **Version control**

For ease of editing only one version of any document should be in circulation at any time. Reviewers should use the 'track changes' or 'comment' features in Microsoft Word to make amendments or comment.

### **Document naming and numbering**

File name should be identical to the title of the document (or the first part of the title in the case of very long titles).

Once the file name has been agreed, it should not change except for the addition of version numbers.

file namev1, file namev2, file namev3 and so on

It is not helpful to add review dates, initials or other information to the file name. The version number is a reliable way to identify a document as the latest version, as long as editing is strictly serial, ie only one editor at a time. When a reviewer has finished with a version it is renamed using the next number in the sequence.

### **Print and online versions?**

There is no need to produce a separate version of any document for online use. PDF converters recognise web links and activate them.

### **Pagination and table of contents**

Editors should add these in the final stage of the production process.

## More information

For questions of common English usage not covered here, refer to The Guardian style guide: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide>.

Email [julian.patterson@pcc.nhs.uk](mailto:julian.patterson@pcc.nhs.uk) with any comments or questions that are not covered here.