

The
Economist

Style Guide

Twelfth edition

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Preface

Every newspaper has its own style book, a set of rules telling journalists whether to write e-mail or email, Gadaffi or Qaddafi, judgement or judgment. *The Economist's* internal style book (now an online guide, rather than a book) does this and a bit more. It also warns writers of some common mistakes and encourages them to write with clarity and simplicity.

All the prescriptive judgments in the style guide are directly derived from those used each week in writing and editing *The Economist*. And some of the judgments, advice and definitions given here differ from those given by other authorities.

This twelfth edition of the “The Economist Style Guide” is in three parts. The first is based on the traditional style book used by those who edit *The Economist*; it is largely the work of John Grimond, who over the years was editor of the Britain, United States and Foreign sections, before retiring in 2013. Johnny is a hard act to follow, and he left at a time when proper English usage seemed in full retreat in the face of texting, tweeting and internet jargon generally. His work still stands as a bulwark against it, as well as a monument to his impish wit and his sense of euphony, rightness and correctness. If slight cracks have now appeared in the bulwark, it is because language is a living thing that continually changes; some changes are benign, and some (such as the pervasive “smartness” of the digital age) simply cannot be resisted.

The second part of the book, on American and British English, describes some of the main differences between the two great English-speaking areas in spelling, grammar and usage.

To make the style guide of greater general interest, Part 3 consists of handy reference material that might appeal to readers of *The Economist*.

Throughout the text, italic type is used for examples except where they are presented in lists, when the type is roman, as this text is. Words in **bold** indicate a separate but relevant entry, that is, a cross-reference.

Many people have been involved in this book as it has developed and changed over the years. Thanks are due to all of them, with special thanks to Penny Butler, Ingrid Esling, Graham Douglas, Penny Garrett, Lane Greene and Anton LaGuardia, whose help has been invaluable and continues to be so.

Ann Wroe,
Obituaries Editor, *The Economist*
January 2018

Introduction

On only two scores can *The Economist* hope to outdo its rivals consistently. One is the quality of its analysis; the other is the quality of its writing. The aim of this book is to give some general advice on writing, to point out some common errors and to set some arbitrary rules.

The first requirement of *The Economist* is that it should be readily understandable. Clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought. So think what you want to say, then say it as simply as possible. Keep in mind George Orwell's six elementary rules:

- 1 Never use a **metaphor**, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print (*see metaphors*).
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do (*see short words*).
- 3 If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out (*see unnecessary words*).
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active (*see grammar and syntax*).
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Readers are primarily interested in what you have to say. By the way in which you say it, you may encourage them either to read on or to give up. If you want them to read on:

Catch the attention of the reader and then get straight into the article. Do not spend several sentences clearing your throat, setting the scene or sketching in the background. Introduce the facts as you tell the story and hold the reader by the way you unfold the tale and by a fresh but unpretentious use of language.

In starting your article, let your model be the essays of Francis Bacon. He starts “Of Riches” with “I cannot call riches better than the baggage of virtue.” “Of Cunning” opens with “We take cunning for a sinister or crooked wisdom.” “Of Suspicion” is instantly on the wing with “Suspicious amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight.” Each of these beginnings carries implicitly within it an entire essay. Each seizes the reader by the lapels and at once draws him into the subject. No gimmickry is needed, no flowery language, no literary contrivance. Plain words on their own carry enough meaning to provoke an intriguing thought, stir the reader’s curiosity and thus make him want to continue.

You must strive for a similar effect. Articles in *The Economist* should be like essays, in that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. They should not be mere bits of information stitched together. Each should be a coherent whole, a series of paragraphs that follow logically in order and, ideally, will suffer if even one sentence is cut out. If the article is a report, the facts must be selected and presented as a story. If it is a leader or more analytical article, it should also have a sense of sequence, so that the reader feels he is progressing from a beginning to a conclusion.

Either way, it is up to you to provide the ideas, analysis and argument that bind the elements of the article together. That is the hard part. Once you have them, though, you need only plain, straightforward words to express them. Do not imagine that you can disguise the absence of thought with long words, stale metaphors or the empty jargon of academics. In moderation, however, you can enliven your writing with a fresh metaphor, an occasional exuberance or an unusual word or phrase that nicely suits your purpose.

Read through your writing several times. Edit it ruthlessly, whether by cutting or polishing or sharpening, on each occasion. Avoid repetition. Cut out anything superfluous. And resist any temptation to achieve a literary effect by making elliptical remarks or allusions to unexplained people or events. Rather, hold your reader’s attention by keeping the story moving. If the tale begins to flag, or the arguments seem less than convincing, you can rescue

it only by the sharpness of your mind. Nothing is to be gained by resorting to orotundities and grandiloquence, still less by calling on clichés and vogue expressions. Unadorned, unfancy prose is usually all you need.

Do not be stuffy. “To write a genuine, familiar or truly English style”, said Hazlitt, “is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command or choice of words or who could discourse with ease, force and perspicuity setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes.”

Use the language of everyday speech, not that of spokesmen, lawyers or bureaucrats (so prefer *let to permit, people to persons, buy to purchase, colleague to peer, way out to exit, present to gift, rich to wealthy, show to demonstrate, break to violate*). Pomposity and long-windedness tend to obscure meaning, or reveal the lack of it: strip them away in favour of plain words.

Do not be hectoring or arrogant. Those who disagree with you are not necessarily *stupid* or *insane*. Nobody needs to be described as silly: let your analysis show that he is. When you express opinions, do not simply make assertions. The aim is not just to tell readers what you think, but to persuade them; if you use arguments, reasoning and evidence, you may succeed. Go easy on the *oughts* and *shoulds*.

Do not be too pleased with yourself. Don't boast of your own cleverness by telling readers that you correctly predicted something or that you have a scoop. You are more likely to bore or irritate them than to impress them.

Do not be too chatty. *Surprise, surprise* is more irritating than informative. So is *Ho, ho* and, in the middle of a sentence, *wait for it*, etc.

Do not be too didactic. If too many sentences begin *Compare, Consider, Expect, Imagine, Look at, Note, Prepare for, Remember or Take*, readers will think they are reading a textbook (or, indeed, a style book). This may not be the way to persuade them to renew their subscriptions.

Do your best to be lucid. (“I see but one rule: to be clear”, Stendhal.)

Simple sentences help. Keep complicated constructions and gimmicks to a minimum, if necessary by remembering the *New Yorker*’s comment: “Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind.”

Mark Twain described how a good writer treats sentences: “At times he may indulge himself with a long one, but he will make sure there are no folds in it, no vaguenesses, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when he has done with it, it won’t be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under the water; it will be a torch-light procession.”

Long paragraphs, like long sentences, can confuse the reader. “The paragraph”, according to Fowler, “is essentially a unit of thought, not of length; it must be homogeneous in subject matter and sequential in treatment.” One-sentence paragraphs should be used only occasionally.

Clear thinking is the key to clear writing. “A scrupulous writer”, observed Orwell, “in every sentence that he writes will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?”

Scrupulous writers will also notice that their copy is edited only lightly and is likely to be used. It may even be read.

part 1

The essence of style



a or the *see* grammar and syntax.

abbreviations

Write words in their full form on first appearance:

Trades Union Congress (not TUC), *Troubled Asset Relief Programme* (not TARP)

unless an abbreviation or acronym is so familiar that it is used more often in full:

AIDS *BBC* *CIA* *EU* *FBI* *HIV* *IMF* *NASA* *NATO* *NGO* *OECD*
UNESCO

or unless the full form would provide little illumination – *AWACS*, *DNA*. If in doubt about its familiarity, explain what the organisation is or does. After the first mention, try not to repeat the abbreviation too often; so write *the agency* rather than the *IAEA*, *the party* rather than the *KMT*, to avoid spattering the page with capital letters. And prefer *chief executive*, *boss* or *manager* to *CEO*.

There is no need to give the initials of an organisation if it is not referred to again. This clutters both the page and the brain.

Do not use scatterings of abbreviations and acronyms simply in order to cram more words in; you will end up irritating readers rather than informing them. An article in a recent issue of *The Economist* contained the following:

CIA *DCI* *DNI* *DOD* *DVD* *FBI* *NCTC* *NSA*

Some of these are well known to most readers and can readily be held in the mind. But unfamiliar abbreviations may oblige the reader to constantly refer back to the first use.

ampersands should be used:

- 1 when they are part of the name of a company:
Procter & Gamble Pratt & Whitney
- 2 for such things as constituencies, where two names are linked to form one unit:
The rest of Brighouse & Spenborough joins with the Batley part of Batley & Morley to form Batley & Spen.
The area thus became the Pakistani province of Kashmir and the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir.
- 3 in *R&D* and *S&I*.

compass references/readings should be given as 40°N , etc.

definite article If an abbreviation can be pronounced – *COSATU*, *NATO*, *UNESCO* – it does not generally require the definite article. Other organisations, except companies, should usually be preceded by the:

the BBC the KGB the NHS the NIESR the UNHCR

elements

Do not sprinkle chemical symbols unnecessarily: they may put readers off. But common abbreviations such as CO_2 may sometimes be used for variety.

Different isotopes of the same element are distinguished by raised (superscript) prefixes:

carbon-14 is ^{14}C

helium-3 is ^3He

initials in people's and companies' names take points (with a space between initials and name, but not between initials). In general, follow the practice preferred by people, companies and organisations in writing their own names, for example:

I.M. Pei J.C. Penney J. Sainsbury A.N. Wilson

junior and senior Spell out in full (and lower case) junior and senior after a name:

Douglas Fairbanks junior Douglas Fairbanks senior

lower case Abbreviate:

kilograms (*not* kilogrammes) to kg (or kilos)

kilometres per hour to kph

kilometres to km

miles per hour to mph

Use *m* for million, *bn* for billion and *trn* for trillion.

Use lower case for *kg*, *km*, *lb* (never *lbs*), *mph* and other measures, and for *ie*, *eg*; *ie* should be followed by a comma. When used with figures, these lower-case abbreviations should follow immediately, with no space:

11am 4.30pm 15kg 35mm 100mph 78rpm

Two abbreviations together, however, must be separated: *60m b/d*.

Use *b/d* not *bpd* as an abbreviation for *barrels per day*.

MPS Except in British contexts, use MP only after first spelling out member of Parliament in full (in many places an MP is a military policeman).

Members of the *European Parliament* are *MEPs* (not Euro-MPs).

Members of the *Scottish Parliament* are *MSPs*.

Members of the *Welsh Assembly* are *AMs* (Assembly Members).

organisations

EFTA is the European Free Trade Association.

The FAO is the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

The FDA is the Food and Drug Administration.

The IDA is the International Development Association.

NAFTA is the North American Free-Trade Agreement.

The PLO is the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

pronounceable abbreviations

Abbreviations that can be pronounced and are composed of bits of words rather than just initials should be spelt out in upper and lower case:

Cocom Nepad Unicef

Mercosur Renamo Unprofor

There is generally no need for more than one initial capital letter, unless the word is a name: *ConsGold*, *KwaZulu*, *McKay*, *MiG*.

OK (supposedly an abbreviation for “Oll Correct”) is spelled thus, and is not okay when spelled thus.

ranks and titles Do not use *Prof, Sen, Col, etc. Lieut-Colonel* and *Lieut-Commander* are permissible. (These should be *Commander* and *Colonel* on second mention.) *Rev* is also permissible, but it must be preceded by *the* and followed by a Christian name or initial: *the Rev Jesse Jackson* (thereafter *Mr Jackson*).

scientific units named after individuals Scientific units, except those of temperature, that are named after individuals are not capitalised when written out in full: *watt, joule, etc.* When abbreviated these units should be set in capitals, though any attachments denoting multiples go in lower case:

watt is W

kilowatt, 1,000 watts, is kW

milliwatt, one-thousandth of a watt, is mW

megawatt, 1m watts, is MW

gigawatt, 1 bn (10^9) watts, is GW

terawatt, 1 trn (10^{12}) watts, is TW

petawatt, 1 quadrillion (10^{15}) watts, is PW

megahertz is MHZ

writing out upper-case abbreviations Most upper-case abbreviations are shortenings of proper names with initial capital letters. The *LSO* is the *London Symphony Orchestra*. However, there are exceptions:

CAP *but* common agricultural policy

EMU *but* economic and monetary union

GDP *but* gross domestic product

PSBR *but* public-sector borrowing requirement

VLSI *but* very large-scale integration

miscellaneous Spell out:

page pages hectares miles

Do not spell out Centigrade, and do not use Fahrenheit for temperature.

Remember, too, that the *V* of *HIV* stands for virus, so do not write

HIV virus. Similarly the *D* of *DAB* stands for digital, so do not write *DAB digital radio*.

See **measures** in Part 3.

absent In Latin *absent* is a verb meaning *they are away*. In English it is either an adjective (*absent friends*) or a verb (*to absent yourself*). Avoid the American habit of using it as a preposition meaning *in the absence of*.

accents On words now accepted as English, use accents only when they make a crucial difference to pronunciation:

café cliché communiqué éclat exposé façade soupçon

But: *chateau decor elite feted naive*

The main accents and diacritical signs are:

acute	république
grave	grand-mère
circumflex	bête noire
umlaut	Länder, Österreich (Austria)
cedilla	français
tilde	señor, São Paulo

If you use one accent (except the tilde – strictly, a diacritical sign), use all:

émigré mêlée protégé résumé

Put the accents and diacritical signs on French, German, Spanish and Portuguese names and words only:

José Manuel Barroso	cafézinho
Federico Peña	coñac
Françoise de Panafieu	déjeuner
Wolfgang Schäuble	Frühstück

Any foreign word in italics should, however, be given its proper accents. See also **italics**.

acronym A pronounceable word, formed from the initials of other words, like *radar*, *nimby* or *NATO*. It is not a set of initials, like the BBC or the IMF.

actionable means *giving ground for a lawsuit*. Do not use it to mean

susceptible of being put into practice: prefer practical or practicable.
Do not use *action* as a verb.

adjectives and adverbs *see* **grammar and syntax, punctuation.**

adjectives of proper nouns *see* **grammar and syntax, punctuation.**

address What did journalists and politicians do in the days, not so long ago, when *address* was used as a verb only before objects such as *audience, letter, ball, haggis* and, occasionally, *themselves*? Questions can be *answered*, issues *discussed*, problems *solved*, difficulties *dealt with*. *See* **clichés.**

aetiology, etiolate *Aetiology is the science of causation, or an inquiry into something's origins. Etiolate is to make or become pale for lack of light.*

affect (verb) means to have an influence on, as in *the novel affected his attitude to immigrants*. *See also* **effect.**

affirmative action is a euphemism with little to be said for it. It is too late to suppress it altogether, but try to avoid it as much as possible. If you cannot escape it, put it in quotation marks on first mention and, unless the context makes its meaning clear, explain what it is. You may, however, find that *preferential treatment, job preferment* or even *discrimination* serve just as well as alternatives. *See* **euphemisms.**

affordable By whom? Avoid *affordable housing, affordable computers* and other unthinking uses of advertising lingo.

Afghan names *see* **names.**

aggravate means *make worse*, not *irritate* or *annoy*.

aggression is an unattractive quality, so do not call a *keen* salesman an *aggressive* one (unless his foot is in the door).

agony column Remember that when Sherlock Holmes perused this, it was a *personal column*. Only recently has it come to mean *letters to an agony aunt*.

agree Things are agreed *on, to or about*, not just agreed. See **transitive and intransitive verbs**.

aircraft *see* **hyphens** and **italics**.

alibi An *alibi* is the fact of being elsewhere, not a false explanation.

alternate, alternative *Alternate* (as an adjective) means *every other*.

As a noun, it has now come to mean a *stand-in* for a director or delegate. *Alternative* (as a noun), strictly, means one of two, not one of three, four, five or more (which may be *options*). As an adjective, *alternative* means *of two (or, loosely, more) things, or possible as an alternative*.

Americanisms

See Part 2, on **British and American usage**. To the points made there might be added the following preferred usages in British English (and in *The Economist*):

and *not* additionally

the army *not* the military (noun)

car *not* automobile

company *not* corporation

court *not* courtroom or courthouse

district *not* neighborhood

normality *not* normalcy

oblige *not* obligate

rocket *not* skyrocket

Back-formations are common in English, so *curate*, the verb meaning *organise* or *superintend* exhibitions of pictures, sculptures and so on formed from *curator*, is now acceptable in British English. But it is still too soon for *gallerist* (prefer *dealer* or, if appropriate, just *gallery*).

adverbs Put adverbs where you would put them in normal English speech, which is usually after the verb (not before it, which usually is where Americans put them).

avoid nouning adjectives Do not noun adjectives such as: advisory – prefer warning

centennial – prefer centenary
 inaugural – prefer inauguration

avoid verb-ing and adjectiving nouns Try not to verb nouns or to adjective them. So do not:

access files (except electronically)
action proposals
author books (still less *co-author* them)
critique style guides
gun someone *down*; use *shoot*
haemorrhage red ink (haemorrhage is a noun)
 let one event *impact* another (try *affect*)
loan money, still less *gift* it
pressure colleagues (*press* will do)
progress reports, or *reference* them
source inputs
summit a hill
trial programmes

See **transitive and intransitive verbs**.

Avoid *parenting* (or using the word) and *parenting skills*. (See also **grammar and syntax**.)

Though it is sometimes necessary to use nouns as adjectives, do not call:

an *attempted coup* a *coup attempt*
 a *suspected terrorist* a *terrorist suspect*
 the *Californian legislature* the *California legislature*

And avoid throwing together several nouns into one adjectival reticule:

Texas millionaire real-estate developer and failed thrift entrepreneur Hiram Turnipseed ...

coining words Avoid coining verbs and adjectives unnecessarily. Instead of:

dining experiences and *writing experiences*, use *dining* and *writing*;
downplaying criticism, you can *play it down* (or perhaps *minimise* it);
upcoming and *ongoing* use *forthcoming* and *continuing*.

Why *outfit* your children when you can *fit* them *out*?

Hosting has now entered the language (often to mean *acting as host at an event paid for by someone else*, otherwise *giving* would be the right word), but *questing* (*appearing as a guest on a programme*) should be kept at bay, as should *gifting*.

overuse of American words Do not feel obliged to follow American usage with such words as:

constituency – try *supporters*

gubernatorial – try *governor's*

perception – try *belief* or *view*

rhetoric (of which there is too little, not too much) – try *language* or *speeches* or *exaggeration* if that is what you mean

Note that in British usage:

City centres are not central cities.

Companies: *call for* a record profit if you wish to exhort the workers, but not if you merely predict one. And do not *post* it if it has been achieved. If it has not, look for someone new to *head*, not *head up*, the company.

Countries, nations and states: London is the *country's* capital, not the *nation's*. If you wish to build a *nation*, you will *bind its peoples together*; if you wish to build a *state*, you will forge its *institutions*.

Deep: make a *deep* study or even a study *in depth*, but not an *in-depth* study.

Grow a beard or a tomato, but not a company (or indeed a salesman: the *Financial Times* reported on August 8th 2003 that BMW was “to grow its own car salesmen”).

Do not use *likely* to mean *probably*.

On-site inspections are allowed, but not *on-train* teams or *in-ear* headphones.

Stay *outside* the door, not *outside of* it.

Programme: you may *program* a computer, but in all other contexts the word is *programme*.

Use *power cut* or *blackout* rather than *outage*.

Keep a promise, rather than *deliver on* it.

Raise cattle and pigs, but children are (or should be) *brought up*.

Regular is not a synonym for *ordinary* or *normal*: Mussolini brought in the *regular* train, All-Bran the *regular* man; it is quite *normal* to be without either.

A religious group sounds better than a faith-based organisation.

Do not *task* people, or *meet with* them.

Throw *stones*, not *rocks*.

Trains run from *railway stations*, not *train stations*. The people in them, and on buses, are *passengers*, not *riders*.

Use *senior* rather than *ranking*.

And only the speechless are *dumb* and the insane *mad*.

tenses Choose tenses according to British usage, too. In particular, do not fight shy of the perfect tense, especially where no date or time is given. Thus:

Mr Obama has woken up to the danger is preferable to *Mr Obama woke up to the danger*, unless you can add *last week* or *when he heard the explosion*.

Do not write *Your salary just got smaller* or *I shrunk the kids*. In British English *Your salary has just got smaller* and *I've shrunk the kids*.

See also **adjectives of proper nouns, euphemisms, grammar and syntax**, and Part 2.

among and between Some sticklers insist that, where division is involved, *among* should be used where three or more are concerned, *between* where only two are concerned. So: *The plum jobs were shared among the Socialists, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats, while the president and the vice-president divided the cash between themselves.*

This distinction is unnecessary. But take care with *between*. *To fall between two stools*, however painful, is grammatically acceptable; *to fall between the cracks* is to challenge the laws of physics.

Prefer *among* to *amongst*, as *while* to *whilst*.

an should be used before a word beginning with a vowel sound (*an egg, an umbrella, an MP*) or an h if, and only if, the h is silent (*an honorary degree*). But *a European, a university, a U-turn, a hospital, a hotel*. *Historical* and *historian* are preceded by *a* whether or not you treat the h as silent.