

# University of Stirling Style Guide

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## Introduction

Every day we write and edit on behalf of the University through our emails, web pages, print publications and posters. From prospective students to academic researchers, we communicate with a range of audiences across the world.

The University of Stirling Style Guide helps staff to write with clarity and consistency. We provide guidelines on style and formatting so that our writing is effective, reflecting our high standards and our brand.

We include guidance on writing for the website, but not for social media. Communication via social media is influenced by its own set of rules and conditions and will be outlined in separate guidance.

This guide is part of the University’s Brand Bank. For information on marketing and writing for audiences, please refer to guidance on graduate marketing campaigns.

### Contact and queries

The Style Guide will be regularly reviewed to reflect modern usage. If you have any queries or suggestions for this guide, please contact us on website@stir.ac.uk.

## Language and style

Our overall tone in our writing is informal, approachable and conversational. Write for your audience as if you were talking to them one-to-one, but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

Use the more personal and conversational pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’. We should use second person pronouns to address our audiences in a more direct and personal way; e.g. ‘How you will be taught’, ‘This is what you’ll learn’.

Use contractions like you’ll and we’ll.

Avoid negative contractions like can’t and don’t - research shows that many users find them harder to read, or misread them as the opposite of what they say

See also the writing for web section below.

Stay active and simple. Say ‘We tried…’ rather than ‘It was attempted …’.

Avoid intensifiers like ‘really’, ‘very’. They weaken rather than strengthen.

### Plain English

Research shows people prefer plain English because it allows them to understand information as quickly as possible.

Do not use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. Use ‘buy’ instead of ‘purchase’, ‘help’ instead of ‘assist’, and ‘about’ instead of ‘approximately’.

Avoid university jargon and buzzwords that may be unfamiliar to someone outside higher education. However, technical terms are not jargon and you can use them. Just explain what they mean the first time you use them.

Read more about [plain English and words to avoid](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide/a-to-z-of-gov-uk-style#words-to-avoid).

### University of Stirling

The official University title is ‘the University of Stirling’ (note initial capitals) and this should be used in all communications and publications. To avoid repetition, ‘the University’ and ‘Stirling’ may be used in text closely following the full title (note initial capitalisation here).

Using Stirling alone should be avoided as it may be confused with the city of Stirling.

In relevant contexts, the University may also be expressed as ‘Scotland’s University for Sporting Excellence’ (note initial capitalisation).

### US spellings

British English spellings should always be used throughout University publications, even when writing for international audiences.

Some examples follow, but it is not an exhaustive list. Consult a good English Dictionary or www.askoxford.com for further guidance.

colour not color

behaviour not behavior

labour not labor

centre not center

theatre not theater

cancelled not canceled

organisation not organization

### Inclusive language

Put people first: people-first language keeps the individual as the most essential element, rather than their characteristics. For example, don’t say 'diabetics' but 'people with diabetes'. (Exceptions are 'disabled people' and 'deaf people'.)

Mention characteristics like gender, sexual orientation, religion, racial group or ability only when directly relevant to the discussion.

Avoid idioms, jargons, and acronyms, as we have an international audience who may not understand British sayings and slang.

### Writing about disability and mental health

The information below has been adapted from gov.uk’s guidance on [words to use and avoid when writing about disability](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability).

The word ‘disabled’ is a description, not a group of people. Use ‘disabled people’, not ‘the disabled’, as the collective term.

Don’t automatically refer to ‘disabled people’, many people don’t identify with this term. Consider using ‘people with health conditions or impairments’ if it seems more appropriate.

Avoid phrases like ‘suffers from’ which suggest discomfort, constant pain and a sense of hopelessness.

Most disabled people are comfortable with the words used to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs ‘go for a walk’ and those with visual impairments may be pleased – or not – ‘to see you’.

### Words to use and avoid

Avoid passive, victim words. Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.

For example, conditions or disabilities describe what a person has, not what a person is. So, not 'diabetics' but 'people with diabetes'.

The information below has been adapted from gov.uk’s [guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability).

| **Avoid** | **Use** |
| --- | --- |
| (the) handicapped, (the) disabled | disabled (people) |
| afflicted by, suffers from, victim of | has [name of condition or impairment] |
| confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound | wheelchair user |
| mentally handicapped, mentally defective, retarded, subnormal | with a learning disability (singular) with learning disabilities (plural) |
| cripple, invalid | Person with disabilities |
| spastic | person with cerebral palsy |
| able-bodied | non-disabled |
| mental patient, insane, mad | person with a mental health condition |
| deaf and dumb; deaf mute | deaf, user of British Sign Language (BSL), person with a hearing impairment |
| the blind | people with visual impairments; blind people; blind and partially sighted people |
| an epileptic, diabetic, depressive, and so on | person with epilepsy, diabetes, depression or someone who has epilepsy, diabetes, depression |
| dwarf; midget | someone with restricted growth or short stature |
| fits, spells, attacks | seizures |

### Gender

Use gender-neutral phrases and words. For example, use ‘police officer’ instead of ‘policeman’, or ‘humankind’ instead of ‘mankind’.

If you need to use an adjective, use ‘female’ and not ‘woman’ in such phrases as ‘female president’ or ‘female MPs’.

Never say ‘his’ to cover men and women: use ‘his or her’, the more generic ‘they’ or a different sentence structure altogether. Good writing avoids using he or she’ or ‘s/he’ yet still retains neutrality.

Do not call groups of people ‘guys’. Do not call women ‘girls’.

### Race and ethnicity

The guidance below has been adapted from:

* [NICE](https://www.nice.org.uk/corporate/ecd1/chapter/talking-about-people)
* [Universities Scotland](https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/raceequalitytoolkit/terminology.htm)
* [Equality Challenge Unit](https://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/)

There is no single, agreed international definition of ethnicity and race or of the distinction between the two.

Use the term family origin, not 'race'. Be specific if you can ('people of south-east Asian family origin; people of African family origin'). Many organisations put the word ‘race’ in inverted commas to emphasise the fact that it is regarded as a social construct.

Avoid using skin colour as a catch-all; for example 'black'. Do not use the term ‘coloured’.

Avoid labelling people based on their ethnicity; don't say 'ethnic minority' or 'ethnic group'.

Remember that everyone has an ethnicity, and that we are communicating to parts of the world where white people could be considered as an ethnic minority. Do not use the term ‘ethnic’ with non-white or non-western; e.g. ethnic clothes or ethnic restaurants.

You can use 'ethnicity' generally; for example 'there is no link between mental health problems and ethnicity'.

Avoid using the abbreviations BME or BAME, as these terms have their limitations. You can use the term 'black, Asian and minority ethnic groups' to describe people in the UK who are not part of the white majority.

Names of ethnic groups (those recognised as an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act) should always begin with a capital letter. This includes Gypsy, Traveller and Irish Traveller.

Both terms are in common usage and are generally acceptable, but try and use ‘minority ethnic’ groups instead of ‘ethnic minority’ groups. 'Ethnic minority' places the emphasis on ethnicity as the main issue and becomes synonymous with non-white. Minority ethnic groups' to highlight the fact that everyone has an ethnicity.

The words ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ should not be used as nouns but adjectives: ‘black people’ rather than ‘blacks’, ‘an Asian woman’ rather than ‘an Asian’.

Avoid the word ‘immigrant’ and use ‘migrant’ instead, which is considered more neutral and bias-free, or better still, use a more descriptive way to refer to the individual characteristics of the people you describe.

Say ‘African-Caribbean’, rather than ’Afro-Caribbean’.

### Sexual orientation

Stonewall provides a useful [glossary of terms](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms).

The terms ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘lesbian’, ‘transgender’, ‘trans’, ‘LGBT’, ‘intersex’ should be used as adjectives, not nouns: a gay man, gay people, gay men and women, not ‘gays’ or ‘lesbians’.

Stonewall uses the acronym LGBT for lesbian, gay, bi and trans.

Don’t use these words in reference to LGBT people or communities:

* homosexual
* queer
* lifestyle
* preference

Don’t use ‘same-sex’ marriage, unless the distinction is relevant to what you’re writing. Avoid the term ‘gay marriage’, it’s just ‘marriage’.

### Age

Talk about young people (or children and young people, if appropriate) rather than 'adolescents' or 'teenagers'.

Say ‘older people’, never ‘the elderly’, ‘OAPs’ or ‘old age pensioners’ unless contextual.

Talk about older people rather than 'pensioners', 'the elderly', or 'old people'.

Be specific when you can about age: compare 'men over 65' with 'men aged 65 years and over'. Saying 18-year olds or over 65s is also fine, as long as it's accurate.

### Widening Participation

It should be noted that copy for the University’s Widening Participation scheme comes under its own style guide in addition to the University’s guide. For example, young people in care are now referred to as care experienced young people. Please contact the Widening Participation Manager for further information.

### International

When writing for international audiences, clear, plain English is essential, as they will not be familiar with UK idioms, metaphors, or colloquialisms, such as:

* Beat the rush
* At the heart of the campus
* The life and breath of the University
* Start from scratch

## University words A-Z

This A-Z list focuses on clarifying University terminology. For more general reference, such as affect vs effect, please refer to the [Guardian and Observer style guide](https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a).

**Advanced module**

(Lower case unless referring to a module specifically entitled with these words)

**Adviser**

(Not advisor)

**Audio-visual**

**Campus-based learning**

 (Hyphenated)

**Combined degree**

**Combined honours degree**

**Cooperate**

(No hyphen)

**Course**

‘Course’ is the official title for degree-earning academic study.

**Coursework**

(One word)

**Decision-making**

(Hyphenated whether before or after the noun)

**Distance learning**

(Lower case unless referring to a programme title with this element named in it)

**Doctoral**

Doctorate

(Lower case unless referring to a specific, named doctorate)

**E-commerce**

(Lower case when in the middle of a sentence)

**E-learning**

(Lower case when in the middle of a sentence)

**Email**

(Lower case when in the middle of a sentence)

**Fieldwork**

(One word)

**First-class**

(Hyphen when it appears before the noun, none if after the noun)

**Foundation module**

(Lower case unless referring to a module specifically entitled with these words)

**Further education**

**Full-time**

(Only hyphenated when used before noun, otherwise no hyphen)

**Group work**

(Two words, no hyphen)

**Higher education**

**Honours degree**

**Interdisciplinary**

**Lifelong learning**

(Initial capitals when referring to the mode of learning at the University of Stirling. Lower case initial if talking generally; e.g. ‘She was a great advocate of lifelong learning throughout her career.’)

**Masters degree**

(No apostrophe, but a Master of Arts, etc.)

**Mixed-mode**

**Multi-ethnic**

(The hyphen appears here to prevent letter clash.)

**Multi-purpose**

**Off-campus facilities**

(Hyphen when used before noun, but no hyphen when used after noun; e.g. ‘the facilities off campus’)

**On-campus facilities**

(But ‘the facilities on campus’. Also see 'off-campus')

**Modules**

Modules are the building blocks to a course

**Part-time**

(Only hyphenated when used before noun, otherwise no hyphen)

**Pathways**

Use pathways whenever you are referring to the different routes to a course.

**PGT/PGR**

When referring to postgraduate-level courses, use ‘postgraduate taught’ (PGT) and ‘postgraduate research’ (PGR), respectively. Do not say ‘taught postgraduate’ (TPG) or ‘research postgraduate’ (RPG).

**Postcolonial literature**

**Postgraduate**

Capital when part of a named degree, e.g. ‘Postgraduate Taught/Postgraduate Research’, otherwise lower case – ‘postgraduate study’

**Postmodern**

**No hyphen**

**Principal**

(Adjective. First in importance, rank or value, e.g. ‘My principal concern is your welfare.’ Also ‘the University Principal’ with initial capitals.)

**Principle**

(Noun. A standard or rule of personal conduct; e.g. ‘He’s got no principles.’)

**Programme**

While course is the official title for degrees, programme may be used to describe the components, attributes or schedule within that degree course. Programme is also used internally; eg programme approval process or programme directors.

**Single honours degree**

**State-of-the-art**

(Hyphenated when before a noun, no hyphens if used after; e.g. The new library is undeniably state of the art.’)

**Supervisor**

**Three-month programme**

(But ‘a programme of three months’)

**Three-year degree**

(But ‘a degree of three years’)

**Undergraduate**

**University**

Capital ‘U’ when referring to the University of Stirling, lower case when used in reference to university in general, e.g. ‘university life’

**Worldwide**

(But ‘world-class’, ‘world-famous’)

## Style and formatting

### Abbreviations and acronyms

Spell out acronyms at first mention unless they’re well known, such as UK, EU or MP. Thereafter, use the acronym alone. Don’t use an acronym if you’re not going to use it again later in the text.

Acronyms that are used as words; e.g. NATO, AIDS, can still be capitalised.

Don’t use full stops in abbreviations – BBC, not B.B.C.

Contractions such as Mr, Mrs, Dr, Ltd, St (which include the first and last letter of the word) should have no full stop after them.

When using a or an before an abbreviation, be guided by pronunciation, not spelling:

* An MA but A Master of Arts
* An FA cup final

Write ‘e.g.’ (for example) and ‘i.e. (that is) in lower case roman with two points and preceded by a semi-colon, comma or dash:

* We use a range of assessment methods; e.g. essays, projects, presentations and exams.
* Modular study is flexible: i.e. students can start on one degree yet graduate in another.

Write ‘etc.’ (and other things) in lower case roman, with one point, preceded by a comma.

* Students can buy take-away food, groceries, stationery, books, gifts, etc. from the campus precinct.

### Academic faculties

The University of Stirling’s five academic faculties should be expressed as follows:

* the Faculty of Arts and Humanities
* the Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport
* the Faculty of Natural Sciences
* the Faculty of Social Sciences
* The University of Stirling Management School

After initially being written in full, each may be referred to as ‘the Faculty’ or ‘the School’ for brevity, but only where there is no risk of confusion with other faculties / schools.

### Academic degrees

These should be expressed as follows:

* A Bachelor’s degree
* A Masters degree (not Master’s)
* Masters degrees
* BA
* BA (Hons)
* BSc
* BSc (Hons)
* DUniv
* EdD
* LLB
* LLM
* MA
* MA (Hons)
* Med
* MPhil
* MLitt
* MRes
* MSc
* PG Dip
* PhD

Do not use ‘in’ when referring to degrees: i.e BSc History not BSc in History.

### Academic year

Refer to semesters as ‘Semester 1’, ‘Semester 2’, and the years similarly as Year 1, 2.

‘Final year’ need only receive initial capitals if it appears in a detailed description of the academic programme of study. Elsewhere, lower case is preferable:

* You may want extra support to get through your final year. This is where we can help.

### Addresses

Use the following format:

University of Stirling

Stirling

FK9 4LA

Scotland UK

Always include the postcode.

### Capitalisation

**General**

Do not use a capital letter unless it is specifically required.

**Specific**

Capitalise:

* when referring to a specific faculty, centre or division
* when referring to a specific University position or job title; e.g. Admissions Secretary
* for University courses, entry qualifications and modules; e.g.
	+ Mathematics and its Applications
	+ Marine Biology
	+ GCSEs in Mathematics, Chemistry and History
	+ Foundations in Nursing Practice
* for titles and ranks when specific or when they accompany a personal name. The Prime Minister, Theresa May met Professor Tom Jones for talks about professors and prime ministers.

For parts of recognised geographical or political names:

* Northern Ireland (as a political entity) but northern Wales
* South Africa but southern Scotland

For proper names of periods of time:

* Dark Ages
* Renaissance

For proper names of movements, institutions, parties, denominations and organisations:

* Surrealism
* The Church of England
* Roman Catholic but catholic tastes

For adjectives and verbs that have been derived from proper names, when that source is obvious:

* Shakespearean
* Christian
* Homeric
* To Americanise

**Books, films and song titles**

Capitalise the first word of the title, and all words within the title except articles (a/an/the), prepositions (to/on/for etc.) and conjunctions (but/and/or etc.), e.g. Far from the Madding Crowd or Gone with the Wind.

**Headlines, articles, chapter titles and lecture titles**

Only capitalise the first word, any proper nouns and the first word following a full stop, question mark/exclamation mark.

### Dates and times

Dates should be expressed in the following ways:

Day, month, year, with no commas:

* 2 September 1990

Unless copying another text, avoid the endings -st, -nd, -rd, -th as in ‘3rd November 1973’.

Add a comma after a named day:

* Tuesday, 20 December 1917

Add another comma after the date if worked into a sentence:

* On Tuesday, 20 December 1917, he found himself alone in France.

When writing out times, use am and pm without full stops, not ‘o’clock’. Include ‘:00’ in hours for clarity.

Use ‘to’ between times (2pm to 4pm) unless space is needed. Then use a hyphen (2-4pm).

* 8:00-5:30pm

Write out full words for days of the week (Monday, Tuesday) and use dates to save space or reference dates in advance. Months can be abbreviated (Jan, Feb, Mar) for space.

Academic years should be formatted as 2019-20.

### Exclamation marks

Exclamation marks are typically used to express excitement. Avoid using them in web and print copy, and use sparingly on social media, only when the context calls for it – e.g. when you are congratulating someone on a big achievement or need to express emotion.

### Lists

There are two kinds of lists - those set off from the main text or ‘displayed’, and those that run on in the text, separated by commas.

**‘Run-on’ sentence lists**

Where the number of list items is small and there is less emphasis on imparting vital information, run the list items into the text. Separate with commas and semicolons, if necessary.

 Example:

The campus offers incomparable sports facilities: a fitness centre and classes, a golf course and golf academy, a 50-metre swimming pool, tennis, badminton and basketball courts, an athletics track, a loch for canoeing, and pitches for football, rugby, and American football.

**Displayed/bulleted lists**

Bulleted lists are useful for getting information across clearly as they help users scan the page.

Avoid lists of seven bullets or more as they become unwieldy. Large amounts of ‘list matter’ like this should be broken into thematic groupings before arranging in bullets.

Take care to standardise punctuation in a bulleted list. When the bullet points are full sentences, the following rules apply:

* Each bullet point must begin with a capital letter.
* Each bullet point must end with a full stop.
* All the bullet points must be proper grammatical sentences.

You may also need to use bullets in a paragraph or to make a sentence clearer. In this situation, think of each bullet point as the second half of the sentence. The first half belongs to all the points and it should be followed by a colon; e.g.:

To be considered for a tennis scholarship, you must:

* hold, or be in the process of applying for, a place on an undergraduate or postgraduate degree course at the University of Stirling
* have a profile in national tennis competitions at junior level or beyond
* take pride in working hard to improve your game

When using bullets in this way you should not put a full stop at the end of each bullet point or at the end of the last bullet in the list.

### Numbers

Numbers up to and including ten should be expressed in words rather than figures:

* One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, 11, 12, 13…

However, this may not apply if the number appears within a specific reference, measurement (e.g. 3kg), date, list, table or other body of statistical data. When a sentence contains one or more figures of 11 or above as well as numbers below that, use numerals throughout to achieve a consistent look:

* There were between 10 and 15 reported instances every day (not ten and 15).

This adoption only holds for the sentence in which this problem occurs: it does not influence usage elsewhere in the text, until the issue arises again.

A combination of both figures and words can be used to aid understanding:

* They hired 10 two-man tents.
* They filled five 36-inch tanks.

Use numerals when it is appropriate to use abbreviations:

* 6 kg (six kilograms not six kg)
* 12 m or 12 metres

Insert a clarifying comma in numbers of four figures or more:

* 2,500 students
* 13,200 applicants

Where possible, numerals should not be used at the beginning of a sentence. Either express the number as a word or reword:

* Thirty delegates attended the conference.
* Some 400 students graduated.
* The year 1914 changed the way the world thought.

Approximations may be better expressed in words if the use of figures implies exactness:

* Around two thousand people came. Not ‘Around 2,000 people came’.

Compound numbers written in words should be hyphenated:

* the twenty-fifth of December
* in his thirty-sixth year

Numbers at each end of a range are linked with a hyphen:

* see pages 30-38
* house numbers 100-120

### Ranges

Use ‘to’ instead of a dash or slash in date ranges. ‘To’ is quicker to read than a dash, and it’s easier for screen readers. Use ‘500 to 900’ and not ‘500-900’ (except in tables). Always explain what your date range represents.

Addresses: use ‘to’ in address ranges:

* 49 to 53 Cherry Street
* the years 1845–1860

When specifying range with a rule like this, never use the word ‘from’ with the time range, which would mix two different styles of expression:

* the war lasted from 1914 to 1918
* the 1914–1918 war

NOT ‘the war from 1914-1918.’

### Measurements and per cent

Numbers with units of measurement, percentage, quantity or proportion should generally be expressed as figures:

* The timber was 60 feet long and weighed 3 tons.
* They found that 45% of all reviewers agreed.
* They undertook a 50–50 share.

Use per cent not percent. Percentage is one word. Always use % with a number.

Write fractions in full, with a hyphen:

* three-quarters of a million

### Numbers for rankings and accolades

We will always aim to lead with a world ranking, followed by UK, followed by Scotland. However, if we rank highly in Scotland then we will use that - particularly where we have a 95% Scottish audience at an event such as Open Day. In some instances we can use both, for example if a subject is within TOP 5 in Scotland and TOP 20 in the UK.

When referring to university table rankings, we always use figures, rather than write the numbers in full.

Always ensure that the correct year is referenced when quoting any ranking.

**Top 3 rankings**
For top 3 rankings we use: 1st, 2nd or 3rd

**Scotland rankings**
If we are 4th or 5th in Scotland, we use: Top 5 in Scotland.

We don’t use any rankings that are beyond Top 5 in Scotland.

**UK and world rankings**
4th or 5th in the UK or world: Top 5 in the UK, Top 5 in the world

5 to 10 in the UK or world: Top 10 in the UK or Top 10 in the world

11 to 15 for the UK and world: Top 15 in the UK, Top 15 in the world

16 to 20 in the UK or world: Top 20 in the UK, Top 20 in the world

### Telephone numbers

Use ‘Telephone: 01786 407058’, not ‘T:’ or ‘Mob:’.

Use spaces between city and local exchange, etc. Here are the different formats which are acceptable:

* 01786 407058
* 07843 497 640
* 020 7450 4000
* 0800 890 567
* +44 (0)20 7450 4000

Always use the full phone number, including the country code (+44), when writing web copy.

### Titles

Don’t put a period ‘.’ after a title:

* Mr
* Mrs
* Ms
* Dr

The title Professor should be written in full.

### Ampersands

Ampersands should be avoided except in established combinations. Such combinations include R & B, R & D (research and development), R & R (rest and recreation) and in the names of companies that use them, e.g. M&S, Dollond & Aitchison, Smith & Wesson. There is normally a space on either side of the ampersand except where the name has been styled otherwise; for example, as seen in M&S and B&Q.

The ampersand may be used:

* to denote co-authorship on a project or paper: Johnson & Bailey, 1995
* to link the last two in a list of multiple authors on a project or paper:
	+ MacGregor, A., Leihmann, C., Magor, L., & Blake, F., 2008.
* to indicate informally that the ‘and’ in a listed item is a part of its name and not a separator:
	+ Sesame, cinnamon & raisin and poppy seed bagels
	+ Garage, Indy, Rhythm & Blues and Soul

### Apostrophes

The apostrophe is always used alone after plural nouns that end in ‘s’:

* Families’ Open Day
* other countries’ exchange programmes

### Italics

Italics should be used:

* To indicate the title of a published book or journal in academic references and bibliography:
	+ Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*: MIT Press.
	+ Steensen, S. and Ahva, L. (2015). ‘Theories of Journalism in a Digital Age’, *Digital Journalism*, 3:1, 1-18.

NB! Always make sure you follow the referencing style consistently – whether it is Harvard, Chicago, APA, MLA, or other.

* To indicate the titles of complete works such as books, long poems, plays, films, newspapers, periodicals, TV and Radio series, albums and CDs, paintings, ships, aircraft and vehicles.
* For Punctuation not belonging to the title should be set in roman:
	+ Have you seen Mama Mia!?
	+ The Mary Rose’s fascinating history.
* To highlight foreign words or phrases that are used in English but are not yet fully assimilated:
	+ He was the lecturer’s *bête noire*
	+ She was a *persona non grata*.

Foreign words that have become fully assimilated no longer require italic, such as petite.

* Sparingly used, italics can be used to give a word emphasis, or distinction from another:
	+ It’s not the length of your essay that bothers me, it’s the *premise*.
* To highlight a word, phrase or character being discussed:
	+ She had never found it easy to spell privilege. Shouldn’t there be a d?

Italics should be used as little as possible on web copy because of readability and accessibility.

## Writing for the Web

The guidance below has been adapted from gov.uk’s guidance on [Content design: planning, writing and managing content](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk).

The focus of writing for the website is to allow users to complete a task or find information as quickly as possible. Digital content should be short, specific and accessible.

Web readers rarely read word for word. They scan initially, usually down the left-hand side. Because of this, put the most important information first. ‘Front load’ sub-headings, titles and bullet points. For example, say ‘Canteen Menu’, not ‘What’s on the menu at the canteen today?’

Avoid directional instructions as different-sized devices may affect layout and cause confusion.

### Page titles and summaries

Most people find the University of Stirling’s website by using a search engine. When writing a title make sure it makes sense by itself, and in search results.

For example, ‘Regulations’ does not say much, but ‘Regulations for landlords’ does.

Once you know the most popular keywords, you can prioritise them in the title, summary, introduction and subheadings.

Make your titles short (50-60 characters, if possible), clear and descriptive so that users can tell if it’s the right content for them. People scan a page and often look at headings first to decide if they are on the right page.

Action-orientated headings work well.

Front-loading headings, to get to the crux of the information much faster.

Avoid saying the same thing twice (tautologies)

Example

Bad title example: Using and submitting your business expenses

Good title example: Submitting your business expenses

Use the active verb (‘Submit’) if you use the page to do the thing. Use the gerund (‘Submitting’) if the page is about doing the thing, but you do it elsewhere.

### What makes a good heading?

* It is seven words or fewer.
* It has emphasis on the first word.
* It will ‘précis’ what is to come in its accompanying paragraph.
* It will compel your reader to find out more.

What might it look like?

* An appeal to reader self-interest – ‘what’s in it for me?’
* The promise of a major benefit
* A question that implies an answer will follow
* An answer to a problem
* A warning
* A news announcement
* Something that piques people’s curiosity, a sensational statement

### Links and call to actions

Use descriptive links - avoid click here or learn more. Actions should start with a verb to guide users. For example, ‘Go to accounts’, rather than ‘Accounts’.

Calls-to-action should be prominent and stand out from the rest of the copy to drive engagement with your content, guiding readers to pages that you want them to go to; e.g. ‘Apply now’, ‘Ask a question’, ‘Book a place now’.

Calls to action in text should be active.

Button text should:

* have 2-4 words
* be active
* be specific: 'get started' is too vague and misleads users

### Structuring your content

**Page length**

There is no minimum or maximum page length but people only read 20 to 28% of text on a web page anyway. Get to the point as quickly as possible so that the target audience will see the information.

**Body copy**

Keep your body copy as focused as possible. Vary the length of paragraphs and sentences so that your page sounds conversational, has pace and rhythm, and reads vibrantly.

To engage readers, the first paragraph should be the snappiest: fewer than 30 words if you can manage it.

Do not repeat the summary in the first paragraph.

Use the ‘inverted pyramid’ approach with the most important information at the top tapering down to lesser detail.

Break up text with descriptive subheadings. The text should still make sense with the subheadings removed.

Paragraphs should have no more than five sentences each.

Sentences should have 15-20 words.

Includes keywords to boost natural search rankings.

Never use more than six bullet points or numbers in a list.

Use a single space after a punctuation mark and between words in a sentence.

**Font style (including use of italics)**

* Use italics only for Latin names of plants, animals etc, use italics and cap the first word only (eg Corvus corone). When using italics, use <em></em> as <i></i> is not recognised by screen readers. Do not use italics for quotes, sentences or paragraphs.
* Avoid text in ALL UPPER CASE. It takes 57 per cent longer to read than normal roman text.
* Don’t underline. This can be confused with hyperlinks.
* Use bold sparingly for emphasis and to aid scanning.

**Headings**

Use headings in order or importance of information. Don’t skip a heading level.

H1 - heading: This is the heading on your page and is only used once on a page.

H2 - introduction: This is the introduction to the next most important piece of information.

H3 - subheading: This is the heading you’ll use to categorise information underneath your introduction heading.

H4 - subheading: This is the heading you’ll use to categorise information underneath the H3 heading.

H5 - subheading: This is the heading you’ll use to categorise information underneath the H4 heading.

All headings should be sentence case and not initial caps – e.g. How to look for a paid internship and not How To Look For a Paid Internship.

### Be mindful of SEO

The way you label and write your copy is important – not only for accessibility but also for its findability in organic search and the rankings of a web page by search engines such as Google and Bing.

Meta descriptions are 100-160 character snippets that summarise a page's content. Search engines show the meta description in search results mostly when the searched for phrase is contained in the description.

Meta descriptions should include a mix of identified primary and secondary keywords for that page. However, it’s important to use keywords in a natural and user-friendly style, to avoid being penalised by search engines.

[SEO guidance](https://stir.box.com/s/94krwerxts89zqg5q115ajq0c6k1itkq)

## About this version

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If you have any queries or suggestions for this guide, please contact us on website@stir.ac.uk.