

Oxford Brookes University
A writing style guide for promotional
documents and websites

www.brookes.ac.uk/branding

OXFORD
BROOKES
UNIVERSITY

Directorate of Corporate Affairs

how can we get
our **message**
across?

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are you making yourself **plain?**

This guide to Oxford Brookes' writing style is about getting your message across.

Or we could have said:

This guide to Oxford Brookes Writing Style has been produced to encourage members of the university to generate writing which is in a style commensurate with transmitting information clearly to the Reader.

Take your pick! We believe that the documents and websites produced by this university should be written in straightforward, plain English – like the first of those statements. Using plain English doesn't mean being patronising or over simple, it doesn't mean being obsessed with grammar or abandoning it. It's just a style which works more effectively.

This style guide gives ideas for writing in **plain English**, which is both **faster to read** and **faster to write**.

Our university has to compete in an extremely competitive marketplace for students, donations, alumni interest, political backing and other forms of support. **If we're to be noticed, we must put across what we do in a clear, distinctive style.**

Our documents must look attractive and be part of the Oxford Brookes family (hence our visual branding). They also must be written simply and coherently, according to this writing guide, depending on the document and audience (see section titled ***Suit the Document*** on pages 10-11).

If we all work towards these goals, we can communicate successfully with our many audiences and reflect Oxford Brookes' active and forward-thinking culture.

Everyone gets bogged down in jargon sometimes, or takes four sentences to say what could be said in one. Many of the examples given here are taken from real documents (disguised to protect the guilty!).

This style guide gives ideas for writing in plain English instead, which is both faster to read and faster to write. It also gives details of our house style for specific points like abbreviations, dates and phone numbers.

be kind to your reader

Straightforward, punchy **text**
will make your **readers**
take notice.

Address them directly

Call readers 'you', even if there are lots of them. Writing directed to the reader is more effective than speaking to them at one remove:

not: **Applicants must complete the form.**

but: **You must complete the form.**

instead of: **All Jones House staff are reminded that they should wear Environment Day stickers on 12 May. Stickers can be obtained from reception.**

try: **Remember to wear an Environment Day sticker on 12 May. You can pick them up from reception.**

For the university or your department, use 'we'.

He/she

It is very tiring to read 'he or she', 'he/she' or '(s)he'. Use 'they' to cover both genders, just as you would if you were speaking. Grammar gurus say it's quite acceptable to do this.

Not: **When a student goes to see the counsellor, he or she will find...**

but: **When a student goes to see the counsellor, they will find...**

or: **When students go to see the counsellor, they will find...**

Tone

Be friendly. Emphasise the positive:

not: **If you don't send payment, we won't be able to renew your club membership.**

but: **Please send your payment so we can renew your club membership.**

Reflect facets of the University's 'personality':

- questioning: challenge preconceptions in an intelligent and helpful way
- demonstrating: reveal a hidden depth of knowledge, show insight
- personal: be human, fun, approachable and conversational.

give them what they **need**

What do your readers need to know? It's easy to assume a knowledge and forget to give the most important piece of information. For instance, if you're writing information about a course, say what the course covers, so:

not: On completion of the course you may expect to have achieved recognised professional status, the requisite skills to be an independent practitioner and to have developed an awareness of the ethics and values expected of a psychotherapist.

but: The course has five modules which cover: emotional development; individual and family behaviour; mental illness; ethics and values; counselling techniques. You'll have the chance to gain the skills you need to practice as an independent psychotherapist, and successful completion of the course will give you recognised professional status.

Or, if you're writing a welcome guide for new students, remember they won't know the layout of the university. So help them out:

not: On 15 September, please attend the important course orientation lecture, which will be held in the Lloyd Lecture Hall at 3pm.

but: Important course orientation lecture: on 15 September at 3pm, please come to the course orientation lecture in the Lloyd Lecture Hall. You'll find the hall on the Headington Campus, near the Gipsy Lane entrance (see the map on page 3).

It's also important to think about where and how your communication fits with other literature. Your readers don't want to waste time on duplicated information. For example, it's probable that a prospective student will read a prospectus before a course leaflet. So, make sure the leaflet contains additional information to that provided in the prospectus.

It's easy to assume a knowledge
and forget to **give**
the most **important**
piece of **information.**

write for clarity

Jargon

Jargon is a type of language that is only understood by a particular group of people.

We love our jargon, but remember that what you write may be read by:

- someone whose first language is not English
- someone unfamiliar with your subject or with higher education who won't know all the jargon

or, just possibly:

- someone with not very much time available.

Even when you are writing for an informed audience, if you use plain English, they won't have to work so hard to plough through your words.

So say what you mean, use the simplest words that fit the reader, and don't assume a knowledge on the reader's part.

From an undergraduate course description: *The course allows a wide interdisciplinary focus.*

Will a sixth-former know which disciplines? It would be better to explain:

The course brings together different disciplines including sociology, history and geography.

As well as jargon which is specific to your subject, try to avoid using management or organisational jargon. Look what happened to this author who tried too hard with corporate waffle:

Not all of the components identified as 'key' to strategy requirements were fully grounded throughout the organisation. This gave impetus to a corporate agenda mirrored within the directorates for the development of action plans to address the 'key' components.

They really meant:

Some parts of the organisation did not take up key parts of the strategy. So the board asked each directorate to create a plan to make sure staff put every requirement into action.

Nominalisation

Nominalisations are abstract nouns for processes, techniques or emotions. They are formed from verbs:

Verb	Nominalisation
provide	provision
arrange	arrangement
delegate	delegation

If you **use plain English**, your audience won't have to work so hard to plough through your words.

Nominalisations make writing heavy going. Use the verb instead.

Not: *Tutors undertook the distribution of campaign leaflets*

but: *Tutors distributed campaign leaflets.*

Confusion and redundancy

Are there redundant words in what you've written? For example, all the words in italics here could go:

Please send appropriate information about your career history to...

Would your applicant send *inappropriate* information?

In its past history, the university...

When else would history be?

At the present time, we are developing a new module.

When else would you be developing it?

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to everyone.

You're taking it.

See also **Words to avoid** on page 15.

Be sure that your verbs and nouns work together properly. Look at this pub advert:

Now under new management, the food has a more traditional feel. It runs a very successful carvery on a Sunday.

Apparently, the food rather than the pub is under new management, and the food itself runs a carvery on Sunday.

A more subtle example: *A dynamic university, you'll find Oxford Brookes has lots to offer.*

In this sentence, 'you' is a university, not a person – which is not what the author meant!

Say what you mean.

Use commands

To keep things direct, don't be afraid to give commands (with 'please' to soften them):

not: *I should be grateful if you would send it to me*

but: *Please send it to me*

not: *Students should put their empty luggage in the store*

but: *Put your empty luggage in the store.*

create **impact**

Start well

The opening words of one major institution's 2000 annual report: 'In last year's review, I noted that "next year will be the last in the present Millennium. Clearly a time for reflection" '. Not the way to kick off a positive, forward-thinking document!

A better example: We are a vibrant and dynamic organisation, and we've taken on challenges for the new millennium.

Remember that almost every newsletter ever written opens with 'Welcome to the latest edition of ...'. People know what newsletter they're reading. Be individual, and start with some positive news instead:

not: Welcome to the 2001 edition of the *Scotland Alumnus*. There have been a number of changes within the university in recent months.

but: A new department opened its doors at Scotland University in April: astro-physics – just one of several recent additions to university services. Spring also saw....

What's the key point?

Bring the main message to the beginning:

not: This course, which starts in September, has been endorsed by the Sixth-Form Teaching Organisation (SFTO) and provides the professional qualification for those who teach over-16s.

but: This course provides the professional qualification for those who teach over-16s. It is endorsed by the Sixth-Form Teaching Organisation (SFTO). Starting in September....

not: Five hundred people gathered for the annual convention, held this year in Boston. A major debate on funding led to a resolution to take strike action.

but: A resolution to take strike action dominated proceedings at the annual convention. Five hundred people gathered for this year's meeting, held in Boston, and funding topped the debate.

Bring the **main message** to the **beginning**.

Sentences can sound **clumsy** and **bureaucratic** if they use **passive verbs**.

Use active verbs

Sentences can sound clumsy and bureaucratic if they use passive verbs – scourge of formal letters and reports.

The problem was examined by the team.

Consider:

- subject (the team)
- object (the problem)
- verb (examined).

The passive sentence says what is being examined before it says who is doing the examining (object, verb, subject).

In an active sentence, the order is: subject, verb, object:

The team examined the problem.

Passive: The matter will be attended to by us shortly.

Active: We will attend to the matter shortly.

Passive: The report was considered by the conference.

Active: The conference considered the report.

In this last example, as well as making the sentence active, we could improve the style by turning the neutral ‘conference’

into real people, and by changing the formal word ‘considered’:

Scientists at the conference talked about the report.

There are some occasions when you may prefer to use a passive:

- To make something less hostile: ‘this bill has not been paid’ sounds less accusatory.
- When you don’t know who or what the doer (subject) is: ‘the England team has been picked’.
- For stylistic reasons – if it sounds better. But handle with care!

Grammatical myths

Despite what the rules used to say, and where your writing demands, it is quite acceptable to:

- start a sentence with: and, but, because, so, however
- split infinitives (‘to boldly go’)
- end a sentence with a preposition (‘Grants are something we should stand up for.’)
- use a comma before ‘and’.

structure

Subheads and paragraphs

Use subheadings to break up your text and group relevant information or paragraphs. This makes it much easier for the reader to find information, and the eye finds a page with white space around text more attractive to read (imagine this page without its subheads).

Paragraphs should usually be no more than three sentences long.

Use **subheadings** to
break up your **text**.

Sentences

Keep them short – 15-25 words is usually enough. If a sentence contains more than one point, or becomes long-winded, break it up:

not: In the context of patient partnerships, public participation in running the hospital is beginning to develop and will need to be extended if patient groups are to be encouraged.

but: In the context of patient partnerships, public participation in running the hospital is beginning to develop. To encourage patient groups, we need to extend this participation.

The eye finds a page with
white space around text
more attractive to read.

Paragraph numbering is not necessary.

Use lists

Lists and bullet points are a simple way to:

- make text more readable
- break up complex sentences and paragraphs
- be punchy
- avoid repetition.

If bullets start with the same word or phrase, move this before your colon:

not: **A survey found:**

- **mature students were too tired to take part**
- **mature students were not available at weekends.**

but: **A survey found mature students were:**

- **too tired to take part**
- **not available at weekends.**

If your bullet points follow as part of a sentence, as above, start each point with lower case letters (many word processing packages default to capitals, so watch out for this), and put a full stop (instead of semicolons or commas) at the end of the last point.

Numbering

It is sometimes helpful to number overall sections, but if you use page numbers and subheadings, paragraph numbering is not necessary. In particular, avoid complex numbering systems like 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 or 7.2.ii because they distract from the text, unless they are a required format in official documents.

Complex numbering systems distract from the text.

selecting your **style**

Formality

The level of formality is governed by who your readers are, and the need to be as straightforward as possible. But most formal writing is very dull, and you can usually avoid using it. This example is from a newsletter article, which should engage its reader:

It is important for the public's questions about the site to be answered prior to work beginning and as it progresses. To this end an information point has been established.

This would be better:

We have set up an information point on site, so we can answer the public's questions before and during the renovation work.

Humour

In the right place, a little humour can often lighten an argument – but handle with care. Avoid in-jokes, and remember that your audience may not all have (UK) English as a first language.

Suit the document

What is your document setting out to do? Our university publications aim to:

- inspire – for example, inspire alumni to keep up their interest
- promote – attract people to a lecture or to come to Oxford Brookes
- inform – give detail about application procedures.

Some may do all three. The style of your writing should vary according to the document's aims. For example:

Inform: our postgraduate course descriptions are straightforward, but should still avoid being dull:

Oxford Brookes University is now offering a unique taught postgraduate qualification, the MSc in Environmental Impact, for scientists who wish to pursue a career in environmental education.

This would be better as:

If you are a scientist who wants to develop the skills to work in environmental education, the new MSc in Environmental Impact could be for you. This unique taught postgraduate course offers...

When writing for **newsletters**
you may **want to be**
more **conversational**.

Be as **straightforward** as possible.

Promote: Our undergraduate prospectus takes a more thought-provoking approach to promote courses to potential students:

Eating is one of life's greatest pleasures and many people are fascinated by the effects of food on our health. Public Health Nutrition is an ideal course to study if you want to turn your interest in food and health into a career...

Inspire: When writing for newsletters or alumni magazines, you may want to be more conversational, even, dare we say it, journalistic. You can grab your audience more forcefully:

Seventy-five years young! We're celebrating three-quarters of a century in architectural education – and our students go from strength to strength. The department received no less than seven awards in 2002, ...

Key words

Use key words and phrases which reflect the values and philosophy of the university or your department. For example:

- for the university: network, growth, community, individuals, innovation, enterprise, seeing beyond
- for the Business School: powerful partnerships, building opportunities

...but always beware that jargon doesn't creep in.

Writing for the web

Plain English writing keeps sentences and paragraphs short. But this is even more important when writing for a website:

- only a small area of text is visible on screen at one time
- readers scroll through at speed.

So readers need:

- frequent subheadings to help direct them
- short paragraphs
- links to later paragraphs/other pages
- simple wording – complex words can be explained in a separate area such as a glossary.

the **finer** points

The university, and making contact

The University should be referred to as Oxford Brookes university or Oxford Brookes. Only use Brookes where it becomes cumbersome to keep using the full name. Do not refer to it as OBU.

Correct names for our campuses:

- [Headington Campus – Gipsy Lane Site, Headington Hill Site](#) (not [Gipsy Lane Campus](#))
- [Harcourt Hill Campus](#)
- [Wheatley Campus](#)

Email addresses on promotional material should be generic subject contacts (languages@brookes.ac.uk), not named contacts who may move on or change role.

Websites: only precede with <http://> if the address doesn't start with [www](http://www.brookes.ac.uk):

so: www.brookes.ac.uk

not: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk>

Phone numbers: include dialling codes: [01865 484463](tel:01865484463).

Include the international dialling code if international students might need to use the number: [+44 \(0\) 1864 484848](tel:+44(0)1864484848).

Dates

Dates should be written day, month, year, without 'st' or 'th', and should not be abbreviated: [1 February 2003](#).

Decades should not have apostrophes: [1990s](#) not [1990's](#).

Numerals

Write one to ten as words, 11 upwards as figures.

Lists of numbers should be consistent: all figures or all words.

Don't start a sentence with a figure, use the word.

Numbers from 1,000 and above should use commas: [1,000](#), [17,034](#).

Use **lower case** for general **descriptions**.
Use **capitals** only for **proper names**.

Capital letters

Minimise the use of capital letters, even in headings – capital letters interrupt the flow of the eye across the page. Think about why you use them: would you get out of your Car, speak to the Milkman? No. So why should a student join a Course or talk to a Tutor?

Use lower case for general descriptions of job titles, roles or types of organisation: chief executive, undergraduate, lecturer, charity, department, building.

Use capitals only for proper names and for specific titles:

- The Department of Architecture at Oxford Brookes University has established an international reputation
BUT
Staff in the department regularly secure research funding
- halls of residence; Clive Booth Hall
- deans of schools; Sarah Brown, Dean of the School of Medicine

Subject disciplines should not be capitalised, but course titles should:

- lectures in history of art, computing and geography
- the History of Art course; eighty students took the Computing Science course.

Use capitals for Year 1, Semester 2.

Titles of publications should use capitals (if their author used them), and be shown in italics: *The Sunday Times*, *Oxford Brookes Short Course Directory*.

Acronyms

When using abbreviations for professional bodies and so on, write the full name out the first time you use it, with the abbreviations in brackets:

Our courses are approved by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), where...

Plural abbreviations do not contain an apostrophe, and the 's' is always lower case:

There are five local education authorities (LEAs).

Abbreviations and titles

Avoid using abbreviations in text if possible. Use *for example* or *such as*, rather than *eg*.

Don't use full stops after titles and abbreviations or between initials: *Mrs*, *PhD*, *BA*, *ie*, *etc*.

A *master's degree* contains an apostrophe (not *masters*).

Note that the term 'joint honours' no longer exists. It has been replaced by 'combined honours'.

Hyphenation

Our writing style for commonly used phrases is:

- *part-time*
- *postgraduate*
- *four-year*
- *health care*
- *email*
- *CD-ROM*
- *online*
- *word processing*
- *website*
- *A-levels*
- *worldwide*.

Avoid hyphens for words beginning 'multi': *multiprofessional*, *multicultural*, unless a vowel follows multi: *multi-operational*.

Centuries should only be hyphenated when used as an adjective:

so: *nineteenth-century art*

but: *in the nineteenth century*.

Quotation marks (inverted commas)

The first set should be single, and any reported speech within that, double:

Professor Brains began: 'Sometimes, "I am worn out with dreams," as *Yeats* said'.

Don't use quotation marks to qualify phrases – they are rarely needed:

not: *The issue of 'equal rights' was very important to her*.

but: *The issue of equal rights was very important to her*.

For further guidance on editorial style, please see the Brookes editorial style guide. You can find it online at https://www2.brookes.ac.uk/marketing/docs/editorial_style.pdf

words to **avoid**

Examples of words and phrases which it's best to avoid, as they can sound pompous or heavy.

Avoid	Use
(an) absence of	no, none
accompanying	with
additional	extra
advantageous	useful, helpful
applicant	you
at the present time	now
by means of	by
commence	start
concerning	about, on
(as a) consequence of	because
consequently	so
due to	because, as
ensure	make sure
erroneous	wrong
facilitate	help, make possible
for the duration of	during, while
in addition (to)	as well as, also
in excess of	more than, over
in respect of	for
in the event of	if
in the near future	soon
on receipt	when we/you get
persons	people
prior to	before
regarding	about
situated in	in
to date	so far, up to now
with regard to	about, for
whilst	while
utilise	use

Providing **information** for **disabled** people

We know that some of our students, staff and visitors are disabled. Bear this in mind when producing your publications, and provide information that may be helpful. For example, in recruitment material you may want to let people know about the kinds of dyslexia and disability support that would be available to them here through the Student Disability Service. In material about visiting the university, include information about access arrangements. Let readers know if your publication is available in alternative formats. Wherever possible, invite people to contact the university to discuss their access requirements and give contact details.

A note on spelling

Remember to watch out for spell checks on word processing packages which default to US spellings (for example: realize, advisor). You can change this in Microsoft Word by selecting 'Tools' then 'Language'.

more information and help

Brand Identity Guidelines and a selection of templates are available on the website www.brookes.ac.uk/branding/ to help you visualise how your text will look within the corporate identity. Please remember that all external promotional material must be produced via Creative Services, email creativeservices@brookes.ac.uk

Also available at www.brookes.ac.uk/branding/ is a Profile of Oxford Brookes University to help you with facts and figures.

Plain English Society website:
www.plainenglish.co.uk

Politics and the English Language, a 1946 essay by George Orwell (easily found on the web) that has much to say about writing of all kinds.