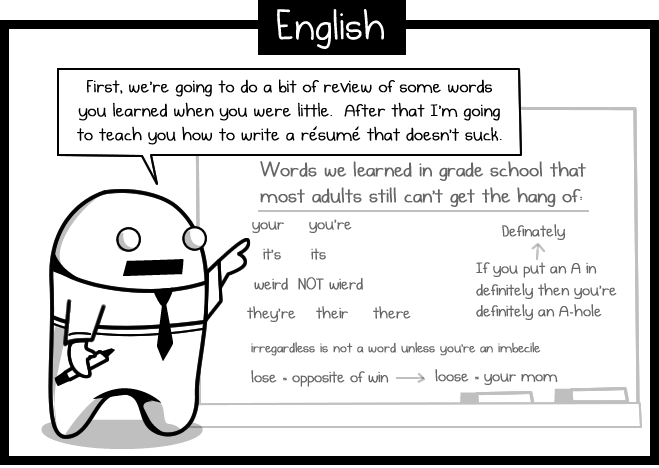
[EXAMPLE - Logo Here]

Writing Style Guide

Last updated on Apr. 20, 2021

[](http://theoatmeal.com/pl/senior_year/english)

[*What We Should Have Been Taught in Our Senior Year of High School*](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/senior_year)

# Introduction

So you are writing for your organization—excellent! We want to make sure you have all the resources you need, so we have created this writing style guide to answer some common (and not-so-common) questions.

Read this guide, give it a prominent home at your workplace, and use it every time you write. If you have any questions or need some clarification, just ask.

**AP Style**: We use AP style (as in, Associated Press) with some exceptions, which we will highlight in this manual. Refer to the latest edition of the AP Stylebook for other questions relating to style. The online version can be found here: <http://www.apstylebook.com/online/>.

**Merriam-Webster**: For questions of spelling, use the [Merriam-Webster Dictionary online](http://www.merriam-webster.com/). Use the first spelling listed.

Got it? Now, go do great work!

# Grammar, Punctuation, & Capitalization

**Acronyms**: Do not assume your audience knows what you are abbreviating. Spell out acronym titles on first reference and follow with the acronym in parenthesis. Every proceeding reference can be abbreviated. Example: The Internet Marketing Association (IMA) is one of the fastest-growing internet marketing groups in the world.

**Ampersand**: Avoid unless part of a proper name, tagline, title, or subheading.

**Apostrophe**: For plural nouns that do not end in an “s,” add an apostrophe s to the end of the word. For nouns that end in an “s,” add only an apostrophe. Example: several businesses’ websites.

Avoid using apostrophes in plurals. Example: URLs, iPhones, FAQs

**Capitalization**: Do not misuse capitalizing words for emphasis. Generally, only capitalize proper nouns inside sentences. Avoid all caps, as it gives the impression of yelling. See capitalization considerations of other rules, like titles and headings.

**Commas**: We observe the serial (or Oxford) comma. In a series of three items or more, keep the comma before and/or. Example: We have got to eat these apples, bananas, and oranges. (Not “We have got to eat these apples, bananas and oranges.”)

**Company and product names**: Follow an organization’s conventions as to how it capitalizes and punctuates its name, paying special attention to capital letters in the middle of the name and punctuation. Example: eBay, HubSpot, YouTube.

**Contractions**: Avoid. Example: Do not use contractions, which can be informal when we are trying to be clear and concise. (Not: “Don’t use contractions, which can be informal when we’re trying to be clear and concise.”)

**Ellipses**: Use sparingly within copy.

**Email subject lines**: Use your best judgment on capitalization and punctuation. If your subject line is in question form, use sentence capitalization and punctuation. Avoid using title capitalization and all caps, and try to keep subject lines short.

Examples:

* Do you like to eat fresh fruit?
* You cannot compare apples to oranges.
* The best way to eat kiwi fruit

**Em dash**: Use to set apart entire phrases from the main body of a sentence, and do not separate the dash from the words that precede and follow it. Example: If you want to know—and surely you do—then you must ask.

**En dash**: Use to show a numeric span, range, or scores. Use for conflicts or connections. Examples:

* The president’s nominee was confirmed by the Senate, which voted 62–38 along party lines.
* UCLA beat USC 28–14 in the final game of the regular season.
* The Los Angeles–London flight.
* There is a north–south railway in the same area as the highway that runs east–west.

**Exclamation marks**: Use one exclamation mark to convey a tone of excitement within copy. Limit the number of sentences that end with an exclamation mark to one per paragraph. Example: I dig it! (not “I dig it!!!!”)

**Lists**: Always capitalize the first word of each bullet point. If your list consists of only one or two words per bullet point, do not use end-of-phrase punctuation. If your list consists of more than two words per bullet point (on average), use a period at the end of each point. When possible, avoid using sublevel bullet points—keep your lists simple. Examples:

I love fruit, including:

* Apples
* Oranges
* Bananas

Here is how you can find the best fruit:

* Go to the grocery store.
* Find the produce section.
* Search for the fruit that is in season.
* Make sure each piece of fruit you pick out looks delicious.
* Buy the fruit.
* Take the fruit home with you.

**Numbers**: Spell out cardinal numbers one through nine, and use numerals for numbers 10 and above. When a number begins a sentence, spell it out. Express large numbers in numerals followed by million, billion, and so forth. If expressing a number greater than 999 in numerals, use a comma. In titles, use numerals. Example: She has nine cats, but he would like 90. One hundred would be too many. So would 5,000. One billion is out of the question.

**OK**: Not o.k. or okay.

**Percentages**: Always use the % symbol when reporting statistics. Avoid starting a sentence with a percentage. Example: Did you know 98% of statistics are made up?

**Periods**: One space after periods and at the end of sentences.

**Pronouns referring to companies**: When referring to a company, use the third-person singular pronouns it and its. A company is treated as a collective noun and requires a singular verb and a singular pronoun.

**Subheadings**: When using a subheading, capitalize the first letter of every word (like with titles) unless it is in sentence form—then use sentence capitalization and punctuation. If you are using title capitalization, use an ampersand in place of the word “and.” If you are using sentence capitalization, spell out “and” as usual. Examples:

* Do not be outsmarted.
* Do you have enough apples and oranges?
* How To Make The Most Of Your Time
* Exports & Imports
* April, May, & June

**Time**: Use cardinal numbers and a.m. and p.m. to indicate time. Use “noon” to indicate 12 p.m. Example: I was awake at 12 a.m. and 4 a.m., but I fell asleep at my desk at noon.

**Titles**: Capitalize the first letter of every word in titles, and always use an ampersand in place of the word “and.” Examples:

* 4 Ways To Make Writing For The Web Less Complicated
* What Is Inbound Marketing & Why Should I Care?

## Commonly Misused Words & How to Spell Them

* call-to-action (plural: calls-to-action, abbreviation: CTA or CTAs)
* Drupal
* ebook (“Ebook” when used in a title/headline; avoid using at the beginning of a sentence)
* e-commerce
* email/email address (We do not ask for someone’s email—we ask for their email address.)
* Facebook
* homepage
* HubSpot
* inbound marketing
* internet
* LinkedIn
* Magento
* Symfony (not Symphony, and not lower case)
* tweet
* Twitter
* URL
* website
* white paper
* WordPress (not Wordpress)

# Style and Tone

## Style

This is about the style of our writing, not the visual style. For that, please consult the organization’s brand style guide, which should typically be applied after the authoring and editorial process.

We want our audience to recognize and understand content when they read it. Here are some key components for our copy:

* Be clear and concise. Avoid run-on sentences.
* Use first person, active voice. Use first-person references like “us,” “we,” and “our team.”
* Keep it conversational, yet polished. Be polite in your writing, but do not be afraid to make bold statements.
* Make content scannable. We include all of the following in our copy:
  + Short sentences
  + Short paragraphs
  + Lists
  + Headings
  + Bold and italic
  + Blockquotes
  + Figures, tables, and references
* Parentheticals: We love using them, but limit them to one per paragraph.
* Keep it simple. The fewer words it takes you to accurately describe something, the better.
* Are you using the correct word? Spell checks will not catch words that sound the same, like *there*, *their*, and *they’re*.
* Are you using a word properly? If in doubt, consult a dictionary.
* Are you using a word too frequently? You may exhaust your audience, so consider using a thesaurus.
* Avoid jargon and needless abbreviations.
* Read your own work from the perspective of your audience.

## Tone

We want our content to have personality. It should not ever be boring or stagnant. We are awesome, fun people! And our writing should reflect this. So, enjoy yourself! Keep things informative, but do not be afraid to be light-hearted. (After all, who wants to read something stuffy?)

Content must be relatable to readers. Therefore, casual, conversational, easy-to-understand copy is a must. We want to consider our audience each time we write to make sure we are not using industry-specific jargon they may not understand.

Note: Our style and tone may vary depending on who we are writing for. In those cases, we will discuss the changes beforehand. So, unless otherwise noted, use the guidelines we have presented in this guide for all writing assignments. We will always make sure you are notified of the persona we are reaching out to and that you are familiar with the "voice" of the company we are writing for.

# Other: Attribution & Social Media

**Attribution**: Always, always give credit to another person’s idea (in whole or in part). Link to the original source, if possible. When referencing online articles in your work, always add a link to the source website spanning a phrase that you have written. If you use the title of the article, no italics or quotation marks are necessary. Never cite an article using the word “source.” Make sure all external links open in a new browser tab. Internal links should open within the same browser window.

**Social media**: We will play by the “rules” in this style guide on social media, too. Keep your posts respectful, polished, and conversational, and always edit for content and grammar. Social media moves fast, but how we represent our brand and our clients will stick around for a long time. On Twitter, use your best judgment to fit the character count; for example, symbols instead of spelled-out words are OK.

# Professional Writing Process

The professional writing process can be more streamlined and efficient—particularly when working collaboratively—if you follow these general steps:

1. **Prewriting**: Define a documents general structure and add notes to be filled in with content.
2. **Copywriting**: Writing the content for a document.
3. **Editing**: Proofreading for grammar, spelling, writing style, tone, and overall readability.
4. **Styling**: Adding a consistent visual style to a document with finalized graphics and tables. *Reference the company's brand style guide and consider working with a designer.*

# Additional Resources

HubSpot and Buffer provided excellent style guide templates ([here](http://offers.hubspot.com/the-internet-marketing-written-style-guide) and [here](http://blog.bufferapp.com/how-to-create-a-content-style-guide-to-improve-your-blogs-quality?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+bufferapp+%28Updates+and+tips+from+Buffer%29)), which were adapted and used in part in creating our style guide.

* [AP Stylebook](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0465093043): <http://www.apstylebook.com/online/>
* [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](https://www.amazon.com/dp/087779295X): <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>
* [MLA Handbook](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0873529863)
* [The Chicago Manual of Style](https://www.amazon.com/dp/022628705X)
* [The Elements of Style](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0205313426)
* [On Writing Well](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0060891548)
* [Buffer: How To Create a Content Style Guide to Improve Your Blog’s Quality](https://blog.bufferapp.com/how-to-create-a-content-style-guide-to-improve-your-blogs-quality)
* [Avoid a Capital Offense: Don’t Uppercase Common Nouns](http://www.writingwithclarity.com/2011/06/avoid-a-capital-offense-dont-uppercase-common-nouns/)
* [Effective Business Writing: Top Principles and Techniques](https://www.englishgrammar.org/effective-business-writing/)
* [Business Students: Tips for Better Writing](http://www.webster.edu/academic-resource-center/writingcenter/writing-tips/business.html)
* [Writing Tips](http://www.webster.edu/academic-resource-center/writingcenter/writing-tips/)
* [10 Words You Need to Stop Misspelling](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/misspelling)
* [How to Use a Semicolon](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon)
* [How to Use an Apostrophe](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe)
* [How and Why to Use Whom in a Sentence](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/who_vs_whom)
* [When to Use I.E. in a Sentence](http://theoatmeal.com/comics/ie)