The Guardian and Observer style guide

Guardian and Observer style guide: S

'Homosexuality? What barbarity! It's half Greek and half Latin!' Tom Stoppard

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A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Illustration: Jakob Hinrichs

Saatchi brothers
Maurice (now Lord Saatchi) and Charles (the one with the gallery) founded M&C Saatchi in 1994 after leaving Saatchi & Saatchi, the advertising agency best known for the slogan "Labour isn't working" in the 1979 general election campaign

saccharin
noun; **saccharine** adjective

sacrilegious
not sacreligious

sacré bleu
No one in France says this any more, and its use by British journalists can come across as flippant or insulting to the French. If you really must use it, this is how it is written, in English

Sad
seasonal affective disorder

Saddam Hussein
Saddam on second mention

Sadler's Wells

Safeway

Sahara
no need to add "desert"

Sahrawi
people of the western Sahara; the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) claims sovereignty over the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, but controls only about a quarter, the rest being controlled by Morocco

said
normally preferable to added, commented, declared, pointed out, ejaculated, etc; you can avoid too many "saids", whether quoting someone or in reported speech, quite easily.
See reported speech

Sainsbury's
for the stores; the company's name is J Sainsbury plc

Saint
in running text should be spelt in full: Saint John, Saint Paul. For names of towns, churches, etc, abbreviate St (no point) eg St Mirren, St Stephen's church. In French placenames a hyphen is needed, eg St-Nazaire, Ste-Suzanne, Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer

St Andrews
no apostrophe for town, university or "the home of golf"

St Antony's College, Oxford
no H

St Catharine's College, Cambridge

St Catherine's College, Oxford

St James Park
home of Exeter City

St James' Park
home of Newcastle United

St James's Park
royal park in London

Saint John
New Brunswick; **St John's** Newfoundland

St John Ambulance
not St John's and no longer "Brigade"

St Katharine Docks
London

St Martin-in-the-Fields
church in Trafalgar Square, London

St Paul's Cathedral

St Petersburg
Russian city founded by Peter the Great in 1703. It was known as Petrograd from 1914 to 1924, and Leningrad from 1924 to 1991

Saint-Saëns, Camille
(1835-1921) French composer

St Thomas' hospital
in London; not St Thomas's

St Vincent and the Grenadines
often referred to simply as St Vincent, which is the main island, but make it clear if you are referring only to the latter

sake
Japanese rice wine

Saki
pen name of the British writer HH Munro (1870-1916), known mainly for his short stories

Salah al-Din road
the main road from north to south in the Gaza Strip

sale
In the UK, "on sale" simply refers to something you can buy: "Widgets on sale here"; if a store is selling items at a reduced price, for example after Christmas, you might say you bought your "sale-price" widgets "in the sale" or "in the New Year sales". In the US, the equivalent of "in the sale" is "on sale": "These widgets were a real bargain - they were on sale!"

saleable

Salvadorian
noun and adjective, for people and things from El Salvador

Salvation Army
not the Sally Army

salvo
plural **salvoes**

Samaritans
the organisation has dropped “the” from its name

sambuca

same-sex marriage
or **equal marriage rights** rather than “gay marriage”

Sami
Indigenous group inhabiting northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia’s Murmansk oblast. Do not refer to them as Lapps. Their homeland is called Sápmi (see entry on Lappland)

Samoa
formerly known as Western Samoa; do not confuse with American Samoa

Sana’a
capital of Yemen

sanatorium
(not sanitarium or sanitorium) plural **sanatoriums**

sanction
To sanction (verb) something is to approve it; to impose sanctions (noun) is to stop something you disapprove of. So politicians might sanction (permit) the use of sanctions (forbidding) trade with a country they don’t, for the moment, happen to like very much.

OED definitions of the noun “sanction” involve penalties or coercion, typically to enforce a law or treaty. So you find “sanction-breaker” (quoted from the Guardian in connection with sanctions against Rhodesia in 1968). Rather chillingly, a draft 1993 addition to the dictionary includes a new definition: “sanction: in military intelligence, the permission to kill a particular individual”.

Definitions of “sanction” as a verb include ratify, confirm, permit, authorise and encourage. Hence expressions such as “sanctioned by common sense” and “sanctioned by usage”.

The Department for Work and Pensions, confusingly, says it “sanctions” people to mean it imposes sanctions on or penalises them. We should not use it in this sense

Sane
mental illness charity

Sanremo
(one word) town in Liguria, north-west Italy; it hosts an annual music festival that inspired the Eurovision song contest

San Sebastián

San Serriffe
island nation profiled in the Guardian on 1 April 1977

sans serif
typeface

San Siro stadium
Milan

São Paulo
Brazilian city, not Sao Paolo

Sarkozy, Nicolas
note that the French name is Nicolas, not Nicholas

Sars
severe acute respiratory syndrome

SAS
Special Air Service, but not normally necessary to spell it out; its naval equivalent is the SBS

Satan
but **satanist, satanism**

satnav

Sats
the old name for the primary school tests that are now in England officially called national curriculum assessments. Sats is still widely used as an informal name, though, and we can do so

SATs
scholastic aptitude tests (in the US, where they are pronounced as individual letters)

Saumarez Smith, Charles
historian; former secretary and chief executive of the Royal Society of Arts

saute, sauteing, sauteed

Savile, Jimmy

Savile Club, Savile Row
in London

Saville theatre
in London, once owned by the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein and used for conc
in the 60s (Jimi Hendrix played there), is now the Odeon Covent Garden cinema

Say's law
"supply creates its own demand" (also known as the law of markets)

Scalextric
often erroneously called "Scalectrix"

Scandinavia
Denmark, Norway and Sweden; with the addition of Finland and Iceland, they constitute the Nordic countries

schadenfreude

scherzo
plural **scherzos**

schizophrenia, schizophrenic
should be used only in a medical context, never to mean in two minds, contradictory, or erratic, which is wrong, as well as offensive to people diagnosed with this illness; schizophrenic is an adjective, not a noun. See also **mental health**

Schoenberg, Arnold
(1874-1951) Austrian-born composer

schoolboy, schoolchildren, schoolgirl, schoolroom, schoolteacher

schools
if in full, like this: Alfred Salter primary school, Rotherhithe; King's school, Macclesfield; Eton college; Outwood academy etc; often the generic part will not be necessary, so: Alfred Salter primary; King's, Macclesfield; Eton, Outwood etc

school years
year 2, year 10, key stage 1, etc

Schröder, Gerhard
former German chancellor

Schwarzenegger, Arnold
Arnie is acceptable in headlines

scientific measurements
Take care: m in scientific terms stands for milli (1mW is 1,000th of a watt), while M denotes mega (1MW is a million watts); in such circumstances it is wise not to bung in another m when you mean million, so write out, for example, 10 million C.

amps **A**, volts **V**, watts **W**, kilowatts **kW**, megawatts **MW**, gigawatts **GW,** milliwatts **mW**, joules **J**, kilojoules **kJ**

scientific names
in italics, with the first name (denoting the genus) capped, the second (denoting the species) lc: *Escherichia coli*, *Canis lupus*, *Quercus robur*. The name can be shortened

by using the first initial: *E coli*, *C lupus*, *Q robur* (but we do not use a full point after the initial)

scientific terms
some silly cliches to avoid: you might find it difficult to hesitate for a nanosecond (the shortest measurable human hesitation is probably about 250 million nanoseconds, a quarter of a second); "astronomical sums" when talking about large sums of money is rather dated (the national debt surpassed the standard astronomical unit of 93 million [miles] 100 years ago)

sci-fi

Scilly
an alternative is **Isles of Scilly** but not Scilly Isles

scoby, scobys
stands for "symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast". Used to make the fermented drink kombucha

scotch
Scottish (not "Scotch") people, also known as Scots, make scotch whisky, usually known simply as scotch. Other countries, including Canada and Japan, also make whisky. In Ireland and the United States - countries that you will note have an E in their name - they make whiskey with an E. You can also scotch (put an end to) someone's hopes or plans

scotch broth, scotch egg, scotch mist
but **Scotch argus** butterfly

ScotchTape
TM; say sticky tape

scot-free
the scot was a kind of medieval council tax, so you got off "scot-free" if you avoided payment

Scotland
The following was written by a Scot who works for the Guardian and lives in London. Letters expressing similar sentiments come from across Britain (and, indeed, from around the world):

We don't carry much coverage of events in Scotland and to be honest, even as an expat, that suits me fine. But I do care very much that we acknowledge that Scotland is a separate nation and in many ways a separate country. It has different laws, education system (primary, higher and further), local government, national government, sport, school terms, weather, property market and selling system, b holidays, right to roam, banks and money, churches, etc.

If we really want to be a national newspaper then we need to consider whether our stories apply only to England (and Wales) or Britain, or Scotland only. When we write about teachers' pay deals, we should point out that we mean teachers in England and Wales; Scottish teachers have separate pay and management structures and union. When we write about it being half-term, we should remember that it's known as mid-term in Scotland. When we write about bank holiday sunshine/rain, we should remember that in Scotland the weather was probably different and it possibly wasn't even a bank holiday. When we write about the English cricket team, we should be careful not to refer to it as "we" and "us". When the Scottish Cup final is played, we should perhaps consider devoting more than a few paragraphs at the foot of a page to Rangers winning their 100th major trophy (if it had been Manchester United we'd have had pages and pages with Bobby Charlton's all-time fantasy first XI and a dissertation on why English clubs are the best in Europe). Andy Murray is Scottish, as well as British, rather than Scottish when he loses and British when he wins.

These daily oversights come across to a Scot as arrogance. They also undermine confidence in what the paper is telling the reader

Scotland Office
not Scottish Office

Scots law
the justice system of Scotland, but use the adjective Scottish to describe its legislation, courts, judges etc

Scott, Charles Prestwich
(1846-1932) editor of the Manchester Guardian for 57 years and its owner from 1907 until his death (his uncle, John Edward Taylor, had founded the paper in 1821). Scott, who was editor when the first "Style-book of the Manchester Guardian" - forerunner of this guide - appeared in 1928, is most famous for his statement "comment is free, but facts are sacred".

WP Crozier recalled of Scott: "Once, when an article in type was shown to him because a certain sentence expressed a doubtful judgment, he noticed that the English was slovenly, amended it, and then, being drawn on from sentence to sentence and becoming more and more dissatisfied, he made innumerable minute corrections until at last, having made a complete mess of the proof, he looked up and said gently: 'Dear X; of course, he's not a trained subeditor.'"

Scott Trust
created in 1936 to safeguard the journalistic freedom and liberal values of the Manchester Guardian. The sole shareholder in Guardian Media Group, its core purpose is to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian "in perpetuity". In 2008 it became a limited company, with the same protections for the Guardian enshrined in its constitution

Scott, Sir George Gilbert
(1811-78) architect who designed the Albert Memorial and Midland Grand hotel at St Pancras station

Scott, Sir Giles Gilbert
(1880-1960) grandson of the above, responsible for red telephone boxes, Bankside power station (now Tate Modern), Waterloo Bridge, and the Anglican cathedral in Liverpool

Scottish Enterprise
non-departmental public body of the Scottish government which encourages economic development and investment, covering the eastern, central and southern parts of Scotland; Highlands and Islands Enterprise is its counterpart in north-western Scotland

Scottish government

Scottish parliament
its members are MSPs

Scottish terrier
not scotch or Scots; once known as Aberdeen terrier

scouse, scouser

Scout Association or Scouts
not “Boy Scouts” (in the UK, at least). The members are scouts and if referring to a particular age group of scouts, who have distinct group names, they are also lowercase, eg cub scouts

Scoville scale
system that measures the heat level of chillies

Scrabble
TM

Scram
secure continuous remote alcohol monitor, as sported in 2010 by Lindsay Lohan

scratchcard, smartcard, swipecard

SCSI
capped up even though generally pronounced “scuzzy”; it stands for small computer system interface

sea change or step-change?
used interchangeably, typically to mean nothing more than “a big change”, but there is a difference that you might think worth preserving. Shakespeare coined the former in a well-known passage of The Tempest:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea change,
Into something rich and strange.

The idea is that a major transformation is taking place, but very slowly. By contrast, step-change comes from physics, where it means an abrupt change in a value, as in voltage

sea level, sea sickness
but **seaplane, seaport, seashore, seaside, seaweed**

Sea of Azov

Sea of Japan
as generally known; but South Korea calls it the East Sea and North Korea the East Sea of Korea

seal pups
not “baby seals” for the same reason we don’t call lambs “baby sheep”

Séamus, Seán
note accents in Irish Gaelic; sean without a fada means old

search dogs
search for people; **sniffer dogs** search for drugs

search engine optimisation (SEO)
how to increase traffic to your website by ensuring that your content shows up prominently in Google and other online search engines, for example by including in headlines key terms that people are most likely to search for. To help, you can monitor such things as hot topics on Google and what is trending on Twitter

seas, oceans
capped up, eg Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Pacific Ocean

seasons
spring, summer, autumn, winter are lowercase

seatbelt

second hand
on a watch; but **secondhand** goods

second world war
try to avoid the ugly abbreviation, but WW2, not WWII, if you must use it in a headline or quote

secretary general

Secret Intelligence Service
official name of **MI6**; may also be abbreviated to **SIS** after first mention

Secret Service
US law enforcement agency

section 28
or clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, widely regarded as homophobic, said local authorities "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship"; it was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and the rest of the UK in 2003. David Cameron subsequently admitted: "We got it wrong"

sections, schedules, subsections
to acts of parliament thus: section 10 (3), schedule 7, etc. An act is divided into numbered sections, which sometimes introduced a schedule placed at the end of the act.

Note that schedules have paragraphs and sub-paragraphs, not sections and sub-sections

Security Service
better known as **MI5**

Segway
TM; hoverboard is a generic alternative

seize
not sieze

self-control, self-defence, self-esteem, self-harm, self-respect

selfie
a self-portrait photograph.

There may or may not be other people in it, and you might post it on social media, frame it or put it in an album, but if you are in it, and you took it, it's a selfie

Selfridges
no apostrophe

sell-off, sellout
noun

sell off, sell out
verb

Sellotape
TM; call it sticky tape

semicolon
Used correctly (which occasionally we do), the semicolon is a very elegant compromise between a full stop (too much) and a comma (not enough). This sentence, from a column by David McKie, illustrates beautifully how it's done: "Some reporters were brilliant; others were less so."

The late Beryl Bainbridge said in the Guardian: "Not many people use it much any more, do they? Should it be used more? I think so, yes. A semicolon is a partial pause, a different way of pausing, without using a full stop. I use it all the time" and George Bernard Shaw told TE Lawrence that not using semicolons was "a symptom of mental defectiveness, probably induced by camp life".

Orwell, on the other hand, thought they were unnecessary and Kurt Vonnegut attacked them as "standing for absolutely nothing". "Do not use semicolons," he advised. "All they do is show you've been to college."

semtex
no longer necessary to cap this

Senate
The Australian Senate and US Senate take an initial capital; state senates are lowercase, eg the Massachusetts senate

senator
lowercase unless used as a title: Senator Penny Wong is an Australian senator; Senator Chuck Schumer, a Democratic senator, is the majority leader of the US Senate

Senedd Cymru
The Welsh parliament. The devolved government's representative body, with 60 members - MSs - who were formerly National Assembly for Wales members, or AMs. The Senedd is also the name of the building where they meet. It's fine to use the Senedd, in the same way we use the Dáil. Take care not to confuse the Senedd (the legislature) with the devolved government (the executive)

senior
abbreviate to **Sr** not Sen or Snr, eg Douglas Fairbanks Sr

Sentencing Council
issues guidelines on sentencing in England and Wales for the courts to follow. The Scottish equivalent is the Scottish Sentencing Council

September 11
Use September 11 (ie contrary to our usual date style) when it is being evoked as a particular event, rather than just a date, eg:
How September 11 changed the world for ever
But "how the events of 11 September 2001 changed the world for ever" would follow our normal date style.

9/11 may be substituted for either, as necessary, particularly in tight headlines, eg:
How 9/11
changed
the world
for ever

The official death toll of the victims of the Islamist terrorists who hijacked four aircraft on 11 September 2001 is 2,976. The figure does not include the 19 hijackers. Of this total, 2,605 died in the twin towers of the World Trade Centre or on the ground in New York City (of whom approximately 1,600 have been identified), 246 died on the four aeroplanes, and 125 were killed in the attack on the Pentagon.

The hijackers were: Fayez Ahmed, Mohamed Atta, Ahmed al-Ghamdi, Hamza al-Ghamdi, Saeed al-Ghamdi, Hani Hanjour, Nawaf al-Hazmi, Salem al-Hazmi, Ahmed al-Haznawi, Khalid al-Mihdhar, Majed Moqed, Ahmed al-Nami, Abdulaziz al-Omari, Marwan al-Shehhi, Mohannad al-Shehri, Wael al-Shehri, Waleed al-Shehri, Satam al-Suqami, Ziad Jarrah (though dozens of permutations of their names have appeared in the paper, we follow Reuters style as for most Arabic transliterations)

sequined
not sequinned

Serb
noun

Serbian
adjective

sergeant major
Sgt Maj (not RSM or CSM) Trevor Prescott, subsequently Sgt Maj Prescott in leading articles; elsewhere just surname

Serious Fraud Office
SFO on second mention

Serious Organised Crime Agency
Soca after first mention

serjeant at arms

serves to
adds nothing to a phrase such as “serves to underline”; replace with “underlines”

services, the
(armed forces)

settler
should be confined to those Israeli Jews living in settlements across the 1967 green line, ie in the occupied territories. It is best not to use the word “settlement” to describe any Israeli towns, villages and communities that are not in these areas

set to
It is very tempting to use this, especially in headlines, when we think something is going to happen, but aren't all that sure; try to resist this temptation. It is even less excusable when we do know that something is going to happen: one of our readers counted no fewer than 16 uses of the phrase in the paper in two days; in almost every case, the words could have been replaced with "will", or by simply leaving out the "set", eg "the packs are set to come into force as part of the house-selling process".

The first readers' editor of the Guardian put it like this: "The expression 'set to', to mean about to, seems likely to ... is often used to refer to something that, though expected, is not absolutely certain to happen. It is a rascally expression which one of the readers who have learned to groan at the sight of it describes as an all-purpose term removing any precision of meaning from the sentence containing it"

Seven
not "Se7en" for the 1995 film starring Morgan Freeman, Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow

sexing up
is what happens in dodgy dossiers and not, we hope, our publications.
From the editor:

Guardian readers would rather we did give them the unvarnished truth - or our best stab at it. It seems obvious enough. But inside many journalists - this goes for desk editors as much as reporters - there is a little demon prompting us to make the story as strong and interesting as possible, if not more so. We drop a few excitable adjectives around the place. We overegg. We may even sex it up.

Strong stories are good. So are interesting stories. But straight, accurate stories are even better. Readers who stick with us over any length of time would far rather judge what we write by our own Richter scale of news judgments and values than feel that we're measuring ourselves against the competition. Every time we flam a story up we disappoint somebody - usually a reader who thought the Guardian was different.

We should be different. Of course we compete fiercely in the most competitive newspaper market in the world. Of course we want to sell as many copies as possible. We've all experienced peer pressure to write something as strongly as possible, if not more so. But our Scott Trust ownership relieves us of the necessity to drive remorselessly for circulation to the exclusion of all else. In other words, we don't need to sex things up, and we shouldn't

sex offender register
abbreviation, normally sufficient, of the Violent and Sex Offender Register (Visor), database set up by the Sexual Offences Act 2003

sex worker
preferable to the term prostitute unless an individual or group use the latter eg the English Collective of Prostitutes.

When reporting on people who work in the sex industry it is Guardian policy that they be identified as individuals first, not by the way they earn money. So for example say police are investigating the murder of three women rather than "three sex workers".

Be careful how you refer to children working in the industry if you do not know the circumstances around how they came to be there. However, avoid referring to them as child sex workers because, depending on the laws of the relevant country, they are more accurately victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

sexual abuse
unwanted sexual behaviour, or molestation. Do not use "sex abuse" as the term "sex" can imply consent.

The term victim is generally used for those in an abusive situation or at risk of abuse. The term survivor is generally used for people who have experienced sexual abuse in the past. Give priority to the preferences of the person we are writing about.

Avoid using the term "historical" to describe sexual abuse crimes from the past. Survivors, particularly adults who were abused as children, feel the term undermines the long-lasting impact of the crimes. Try to date the crimes (year, decade etc) instead, or say they happened in the past eg "Detectives are investigating allegations of child sexual abuse from more than 30 years ago." Exceptions may be necessary in court cases where specific wording is required. (See also **abuse.**)

Always include helpline numbers:
In the UK, Rape Crisis offers support for rape and sexual abuse on 0808 802 9999 in England and Wales, 0808 801 0302 in Scotland, or 0800 0246 991 in Northern Ireland. In the US, Rainn offers support on 800-656-4673. In Australia, support is available at 1800Respect (1800 737 732). Other international helplines can be found at ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html

sexuality
From a reader:

"Can I suggest your style guide should state that homosexual, gay, bisexual and heterosexual are primarily adjectives and that use of them as nouns should be avoided. It seems to me that this is both grammatically and politically preferable (politically because using them as nouns really does seem to define people by their sexuality). I would like to read that someone is 'homosexual', not 'a homosexual' about 'gay people', not 'gays'. Lesbian is different as it is a noun which later began to be used adjectivally, not the other way round. As an example from Wednesday, the

opening line ‘Documents which showed that Lord Byron … was a bisexual’ rather than ‘was bisexual’ sounds both Daily Mail-esque and stylistically poor.”

sexual orientation
is generally more accurate and appropriate than “sexual preference”

Seychelles
not the Seychelles. The full name of the country is the Republic of Seychelles

Seym
not Seim, for the river in Ukraine and Russia

Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
1967 album by a popular beat combo of the day; not Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band

Shaanxi
(capital Xi’an) and Shanxi (capital Taiyuan) are adjacent provinces in northern China

Shabiha
Syrian pro-government militia

the Shah of Iran
at first mention; thereafter the shah

shakedown, shakeout, but shake-up
(nouns)

Shakespearean
not Shakespearian

shall or will?
Once regarded as a very important distinction, and some people still get excited about it. In practice, there is very little difference these days. Use the former for emphasis (“you *shall* go to the ball”) and don’t worry too much. They seem to get by quite happily in the United States hardly bothering with “shall” at all

Shankill Road
Belfast, not Shankhill

shantytown

shared possessives
Freddie and Beth’s party (they share one)
Freddie and Beth’s parties (they share two)
Freddie’s and Beth’s parties (they have one each)

shareholder

sharia law

shark-infested
A reader (one of several to complain about our use of this phrase) pointed out: “The seas are not ‘infested’ with sharks. They live there … Millions of sharks are being killed. By planet-infesting humans. They need protection.” The word “infest” is defined as “swarm over, cover or fill in a troublesome, unpleasant or harmful way, to invade and live on as a parasite”. The phrase “shark-infested” is in any case a lazy cliche and should be avoided

sheepdog

Shehbaz Sharif
former prime minister of Pakistan

sheikh

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani
Qatari prime minister. Sheikh Mohammed on second mention

Shepherd Market
Mayfair; **Shepherd’s Bush** west London

shepherd’s hut, shepherd’s pie

Sherpa
indigenous people of the Himalayan region known for their skill as mountaineers and guides. Avoid using it as a descriptor for a person carrying the load or doing the work for others, including in government settings; use alternatives such as representative instead

Shetland
rather than Shetland Isles or Shetlands, but note that the local authority is Shetland Islands council

Shia, Sunni
two branches of Islam (note: not Shi’ite); plural **Shia Muslims** and **Sunni Muslims**, though Shias and Sunnis are fine if you are pushed for space

shiatsu
massage; **shih-tzu dog**; **shiitake** mushrooms

ship or boat?
large, ocean-going vessels, eg liners, tankers and warships, are ships rather than boats, which is a term better suited to small vessels such as fishing boats, dinghys, lifeboats etc. Remember that “a ship can carry a boat, but a boat cannot carry a ship”.

ships
are not feminine: it ran aground, not she ran aground; no quotes, no italics; you sail in, not on, ships

shipbuilding, shipmate, shipowner, shipyard

shock wave

shoo-in
not shoe-in

shootout
noun; not “shoot-out”

shopkeeper

Shoreham-by-Sea
not Shoreham on Sea

shortlist, longlist

Short money
payment to opposition parties to help them carry out their parliamentary functions, named after Ted Short, the Labour leader of the house who introduced it in 1975

shortsighted, longsighted, nearsighted

shrank, shrunk
shrank, not shrunk, is the past tense of shrink, except in the film title Honey, I Shrunk the Kids (and perhaps the occasional piece of wordplay based on it); shrunk is the past participle (the kids had shrunk) or what is sometimes known as the present perfect form (Honey, I’ve shrunk the kids)

Shtayyeh, Mohammad
the Palestinian prime minister

shtick
not schtick

Shukr, Fuad
Hezbollah military commander killed in Beirut

Siamese twins
conjoined twins, please

sickbed, sicknote, sickroom
but **sick pay**

sickie

side-effects

sidestreet

siege
not seige

Siena
Tuscan city; **sienna** pigment; **Sienna Miller**

signoff
noun; **sign off** verb

Sikh names
Singh means a lion and Kaur a princess. Guru Gobind Singh Ji gave Singh as a last name to all Sikh men and Kaur to all Sikh women to eliminate discrimination based on family name, which denoted which caste someone belonged to.

Over time, many Sikh families have reverted to using their family name, but have maintained Singh and Kaur as middle names; in such cases, include the full name at first mention, thereafter surname only

silicon
computer chips; **silicone** breast implants - we have been known to confuse the two, as in “Silicone Valley”

Silkin, Jon
(1930-97) English poet, not to be confused with his cousin John Silkin (1923-87), a Labour cabinet minister, as was John’s brother Sam Silkin (1918-88)

silly billy

sim card
(it stands for subscriber identity module)

since
See as or since

Singaporean names
in three parts, eg Lee Kuan Yew

Singin’ in the Rain
not Singing

single quotes
in headlines (but sparingly), standfirsts and captions

singles chart

singsong
(adjective): her voice had a singsong quality

sing-song
(noun): we had a sing-song round the campfire

singular or plural?
Corporate entities take the singular: eg The BBC has decided (not “have”). In

subsequent references make sure the pronoun is singular: “It [not “they”] will press for an increase in the licence fee.”

Sports teams and rock bands are the exception - “England have an uphill task” is OK, as is “Nirvana were overrated”

sink
past tense sank, past participle sunk: he sinks, he sank, he has sunk

Sinn Féin

Sinwar, Yahya
Hamas leader

siphon
not syphon

Sisi
The Egyptian president is Abdel Fatah al-Sisi; Sisi after first mention

sisyphean
a futile or interminable task (Sisyphus had to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a hill)

sit
I sat down at the back but he was sitting near the front (the horrible “he was sat” is, sadly, a very frequent error)

sitcom

six-day war
between Israel and its neighbours in June 1967

size
Attempts to express the size of objects and places in terms of their relationship to doubledecker buses, Olympic swimming pools, football pitches, the Isle of Wight, Wales and Belgium are cliched and unhelpful, which does not stop journalists engaging in them. The same applies to measuring quantities of, say, hotdogs served at the Cup final in terms of how far they would stretch to the moon and back

ski, skis, skier, skied, skiing

skilful
not skillful

skin-coloured
skin comes in a variety of colours, rendering phrases such as “skin-coloured tights” meaningless and often exclusionary given it is usually used to refer to the skin colour of white people. Either avoid the term or be clear in its meaning. This also applies to the term “nude”.

skimmed milk
not skim

skinny jab
please avoid, unless in a quote. Weight loss jab is a preferable term for medications such as Wegovy

skipper
usually only of a trawler

Sky
no longer BSkyB

Sky+
Sky's personal video recorder service

Sky One
no longer Sky 1

skyrocket
No!

slavery
was not abolished in 1807, as we sometimes say. Slavery in England was ruled unlawful in 1772 and in Scotland in 1778. The slave trade in the British empire was abolished in 1807, but slavery remained in the colonies until the Slavery Abolition Act 1833

slaves
enslaved people is preferred, to reflect the fact that it is a condition imposed on them by others. Also, enslaver is preferable to slave owner

slay
past tense: slew; past participle: slain

sleight of hand
although it is pronounced "slight"

slither
slide; **sliver** small piece. Writers often get this wrong, saying things like "a tiny slither of the global population" when they mean sliver

sloppy seconds
this phrase has a derogatory sexual origin so avoid using in any context; use second best or seconds instead

Slovak
noun

Slovakian
adjective

Slovene
noun

Slovenian
adjective

small-c conservatism

small talk
polite conversation

Smalltalk
a computer programming language

smartphone

smartwatch
a computer you wear on your wrist

smart watch
something from the Armani retro collection, perhaps

Smith & Wesson
handguns

Smithsonian Institution
not Institute

smooth, smooth down, smoothen
(verb) not smoothe (you may be thinking of "soothe")

smorgasbord

smuggling or trafficking?
There are three key differences between people-smuggling and trafficking.

1 Exploitation: smugglers are paid by people to take them across borders, after which the transaction ends; traffickers bring them into a situation of exploitation and profit from their abuse in the form of forced labour or prostitution.

2 Consent: migrants usually consent to be smuggled; a trafficked person does not (or their "consent" is meaningless because they have been coerced).

3 Borders: smuggling always takes place across international borders; trafficking does not (you can be trafficked, say, from Rochdale to Rotherham)

snooper's charter

snowclone
A type of cliched phrase defined by the linguist Geoffrey Pullum as "a multi-use, customisable, instantly recognisable, timeworn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different variants". The name

is derived from the cliche about how many words “Eskimos” are mistakenly said to have for snow. Examples of snowclones include “xxx [eg comedy] is the new yyy [eg rock’n’roll]”, “you wait ages for a xxx [eg gold medal] and then yyy [eg three] come along at once”, and so on. Such phrases are very popular with journalists searching for what Pullum calls “quick-fix ways of writing stuff without actually having to think out new descriptive vocabulary or construct new phrases and sentences”

Snowdon
means “snow hill” in Old English so avoid calling it Mount Snowdon; the Welsh name, Yr Wyddfa, should be included in articles, eg Snowdon, or Yr Wyddfa, was described by Jan Morris as a “dream-view”

Snowdonia
please also include its Welsh name, Eryri, in articles

snowplough

Soas University of London
Formerly the School of Oriental and African Studies

so-called
overused: as a reader pointed out when we used the term “so-called friendly fire”, the expression is “obviously ironic and really doesn’t need such ham-fisted pointing out”

social grades
The NRS social grades (not classes), originally developed by the National Readership Survey and still widely used in stories about market research, are the familiar A (upper middle class), B (middle), C1 (lower middle), C2 (skilled working), D (semi- and unskilled) and E (at the lowest levels of subsistence); they are based on the occupation of the chief income earner of a household and are sometimes grouped into ABC1 (middle) and C2DE (working class).

Since the 2001 census, the main UK social classification has been the National Statistics socioeconomic classification (NS-SEC), grouping occupations by employment conditions and relations rather than skills, and has 17 categories, which can be broken down into eight (from higher managerial and professional occupations to never worked and long-term unemployed), or just three (higher, intermediate and lower occupations)

socialism, socialist
lc unless name of a party, eg Socialist Workers party

social media
are plural

social security benefits
all lc, income support, working tax credit, etc

socioeconomic

sockpuppet
an online identity used for deception, typically by someone posing as an independent third party unconnected to a person or product that the sockpuppet then promotes

sock puppet
a puppet made out of a sock

sod's law
See Murphy's law

Soho
London; **SoHo** (as in "South of Houston Street") New York

soi-disant
means self-styled, not so-called; both phrases should be used sparingly

soiree
no accent

solar system
See planets

sold down the river
this phrase is thought to have originated in reference to the trafficking of enslaved people within the US in the 19th century, so don't use it casually or frivolously in other contexts

soldiers
It is good to remember that not everyone in a military uniform belongs to the army. Those who do not should not be referred to as soldiers. If you are unsure, military personnel or members of the armed forces are handy alternatives

solicitor general

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr
(1918-2008) Russian novelist

Somalia
adjective Somali; the people are Somalis, not Somalians

some
should not be used before a figure: if you are not sure, about or approximately are better, and if you are, it sounds daft: "some 12 people have died from wasp stings this year alone" was a particularly silly example that found its way into the paper

Sopa
Stop Online Piracy Act

Sotheby's

soundbite

sources
Anonymous sources should be used sparingly. We should - except in exceptional circumstances - avoid anonymous pejorative quotes. We should avoid misrepresenting the nature and number of sources, and we should do our best to give readers some clue as to the authority with which they speak. We should never, ever, betray a source

South America

Southbank Centre
on the South Bank in London

South Bank University

south
south London, south-west England, the south-east, south Wales, etc

southern hemisphere

Southern Ocean
not Antarctic Ocean

south pole

Southport Visiter
newspaper, not to be confused with the Visitor, Morecambe

so what if ...
needs a comma when used at the start of a sentence to distinguish between "So, what if ... " and "So what, if ... "

The former expresses an open mind ("So, what if we all voted Green?"); the latter is more sceptical ("So what, if we all voted Green?")

soy sauce

soya beans
not soybeans or soy beans

space hopper

spacewalk

spaghetti western

span of years
2010-12 or from 2010-12; but between 2010 and 2012, not "between 2010-12"

Spanish flu
1918 flu pandemic is preferred

Spanish names and accents
Take care over use of the tilde, which can change the meaning: Los Años Dorados (the Spanish version of the sitcom The Golden Girls) means The Golden Years; leave out the tilde and Los Anos Dorados becomes The Golden Anuses.

The surname is normally the second last name, not the last, which is the mother's maiden name, eg the writer Federico García Lorca - known as García in Spain rather than Lorca - should be García Lorca on second mention. Note also that the female name Consuelo ends with an "o" not an "a".

In Spanish the natural stress of a word generally occurs on the second to last syllable. Words that deviate from this norm must carry a written accent mark, known as the acento ortográfico, to indicate where the stress falls. A guide to accents follows. If in doubt do an internet search (try the word with and without an accent) and look for reputable Spanish language sites, eg big newspapers.

Surnames ending -ez take an accent over the penultimate vowel, eg Benítez, Fernández, Giménez, Gómez, González, Gutiérrez, Hernández, Jiménez, López, Márquez, Martínez, Núñez, Ordóñez, Pérez, Quiñónez, Ramírez, Rodríguez, Sáez, Vásquez, Vázquez, Velázquez. Exception: Alvarez; note also that names ending -es do not take the accent, eg Martines, Rodrigues.

Other surnames Aristízabal, Beltrán, Cáceres, Calderón, Cañizares, Chevantón, Couñago, Cúper, Dalí, De la Peña, Díaz, Forlán, García, Gaudí, Miró, Muñoz, Olazábal, Pavón, Sáenz, Sáinz, Valdés, Valerón, Verón.

Forenames Adán, Alán, Andrés, César, Darío, Elías, Fabián, Ginés, Héctor, Hernán, Iñaki, Iñés, Iván, Jesús, Joaquín, José, Lucía, María, Martín, Matías, Máximo, Míchel, Raúl, Ramón, Róger, Rubén, Sebastián, Víctor. The forenames Ana, Angel, Alfredo, Alvaro, Cristina, Diego, Domingo, Emilio, Ernesto, Federico, Fernando, Ignacio, Jorge, Juan, Julio, Luis, Marta, Mario, Miguel, Pablo and Pedro do not usually take accents.

Placenames Asunción, Bogotá, Cádiz, Catalonia, Córdoba, La Coruña, Guantánamo Bay, Guipúzcoa, Jaén, Jérez, León, Medellín, Potosí, San Sebastián, Valparaíso.

Sports teams, etc América, Atlético, El Barça (FC Barcelona), Bernabéu, Bolívar, Cerro Porteño, Deportivo La Coruña, Huracán, Málaga, Peñarol.

Note: Spanish is an official language in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela

Spanish practices, Spanish customs
If you are talking about questionable trade union activities, restrictive practices

might be a less offensive way to put it

‘spared jail’
We should say what the actual verdict was in a court report, rather than that the accused was “spared jail” or “walked free from court”, which sounds as if we think they should have been jailed

spare-part surgery
Avoid this term

spark
overused in headlines of the “rates rise sparks fury” variety

spastic
the Spastics Society, which supports disabled people and in particular those with cerebral palsy, changed its name to Scope in 1994

speakers
lowercase for the speaker of the House of Commons (you can call him “the Commons speaker” if you need to clarify you don’t just mean any MP who happened to be speaking), the **lord speaker** (House of Lords), the House speaker (US) and speakers and presiding officers elsewhere; also for **the llywydd in Wales**

special
often redundant

special branch

Special Immigration Appeals Commission
Siac or “the commission” on second mention

spellchecker
if you use one, read through your work afterwards: a graphic on our front page was rendered nonsensical when a spellcheck turned the species Aquila adalberti into “alleyway adalberti”, while Prunella modularis became “pronely modularise”; also note that most use American English spellings

spelled or spelt?
spelled is the past tense, spelt is the past participle; she spelled it out for him: “the word is spelt like this”

Spice Girls
Victoria Beckham was Posh Spice; Melanie Brown was Scary Spice; Emma Bunton was Baby Spice; Melanie Chisholm was Sporty Spice; Geri Halliwell was Ginger Spice

spicy
not spicey

Spider-Man
for the cartoon and film character, but **Spiderman** (no hyphen) is the nickname of

Alain Robert, a Frenchman who specialises in climbing skyscrapers without a safety net

spilled or spilt?
spilled is the past tense, spilt is the past participle; she spilled the beans: the beans were all spilt

spin doctor

spin-off
noun, **spin off** verb

spinster
avoid this old-fashioned term, which has acquired a pejorative tone; say, if relevant, that someone is an unmarried woman

spiral, spiralling
prices (and other things) can spiral down as well as up; try a less cliched word that doesn't suggest a circular movement

split infinitives
"The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and distinguish. Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are happy folk, to be envied." (HW Fowler, Modern English Usage, 1926)

It is perfectly acceptable, and often desirable, to sensibly split infinitives - "to boldly go" is an elegant and effective phrase - and stubbornly to resist doing so can sound pompous and awkward ("the economic precipice on which they claim perpetually to be poised") or ambiguous: "He even offered personally to guarantee the loan that the Clintons needed to buy their house" raises the question of whether the offer, or the guarantee, was personal.

Raymond Chandler wrote to his publisher: "Would you convey my compliments to the purist who reads your proofs and tell him or her that I write in a sort of broken-down patois which is something like the way a Swiss waiter talks, and that when I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split." And after an editor tinkered with his infinitives, George Bernard Shaw said: "I don't care if he is made to go quickly, or to quickly go - but go he must!"

spoiled or spoilt?
spoiled is the past tense, spoilt is the past participle; she spoiled her son: in fact he was a spoilt brat

spokesperson
a quote may be attributed to the organisation, eg "The AA said ... ", but if necessary say spokesperson rather than spokesman or spokeswoman (assuming they have actually spoken to you)

SpongeBob SquarePants
is his full name; SpongeBob after first mention

sponsorship
We are under no obligation to carry sponsors' names. So London Marathon, not Virgin London Marathon, etc. When a competition is named after a sponsor, it is unavoidable: Friends Provident t20, etc

spoonful, teaspoonful
plural spoonfuls, teaspoonfuls, not the old-fashioned spoonsful, teaspoonsful

sprang or sprung?
sprang is the past tense of spring; sprung is the past participle. When we got this wrong, a reader commented: "The error sprang out at me immediately as it should have sprung out to your subeditor"

spree
shopping or spending, not shooting: describing a series of murders as a "killing spree" sounds flippant

spring, summer, autumn, winter

spun
is the past tense and past participle of spin, despite "when Adam delved and Eve span" (1560), which is an older past tense form

square brackets
are used for interpolated words in quotations, eg David Cameron said: "Theresa [May] has my full support."

They can clutter up a piece and make it difficult to read, as in this example: "I was in awe of the place as a player. You looked at Man United and you saw men. [Eric] Cantona, Giggs, [David] Beckham, [Andrei] Kanchelsis, Bryan Robson, it just went on." And on, he might have added. The subeditor was trying to help, but you'd have to have spent 10 years on another planet not to know who "Cantona" or "Beckham" are.

Use square brackets sparingly and only when they will help, rather than insult [the intelligence of] the reader

square metres
not the same as metres squared: eg 300m squared is 90,000 sq metres which is very different from 300 sq metres; we often get this wrong

Square Mile
rather old-fashioned term for City of London

squaw
is regarded as offensive and should be avoided

SSSI
site of special scientific interest

stadium
plural **stadiums**, not stadia; also, initial caps when it is in the name of the venue eg London Stadium, Etihad Stadium, but leave out whenever possible eg at Wembley, at Old Trafford.

staff
are plural

stalactites
cling from the ceiling; **stalagmites** grow from the ground

stalemate
in chess, a stalemate is the end of the game, and cannot be broken or resolved; **deadlock** or **impasse** are more suitable for metaphorical use in such cases as "Zawiyah - 30 miles from the capital - is a metaphor for Libya's current stalemate, which could itself end at any moment"

Stalin, Joseph
not Josef

stammer/stutter
stammer is the more well-used term for the speech condition. Avoid using either term when describing something operating in a stop-start manner and use an alternative instead, eg falter

stampede
should be reserved for herds of animals, and not used in tragedies involving crowds of people, for example at the hajj in Mina in 2015. People are crushed to death in high-density crowds and typically die of asphyxiation, not because they are trampled in the way that "stampede" implies. Human "stampedes" are very unusual, and rarely fatal.

The word "stampede" suggests a panicking mass of people who are collectively responsible for trampling others to death, whereas in fact the deaths occur (at a slower speed) as an accidental result of high densities. Those who allow such densities to build up are responsible and as a result, as with Hillsborough, they are often keen to portray the event as a panic or a stampede.

We should follow the experts and use the term "crowd crush" or similar

standard of proof
The standard of proof is either criminal (beyond reasonable doubt) or civil (on a balance of probabilities). The **burden of proof** refers to who has to prove an allegation in court ie in criminal cases the burden of proof is on the prosecution, in libel cases it is the defendant (ie the libeller rather than the libelled).

standoff

standout, standup
adjectives, as in a standup comedian performing a standout standup routine; nouns, as in one standout was a standup performing standup

Stansted

Star Wars
the Empire, the Force, lightsaber.

dark side: Darth Maul, Darth Sidious, Darth Vader, Emperor Palpatine (or just the Emperor).
light side: Jedi knights (or just Jedi), Rebel Alliance, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, Princess Leia, Yoda.

Wookiee (note two Es), a species of which Chewbacca is a member; Ewok

Starck, Philippe
French designer

Starkey, Zak
(not Zac) son of Ringo Starr; plays drums for the Who

start up
verb; **startup** noun (as in business startup); **star tup** top-performing ram

state department
its official name is US Department of State

statehouse
office of the state governor in the US, one word except in New Jersey where it is the state house

State of the Union address

stationary
motionless; also used by some stationery shops to mean stationery; **stationery** writing materials; also used by some signwriters to mean stationary

staunch
verb: to stop the flow of something, eg blood or confidence;
adjective: steadfast, eg a staunch defender of human rights

staycation
use to refer to people staying in their own home for their holidays and going out on day trips. Its definition has expanded to sometimes include people going on holiday in their own countries but given this is how a significant proportion of any population take their holidays its use in this context can potentially cause confusion and offence.

STD or STI?
STI (sexually transmitted infection) is a broader term than STD (sexually transmitted disease): you can have the infection without feeling ill or displaying any symptoms

steamboat, steamhammer, steampunk, steamship

steam engine

steelworker, steelworks

Stelios
Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, founder of easyJet; Haji-Ioannou after first mention, although Stelios is acceptable in headlines

sten gun

stentorian
loud, sometimes confused with **stertorous**, a snoring sound

stepfamily, stepfather, stepmother
etc, but **step-parents**. Don't confuse, say, a stepsister and half-sister, as we did when writing about Barack Obama's family

Stephen or Steven?
Stephen Baldwin, Stephen Chow (actors), Stephen Colbert (satirist), Stephen Crane (wrote The Red Badge of Courage), Stephen Foster (wrote Oh! Susanna), Stephen Fry (national treasure), Stephen Jay Gould (biologist), Stephen Hawking (physicist), Stephen King (novelist), Stephen Merchant (Ricky Gervais collaborator).

Steven Gerrard (footballer), Steven Moffat (Doctor Who writer and producer), Steven Spielberg (film director)

sterling
the pound; also sterling qualities

Stetson
TM; hat

sticky-back plastic

stiletto
plural **stilettos** (not stilettoes)

still life
plural still lifes (not lives)

stilton
cheese

stimulus
plural **stimuli**

Stirling prize
awarded annually by the Royal Institute of British Architects

Stock Exchange
caps when referring to the London Stock Exchange; but lc in other countries, eg Hong Kong stock exchange

stock in trade

stock market

stolen generations
Australian Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families

stone age
The charity Survival says: " 'Stone age' and 'primitive' have been used to describe tribal people since the colonial era, reinforcing the idea that they have not changed over time and that they are backward. This idea is both incorrect and very dangerous: incorrect because all societies adapt and change, and dangerous because it is often used to justify the persecution or forced 'development' of tribal people"

stony broke, stony-hearted
not stoney

stopgap

storey
plural storeys (buildings); **story** plural stories (tales)

Storm Abigail, Storm Barney
etc

straight away, straightforward, home straight, final straight

straitjacket, strait-laced, Dire Straits

strait of Dover, strait of Gibraltar, strait of Hormuz
not Strait, Straits or straits

straitened circumstances, straitened times
not "straightened", one of our most frequent errors

Strategic Rail Authority
SRA on second mention

Stratford-on-Avon
district council and parliamentary seat, although most other local organisations, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, call this Warwickshire town Stratford-upon-Avon

stratum
plural strata

Street-Porter, Janet

streetwise

strep A

stretchered off
has a slight ring of Charles Buchan's Football Monthly; say carried off

strikes
we aim to accurately describe strike action in industrial disputes without taking sides. Saying employees are **on strike, striking** or taking **strike action** is the most straightforward way. Of the other options, some are more helpful than others.

Stoppage, stopped work or **stayed off work** are fine.

Industrial action is a bit vague, and does not necessarily include strikes.

Walkout (as a noun) has negative (in the sense of anti-union) connotations. It does evoke sudden or wildcat strikes. Use with care.

Walked out as an alternative to stopped work is not quite the same as walkout, and is fine if that actually happened, but context is all: "Thousands of tube workers walked out at 6pm to start a 24-hour strike" is OK. The point is that we are describing what happened without taking sides.

Downed tools is too old-fashioned. "Journalists at the Guardian downed tools yesterday" just sounds silly. Avoid, unless actual hammers, screwdrivers etc are involved

strippergram

strip-search
noun and verb

students' union
lowercase in full name, eg Sheffield University students' union

stumbling block

stumm
as in "keep stumm", not schtum

Sturm und Drang
German literary movement

stutter (see stammer)

STV
single transferable vote

stylebook
but **style guide**

Subbuteo
table football game in which players "flick to kick", named after the bird of prey Falco subbuteo (the hobby) and immortalised in the Undertones' My Perfect Cousin

subcommittee, subcontinent, sublet, subplot, subsection

subeditors, subs
Journalists who traditionally edit, check and cut copy, write headlines and other page furniture, and design pages; to which can be added, in the digital age, an ever-widening range of multimedia and technical skills. In some countries, eg the US and Canada, they are known as copy editors.

WP Crozier said of CP Scott: "As a subeditor he got rid of the redundant and the turgid with the conscientiousness of a machine that presses the superfluous moisture out of yarn. The man who passed 'seaward journey to the great metropolis', and when the copy came back to him found written in firm blue pencil 'voyage to London', knew what sort of English 'CP' liked"

subfusc
an adjective meaning dull and gloomy or a noun for the dark clothing worn for exams and formal occasions at some universities

subjunctive
Fowler noted that the subjunctive was "seldom obligatory" and Somerset Maugham declared half a century ago: "The subjunctive mood is in its death throes, and the best thing to do is put it out of its misery as soon as possible." Would that that were so.

Most commonly, the subjunctive is a third person singular form of the verb expressing hypothesis, typically something demanded, proposed, imagined: he demanded that she resign at once, I propose that she be sacked, she insisted Jane sit down.

It is particularly common in American English and in formal or poetic contexts: If I were a rich man, etc, and you have to admit the song sounds better than "If I was a rich man …"

We get this wrong at least as often as we get it right. Two examples from the same issue in April 2010 in which "was" should be "were":
"If every election or ballot in which there are cases of bad practice was to be invalidated, democracy would soon become a laughing stock …" (leading article); "If this was the centred Conservative party that Cameron claims, its strategists wouldn't be half as worried as they are …" (column)

Nobody died and no great harm was done, but as professional writers we should be aware of the distinction. Used properly, the subjunctive can add elegance to your writing; an object lesson was provided in a Gary Younge column of 5 July 2010: “It was as though Charlie Brown’s teacher were standing for leader of the opposition … “ (one of three examples of the subjunctive in the piece).

As with the hyper-corrective misuse of whom instead of who, however, using the subjunctive wrongly is worse than not using it at all, and will make you look pompous and silly

submachine gun

submarines
are boats, not ships

subpoena, subpoenaed

sub-prime, sub-Saharan

substitute

Is it by, with or for? If you don’t choose the right preposition, it’s not always easy to see who’s replaced whom.

Let’s say Player A is injured and Player B comes on as a substitute. So: the manager replaces A *with* B; A is replaced *by* B; the manager has substituted B *for* A; B is substituted *for* A

suchlike

sucking-pig
not “suckling-pig”

Sudan
not “the Sudan”

sudoku

sue, sued, suing
(not sueing)

suffer little children
nothing to do with suffering, this frequently misquoted or misunderstood phrase was used by Christ (Luke 18:16) to mean “allow the little children to come to me”; it is also the title of a song about the Moors murders on the first Smiths album

suffragist or suffragette?
these two terms are not interchangeable, so make sure you are using the right one. The suffragettes, associated with Emmeline Pankhurst, advocated achieving the vote for women by any means necessary. Suffragists such as Millicent Fawcett, on the other hand, campaigned using more peaceful methods. Of the two terms

suffragist is the one that can be used more generally to signify people through history advocating for the right to vote

suicide
Say that someone killed him or herself rather than "committed suicide"; suicide has not been a crime in the UK for many years and this old-fashioned term can cause unnecessary further distress to families who have been bereaved in this way.

Journalists should exercise particular care in reporting suicide or issues involving suicide, bearing in mind the risk of encouraging others. This applies to presentation, including the use of pictures, and to describing the method of suicide. Any substances should be referred to in general rather than specific terms. When appropriate, a helpline number (eg Samaritans) should be given. The feelings of relatives should also be carefully considered.

The following note should be added to stories about suicide:

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on freephone 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, you can call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline on 988, chat on 988lifeline.org, or text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis counselor. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at befrienders.org

Change the order if necessary to reflect the context and origin of the story; only the Samaritans number need be used in print editions that are not sold outside the UK.

The endnote should not be used on stories about assisted dying.

If a story is about a murder/suicide, use the following endnote:

> *In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 and the domestic abuse helpline is 0808 2000 247. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is on 13 11 14 and the national family violence counselling service is on 1800 737 732. In the US, the suicide prevention lifeline is at 988 and the domestic violence hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Other international helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org*

Sultan Al Jaber
Emirati minister, oil company chief executive and president of the Cop28 climate talks. On second mention, call him Al Jaber

summer

summer solstice
the longest day of the year, but not the same as Midsummer Day (although we often seem to assume it is)

sun, the
celestial body

Sun, the
newspaper, but just call it the Sun, not “the Sun newspaper”

Sunday Sun
long-established newspaper covering the north-east of England, not to be confused with the Sunday edition of the Sun

Super Bowl

supercasino, superinjunction

superlatives
“Superlatives must be used very sparingly, in every sense. We do not wish to give the impression that we live in a constant state of excitement.”

Sound advice from AP Wadsworth, the then editor, in the 1950 edition of the Manchester Guardian stylebook

supermarkets
Marks & Spencer or M&S, Morrisons, Safeway, Sainsbury’s, Tesco (no wonder people get confused about apostrophes)

supermodel
model is normally sufficient

supernova
plural supernovae

Super Pac
an “independent-expenditure only” political action committee that can raise unlimited sums from corporations, unions and other groups, as well as individuals, in support of a US political candidate or party

super-rich

supersede
not supercede

supine
face up; **prone** face down

supply days
(parliament)

supreme court

Sure Start

surge
prefer rise or increase, if that is the meaning; but surge is preferable to “upsurge”

surgeons
surgeons traditionally take the honorific of Mr/Ms/Miss/Mrs, not Dr. As such, and in line with Guardian style, use their full name at first mention, and surname thereafter eg Henry Marsh, then Marsh

Suriname
(not Surinam); formerly Dutch Guiana

surrealism

Sutcliff, Rosemary
British historical novelist (1920-92) whose works include The Eagle of the Ninth

svengali
(lc) although named after the sinister Svengali in George du Maurier's 1894 novel Trilby

swap
not swop

swat
flies

swot
books

swastika
ancient symbol whose name comes from the Sanskrit for "that which brings wellbeing", but which was appropriated as an emblem of racism by Nazis in 1920s Germany, where it's known as the Hakenkreuz (hooked cross)

swath/swathe
either is acceptable to refer to a strip of land

Swaziland
now called Eswatini but worth mentioning its former name at first reference

swearwords
We are more liberal than any other newspapers, using language that most of our competitors would not. The statistics tell their own story: the word "fuck" (and its variants) appeared 705 times in the Guardian in the 12 months to April 2010, with a further 269 mentions in the Observer. (The figures for other national newspapers were as follows: Independent 279, Independent on Sunday 74, Times 3, Sunday Times 2, all other papers 0.) The figures for the C-word, still regarded by many people as taboo, were: Guardian 49, Observer 20, Independent 8, Independent on Sunday 5, everyone else 0.

Even some readers who agree with Lenny Bruce that "take away the right to say fuck and you take away the right to say fuck the government" might feel that we sometimes use such words unnecessarily, although comments in response to

Guardian Style's blogpost on the subject were overwhelmingly in support of our policy.

The editor's guidelines are as follows:

First, remember the reader, and respect demands that we should not casually use words that are likely to offend.

Second, use such words only when absolutely necessary to the facts of a piece, or to portray a character in an article; there is almost never a case in which we need to use a swearword outside direct quotes. The use of swearwords in furniture, especially headlines, should also be avoided unless an editor deems it absolutely necessary.

Third, the stronger the swearword, the harder we ought to think about using it.

Finally, never use asterisks, or such silliness as b------, which are just a cop-out, as Charlotte Brontë recognised: "The practice of hinting by single letters those expletives with which profane and violent people are wont to garnish their discourse, strikes me as a proceeding which, however well meant, is weak and futile. I cannot tell what good it does - what feeling it spares - what horror it conceals"

swingeing

swinging 60s

sync
as in "out of sync", also lip-sync, lip-syncing

synopsis
plural synopses

syntax
Beware of ambiguous or incongruous sentence structure - the following appeared in a column in the paper: "This argument, says a middle-aged lady in a business suit called Marion, is just more London stuff … " (What were her other outfits called?).

In English, unlike some languages, the slightest difference in word order can change the meaning: we referred to the "number of average holidays taken a year by the most affluent households", an apparent comment on the quality of the holidays rather than what we actually meant, which was the average number of holidays

synthesis, synthesise, synthesiser

Syrskyi, Col Gen Oleksandr
commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces

systematic
methodical

systemic
relating to a system

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