

## The Guardian and Observer style guide

# Guardian and Observer style guide: O

'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.' **George Orwell**

Wed 23 Dec 2020 08.25 GMT

**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**



## Occam's razor

🖼 Illustration: Jakob Hinrichs

### OAPs, old age pensioners

Do not use: they are pensioners or old people; do not use old or elderly to describe someone under 75 (the editors reserve the right to increase this upper limit, as appropriate)

### obligato

not obligato

### obesity

the word obese is not banned, but it is preferable to say someone has obesity, or is living with obesity

### Obiang

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, president of Equatorial Guinea since 1979; Obiang on second mention

T

**oblast**

a generic term for an administrative region in many countries including Russia and Ukraine. Therefore no need to cap it up in names such as Kyiv oblast. As an alternative you can say the Kyiv region

**obliged**

not “obligated”

**O’Brian, Patrick**

author of Master and Commander

**obtuse**

means “mentally slow or emotionally insensitive” (Collins); often confused with abstruse (hard to understand) or obscure

**Occam’s razor**

philosophical principle, attributed to the 14th-century English friar William of Ockham, that broadly means prefer the simplest explanation, adopting the one that makes the fewest assumptions and “shaving away” the rest

**occupied territories**

Gaza and the West Bank

**occurred**

two Rs

**Oceania**

a preferable term to Australasia, it is sometimes divided into Near Oceania and Remote Oceania, and comprises, according to the UN:

**Australia/New Zealand****Melanesia**

(Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu)

**Micronesia**

(Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau)

**Polynesia**

(American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Pitcairn, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Wallis and Futuna Islands)

**oceans, seas**

capped up, eg Atlantic Ocean, Red Sea

**octopus, platypus**

plural octopuses, platypuses, not the cod Latin octopi, platypi

**Odesa**

not Odessa for the port city in Ukraine

**Odisha**

Indian state formerly known as Orissa

**OECD**

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development at first mention

**oedipal complex**

the female equivalent is electra complex

**Ofcom**

Office of Communications – the broadcasting and telecommunications regulator

**Offa**

eighth-century king of Mercia, best known for Offa's Dyke, a giant earthwork that separated the kingdom from Powys

**offbeat, offhand, offside****Office for National Statistics**

ONS on second mention Office of Fair Trading OFT on second mention

**off-licence****Ofgem**

regulates the gas and electricity markets in Britain

**Ofsted**

the schools inspectorate in England. Its full name is the Office for Standards in Education, but normally no need to spell that out. The Welsh equivalent is Estyn, the Scottish is Education Scotland and Northern Ireland has the Education and Training Inspectorate

**Ofwat**

regulates the water and sewerage industry in England and Wales

**Oh not O**

except in phrases of invocation or hymn titles, eg O God, Our Help in Ages Past

**oilfield, but oil well****oil painting****oil production platform**

for production of oil

**oil rig**

for exploration and drilling

**oilseed rape****OK**

is OK; okay is not

**Old Etonian****old Labour**

but **New Labour**

**old master**

lowercase for paintings as well as ageing schoolteachers

**Old Testament****olé!**

needs the accent to stop it reading like “ole”

**O-levels**

GCE O-levels and CSEs were combined in 1986 to become GCSEs

**Olympic Games**

or just **Olympics**, or the Games

**omelette**

not omelet

**omertà**

code of silence; note accent

**Omicron**

note the initial capital for the Covid-19 variant

**onboard**

one word: “Once onboard, they got so drunk that the onboard explosion went undetected.”

Avoid “aboard” except in the phrase “All aboard!”

**one**

One should find an alternative, preferably **you** (unless one is making fun of one’s royal family).

If you do use it, the possessive has an apostrophe: “the ones in the window are one’s favourites”

**one in six, one in 10**

Phrases of this sort should be treated as plural. There are good grammatical and logical reasons for this. Compare “more than one in six Japanese is 65 or older ...” with “more than one in six Japanese are 65 or older ...”

Grammatically, we are talking not about the noun “one” but the noun phrase “one in six”, signifying a group of people. Logically, the phrase represents a proportion – just like “17%” or “one-sixth”, both of which take plural verbs. “Two out of every seven” and “three out of 10” take plurals too, functioning identically.

“One in six is ... “ is also unnecessarily (and possibly misleadingly) specific, implying that of any six people from the group you take, exactly one will be as described.

“One in six” means one-sixth on average over the whole group, and a plural verb better reflects this. We wouldn’t say “Only 1% of Republican voters is able to point to Iraq on a map” just because there’s a “one” in there

### **one-nation politics**

but **one nation Tory** for individual Conservatives, and **One Nation group** for the caucus of Conservative MPs formed in April 2019

### **one-stop shop**

### **Onetel**

UK telecom company, not One.Tel, which is Australian

### **ongoing**

Bureaucrats and business people love this jargon word and associated phrases such as “ongoing situation” or “on an ongoing basis”. Even some journalists are oddly fond of it, although the story has yet to be written that cannot be improved by removing it. “The case continues” is preferable to “the trial is ongoing”

### **online**

### **only**

can be ambiguous if not placed next to the word or phrase modified: “I have only one ambition” is clearer than “I only have one ambition”; however, be sensible: do not change the song title to I Have Eyes for Only You.

Say “the only” or “one of the few” rather than “one of the only”, which has found its way into the paper

### **on side or onside?**

The referee kept the home crowd on side by ruling the goal onside

### **on stage**

two words unless used adjectivally, for example in the phrase “her onstage persona”

### **on to not onto**

Kingsley Amis, perhaps slightly overstating the case for this, argued: “I have found by experience that no one persistently using onto writes anything much worth reading”

### **[See into](#)**

### **oo gauge**

(model railways) - the number 0, not the letter O, though pronounced “double-C (as in Hornby Dublo)

### **ooing and aahing, oohs and aahs**

**Op 58, No 2**

for classical music

**Opec**

Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, but not necessary to spell out

**Open Society Foundations**

plural

**opencast mine****openly gay**

avoid, just say someone is gay. Or when the fact that someone is uncloseted is the story, out gay person is a good alternative, as in, for example, the first out gay royal

**ophthalmic****opossum****opposition, the****or**

need not be used when explaining or amplifying - rather than “the NUT, or National Union of Teachers” say “the NUT (National Union of Teachers)” or, even better, “the National Union of Teachers” at first mention and then just “the NUT” or “the union”

**orangutan**

one word

**orca**

also known as the killer whale, but orca is preferable

**orchestras**

take initial capitals, eg London Symphony Orchestra (LSO after first mention), Berlin Philharmonic, etc

**ordinance**

decree

**Ordnance Survey**

Britain’s national mapping agency (ordnance because such work was originally undertaken by the army)

**oriented, disoriented**

not orientated, disorientated

**Orkney**

not “the Orkney Isles” or “the Orkneys”

**Orthodox**

capped up in the names of religious denominations eg Orthodox Judaism, ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Russian Orthodox church

**Ottakar's bookshop**

taken over by Waterstones

**O2, the**

(cap O, not the number 0) is the name of the former Millennium Dome

**Ötzi**

the Iceman Europe's oldest natural human mummy (dated to about 3300BC), found in the Alps in 1991

**Ouija**

TM; the generic name most commonly used, though not very satisfactory, is "talking board"

**outback**

(Australia)

**outed, outing**

take care with these terms: if we say, for example, that a paedophile was outed, we are equating that with a gay person being outed; use exposed or revealed instead

**Outer Hebrides**

use when referring to the islands in a geographical context; if referring to them in a political capacity, use Western Isles (see Western Isles entry).

**outgrow, outgun, outmanoeuvre****outpatient**

St Thomas' hospital in south London boasts the following styles, all on signs within a few yards of each other: Out Patients, Out-Patients, Outpatients, and outpatients. Across London, Barts adds Out-patients and OUTPATIENTS to the eclectic mix. In a further development, the NHS has all but eradicated the apostrophe

**outré**

no accent

**outside**

not "outside of"

**outward bound**

outdoor adventure or adventure training are safer terms: we have been sued twice for reporting that people have died on "outward bound" courses that were nothing to do with the Outward Bound Trust

**over**

is already an adverb, so "overly" is unnecessary. The same applies to "regardless" (regardless of how you feel about it), last, not "lastly", and least, not "leastly"

**overestimate, overstate**

are frequently confused with underestimate or understate

**overreact, override, overrule**

and most other words with the prefix “over” do not need a hyphen

**oxen**

rather than “oxes” is the plural of ox

**oxi**

not strictly a transliteration of the Greek for no, but this is what we use

**Oxford comma**

a comma before the final “and” in lists: straightforward ones (he ate ham, eggs and chips) do not need one, but sometimes it can help the reader (he ate cereal, kippers, bacon, eggs, toast and marmalade, and tea).

Sometimes it is essential: compare

I dedicate this book to my parents, Martin Amis, and JK Rowling  
with

I dedicate this book to my parents, Martin Amis and JK Rowling

**oxymoron**

does not just vaguely mean self-contradictory; an oxymoron is a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms are used in conjunction, such as bittersweet, compassionate conservatism, “darkness visible” (Paradise Lost), “the living dead” (The Waste Land); one of Margaret Atwood’s characters thought “interesting Canadian” was an oxymoron

**Özil, Mesut**

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