

A way with words
Guide to Style at
Queen's University Belfast



A way with words

Guide to Style at Queen's University Belfast

Contents

Preface : Saying what we mean	3
Foreword : Proper words in proper places	4
Introduction : The English language is a living thing	7
A–Z Queen's University Style	9
General Principles : Writing and editing good English	31
Acknowledgements	37

Preface

Saying what we mean

Professor Peter Gregson
President and Vice-Chancellor

Language is one of the most fundamental skills we learn. Without it, we would not be able to communicate knowledge effectively, and knowledge is so crucial to the way we live our lives. In any large organisation, the ability to communicate well is essential. Each of us depends on one another for the information we need to do our jobs, and communication is key to exchanging information.

In the main, people communicate well in written and in spoken form. But I am sure everyone reading this preface will be able to point to times when unclear communication has had a negative impact on their ability to do their work.

The arrival of quick and easy electronic communication has brought with it enormous benefits, but there are downsides too. Email is an impersonal medium, and the tone of emails can often be misread, leading to conflict and stress.

The ease with which an email can be dashed off has also had a negative impact on formal written English. For all the growing trend of informality, it is important that the University's business is carried out using language which is unambiguous.

Every day, millions of words move around the University in emails, attachments, letters, memorandums and by word of mouth. I hope this guide will help us to ensure that what we say is what we mean.



Foreword

Proper words in proper places

James O’Kane
Registrar and Chief Operating Officer

The humorous writer, James Thurber, put it simply when he said: “Precision of communication is important, more important than ever, in our era of hair-trigger balances, when a false, or misunderstood word may create as much disaster as a sudden thoughtless act.”

Queen’s is a large and complex organisation – larger and more complex than at any time in its history. Our academic staff are building a university for the next generation, and beyond, which is capable of competing with the best in the world. Academic support staff deliver crucial services, without which Queen’s would be unable to function as a centre of learning. As for our students, greater and greater demands are being made of them as they juggle paid employment with their studies.



Society too is more demanding of institutions such as ours. We are expected to operate to the highest standards, and are under constant scrutiny – from the media, regional and local government, and from our customers too. We live in an increasingly regulated society which expects us to manage risk, ensure the health and safety of staff and students, and implement legislation affecting the whole range of our activity.

For all the talk about the paperless office two decades ago, this has become the age of the paper trail. Is it any wonder then that we are coming down with communications of one form or another? Some are carried on mediums which stretch to antiquity – books and pamphlets – others pixelated and transmitted electronically.

We do not need to become entwined in red tape just because we are a large organisation which needs to ensure its policies, processes and actions are documented. People complain about bureaucracy at Queen’s, but there need be none. The challenge for each of us is to simplify what we do, ensure it is detailed clearly and concisely, and to communicate it effectively to those who need access to it.

We have no-one to blame but ourselves if our papers are dense and ill-thought through, if our policies and procedures are unclear, or even if we are weighed down with paper.

There can be no doubt that there has been an erosion of standards in formal written English over this past generation. Some argue it is more important that something is understood rather than properly expressed. This may be true where the person speaking is physically present and can be quizzed, or when we are in a position where we can interpret non-verbal communication. But none of us can quiz the author of a paper or a policy which is handed down over time, and few of us have the time or inclination to track down the author of an official letter filled with garbled information.

Too often people receive communications from the University which are confusing, contain basic errors of grammar or (worse) fact, and where the punctuation is distributed with little thought for meaning. Communications of this nature speak volumes about the quality of thought which goes into putting something down on paper.

The secret to effective writing is well summed up in a proverb: “Think much, speak little, and write less.” If you are clear in your own mind what you want to say, and you express it in the simplest terms possible, you are more likely to be understood. In the words of Winnie the Pooh: “I am a Bear of Very Little Brain and long words Bother me.” (We’ll forgive him the capitalisation.)

One other thing is crucial. You must remember who your audience is. We live in a world where people value their time, and where they are unwilling to waste it deciphering a paragraph in a missive from us.

This guide was inspired by a publication well-known to those of us in the Northern Ireland higher education system who have been around for some time. Sir Derek Birley, a former Vice-Chancellor of our sister institution, the University of Ulster, produced a witty and erudite style guide for staff, photocopied copies of which still exist in bottom drawers and filing cabinets at UU and Queen’s.

Style guides abound in bookshops today: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Financial Times*, among others, have made books out of their in-house advice. There are many popular volumes: Penguin’s *Mind the Gaffe*, and Lynn Truss’s controversial *Eats Shoots and Leaves* spring to mind, as well as more academic approaches. There are treasures in all these books for those who care about English and how it is written.

I know you will find this publication useful. I also hope it will be a living document which will grow and develop in the years to come. I will leave you with the words of Jonathan Swift when he wrote: “Proper words, in proper places, make the true definition of style.”

Introduction

The English language is a living thing

Style guides are used by many organisations, not just newspapers and magazines, which produce written material. They encapsulate editorial policy; address troublesome points of grammar and vocabulary; define obscure acronyms and abbreviations, and offer advice on potentially sensitive language. They provide communicators with a writing tool which helps them produce coherent, consistent and appropriate documents.

Each document produced within Queen's should underline the University's Vision and Mission Statement, and should articulate a tone of voice which is consistent with these goals. If we say we are a world-class institution, we must ensure that the documents we produce are also of the highest quality.

The English language is a living thing. Its ability to change to suit the needs of time and place is one of the qualities which has made it a genuinely global language. As you might expect, there are very few absolutes in establishing the 'right' way of doing things. Many great writers have had the most effect when they have broken 'the rules'. But we are not all great writers, and a set of principles provides a safety net for those of us who have to write as part of our jobs, rather than write for a living.

The guidelines here are not mandatory. The University has no desire to suppress individuality, but wants to do all it can to encourage staff to produce communications which are consistent and clear, whatever the medium and whatever the message.

The guide emphasises that good style is determined by making appropriate rhetorical choices for a particular purpose and audience. It is not about following slavishly a set of inflexible rules. Derek Birley makes the point rather well in his excellent *Putting It In Writing*: "When you send an official letter, your main task may be to pass on information and the recipient may be more interested in content than in style. Nevertheless, the way the letter is written will convey an impression not only of you, the writer, but also of the organisation you represent."

This guide assumes some skill in writing, and stresses the desirability of lucidity, precision, authority and professionalism. It does not want to make documents overly simplistic; nor does it seek to replace, or supersede, specific academic style guides, or those which are presented to students within their School or Faculty. Neither is it a substitute for any number of excellent style guides aimed at communications professionals. Rather, since most documents

are neither academic nor journalistic, it aims to encourage writing for general communication which is jargon-free (unless absolutely necessary), clear and accessible to the reader.

For this reason it omits field-specific style issues, such as how to present mathematical equations, poetic quotations or listings of computer code. It also avoids lengthy and tortuous descriptions of grammatical minutiae. Good writing owes more to clarity and approachability than an indecent obsession with split infinitives or subordinate clauses.

The A–Z, and the Principles for Writing and Editing Good English, should help communicators keep 'officialese' to a minimum and produce material which is informative, authoritative and accessible.

A to Z

Queen's University Style

A

a, an

Use *a historic occasion* or *a heroic act* rather than *an historic* or *an heroic*. *An* is indisputably correct before just four words beginning with 'h': *hour, honest, honour* and *heir*.

abbreviations, acronyms and contractions

The word *abbreviation* is the umbrella term used to describe any shortened word or term – *BBC, UK, PEC*. Contractions and acronyms are types of abbreviation. Acronyms are abbreviations that are pronounced as a word, such as *NATO, QUBIS*.

All abbreviations, except those which have passed into normal language (*BBC, CBI, UTV*), should be spelled out in full the first time they are used. Where possible, avoid using the abbreviation subsequently; abbreviations usually have to be mentally deciphered and therefore act as an obstacle for the reader. *The Physical Education Centre opened its doors yesterday. The centre will... not The PEC will...* If the abbreviation or acronym has to be used later in the text, it should be given after the first

mention in brackets: *The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds several doctoral scholarships. Contact the AHRC directly for details.* Avoid using full stops (periods) in abbreviations or acronyms (*FBI* not *F.B.I.*). It looks clumsy. Omit full stops from degree titles (*BA, MA, MSc, PhD*) and personal titles (*Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr*). Use *Professor* rather than *Prof.*

A contraction is a word made of two words that are put together and then made shorter, for example, *can't*. Avoid using contractions in formal writing unless they are part of a direct quotation.

-able/-ible

Words from English or French tend to take *-able*. Latin-based words take *-ible*. But there's no consistency. Check in the dictionary.

academic freedom

Under the Education Reform Act 1988, academic staff have: "Freedom within the law to question and to test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions."



academic year

The academic year at Queen's University Belfast is divided into two semesters rather than three terms.

access

This is the policy of extending the opportunity to enter higher education to students who do not necessarily have standard entry qualifications. Such students are typically from lower socio-economic groups or have an ethnic minority background, or have special educational needs (such as dyslexia or deafness). Mature and part-time students also fall into this category. Access courses are designed to prepare students for the demands of higher education.

acting

Upper case in a title: *Acting Head of School*.

ACU

Association of Commonwealth Universities.

addendum

The plural is *addendums*.

addresses

Do not insert commas in addresses unless they are written on one line:

*Queen's University Belfast
University Road
Belfast
BT7 1NN.*

admissions

Higher education institutions have the right to choose their own students. Admission to UK universities is coordinated through the Universities and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS).

adverbs

Avoid using hyphens after adverbs ending in *-ly*, for example *a highly controversial decision*, *a sorely needed funding increase*. However, hyphens are required following short and common adverbs: *hard-pressed for time*, *ill-prepared*.

affect/effect

Often confused. Affect is a verb, effect normally a noun. *Your decision will affect me. This is the effect it has had on me. To effect change.*

adviser

Not *advisor*.

**ageing**

not aging.

agenda

The plural is *agendas*.

A-levels

Not *A Levels* or *A-Levels*.

albeit

avoid its use, albeit quaint.

all right

Always two words. As the *Guardian* style guide puts it, 'All right is right; alright is not all right'.

alumnus

A man is an alumnus (plural, alumni), a woman is an alumna (plural, alumnae). Mixed sex groups are alumni. Any former student is an alumnus or alumna, regardless of whether or not a graduate of the University.

am/pm

Lower case, no punctuation.

American universities

Most states have two large public universities – University of Kentucky and Kentucky University (or U of Kentucky and Kentucky U). Avoid ambiguity when referring to them.

ampersand (&)

Use the word *and* unless referring to a specific company name which uses the ampersand instead of the word and, *Marks & Spencer*, *P&O*.

analysis

The plural is *analyses*.

and

And it can be effective to begin a sentence with this word. It adds forward momentum to the sentence, but do not overuse the device.

any more

Should always be two words.

anyway

Should always be one word.

apostrophes

Misuse of apostrophes is one of the single biggest areas of abuse in written English. Special care should be taken in using apostrophes – mistakes are easily seen and not often forgiven. When indicating the possessive for names, use an apostrophe followed by an *s* even when the person's name ends in *s* or another sibilant. Therefore: Dickens's *Great Expectations*: Marx's ideas.



With a few exceptions, the possessive of a singular common noun is formed by the addition of an apostrophe and s, and the possessive of a plural common noun by the addition of an apostrophe only. *The horse's mouth; the puppies' tails.*

Do not use an apostrophe to indicate plurals, including the plurals of acronyms and abbreviations, unless confusion would result without the apostrophe (as in the first example) *There are five s's in that word; there are five 5s in that number; there were five PhDs awarded last year.*

Apostrophes are not required for the terms bachelors degree or masters degree, nor should they be used if referring informally to 'a masters', as in *She's taking a masters in English.*

Queen's in *Queen's University Belfast* takes an apostrophe before the s. Making a mistake in the institution's name is not acceptable. Often the word *Queen's* is used on its own; avoid using it where it would need an apostrophe 's for the possessive. Use *The University's students*, not *Queen's's students*. You might just get away with *Queen's students*.

Apostrophes are sometimes used for shortened forms of words *'flu* for *influenza*.

If the word has taken flight in its own right, drop the apostrophe.

appendix

The plural is *appendices*.

appraise, apprise

The former means to estimate the worth of something; the latter means to inform someone.

AUT

Association of University Teachers, now no longer in existence (See UCU).

AUA

Association of University Administrators.

B

BA/BSc

Bachelor of Arts/Science.

bank holiday

No hyphen or initial capitalisation.

basically

Almost always used as an unnecessary qualifier in sentences. Best avoided, basically.

biannual, biennial

The first means twice a year; the second, once every two years.

black

If used in a racial context, always use lower case.

blueprint

Take care with this over-used metaphor; it refers to a completed plan rather than a preliminary one.

bottleneck

No hyphen. Another over-used metaphor, which means point of constriction, not merely an unspecified obstacle.

brackets

If a sentence is logically and grammatically complete without the information in round brackets (parentheses), the punctuation remains outside the brackets. *He attended a meeting at the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).* (A complete sentence that stands alone in brackets starts with a capital letter and ends with the stop inside the closing bracket.)

Britain

It is best to use the correct geo-political terms: Great Britain (GB) for England, Scotland and Wales; United Kingdom (UK)

for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

British

You will not normally have to identify people's nationality in formal writing. If doing so ensure you describe people in the way they would wish to be described – British, Irish, Northern Irish, American, African-American. Always be sensitive to issues of cultural identity when writing.

It is best to describe Queen's as a UK university, but it not inaccurate to say it is a British university. As it sits on the island of Ireland, and was founded in 1845, and received full university status in 1908, when Ireland was a single political entity within the UK, it is also an Irish university. The University is non-political and non-partisan. Every effort should be made to ensure language does not undermine its political neutrality.

Be aware of the audience you are writing for. For example, international students may want to know that their degrees carry the premium brand of a British education; they might also be interested in some of the brand values of being an Irish institution.

The term British Isles to describe the islands of the North Atlantic can be



contentious, and the euphemism 'these islands' sometimes used to get around this is not always acceptable to people either.

British Academy

The British Academy was founded in 1901. Its main purpose is to promote research and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

bullet points

Punctuation is not normally required after bullet point copy. For example:

- Shakespeare
- Modernism
- Chaucer

businessmen

Use *business people* or the *business community* instead.

C

can, may

Can applies to what is possible and *may* to what is permissible. Therefore a student *can* miss every tutorial on their course, but *may* not if tutorial attendance is a prerequisite for passing.

capitals

Proper nouns, official titles (books, films, etc) and course titles should be written with initial capitals, for example *Microsoft*, *As You Like It*, *Raging Bull*, *Introduction to Computer Science*. Capitalize abbreviations of degrees, but not the spelled-out versions and not when they're referred to generically: *After completing his BA, John Smith received his masters degree from Queen's.*

Do not capitalize small words such as *a*, *in*, *at*, *of*, *the*, *and*, *on* when they appear in presentation or document titles.

Some in-house words and titles are dignified with a capital letter, for example *the University*, when referring to Queen's, but *the university sector* and *universities*. Similarly the *Vice-Chancellor*, the *Pro-Vice-Chancellor* (note the hyphens), *Deans*, *Heads of School*, *Directors*, *Faculties*, *Schools*, *Directorates*, *the Vision*, *Senate*, *Academic Council*, *Convocation*. It is *Professor Joan Smith*, but the *professor*.

Try to minimize the use of capitals in a piece of writing; too many can make it more difficult to read and make it look too much like a metaphysical poem or the text of a restoration comedy.

CAT

See credit accumulation and transfer.

CD-rom

Not CD-ROM or CD-Rom.

chair

Preferred alternative to *chairman* or *chairwoman*.

Chancellor

The titular head of a university. The Chancellor's main responsibility is conferring degrees. The Chancellor also has the right to chair Senate, the governing body.

Charter

A charter is a document establishing a higher education institution. Queen's, in common with many 'old' universities, is constituted by Royal Charter, granted by the monarch in Privy Council. The University Charter (capital C for the Charter) dates from 1908.

civics

These are universities originally founded by Royal Charter in major cities, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool and Sheffield. Queen's University Belfast is also a 'civic' university.

cliché

Avoid them... like the plague.

collective nouns

Nouns such as committee, family, government, take a singular verb or pronoun when thought of as a single unit, but a plural verb or pronoun when thought of as a collection of individuals: therefore, the committee gave *its* approval to the proposal, but the committee reported back to *their* departments – it is better to say *Committee members reported back to their departments*.

collegiality

The principle of a university or department being a community of scholars who share the decision-making.

colon

the colon (:) is an important mark: it indicates that what follows explains what precedes it. The phrase before the colon is normally a complete sentence.

It can be followed by a sentence, a phrase, a list of words, or a single word. *The University has shortlisted four companies: A&B, C&D, E&F, G&H.*

Bullet points are normally introduced by a colon, like this:

- first point
- second point
- third point

Semicolons should be used for pauses which are longer than a comma and shorter than a full stop. *The battle of the sexes will never be won; there's too much fraternization with the enemy.*

comma

One of the most common punctuation marks, the comma, is used to:

- separate items in a list
- join two sentences into a single one when followed by a connecting word. *I heard the shot, but I did not see the smoke from the gun*
- indicate a parenthesis. The moon, full and bright, could be seen through the mist.

It is all too easy to overdo commas, and it is just as easy to put in too few. If you are not sure where to put commas in a sentence, it is probably too complicated and should be rewritten.

complement, compliment

Compliment means to praise; *complement* means to fill out or make whole.

comprise

Means to consist of. *Comprised of* is a common expression, but is always wrong.

computing terms

Use the following style: *database, email, homepage, internet, intranet, online, PC, URL, website, world wide web, www, web page*. Avoid hyphens and other punctuation.

continual, continuous

The former means very frequent but not constant; the latter means an uninterrupted sequence.

Convocation

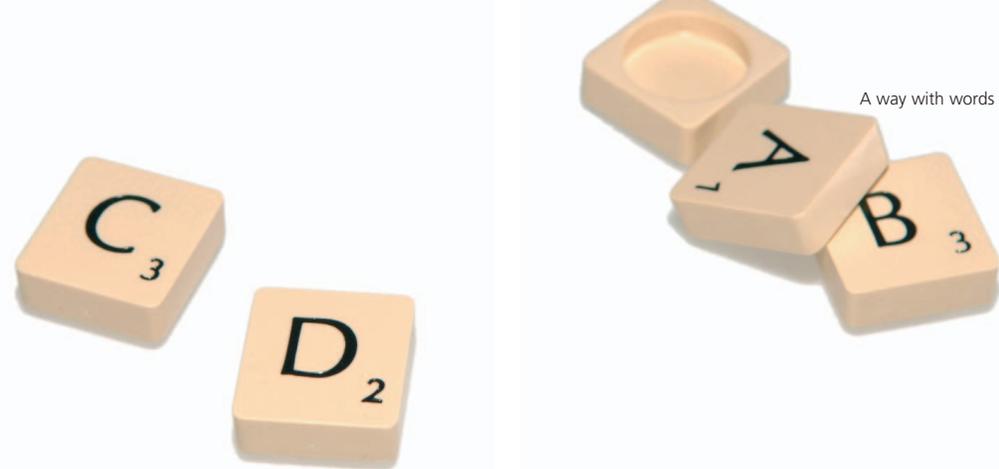
Convocation consists of senior officers of the University, remaining members of Senate, graduates of the University who are enrolled as members and such other members of staff and classes of persons as the Senate may determine following consultation with Convocation.

council, counsel

The first means an assembly, the second means advice. In a courtroom counsel is a legal representative.

CPD

Continuing Professional Development.



credit

Credits are awarded to a student who has successfully completed one or more modules of a modular degree course.

credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)

Credit accumulation is the process of a student earning credits on module-based courses which count towards a degree, and which enables a student to complete a degree more flexibly than under the traditional three or four-year honours courses. Credit transfer enables a student gaining a credit at one institution to transfer it to another, where the credit can be used towards an academic award.

criteria, criterion

The former is the plural; thus, one criterion but several criteria.

curriculum vitae (CV)

The plural is *curricula vitae* (CVs).

cutbacks

This is a loaded phrase, be careful with its use. Euphemisms such as *efficiency gains* may go down all right in Finance, but ring hollow elsewhere. Be careful in the use of the word cuts, it is often used by people sloppily, for example when an increase in budget falls short of the amount requested.

D

data

The word is plural, but takes a singular verb: *The data has been analysed.*

dates

Use this format: 1 January 2005 (no commas). Leave out the day of the week unless needed for clarity.

Dean

The head of a Faculty. Deans in Queen's line-manage Heads of School and are members of the University's senior management team.

decimate

Means kill or destroy a large proportion of and not obliterate.

definite, definitive

Definite means precise and unmistakable. *Definitive* means final and conclusive.

degree

The main qualification conferred by higher education institutions. First degree courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland usually last three years; some, such as language or engineering degree courses,

may last four years. Medicine, dental and veterinary courses normally last five years.

degree classification

The standard classifications for bachelors degrees are: first, upper second, lower second and third.

degree titles

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the most common titles for a first degree is Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science.

DEL

Department for Employment and Learning, not *Department of*, and not *Education and Learning*.

dependant, dependent

The former is the noun (*'My dependants are...'*), the latter the adjective (*'I am dependent upon this income'*).

developing countries

Preferable to 'the third world'.

dictionary

As a general rule, if a word does not appear in the smallest dictionary you can buy, it should not appear in papers or documents – unless it is a specialist term. Pocket dictionaries contain definitions for some 25,000 words which are more than enough

to meet normal needs. The University House dictionary is the *Collins English Dictionary* series. Unless stated otherwise in this guide, it is the final arbiter of spelling and usage.

disability

When referring to students, staff or other individuals with disabilities in university communications, bear in mind this advice from *The Guardian* style guide:

"Use positive language about disability, avoiding outdated terms that stereotype or stigmatise. Terms to avoid, with acceptable alternatives in brackets, include 'victim of', 'crippled by', 'suffering from', 'afflicted by' (prefer 'person who has', 'person with'); 'wheelchair bound', 'in a wheelchair' ('wheelchair user'); 'invalid' ('disabled person'); 'mental handicap', 'backward', 'retarded', 'slow' ('person with a learning disability'); 'the disabled', 'the handicapped', 'the blind', 'the deaf' ('disabled people', 'blind people', 'deaf people'); 'deaf and dumb' ('a person who is deaf and speech-impaired', or 'a person who is hearing and speech-impaired')."

discreet, discrete

The first means circumspect; the second means unrelated – individually separate and distinct.



disinterested, uninterested

The former means unbiased or impartial; the latter means uncaring.

DPhil

Doctor of Philosophy.

dual support system

Under the dual support system there are two main sources of public funding for research in higher education institutions:

research council grants, which are tied to specific projects; and **recurrent funding** for research from the funding councils, usable at the discretion of higher education institutions.

E

eg

No punctuation required. Try to avoid using in copy. The phrase *For example* is acceptable.

email

Lower case, and without a hyphen. If you must, do what you like in private emails, but if you are using email to discharge University business, internally or externally, follow the University style. Email is an abrupt form of

communication so be very careful about the tone of your messages. You should not use email to tell someone off, convey bad news or express anger. Always fill in the subject line on emails. This helps recipients prioritise their work. Email is not a substitute for other forms of communication, so do not overuse it. Email should certainly not be used as an alternative to face-to-face or telephone communication.

enquire/inquire enquiry/inquiry

inquire and inquiry is preferred.

ensure, insure

The first means to make certain; the second means to arrange for compensation to help in event of loss.

Erasmus

A European Union (EU) education programme to increase the number of university students studying part of a course in another member state of the EU, and to promote cooperation among universities through greater staff mobility. In 1995 Erasmus was officially absorbed into the Socrates programme, part of which deals with higher education.

**etc**

No full stop, and preceded by a comma. It has little place in formal writing as it betrays incomplete information in a sentence.

EU

European Union.

ex-

As a prefix, this takes a hyphen, for example *ex-directory*.

F

faculty

A group of schools headed by a **dean**.

Faculties at Queen's are organisational units and have no administrative responsibilities.

There are three:

- Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- Medicine, Health and Life Sciences
- Engineering and Physical Sciences.

FE

Further Education.

feedback

Do you really need feedback? Avoid this bit of jargon.

fewer, less

The general rule is that *less* applies to quantity (amounts) and *fewer* to number. Thus we have *fewer* students but *less* money.

finalise

Avoid if possible; use *complete* or *finish*.

first name, forename

Use instead of Christian name.

focused

Not *focussed*.

former

Means first of two (in conjunction with *latter*) previously mentioned objects or people.

If more categories are involved use 'first', 'second' and 'last'.

fortuitous

Not to be confused with 'fortunate'. Means accidentally or by chance.

fractions

Two-thirds, three-quarters, etc, but two and a half.

fundraiser, fundraising

No hyphen.



G

gay

Use as an adjective ('gay men', 'gay women', 'gay students', etc) wherever possible rather than as a noun ('gays').

Gaelic

In referring to language, use Gaelic for Scotland, Irish for Ireland. In sport, use lower case unless in a title. *Gaelic Athletic Association, gaelic games, gaelic football.*

gender/sex

Gender is used in grammar. Sex is used in a biological context – you are born into one sex or another. *She claimed sex discrimination, not gender discrimination.* Note however that it is *Queen's Gender Initiative* not *Queen's Sex Initiative*, which would be something else entirely.

government

If referring to the British Government, use *the Government* qualifying it with *British* or *UK* only if the context demands it (for example, if referring to a number of governments). Use lower case in all other contexts and in relation to all other countries. *The Canadian government... The French government...*

grassroots

One word.

H

halfway

One word, no hyphen.

hanged/hung

A man is hanged; a picture of a man is hung.

hers

Does not take an apostrophe.

however

The word *however* should not be used as a conjunction joining two sentences. Avoid using it at the beginning of a sentence. When used within a sentence, trap it between commas. The word *but* will often suffice. *He agreed with the concept, however, he disagreed with the specific proposal – He agreed with the concept, but he disagreed with the specific proposal.*



I

ie

No full stop. Like other abbreviations, avoid its use if you can.

imply, infer

Imply means to suggest; *infer* means to deduce.

impracticable, impractical

Not interchangeable. The first means impossible, the second means possible in theory but not workable at the moment.

initials

No spaces or points, whether individuals or institutions, for example FR Leavis, WH Smith.

Ireland

The island is Ireland. Northern Ireland is the six counties of the northeast of the island. Avoid calling it *the Province*, *Ulster* or *the North*. Province can be used to describe the nine counties of Ulster. The Republic of Ireland, or Irish Republic, is the name of the southern state. You can use *the Republic* when the context is clear, but do not use *Eire*, unless in a historical context.

its/it's

One of the most common confusions. *Its* is the possessive; *it's* is a contraction of *it is* or *it has*.

ize/ise

Most verbs ending in –ize, –ise can trace their roots to the Greek –izo. In *Modern English Usage*, HW Fowler notes: “Most English printers, taking their cue from Kent in *King Lear*, ‘Thou whoresom zed! Though unnecessary letter!’ , follow the French practice of changing –ize to –ise. But the Oxford University Press, The Cambridge University Press, *The Times* and American usage, in all of which –ize is the accepted form, carry authority enough to outweigh superior numbers.” Queen’s follows his advice. However, there are exceptions to the rule. The most common ones are: advertise, advise, chastise, comprise, compromise, demise, despise, devise, enfranchise, enterprise, exercise, excise, improvise, supervise and televise.



J

JANET

Acronym for Joint Academic NETWORK – a computer network linking UK higher education institutions at 150 sites, and providing connections to worldwide networks.

jargon

Jargon tends to exclude readers who are not ‘in the know’. Sloppy writing is often filled with jargon. Do your readers a favour and try and use clear and precise language.

job evaluation (JE)

This is a process which breaks jobs down into factors such as responsibility, knowledge, skill and creativity to avoid discrimination in employment. These factors are then weighted so that each job can be given a total points score. The system is used to decide pay or grading and to show an objective and transparent means of establishing ‘job size’ in the face of ‘equal value’ pay claims. Queen’s University uses the Hay job evaluation scheme.

K

key

A much overused term. It is usually used to imbue something mundane with an inflated sense of importance. How many keynote addresses can you remember? How many key tasks are normally delivered? How many key players really are? Use an adjective eg “This is key to our success”.

L

languages

The names of languages always take an initial capital: English, French, Chinese, Dutch.

last/past

Use last when meaning final, past for the most recent, or previous. *The last examination*, but the *past Vice-Chancellor*, *past Deans*.

Latin

Use English where possible. Except where Latin is accepted everyday speech, for example per annum. *Note well* not *nota bene*.



latter

Means second of two, not the third of three or the fourth of four.

lead, led

Led is the past tense of the verb *lead*.

lend, loan

Lend is the verb ('Can you lend me some money?') and *loan* the noun ('I've asked the bank for a loan').

licence, license

Noun, verb.

like, as

Avoid using *like* as a substitute for *as*, *as if* or *such as*, wherever possible.

literally

Frequently used erroneously. As Bill Bryson puts it in *Troublesome Words*, "if you don't wish to be taken literally, don't use *literally*. The word means actually, not figuratively."

Londonderry/Derry

Use Londonderry at first mention, Derry thereafter. The local authority is Derry City Council.

M

major

Often misused to mean main, chief or important. *Major* simply means greater and should be used as such.

manifesto

The plural is *manifestos*.

media

A plural term, and should be treated as such grammatically: 'The news media have reported...', not 'the news media has reported'.

meet with

Much loved by viewers of American soap operas – of whom there are a surprisingly high number at Queen's. The word *with* is redundant, and should not be used in speech or in writing.

memorandum

The plural is *memorandums*.

mega-

Only as a scientific terms please, unless you are ordering a mega-cheeseburger in the Students' Union.

midterm

No hyphen.

**militate, mitigate**

The former means to operate against something. The latter means to assuage, soften or make more endurable.

minor

Like *major*, frequently misapplied. Means lesser, not small or unimportant.

minuscule

Often misspelled as *miniscule*.

misspell

Take extra care not to misspell this word.

N

nevertheless, none the less

One word; three words.

Nobel prize

The second word is not capitalised.

none

Does not necessarily have to take a plural verb – ‘None of the issues has been resolved’ is an acceptable construction. The important point is to be consistent with your usage.

no one

Two words, no hyphen.

numbers

Spell out from one to nine; integers from 10 to 999,999 (except when a sentence begins with a number). Take care when using numbers to the power of ten; avoid usages such as ‘Over a 100 students...’. Make it ‘over a hundred students’ or ‘over 100 students’.

O

obscene

There is no such thing as *an obscene amount of money*. The obscene demands a high degree of indecency.

Office of Science and Technology (OST)

The OST was established by the government in 1992. It is headed by a Chief Scientific Adviser, and is responsible for the Government’s Science Budget which funds the research councils.

ours

No apostrophe please.

P

partially, partly

These two words have slightly different meanings. *Partially* means incompletely and *partly* means in part.

percentages

In text, write 'per cent' rather than %. The symbol can be used in tables.

personal names

Do people the courtesy of spelling their names correctly. Check the spelling of even common names, and look out for old favourites such as Stephen/Steven Smyth/Smith.

Use people's given names, not their full names unless they prefer these to be used on formal occasions. If people use initials (PJ) then do so too. If referring to an individual in a report or paper, use their full name at first mention, Professor Joan Jones, Mr John Smithers, Ms Pauline Johnston. In subsequent references omit their first name: Professor Jones, Mr Smithers, Ms Johnston. If they have received a knighthood or been created a dame then use Sir Firstname, Dame Firstname.

For women's titles, check whether they prefer Mrs, Miss or Ms. Make assumptions at your peril. If using surnames alone in a piece – a newspaper article, for example – treat women and men the same way.

personnel

The Human Resources Directorate includes responsibility for personnel, but the two are not interchangeable.

political correctness

This is a minefield you negotiate at your own peril. Use language which is respectful of other people and which does not demean them. Remember, something is offensive if that is how it is perceived by the person on the receiving end, regardless of the writer or speaker's intent.

postgraduate

One word.

practically

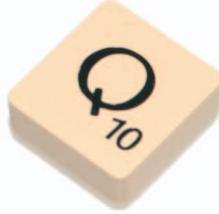
Means in practice, not almost or virtually.

practice, practise

Noun, verb.

presently

Means soon, not at present.



principal, principle

Principal can be a noun or adjective meaning chief or head. *Principle* is always a noun, and means a fundamental belief or theoretical basis.

Pro-Chancellor

A Pro-Chancellor is appointed by Senate and responsibilities include chairing Senate and University committees. Queen's can have up to three Pro-Chancellors at any one time.

program, programme

The former is appropriate only in the context of computing; otherwise use the latter.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor

Senior management post filled by a senior member of academic staff for a fixed period, appointed by Senate. Pro-Vice-Chancellors support the Vice-Chancellor in academic leadership and management of the University, and are members of the University Management Board. They play an active role in policy formulation and the strategic development of the University. The contraction PVC may be used in informal speech, but not in formal writing unless you are referring to poly vinyl chloride.

proviso

The plural is *provisos*.

Q

Queen's University Belfast

This is the preferred way of naming the University. Queen's and Queen's University can be used if appropriate. Avoid using QUB. The University always takes a singular verb; 'Queen's has decided to...' or 'the University has chosen to...'. The formal title of the University is: The Queen's University of Belfast. This is used on legal or quasi-legal documents, in material relating to Senate, Academic Council and Convocation, and for publications and other material relating to graduations. The coat of arms is normally used as the University mark on documents of this nature.

queuing

Not *queueing*.

quotation marks

These are used to indicate direct speech. Quotations should normally be introduced by a colon, and employ double quotation marks. *The Vice-Chancellor said: "This is the way to the Great Hall."* If using a quote within a quote, the second quote takes single quotation marks. *He said: "Churchill's phrase 'blood, sweat and tears' resonates down the decades."*



Note that punctuation goes within the quotation marks if it is a full sentence. Punctuation goes outside if it is a partial quote. *He said the paper was “an absolute disgrace”*. Single quotes can be used to distance oneself from a word, or to highlight it. “It stank of ‘new age’ philosophy.”

R

reader

A member of academic staff equivalent to senior lecturer – and just below a professor – who is expected to have a strong research background.

recurrent funding

This is annual government funding for teaching and research which is distributed to higher education institutions in the form of a block grant. Normally on an annual basis.

referendum

The plural is *referendums*.

re-form, reform

Note the distinction here; the first means to form again (*‘The committee was re-formed’*), the second to change for the better (*‘The voting system was reformed’*).

Registrar and Chief Operating Officer

The head of the integrated academic support structure of nine Directorates. The post holder is also secretary to the University’s governing body.

regretfully, regrettably

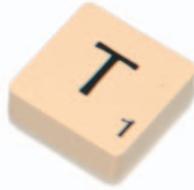
An important distinction, especially with regard to external letters. The first means with feelings of regret; the second means unfortunately. Beware of the ambiguity between these two terms.

remunerate

Not *renumerate*, although the mistake is frequent and easily made. Also take care with *remuneration*.

research council

A public body, set up by royal charter, which conducts its own research and funds selected research programmes in higher education institutions.



S

school

One or more related branches of teaching and research. A School is the primary academic unit at Queen's. Each has a Head of School. Use *Heads of School* for two or more.

Senate

The University's governing body, Senate is chaired by the senior Pro-Chancellor. Its membership is made up of University Officers, elected staff representatives, lay members and alumni elected by Convocation.

split infinitive

This is dangerous territory. It is all right to split infinitives when the phrase would otherwise be unacceptably cumbersome or so long as you don't do it to annoy people. Where would life be if we could no longer say: "To boldly go."

stationary, stationery

The former means not moving; the latter, writing materials.

strategy, tactics

A *strategy* is a long-term plan; *tactics* the day-to-day means of carrying it out.

Student Loans Company

Set up in 1990 to lend money to students for maintenance. The loans company will also administer variable fees.

sub-committee

Hyphenate.

SuperJANET

An advanced fibre optic computer network with the potential for a thousand-fold increase in the performance of JANET.

synopsis

The plural is *synopses*.

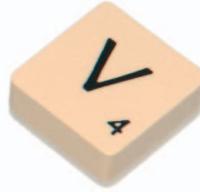
T

target

In business-speak, a target is something to be attained, achieved, beaten, obtained and a range of other terms. In fact, targets should be referred to in one of two ways – either the target is hit, or it is missed.

titles

Titles of books, journals, movies, newspapers, TV and radio programmes, and campus publications are styled italic with



initial caps *The Guardian*, *UTV Live at Six*, *Journal of Contemporary Science*.

transpire

Means to leak out, not to occur.

U

UCU

University and College Union formed in 2006 from the merger of the AUT and NATFHE third-level education unions.

unexceptionable, unexceptional

Often confused. *Unexceptionable* means not open to objections; *unexceptional* means ordinary and everyday.

university

When referring to Queen's University Belfast as *the University* use initial capitals. When referring to *a university* use lower case.

university names

It is important that you double check the spelling of names – there are a number of idiosyncratic titles in the university sector. These are a few examples, and may be of use in trivia quizzes.

All Souls College, Oxford – has no apostrophe.

Catharine's, Catherine's – the Cambridge college is St Catharine's; the Oxford college is St Catherine's.

Goldsmiths College – no apostrophe.

Johns Hopkins – s on both – no apostrophes.

King's College – *King's College, Cambridge* (note comma) but *King's College Oxford* (no comma).

Queen's College, Queens' College – It is *Queen's College, Oxford* but *Queens' College, Cambridge*.

St Andrews University – no apostrophe.

UCLA

Stands for the University of California at Los Angeles, not University College of Los Angeles.

V

Vice-Chancellor

The main academic and administrative officer – the institution's chief executive. Often abbreviated to VC in speech, this should never appear in writing unless in a direct quotation.

General principles

Writing and editing good English

In his book *Mind the Gaffe* (Penguin 2001), Larry Trask sets out some simple advice on good style. It is worth cutting the quotation out and sticking it on any keyboard you might come near.

“Write simply, plainly and clearly. Use plain words and not fancy words – especially when you’re not sure what the fancy words mean. Avoid vogue words and jargon. Plan your writing. Think about what you mean, and choose your words carefully. Don’t just dump a pile of hackneyed phrases onto the page. If you are not sure about a spelling or a usage, look it up. Read what you’ve written. Edit it and polish it. Work hard to be sure that your meaning is so clear that no reader can possibly misunderstand you or be puzzled.”

Here are some key points to consider when you sit down to write a document.

1. Vary the sentences

Writing which contains nothing but short – or long – sentences can be difficult to read. Introduce pace by varying the length of sentences, but be particularly wary of long sentences littered with sub-clauses. Leave streams of consciousness to writers of literary fiction. Varying sentence structure also makes a passage easier to read, and

avoid using the same opening word in successive paragraphs. As an example, if you are writing about a particular person, do not begin every sentence with their name or personal pronoun. Repetitive language bores the reader and obscures your meaning.

2. Use active verbs

Text with too many passive constructions can be unfocused and dull. Using active verbs helps to maintain the reader’s attention. It is better to use “Queen’s launched the initiative”, rather than “The initiative was launched by Queen’s”. Even a straightforward phrase like: “The Committee had a discussion about the matter,” is less effective than: “The Committee discussed the matter”.

3. Be concise

This is critical. The primary cause of ‘officialese’ is needlessly inflated language employed by institutions in correspondence. You should respect your readers by avoiding unnecessary wordiness. Where possible, use short verbs and nouns. For example: ‘buy’ rather than ‘purchase’, ‘start’ rather than ‘commence’, and so on. Use simple synonyms unless a more complex alternative offers necessary precision.

Officialese

afford an opportunity
 are desirous of
 are in receipt of
 at an early date
 at a later time/stage
 at the present time/at this moment
 at this point/point in time
 beneficial aspects
 by means of
 comes into conflict
 despite the fact that
 during the course of
 effect an improvement/change
 for the purpose of
 for the reason that
 give consideration to
 have a need/requirement for
 in agreement with
 in a timely manner
 in close proximity to
 in large measure/part
 in order to
 in regard to
 in the absence of
 in the course of
 in the event that
 in the (very) near future
 in view of the fact that
 make a determination that
 make an adjustment in
 make provision for
 make the assumption that
 not in a position to
 take action
 take into consideration
 the extent to which
 to a large extent
 until such time as
 with the exception of
 with the knowledge that
 without further delay

Alternatives

let, allow, permit
 want, wish
 have
 soon
 later
 now
 now
 benefits
 by
 conflicts
 despite
 during
 effect
 to
 because
 consider
 need
 agree
 on time
 near
 mainly, chiefly, principally
 to, for
 regarding
 without
 during
 if
 soon, immediately
 since, because
 determine
 adjust
 provide
 assume
 cannot
 act, do
 consider
 how much
 largely, mostly
 until
 except
 knowing, aware
 now

Some wordy examples of officialese with alternatives are listed opposite.

In addition, avoid meaningless filler phrases such as 'to all intents and purposes', 'first and foremost', 'as such', and so on.

Constructions like: 'on a weekly/monthly/yearly basis' are pointless inflation; the adverb alone is sufficient.

4. Be aware of your audience

Write for the intended audience for your document. Will the recipients be familiar with the terminology you are using? As a rule, do not assume knowledge. Use your judgment. If the recipient is looking purely for information, it may be appropriate to omit much of the contextual content. However, if writing for strangers – trying to engage the interest of potential students or commercial partners, for instance – a user-friendly approach may be more suitable.

5. Tone of voice

University communications should project a consistent tone of voice. That voice should be approachable, yet authoritative and professional. Personal opinions have no place in official papers, but it is also important to avoid appearing indifferent, especially in sensitive areas such as

rejection letters to students or job applicants. If you have to report a difficult decision, do not evade the point, and avoid cumbersome impersonal constructions such as: 'It is considered that...' or 'It has been deemed necessary to...' Your respondent is entitled to know who has made the decision. If writing on behalf of a committee or an Officer of the University it may be better to write: 'The Vice-Chancellor believes...' or 'The Student Appeals Committee consider...' Explanations or clarifications may be included at your discretion, but avoid expressions of regret which give the impression you disagree with the verdict. If you are writing on behalf of a manager or senior officer, make sure he or she is happy with the words you are using on their behalf.

6. Proofreading, revising and editing

It is essential to read what you have written to check simple errors of grammar, syntax and spelling. Revision is as important in writing as typing the words. It is good practice to give everything a final read-through. Where possible, get a colleague to check what you have written. It is easier for them to identify errors. Beware of late changes. You can introduce a mistake when fixing one. Always check phone numbers

and email addresses are up-to-date. Add up columns of numbers to make sure the total is correct. Question any statistic or statement of which you are unsure. If you have to read a sentence more than once to grasp its meaning, revise it. Don't avoid making large-scale changes to a document if needed. When proofreading, it is your job to be the reader's advocate.

Remember the two keywords – *clarity* and *consistency*.

Report writing

The University's decision-making process depends on managers being able to make informed decisions. Reports are an important source of information, and consequently play a pivotal role in the decision-making process. They are also a vital part of the University's records system, allowing the University to justify its decisions and giving future generations an insight into the thought processes which underscored key decisions in the University's history.

Reports do many jobs. Some inform people about facts or decisions, or record them for posterity; others are designed to provoke debate, or persuade people to take a

particular course of action. Many will make recommendations on the basis of arguments set out within the body of the report.

The ability to write reports is an important skill for many within Queen's, and ability in this area is a real advantage when competing for senior roles within the University.

All the principles outlined in this document underpin the production of a good report, but two are paramount: quality and consistency. At the outset, it is crucial that you think about the audience. Who is the report for? What is its purpose? What do they need? And what do they expect?

There will be times when you are expected to be creative, but the best reports have an inescapable logic to them: a beginning, a middle and an end. They are clearly laid out, in numbered paragraphs for easy reference, with appropriate headings and sub-headings. The language should be formal, but not stuffy. Do not confuse complicated language for formality.

Many reports are there to inform decision-making. The structure should:

1. Set out the context and the purpose of the report

2. Outline the problem or the challenge being faced, and the implications
3. Set out the options – there should be a number of options – and the arguments for and against. There should be a conclusion
4. Give a summary and make recommendations.

In a major report, you would expect to see an executive summary at the beginning which gives a summation of the arguments and sets out the recommendations.

Any report, no matter how well it is written, is only as good as the work which has gone into putting it together. At the outset, you should identify the information needed, decide whom to consult, and gather any relevant papers and documents. Tables are a good means of communicating complex information, so think about how data can best be expressed.

Do not worry too much about the first draft. Write something down on paper. You can review it and rewrite it later. There is nothing as daunting as a blank piece of paper or a clear screen on your PC. The sooner you have something to work with the better.

Ask colleagues to read the draft and make suggestions; you may have a committee which will be signing off the report. Work closely with the chair to get a document in shape for consultation. Make the status of the paper clear – is it for comment, for noting, or for approval? – and welcome robust feedback. Do not feel precious about what you have written.

Redraft if necessary, and when you have the final version, proof it, and ask someone else to do this. You may not see your own mistakes. You will read what you think is there, not what is really there. After the final proofing – read it again. It is at this stage that the most glaring mistakes often slip through, usually because they have been introduced during the proofing stage. Always be alert, some mistakes do their best to remain invisible until they appear in print. Then they reveal themselves in all their glory.

Minutes

Gone are the days when minutes of meetings recorded every detail of a discussion. Minutes should record three things:

- date and time of the meeting
- attendees and absentees
- issues discussed and decisions taken.

It is as simple as that. You do not need to go into great detail about the nature of a discussion, except where there is a need to include relevant considerations leading to a decision or unless someone makes a particularly important comment, or an individual member wishes to record dissent.

Minutes should be written as soon after the meeting as possible, checked with the individual responsible for driving the committee, and then with the chair. It is good practice to circulate them as soon as they have been cleared.

Take copious notes during the meeting, but leave most of them in your notebook to be used as a reference if you are challenged.

Typography

Reports and minutes should be dressed in the approved typography. Templates are available. The text for A4 reports and minutes should be in 11 point Arial, the line spacing should be set at 14 point. In Microsoft Word, go to Format (top line), choose Paragraph; Line Spacing, and

Exactly from the drop down menu. Change the number to 14 point. Reports should be justified on the right-hand margin.

University secretaries are the experts in setting out reports. Let them do it. Academic support staff and managers who try to do it themselves often create more problems than they solve.

Acknowledgement

This guide was developed by the Use of English working group: Wilma Fee, Barbara Groves, Lorraine McCallum, Derek Smyth and Tom Collins. Much of the text was written by Dr Nic Dunlop, then working at the School of English and now a lecturer in the University of Birmingham. The text has been informed by colleagues across the University who bravely submitted their correspondence and other documents for examination.

The Group would like to thank everyone who contributed to the production of the Guide. The project was inspired by the Registrar, whose office bears the brunt of much incoherent English in spoken and written form and which does so with good grace – most of the time.

Additional thanks to Publications Manager Yasmin Jeffery and Media Services for the design and photography.

Copyright © 2007
Queen's University Belfast. All rights reserved.

**Marketing, Recruitment and
Communications**

Queen's University Belfast
University Road
Belfast
BT7 1NN
Northern Ireland
Tel: (028) 9097 3091
Fax: (028) 9097 3401
Email: comms.office@qub.ac.uk
www.qub.ac.uk

© Queen's University Belfast, 2007

CDS N108876