#### Introduction

Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust has processes in place to ensure that quality health information is produced (see Patient Information Policy on ICID). However, it is recognised that there is often more than one correct way to write something. A house style guide is a way for organisations to develop their own set of rules when there is no agreement in traditional grammar. The guide is also useful in recording common mistakes and for listing terms that have been adopted or accepted by the hospital.

The guide will be added to, as issues about language are raised and solved. It is not meant as a comprehensive overview of grammar and the English language but it will help resolve common ambiguities so that we can be more consistent in the way we write, edit and present our patient literature.

## The Style Guide

## A

#### Abbreviations and acronyms

Typically, unless an abbreviation or acronym is so familiar that it is used more often than the full form (such as BBC, HIV, NATO), you should introduce an abbreviation or acronym by putting it in parentheses immediately after the words it stands for.

An example is “emergency department (ED).” But sometimes you need to reverse the order as in “TB (tuberculosis).” This reversal puts emphasis on the more widely-used term but still makes its meaning clear.

In longer documents, we recommend re-defining abbreviations and acronyms at the first use in each chapter or section.

**Abbreviations – lower case**

Lower-case letters are preferable because they are quicker and easier to read and do not interrupt the word-flow by making the eyes move up and down. Therefore, as a general rule, capitals should not be used unless there is a good reason to do so, such as to show the beginning of a sentence.

Thus, measures such as kg and km are always in lower-case. When they are preceded by a figure, it is common practice is not to put a space between the figure and the abbreviation, e.g., 2pm, 45lb, 20kg, 80kph, 50mph.

**Abbreviations - capitalising**

In most other cases abbreviations are capitalised: DVT, PE, CHD

The plural of these abbreviations is always indicated by a lower-case ‘s’, e.g., GPs.

**Accents**On words now accepted as English, use accents only when they make a crucial difference to pronunciation: cliché, soupçon, façade, café, communiqué, exposé (but not chateau, decor, elite, feted, naive).   
  
If you use one accent, use all: émigré, mêlée, protégé, résumé.

#### Active, not passive Active phrases have greater impact, and tend to be shorter, than passive ones.

#### Be direct. A hit B describes the event more concisely than B was hit by A.

*The hospital committee will meet next week*

Not

*A meeting of the hospital committee will be held next week.*

#### **Americanisms**

Do not adopt American practice of turning nouns into verbs.

#### **Apostrophes**

Apostrophes tend to be overused with plurals. For example it is *GPs not GP’s,*

*RNs* not *RN’s*. Unless you are indicating possession i.e. *It is the GP’s car.*

The rule is this:

To indicate possession in a singular common noun you use apostrophe *s*

*The dog’s breakfast* – belonging to the dog

Plural nouns ending in s take the *s* apostrophe

*The dogs’ breakfast* – belonging to many dogs.

Plural nouns that don’t end in *s* use apostrophe *s*.

*The children’s breakfast* – belonging to many children.

## B

#### Brackets

If a whole sentence is within brackets, put the full stop inside.

If the clause ends with a bracket, which is not uncommon (this one does), the bracket should be followed by a comma.

**Bold**

Because the bold version of a font makes text stand out strongly, it needs to be used for highlighting **important words**, **phrases** and **sections**. Thus main headings, subheadings etc provide the reader with clues as to what your document is all about.

## C

#### **Capitalisation**

Capital letters are useful because they announce the start of a piece of text (sentence) or an important piece of information such as a name. They lose their effectiveness when over-used. Full capitalisation is more tiring and slower to read, because it reduces recognition by making all letters a similar size.

For this reason minimal capitalisation is preferred. Obvious capitalisation including proper nouns – names of people, places, trademarks etc. should be used.

DON’T USE CAPS FOR BODY TEXT, BECAUSE IT DECREASES THE CONTRAST BETWEEN LETTERS.

People’s positions are uncapitalised, for example the divisional director of Surgical Services, the manager of Well Women’s Services, the doctor in the Respiratory Clinic, the nurses on Britford ward.

When referring to particular people use capitals. Janet Joss, Senior Manager.

Specific departments, clinics or directorates are always capitalized e.g. Speech and Language Therapy, Medicine, Genetics, the Sexual Health Clinic. However subsequent use of the generic abbreviation is uncapitalised.

*The Sexual Health Clinic was opened in 2009. Women have attended the* clinic from all over Salisbury.

Medications should only be capitalised if a brand name is used.

*An injection of dalteparin (Fragmin) will be ……..*

In titles, use capitalisation consistently. It is generally accepted that if you are going to capitalise words you capitalise the more important words only, and keep the lesser filler words in lowercase (and, the, to, a, etc.)

#### Capitals and medical terms

Unless they contain a proper noun (*Pap smear*), disease, virus and treatments should be lower case e.g. *hepatitis B, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).*

# **Contact details**

Use the following standard abbreviations for all patient literature:

Tel: 01722 336262 ext. 4401

Fax:

Email:

Web:

#### Colons

#### Use a colon “to deliver the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words” (Fowler). They brought presents: gold, frankincense and oil at £35 a barrel. Use a colon before a whole quoted sentence, but not before a quotation that begins in mid-sentence. She said: “It will never work.” He retorted that it had “always worked before”.

#### Commas

Use commas as an aid to understanding. Too many in one sentence can be confusing.   
  
It is not always necessary to put a comma after a short phrase at the start of a sentence if no natural pause exists there: *The clinic is open from 9am to 4pm*. But a breath, and so a comma, is needed after longer passages: *most patients cope with the examination well, experiencing only a mild discomfort.*  
Use two commas, or none at all, when inserting a clause in the middle of a sentence. Thus, do not write: *Use two commas, or none at all when inserting* . . . *Use two commas or none at all, when inserting . . .*   
  
Commas can alter the sense of a sentence. To write *Mozart's 40th symphony, in G minor*, with commas indicates that this symphony was written in G minor. Without commas, *Mozart's 40th symphony in G minor* suggests he wrote 39 other symphonies in G minor.   
  
Do not put a comma before and at the end of a sequence of items unless one of the items includes another and. Thus *The doctor suggested an aspirin, half a grapefruit and a cup of broth*. But *he ordered scrambled eggs, whisky and soda, and a selection from the trolley*.   
  
Do not put commas after question-marks, even when they would be separated by quotation marks: *“May I have a second helping?” he asked*.

#### Contractions

For clarity and impact, spell out all words.

Do not abbreviate such as can’t, don’t, mustn’t etc

## E

## F

**Full stops**  
Use plenty. They keep sentences short. This helps the reader.   
  
Do not use full stops in abbreviations or at the end of rubrics (title, heading or subheading).

## H

#### Hyphens

According to the Oxford Dictionary ‘there are few clearly defined rules’ on the subject of hyphens. Even the dictionaries are in disagreement as to which words should be hyphenated. It is important for the hospital to adopt a style and to be consistent with its use of hyphens in all literature.

Minimal hyphenation is encouraged and should only really be used to avoid ambiguity.

*e.g. Re-cover (cover again) and recover (retrieve), a little-used car* and a *little used-car*.

Sometimes when a prefix ends in the same vowel as the word that follows:

*De-emphasise*

*Re-enter*

Though this is less important for words that are well known:

*Coordinate*

*Cooperate*

Use a hyphen with a prefix when the main word starts with a capital

non-English, un-American

The following words recur in Salisbury District Hospital’s (SDH) literature and should not be hyphenated:

* breastfeeding
* babysitting
* childcare
* homebirth
* wellbeing
* post mortem
* side effects
* health care
* pain killers
* outpatient
* inpatient.

The following words recur in SDH literature and should be hyphenated:

* part-time
* co-author
* co-worker
* X-ray
* well-known

Compound adjectives that are short adverbial phrases are hyphenated such as:

Up-to-date

40-year-old

A compound adjective with an adverb ending in *ly* doesn’t have a hyphen:

*Beautifully made bed*

But a compound adjective with an adverb that doesn’t end in *ly* does have a hyphen:

*Well-known maker of beds.*

## I

**Italics**

The purpose of italic typefaces is to aid the reader’s comprehension by separating off certain words and phrases from their surrounding text*.*

1. Foreign words; e.g.: ‘We turned left and found ourselves in a *cul de sac*.’
2. The titles of books, newspapers, articles and stories within a sentence on their own without explanation; e.g.: ‘The weekly edition of the *Salisbury Journal* was always on the streets by Friday afternoon.’
3. Latin phrases used to classify living things; e.g.: ‘Many people wonder why mankind is referred to as *homo sapiens*.’ Another use of italics that has been around *ab aeterno*.
4. Where a word is used as an example rather than for its meaning; e.g.: ‘The word *Kennedy* is a proper noun.’
5. For introducing new terms; e.g.: ‘In Freudian psychology reference is made to the *ego*, the *super-ego*, and the *id*.’ This is a good solution for highlighting words that will be explained later.
6. For the subjects of definitions; e.g.: ‘An *odd* *number* is any number that cannot be divided by two.’
7. For mathematical symbols: e.g.: ‘The standard acceleration of gravity *g* is 9.81183 metres per second per second.’
8. For emphasis; e.g.: ‘Janice wasn’t the *only* girl at the party.’ The use of italics for emphasis is less intrusive than bold and more subtly suggestive.
9. Using a letter or number as a noun; e.g.: 'He was vexed because they had left out the *d* in his name.'

Italics should not be used for blocks of text because they can reduce readability.

## J

#### Jargon and technical language

You should avoid technical language e.g. *provider trusts, acute services* or medical terms e.g *video-urodynamics, urethral catheter, intravenous, cannula* unless:

* it is clearly explained when it is introduced
* your information is only intended for readers who will understand these terms (however, since all patient information can be read by relatives of expert patients, **all** jargon and medical terms should be clearly explained).

## L

#### Lists

Lists, including bulleted lists should have no punctuation when introduced by a colon. Except for a full stop after the last point to indicate the end of the list.

Symptoms to watch for include:

* nausea and stomach cramps
* rashes and skin discolouration
* dizziness
* constipation
* fatigue.

If the bullet points contain sentence fragments, use a full stop only to indicate that one sentence has ended and to indicate the end of the list.

The clinic takes several approaches to this:

* patients can be referred by their GP. This means that they would be referred directly to the clinic
* patients can self-refer. They may make appointments through outpatients
* patients can be referred through the Emergency Department
* several patients will be referred through the AMU and Nunton Unit.

Shorter lists do not require a colon and can be separated by a comma.

The hospital provides a clean environment, uncluttered wards and freshly made food for all patients.

## N

#### Numbers

Spell out numbers one to ten (*one, two, three*). Use numerals for subsequent numbers (11, 12, 13).

*There were seven people waiting in the GUM Clinic but more than 15 were waiting in the Orthopaedic Clinic.*

If a series of numbers is being related, use numerals regardless of the size of the number:

*Of the 200 women who came to the Orthopaedic Clinic 30 were Chinese, 6 were Arabic, 4 were Vietnamese and the remaining were French.*

With measurements always use the numeral.

2 kg, or 2 ml

Common symbols - such as **ml** - can be used. Less common symbols should be spelt out.

Use figures when a decimal is used (8.78).

When the number begins the sentence it should be typed in full.

Fractions should be hyphenated (*one-half, three-quarters*, etc) and, unless they are attached to whole numbers (*8½, 29¾),* spelled out in words, even when the figures are higher than ten: ‘*Of those that attended the clinic, one tenth came from Salisbury, a twentieth from Fordingbridge’.*

## P

#### Percentages

In patient information it is often necessary to explain side effects or risks of certain treatments or procedures. These are most commonly expressed in percentages i.e*. 50% of women will experience fatigue*. However, it is recognised that many people have difficulties with percentages, and It is preferable, wherever possible, to say *‘one in every two women will experience fatigue.’*

Frequency statements work better – i.e. *‘4 out of every 10 patients have a side effect’*. Research has shown that patients also like a mixture, i.e. *‘rare – affects fewer than 1 in 10,000 people’.*

#### Pronunciation

Whilst not strictly grammar, it is recommended that if a difficult to pronounce medical word is used, a guide as to the pronunciation can be added.

For example: Psychologist (si-col-o-jist)

## Q

#### Quotation Marks

Single quotation marks ‘*word* ’ are preferred when direct quotes are used in patient information.

## R

## S

**Semi-colons**Semi-colons should be used to mark a pause longer than a comma and shorter than a full stop. Don't overdo them.   
  
Use them to distinguish phrases listed after a colon if commas will not do the job clearly. *The research confirms three points: the apples should be red; they should be English; and they should always be cut up before eating.*

#### Short words

Use them. They are often Anglo-Saxon rather than Latin in origin. They are easy to spell and easy to understand. For example:

About = approximately,

Before = prior to,

After = following,

Let = permit,

But = however,

Use = utilise,

Make = manufacture,

Take part = participate,

Set up = establish,

Enough = sufficient,

Following = after

Show = demonstrate and so on.

**Singular or plural? Collective nouns**  
There is no firm rule about the number of a verb governed by a singular collective noun. It is best to go by the sense, that is, whether the collective noun stands for a single entity (The committee was elected in March, The staff is loyal) or for its constituents: (The committee is unsure but the committee members are unsure, The preceding generation are all dead, The staff are at each other's throats). Do not, in any event, give all singular collective nouns singular verbs: The couple have a baby boy is preferable to The couple has a baby boy. Indeed, in general, treat both a pair and a couple as plural.   
  
A rule for number. The number is. . ., A number are. . .

## T

## U

**Underlining**

According to studies, the regular Web user sees blue-and-underlined text as hyperlinks. For this reason this is a good standard to stick to.

Underlined words are difficult to read and therefore should only be used for links and nothing else!

## V

## W

**Word order**

Phrases at the beginning of a sentence will attach themselves to the first noun or pronoun that follows.

After eating my lunch, the waiter spoke to me.

## X

## Y

## Z

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