WRITING STYLE GUIDE

JUNE 2016

INTRODUCTION

The University's visual identity reflects the diversity, breadth and dynamism of our institution. Ensuring this is consistent throughout all materials and activity is essential to presenting a reputable and professional appearance.

The University's writing style should also reflect this – ensuring that we are engaging our readers, communicating key messages, and presenting the right impression of Loughborough University.

This guide has been created to support both experienced colleagues, and those with less confidence, when producing copy for the web and outward-facing documents on behalf of their school or department. It is not intended to replace any publisher or discipline-specific style sheets followed by academics, nor is it intended to dictate how you should write publications.

It offers advice and tips to help you create effective copy that is in line with the University's current identity and tone of voice. It should support you in creating publications that are easy to understand, accessible to all, and enjoyable to read. It is not intended to make publications simplistic or to stop individual writing styles.

Further guidance
You will need your staff login details to access these resources
Copywriting 101 - How to craft compelling copy (Copyblogger)
Tips for Writers (CIPR)
Writing for online audiences (CIPR)

The purpose of any publication is to engage and inform the reader. Keep your text clear and concise. As a general rule, sentences should be no more than 25 words long.

Don't over communicate. The reader should be able to understand a document at first reading, and in the same sense that you, as the writer, meant it to be understood.

Keep your writing style simple by using plain English. This will make your text more readable and ensure your message is delivered in the clearest manner, with the greatest impact.

For further advice and guidance see
www.plainenglish.co.uk

Avoid using bureaucratic language and jargon that individuals from outside a university environment may not understand. This does not include acronyms which are covered later in this guide.

Present your information in a logical and consistent way. When reading your text back, imagine it is the first time you're reading the information – would you understand what it was telling you?

Tip: Making a plan before you get started will make this easier - what topics will you cover and in what order? This will help you prioritise your main messages, and ensure the content is effective, logical and not repetitive.

Signpost information clearly rather than duplicating your copy on various pages across the publication. This includes directing the reader to different pages within the publication or providing website URLs to send the reader online.

Don't be afraid to use bullet points – they make information easier to consume. More guidelines on the use of bullet points can be found in the 'Formatting and design' section of this document. The tone should be professional, but not too formal. Use *you* and *we* to speak directly to the reader.

Where appropriate keep the tone conversational. Choose language that is polite, clear and suitable for face-to-face conversation.

Try not to use the same sentence structure throughout your copy. For example, if you are writing about a person or a group, refrain from starting every sentence with their name or the same personal pronoun (he, she, they).

Make it active! Passive verbs can prevent your copy from being engaging and cause confusion. Active verbs will grab the reader's attention, make the information clear and sound less pompous.

Example:
Active verb: Many students visit our open days.
Passive verb: Open days are visited by many students.

Contractions such as *you'll* and *we'll* can help establish a friendly, informal tone, and are useful when communicating with prospective students. However, as a general rule for publications, they should be used sparingly. The use of negative contractions such as *can't* and *won't* should be avoided where possible.

Keep styling consistent throughout your text. From the way you display quotes, to the words that you hyphenate; ensure all your style choices are consistent throughout.

WRITING FOR THE WEB

Copy that is created for print should not be replicated online. Many web visitors are looking for information at speed, so you need to grab their attention as soon as they land on the page. Others may be browsing but will expect to be able to locate the information they need quickly, and copy that is longer than necessary can stop them from doing so.

Use shorter sentences and paragraphs (ideally no more than four sentences).

Where appropriate, break up long paragraphs into sections with headings/subheadings. Make headings simple and concise to aid skim reading.

Each page has a purpose – get to the point as quickly as possible.

Use simple language and words that people are likely to look for.

By using keywords and phrases that people are looking for, there's also a good chance you'll be improving your search engine optimisation, and ultimately pushing your web pages further up the search results pages.

The most important points should always come first, before any detail and background information are provided.

People will land on your page from different routes so make sure your text makes sense as a single entity.

Try and include one clear call to action or incentive to keep your reader on the site, after they have read your content.

For example: If you are writing a page about course fees, include a link to your scholarships page. Put yourself in the position of the reader and think about their thought processes after reading your copy.

Be clear about what you want the reader to do next. Don't overwhelm readers with multiple hyperlinks to other sites, or lists of contact details.

Key questions to ask when reviewing your web copy:
• Does your headline communicate what you are talking about?
• Does your image communicate this message?
• Do your subheadings summarise your key points?

Further guidance
We are currently developing some broader guidance on writing for the web. When ready, this will be made available to all University staff.

For advice and guidance on writing for the web in the meantime, contact the Web and Digital team. E: digital@lboro.ac.uk

FAIRNESS AND INCLUSIVENESS

Disability
Avoid outdated terms that stereotype or stigmatise.

Refer to disabled people, not the disabled; or somebody who is visually impaired, not blind.

The following government website is useful for suggested words and phrases when writing about disabilities.

Inclusive language:
[Words to use and avoid when writing about disability (link)](link)

If you need to refer to disability within your text, try to structure sentences in a positive way.

Example: John Smith, who is a wheelchair user, studies... (not wheelchair bound or in a wheelchair)

John Smith, who has muscular dystrophy, is a student... (not suffers from, or is a victim of)

Gender
Use the pronouns *they* or *them* where gender is not specified. Choose accurate words that are free from bias, such as people or humanity instead of man or mankind.

Age
Consider whether a term could be deemed as offensive (ie referring to someone as elderly or old).

Further guidance

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FORMATTING AND DESIGN

Formatting text
Following the guidelines below will ensure that your text is legible and consistent.

Text should be aligned to the left where possible. This is standard practice and ensures your text is legible. It also makes it easier for the reader to find the start and finish of each line. Left-alignment also makes the text easier to read for individuals with dyslexia and visual impairments.

Do not justify the text as this will make it harder to read.

For recommended font types and sizes for both print and web please refer to the Visual Identity guidelines.

Where necessary, include a statement to inform readers that alternative formats are available.

Alternative format statements should be clearly visible on either the back or front cover, and include full contact details.

Example: If you need a copy of this document in an alternative format (for example Braille, large print, audio or e-text) please email or telephone 01234 567890.

Highlighting and emphasising text
Avoid excessive use of bold and italic fonts. Italics can be used to flag text that is different from that surrounding it.

Example: Contractions such as

Spell out common fractions rather than using numerals.

Example: half or three-quarters NOT ½ or ¾

Subscript and superscript
A subscript or superscript is a number, figure, symbol or indicator that is smaller than their normal line of type and is set slightly below or above the line.

Writing dates
Always write the date before the month – ie 10 June.

Do not use th, nd, st, rd with dates, just the number.

Never write *the* before the date – ie the 10 June. Unless absolutely necessary, do not use days with dates to avoid confusion.

When referring to an academic year use the format *2014/15*.

Headings and subheadings
Main page headings and subheadings should use sentence case (capital letter at the start of a sentence and on names).

Example:
Our research and impact

Why choose design at Loughborough?

Some designers prefer capitals for styling purposes, so in some circumstances block capitals can be used for main headings only.

All headings should have minimal punctuation.

Ensure your styling and presentation of headings and subheadings is consistent throughout. Consider alignment, font size, and bold effects.

Course and module titles
As a general rule, *programme* should be used for postgraduate offerings and *course* for undergraduate. Both words can be used if needed, to improve the fluidity of the text, but you should ideally aim for consistency. Which word you use may also depend on how formal the document/ audience is.

ie *Programme* would be used in official reports, *course* would be used in undergraduate student recruitment materials.

The words *programme* and *course* should never be capitalised unless they are used as part of an official course title.

Example: International Foundation Programme (IFP)

This programme offers a comprehensive understanding of...

Capitalise module titles.

Example: Modules include Introduction to Language, Introduction to Poetry, and Writing in History.

Do not capitalise disciplines of study.

Example: Areas studied include English language, poetry, English literature in its historical context, and literary and critical theories.

When writing honours as part of a degree title, it can be written as Hons or Honours, in round brackets, with a capital letter, alongside the qualification type.

Example: BA (Hons) BA (Honours)

Honours should be written in lower case if referred to within a general sentence.

Example: This honours degree is...

Do not use capitals when referring to degrees in general terms (bachelor's, master's, doctorate, associate degree) but always capitalise specific degrees (Bachelor of Arts, Master of Science).

When referring to a master's degree, use an apostrophe.

Below is a list of all abbreviated academic qualifications and the correct way to format them.

BA	Bachelor of Arts
BEng	Bachelor of Engineering
BSc	Bachelor of Science
EngD	Engineering Doctorate
MA	Master of Arts
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MChem	Master of Chemistry
MEng	Master of Engineering
MMath	Master of Mathematics
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
MPhys	Master of Physics
MRes	Master of Research
MSc	Master of Science
MSci	Master in Science
PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy

Bullet points

Bullet points make information easier to understand and quicker to consume. They can be used in a number of ways, and punctuation rules vary for each.

Single word bullet points

can also help here by providing a clear and easy to understand URL that directs traffic through to the original web address.

Example:
http://www.lboro.ac.uk/services/hr/a-z/family-leave-policy-and-procedure---page.html

would be presented in print as

www.lboro.ac.uk/familyleave

Using hyperlinks

Make your link words specific. The focus for the link should be to inform the reader of exactly what is going to happen next.

Avoid words such as *click* and *here*. These words are irrelevant to assistive technologies and not descriptive enough for screen readers – meaning they can cause major accessibility issues.

Labelling your links properly allows the user to access the information quicker as they don't necessarily have to read all the copy associated to the link.

This also makes it easier for the reader to identify and differentiate between multiple links on a page when returning to the content.

Where possible, place your hyperlinks at the end of a sentence – this will allow the reader to action it straight away, rather than having to go back and find the link once they have read the rest of the sentence.

Provide the user with as much information as possible:

what will they be doing...
watch/download/view

what is the object...
student handbook/highlights video/article

Example:
Download the student handbook

View the Highlights 2014/15 video

General rules

Avoid double punctuation. Quotations that end with a question mark or exclamation mark should not be followed by a full stop outside the quotation marks.

If the sentence ends with a quotation that is a full sentence, the full stop should come before the closing quotation mark.

Avoid excessive use of exclamation marks.

When brackets are used in a sentence, the sentence has its own punctuation. This means that the sentence must end with a full stop or question mark, outside the brackets, even if the brackets come at the end of the sentence.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two uses:

1. They show that letters have been removed from a word to shorten it.

Example:
are not - aren't

Capital letters

Capital letters are overused on a regular basis. Not only is this grammatically incorrect, it also makes the text harder to read - particularly for individuals with dyslexia and visual impairments.

We recommend you use sentence case throughout your copy. Block capitals should only be used when required for stylistic purposes.

Below are some guidelines for using capitals that refer specifically to the work we do.

The University

Capital letters should be used when quoting the University's name in full.

Example: Loughborough University

University should be capitalised when referring directly to a university as the University.

Example: Thank you for your enquiry. The University will contact you shortly.

Lower case should be used when talking about universities in general.

Example: Your time at university should be the best years of your life.

Faculties, departments, institutes and schools

The full names of faculties, departments, institutes and schools should use capital letters.

Example: Loughborough Design School, the

The Oxford comma

It's not necessary for us to get into explanations of how, where and when a comma should be used. We did however want to touch on the use of the Oxford comma - also known as the Harvard or serial comma.

When following the rules of grammar, there is no comma between the penultimate and final items in a list.

Example: The University requests A level English, Maths and Science.

Sometimes a comma is needed between the two items though to prevent ambiguity. This is known as the Oxford comma. Not using the Oxford comma when needed can significantly alter the meaning of a sentence, as you will see with the examples below.

Without: Jamie found herself sharing a taxi with her ex-boyfriend, a doctor and a detective.

With: Jamie found herself sharing a taxi with her ex-boyfriend, a doctor, and a detective.

In the first sentence it is unclear if the doctor is also a detective, or if the doctor and the detective are separate people. The second sentence makes it clear that there are four people sharing the taxi.

Without: My heroes are my parents, Superman and Superwoman.

With: My heroes are my parents, Superman, and Superwoman.

Without the additional comma it is unclear whether the individual is thanking Superman and Superwoman in addition to their parents, or whether their parents are Superman and Superwoman. With the comma it makes it clear that they are thanking them in addition to their parents.

Without: John, Mike and I want to party.

With: John, Mike, and I want to party.

In the first part of this example it is unclear whether the speaker is telling John that he/she and Mike want to party. The second part of the example makes it

Quotation marks

Double quotation marks should be used for direct reported speech.

Example: David Steel, Director of Finance said: "I am delighted with the outcome."

Single quotation marks (also known as inverted commas) should be used to show direct speech, a quote within a quote, or to denote the title of a single poem, chapter, essay, article, journal, newspaper or section of a larger book.

If a quote requires punctuation in its original form, place the punctuation inside the quotation marks.

Place any punctuation that does not belong to the quote outside of the quotation marks; except for the closing punctuation if the end of the quote is also the end of the sentence.

When a sentence starts and leads into a quote, ensure a colon is added before the double quotation marks.

Neither double nor single quotation marks should be used to suggest emphasis or colloquial speech. If emphasis is needed then italics should be used.

When dealing with quotations that extend over more than one paragraph quotation marks should be used at the beginning of each paragraph, but left open to indicate that the original speaker is still talking. The quote should be closed at the end of the final paragraph. Quotation marks are used at the beginning of each sentence to show that you are still dealing with quoted material.

Example:
"I am delighted that you are considering coming to Loughborough University.

"I often ask our students what it is that they get particularly love about the University and I get a number of different responses.

"But the one thing that all our students agree is great is the strong community feel at Loughborough."

Hyphens

There are few set rules to follow when it comes to using hyphens. Below are some guidelines that will help.

Hyphens can be used:

when an adjective modifies a noun	eg 18-year-old student
to unify two words	eg hot-water bottle
to add a prefix	eg re-read
to prevent confusion	eg re-cover/recover
to keep two vowels apart	eg co-ordinate
to stop a word from looking unwieldy	eg anti-establishment
to join a letter with a word	eg x-ray
when writing numbers in full	eg twenty-one

If there is chance for confusion or difficulty reading a word, a hyphen is needed.

When using an adjective to modify a noun: if the adjective comes after the noun, the hyphen is not needed.

Example:
The 18-year-old student
The student is 18 years old

Different vowels can double up.

Example: reactive, proactive

Most prefix words exist in both forms (with and without a hyphen). If you can avoid the hyphen then do.

If you are unsure about hyphenation of a word, we would recommend checking the Oxford English Dictionary.

Ensure that usage of hyphens is consistent throughout your text.

Points of reference and top tips

When writing on a computer, ensure you are using the UK version of spell-check not the American version which is usually the default.

If you are unsure of a spelling, our recommended point of reference is the Oxford English Dictionary. However, please note that the site uses –ize for words such as categorise and organisation – a style we are not recommending.

Be aware of words that sound the same but have different spellings for alternative meanings.

Examples that often cause errors include: enquiry/ inquiry; lead/led; effect/affect; there/their; hear/ here; compliment/complement, and stationary/ stationery.

Jargon

Always consider all audiences, not just your intended audience, when using jargon in publications. This includes business-speak and corporate buzzwords.

It's tempting to use a word because it sounds authoritative, but don't; you will risk losing your audience's attention.

Misused words and spelling mistakes
Below is a selection of words and terms that are often misused in speech and writing.

A level
Our style preference is that the word A level always be written without a hyphen, and a capital letter is only needed on the A.

Alumni – using the right word
There are several different words you can use when talking about our alumni. Depending on how many people you are referring to, and whether the individuals are male or female will dictate the word you should use.

Alumnus refers to a male graduate of the University.

Example: "My brother is an alumnus of Loughborough University."

Alumna is used to refer to a female graduate of the University.

Example: "My sister, Karen, is an alumna of Loughborough University."

Alumni is the plural form of 'alumnus' and is used when referring to male graduates of the University.

Example: "Loughborough alumni Paul and Joe won awards at last night's ceremony."

'Alumni' is also used when talking about groups that include both male and female graduates.

Examples: "My brother and sister are alumni of Loughborough University."

Referring to a master's degree
When referring to programmes/degrees generally a capital letter is not needed. An apostrophe before the 's' is needed though.

Example: I have a master's degree.

When using as a plural, the adjective (master's) does not become plural just the noun (degrees) alumni Paul and Joe won