



Style Guide

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Communications Department

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Let's get started

The communications department thought it would be useful to put together a few notes regarding style for any written materials you prepare. As a department, we strive to follow The Canadian Press (CP) style, rules developed for journalists to provide consistency when writing and editing.

Given the influence RNAO has within the health-care sector, we want all RNAO documents – from the Registered Nurse Journal and newsletters to marketing materials and correspondence – to look professional and consistent.

Following CP's most basic grammar and style rules will help us achieve this goal.

Misused words

Health care vs. health-care

When health care is used as an adjective (a word that describes a noun), it is hyphenated and lower case. For example: registered nurses are the largest group of professionals in the health-care system. In this case, “health-care” describes the word “system.”

Another quick and easy way to remember this rule is if health care precedes another word (health-care professional, organization, team, budget) it should be hyphenated. The same rule applies for other words. For example: evidence-based practice, knowledge-based profession, three-day conference.

Practice vs. practise

The word practice is generally used as a noun. When used as a verb, it is spelled practise. For example: I've been practising as an emergency room nurse for 20 years. In my practice, I meet many clients who rely on food banks.

That vs. which

That* tends to restrict the reader's thought and direct it the way you want it to go. Which is non-restrictive and introduces additional information. For example: the lawnmower that is in the garage needs sharpening (meaning: we have more than one lawnmower. The one in the garage needs sharpening.) The lawnmower, which is in the garage, needs sharpening (meaning: our lawnmower needs sharpening.)

Only use it to avoid misleading the reader even momentarily. For example: Cam said **that** on May 1 he was in Halifax.

Affect vs. effect

Generally, affect is the verb; effect is the noun. For example: the letter did not affect the outcome. The letter had a significant effect.

Affect = to have an effect on.

Effect = a result/outcome.

* Dropping “that” often makes for smoother reading, especially in shorter sentences. For example: She said (that) she wanted to be alone.

Over vs. more than

They aren't interchangeable. Over refers to spatial relationships. For example: the plane flew over the city. More than is used with figures. For example: more than 12,000 members signed RNAO's action alert.

Fewer vs. less

Fewer is used when discussing items you can count; less is used for things you cannot count. For example: fewer people, fewer dollars vs. less milk, less time. Less is also used with numbers when they are on their own and with expressions of measurement or time. For example: their marriage lasted less than two years.

"Our" spelling

Spell words such as colour, flavour, honour, neighbour, rumour, labour and humour with an "our." The "or" spelling comes from American English, but CP uses the "our" spelling because it is Canadian English spelling.

Capitalization

Capitalize proper names, government departments and agencies of government, names of associations, companies, clubs, religions, languages, nations, races, places and addresses. Otherwise lowercase is favoured where a reasonable option exists.

Common nouns – program, committee – are capitalized when part of a proper name: Legal Assistance Program, Editorial Advisory Committee. They are normally lowercased when standing alone: the program's success, the committee's spokesperson.

The names of national legislative bodies, including some short forms, are capitalized. For example: House of Commons, the House, the Commons. Provincial legislatures and local councils are lowercased. For example: Quebec national assembly, Toronto city council.

National and provincial government departments and agencies are capitalized: Health Canada, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Local government departments and boards are lowercased: parks and property department.

Awards and decorations are capitalized. For example: Order of Canada. University degrees are lowercased except when abbreviated. For example: master of nursing, a master's degree; doctor of philosophy, PhD.

Please refer to RNAO's glossary to learn more.

Titles

Don't use courtesy titles, such as Dr., Mr., Mrs., Miss. or Ms.

Capitalize formal titles – those that are almost an integral part of a person's identity – when they directly precede the name. For example: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Mayor John Tory, Queen Elizabeth.

A title set off from a name by commas is lowercased. For example: The prime minister, Justin Trudeau, will represent Canadians at the conference.

Lowercase occupational titles and descriptions. Titles of officials of companies, unions, political organizations and the like are also lowercased. For example: general manager Art Simpson, registered nurse Margaret Wilson, RNAO president Angela Cooper Brathwaite or senior policy analyst Lynn Anne Mulrooney.

Lowercase formal titles when preceded by former, acting and so on. For example: former mayor Rob Ford, acting health minister Kim Shen, past-president Carol Timmings, prime minister-designate Mary Brown, the one-time president Gerald Ford.

Lowercase plural use of titles and when they are standing alone. For example: the prime minister, the premier, premiers Jean Martineau and Gertrude Germain.

Front-loading – piling nouns in front of a name – is hard on the reader. Instead, use **of**, **the** and **a**, and set off long titles with commas. For example: ‘The president of Groovy Records of Canada, Sheryl Jones, attended the news conference’ instead of ‘Groovy Records of Canada president Sheryl Jones attended the news conference.’

Please refer to RNAO’s glossary to learn more.

Acronyms

Spell out acronyms on the first reference and use initials for each reference afterward. For example: nurses use best practice guidelines (BPG) to improve patient care. To date, there are more than 50 BPGs.

Note there is no “s” within the brackets even though you’re identifying something that is plural. The acronym remains singular on the first reference, and is pluralized thereafter. When pluralizing an acronym, simply add an “s”, don’t use an apostrophe.

Use only commonly recognized acronyms instead of creating new ones. Please refer to RNAO’s glossary to learn more.

Publications (e.g. best practice guidelines)

Italicize

Official titles of publications – such as BPGs (e.g. Adopting eHealth Solutions: Implementation Strategies, third edition), reports (e.g. Mind the Safety Gap), acts (e.g. Canada Health Act), and (e.g. Registered Nurse Journal) – should be italicized and **not placed in quotation marks or bolded**.

Web throws and email addresses

When including a web throw or email address, always capitalize RNAO. For example: email@RNAO.ca or RNAO.ca.

When using the acronym RNAO, do not say the RNAO. For example: The Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) worked with RNAO on a press release.

Punctuation

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are frequently used to indicate possession. Singular and plural nouns not ending in “s” take an apostrophe and “s” to form the possessive case. For example: nurse’s uniform, people’s food, alumni’s donations.

Plural nouns ending in “s” take an apostrophe alone. For example: the nurses’ uniform, teachers’ apples.

For abbreviations, acronyms or numbers as nouns, form the plural by adding an “s”. For example: LHINs, BPGs, 1960s.

This rule also applies to RNAO’s full name: The Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario.

Commas

Put commas between the elements of a series but not before the final **and, or or nor**. For example: men, women, children and pets. However, use a comma before the final **and, or or nor** if it avoids confusion. For example: breakfast consisted of oatmeal, fried eggs, and bread and butter.

Exclamation marks

Do not overuse exclamation marks. Repeated use actually diminishes its effect. Use it to denote great surprise, a command, deep emotion or emphasis.

Quotation marks

Quotation marks always go outside other punctuation (except for semicolons and question marks).

For example: “I’m going to the store,” she said, “and I won’t be back until noon.”

The exception: when using a question mark, place it inside the quotation marks when it relates to the sentence in quotations. When it does not relate directly with the sentence in quotations, place it outside.

For example: have you read the assigned short story, "Flowering Judas"? No, but I read last week's assignment, "Where Are They Now?"

In addition, when a quote by a single speaker extends more than one paragraph, put quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph but at the end of only the last.

Semicolons

A semicolon is used to separate statements too closely related to stand as separate sentences. It can also be used to separate phrases that contain commas. If you are using quotation marks, the semicolon goes on the outside of quotation marks.

For example: some people write with a computer; others write with a pen or pencil.

There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.

Dashes

The dash is an effective tool but can easily be overused. Many times it can be avoided by breaking a long sentence into two shorter ones.

Use dashes to set off mid-sentence lists punctuated by commas. For example: the ministers will discuss common problems – trade, tourism, immigration and defence – before going to the summit talks.

Use dashes when commas (generally preferable) would create confusion. For example: The pies – meat and fruit – were cheap.

Hyphens

Compound words may be written solid (sweatshirt), open (oil rig) or hyphenated (white-haired) See RNAO glossary for examples.

Write words as compounds to ease reading, to avoid ambiguity and to join words that when used together form a separate concept.

In general, hyphenate compound modifiers preceding a noun, but not if the meaning is instantly clear because of common usage of the term. For example: the third-period goal, three-under-par 69, a 5-4 vote, multimillion-dollar projects, 40-cent coffee

Use a hyphen with fractions standing alone (two-thirds, three-quarters) and with the written numbers 21 to 99 (fifty-five, ninety-nine).

Use hyphens with a successive compound adjective. Example: 18th- and 19th-century

Numbers, percentages, time, money, dates, telephone numbers

Numbers

Write out the numbers one to nine; use numerals for 10 and above – except at the beginning of sentences, when all numbers are written out.

Percentages

Spell out the words “per cent” (with no hyphen) instead of the numeral figure %. The symbol is permitted in charts and graphs.

Time

1 p.m. (not 1:00 p.m. or 1 PM); 1:25 a.m., 3:42 p.m., noon, midnight. Don’t use o’clock. For time zones, the abbreviations are all caps, without periods: EDT, AST.

Money

\$2, not \$2.00. Use numerals until you get to millions, then \$1 million, \$1.5 million. Remember that the \$ takes care of the word dollar, so you do not need to repeat it.

Dates

For consistency, run dates with the day spelled out and the month abbreviated: Monday, Oct. 15, 2018. Do not abbreviate March, April, May, June or July.

Telephone numbers

No parentheses around the area code, instead use hyphens. Example: 416-599-1925

Lists

For lists with short items, do not:

- capitalize first words
- use commas
- include a final period

For lists with long items, where items are complete sentences:

- Capitalize the first word of each item.
- Place a period at the end of each bulleted item in the list.

For lists that complete a sentence using a series of related items:

- do not capitalize;
- use semicolons between the items;
- put the word “and” at the end of the second-to-last item; and
- put a period at the end of the final item.

In essence, maintain the punctuation that would occur if the bullet set up and body was presented as a complete sentence.

Numbered lists

Capitalize the first word in a numbered list, even if the item is not a complete sentence.

If numbered list items are short, it is not necessary to use a period.

Contact us

If you have any questions or want us to review a document, letter, brochure or pamphlet, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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