

### 3. Drafting tips and principles of style

This chapter gives tips and advice on how to strengthen writing so that it is clear, simple and concise. It includes a section on commonly misused words as well as a checklist for revising content.

Strong writing is **clear, crisp, simple** and **concise**. Clarity does not come from simple ideas, but from presenting ideas in the simplest form possible. The writer's challenge is to choose the right words and use them well within an appropriate structure, always keeping the reader in mind. This section will help you to accomplish this. In short:

- keep it short and simple
- choose the right words
- be aware of commonly misused words
- bear in mind the basics of grammar and syntax.

#### Keep it short and simple

Shorten and simplify text to allow your reader to access your information as quickly and easily as possible.

#### Use short sentences

A good average sentence length is 15 to 20 words. Long sentences may overwhelm readers and make them reluctant to read further, or worse, readers may lose their way. However, too many short phrases in quick succession can be distracting, so vary your sentence length.

- Separate your ideas.
- Use fewer words.
- Use basic, simple sentence structures:
  - subject + verb + direct object: **The director approved the project.**
  - subject + verb + indirect object + object: **The director gave her the project.**
  - subject + verb + complement: **She became the project manager.**
- Do not start a sentence with a subordinate clause.
- Do not bury long dependent clauses in mid-sentence.


The reader may give up if a subject drifts too far from its main theme, separated by endless intervening clauses. For example, the following sentence can be rewritten so that the dependent clause either precedes or follows the main sentence.

☹ BEFORE	☺ AFTER
The Delegation reserves the right, in the event of the data not being available in time, to postpone the workshop.	<b>The Delegation reserves the right to postpone the workshop if the data are not available in time.</b>



## Choose action verbs

Choose strong action verbs over weak verbs (**be, make, hold, have**) or prepositional phrases (**in, of, for**). Action verbs keep sentences short and dynamic.

☹ AVOID	☺ USE
to be of the opinion that	<b>to believe</b>
to be indicative of	<b>to indicate</b>
to come to an agreement on	<b>to agree</b>
to put in an appearance	<b>to appear</b>
to raise some doubts about	<b>to question</b>
in order to eliminate	<b>to eliminate</b>
to be in possession of	<b>to own</b>
for the purpose of providing	<b>to provide</b>
to perform an analysis of	<b>to analyse</b>

 AVOID	 USE
to study in depth	<b>to examine</b>
to be in receipt of	<b>to receive</b>
to make a discovery	<b>to discover</b>
to hold an investigation	<b>to investigate</b>
to be a good writer	<b>to write well</b>

Replace noun phrases with verbs. Notice how much more straightforward the message becomes when a simple subject-verb construction is used.

 AVOID	 USE
Verification of the data is carried out as quickly as possible by the OECD.	<b>The OECD verifies the data as quickly as possible.</b>
A rise in unemployment was recorded last month.	<b>Unemployment rose last month.</b>
This paper’s discussions concentrate on...	<b>This paper discusses...</b>

### Use nouns properly

Choose each noun for its efficiency in the sentence. Replace “the fact that”, which is wordy and awkward.

 AVOID	 USE
The fact that they were involved in the local community has greatly contributed to their success.	<b>Their involvement in the local community has greatly contributed to their success.</b>

Reduce adjective strings: nouns can be combined to make new phrases, e.g. government spending, education policy. However, do not use five nouns when one will do:

😊 **road works**

☹️ ongoing highway maintenance programme.

Reduce consecutive nouns in prepositional phrases (**on, of, in, for, with**) by using the noun as an adjective or by including the noun in another sentence.

☹️ <b>AVOID</b>	😊 <b>USE</b>
There was a review of the development of the region.	<b>The study reviewed regional development.</b>

## Use the active voice

Prefer the active voice where possible. It is shorter than passive structures, and if your goal is to persuade the reader, the active voice is more forceful and convincing. Passive constructions are common in official and academic texts and owe more to convention than efficiency.

☹️ <b>AVOID</b>	😊 <b>USE</b>
The regions were defined by the ministry...	<b>The ministry defined the regions...</b>
The project was submitted by the regional authorities...	<b>The regional authorities submitted the project...</b>
At the meeting of energy ministers, the decision was made to introduce new regulatory measures.	<b>Energy ministers decided at their meeting to introduce new regulatory measures.</b>

## Choose the right words

Choose words that convey the most meaning and have the greatest impact on the reader.



### Use specific language

Use the simplest, most specific language your subject allows. The more specific your words, the more likely you are to hold the reader's attention.

 AVOID	 USE
<p>It is the widespread opinion of delegates that the report is of a rather general nature and does not succeed in addressing the issue, which is currently of such significance, of reforming the programme. Furthermore, there is complete agreement among delegates on the fact that no new data on unemployment across countries are presented in the report.</p>	<p><b>Delegates believe that the report is too general and fails to discuss the important issue of programme reform. They also agree that it does not present any new data for OECD countries.</b></p>

### Use plain English

Often shorter, simpler words do the trick. Whenever possible, avoid using words and expressions that could be misunderstood, especially by non-native English speakers and non-specialist readers.

 AVOID	 USE
accede	agree, grant, allow
aforesaid	<i>(omit or be specific)</i>
asymmetric	uneven
cf. (conferre)	compare
cognisant of	aware of, know, about
disburse	pay
endeavour	try



expenditure	spending
institute (verb)	begin, start
remunerative employment	paid work

- Avoid foreign phrases, scientific words and jargon if there is an everyday English equivalent. Jargon and technical terms limit your readership. However, a clearly explained technical term can prove useful by helping you to avoid extensive paraphrasing, if the term is used repeatedly.
- Spell out abbreviations and acronyms on first occurrence.

**See also:** *Abbreviations and acronyms*, pp. 52-55; *Foreign words and expressions*, p. 78

## Resist “business speak”

Using nouns as verbs, or misusing verbs, makes your text harder to read, and is ungrammatical.

 AVOID	 USE
The budget impacts the project’s scope	<b>The budget affects the project’s scope</b>
The committee has tasked the OECD with several...	<b>The committee has given the OECD several tasks...</b>
Leverage (in the sense of use or draw upon)	<b>Leverage</b> (in the very specific financial sense of borrowing money to increase returns on an investment)
Drive (anything, except a vehicle)	
Deliver (anything, except pizzas, post and services)	
Foster (unless it is children)	



## Omit needless words

“Omit needless words” is perhaps the most famous piece of style advice in English. As a writer, it is your job to transmit information. You can achieve this by saying everything relevant in fewer words than you think.

- **Get to the point.** Even short sentences can be made more concise.

 <b>AVOID</b>	 <b>USE</b>
Another phenomenon that contributes to this voluntary unemployment is the extended family system.	<b>The extended family system also contributes to this voluntary unemployment.</b>
As a result of the trend towards lighter, more valuable goods, recourse to greater volume will increase.	<b>As goods become lighter and more valuable, people will ship in greater volume.</b>



- **Eliminate fluff and false starts such as:** I think, there was, it is.

 <b>AVOID</b>	 <b>USE</b>
There is a need for extra study...	<b>The government must study this further...</b>
There was erosion of the land from floods.	<b>Floods eroded the land.</b>
It is essential that the programme start immediately.	<b>The programme must start immediately.</b>



- **Think twice before using adjectives such as:** relevant, suitable, appropriate, serious, broad, effective, positive, meaningful, significant, major, main, particularly, obvious.
- **Remove weak intensifiers and qualifiers such as:** very, quite, rather, actually, completely, definitely, so.

- **Avoid phrases such as:**

the fact of the matter, on this subject, as it relates to, at the outset, one might add that, it should be noted that, it goes without saying that, it is important to add that, etc.

 AVOID	 USE
in the eventuality of	<b>if, when, in</b>
in view of the fact that	<b>as, because</b>
with reference to	<b>about, concerning</b>
as a consequence of	<b>because, as</b>
despite the fact that	<b>although, despite</b>
due to the fact that	<b>as, because of, due to</b>
if this is not the case	<b>if not</b>

- **Repeat a word if it is the best word.** Repetition is a device that can help continuity and clarity; it can hold the paragraph together, and it makes information easier to find for the reader.
- **Ban redundancy,** such as: mutual co-operation, broad consensus, urgent necessity, false pretext, future prospects, desired objective, estimated at about, introduced a new law, future forecast, is currently, acute crisis, join together.
- **Put statements in positive form.** Negative constructions are often wordy and sometimes pretentious. In addition, they oblige readers to imagine the positive alternative and then cancel it out.

 AVOID	 USE
The period of imprisonment ranges from not less than two years to no more than ten years.	<b>The period of imprisonment ranges from two to ten years.</b>
The economy did not experience as substantial a negative impact from the financial crisis as had been anticipated.	<b>The economy suffered less than expected from the financial crisis.</b>
... does not make it any less necessary to...	<b>One must still...</b>



### ▼ Commonly misused words

<b>Across</b>	<b>Across</b> is ambiguous in such expressions as “data on unemployment across countries”. Make clear whether you mean data on regions within countries, on each of several countries, or on a group of countries.
<b>Address</b>	<b>Address</b> , as a verb, lacks precision and can often be replaced with a more specific word (e.g. “address the issue” can mean “discuss the issue”, “think about the issue”, “investigate the issue”).
<b>Affect, and effect</b>	<b>Affect</b> is a verb meaning “to influence”. <b>Effect</b> as a verb means “to execute, to bring about, to accomplish”. As a noun <b>effect</b> means “result, consequence, being in operation”.  <i>The new law affects few taxpayers.</i> <i>To effect any change will require many sacrifices.</i>
<b>All ready and already</b>	<b>All ready</b> is a pronoun plus an adjective. <b>Already</b> is an adverb that means “before a specified or implied past, present, future”.  <i>Once we have it all ready, we can mail it.</i> <i>The meeting is already finished.</i>
<b>All right</b>	<b>All right</b> should always be two words. “Alright” is incorrect.
<b>All together and altogether</b>	<b>All together</b> is a pronoun plus an adjective used to indicate “at one time” or “in one place”. <b>Altogether</b> is an adverb meaning “entirely” or “in sum”.  <i>They were all together at the conference.</i> <i>The director was not altogether pleased with the results.</i>
<b>Allude to and refer to</b>	<b>Allude to</b> means “to mention indirectly” and <b>refer to</b> means “to mention directly”.
<b>Alternate and alternative</b>	<b>Alternate</b> means “every other”. <b>Alternative</b> means another option. “Alternative fuels” refers to options other than fossil fuels.  <i>They drove on alternate days.</i> <i>An alternative solution to shooting badgers to control tuberculosis is to vaccinate them.</i>
<b>Among and between</b>	Use <b>between</b> when referring to two persons or things and <b>among</b> when referring to more than two.  <i>The friendship between the two countries is considerable.</i> <i>The work will be divided equally among the staff.</i>
<b>Amount and number</b>	<b>Amount</b> refers to bulk, mass or aggregate. <b>Number</b> refers to countable nouns.  <i>She spent a large amount of time on the document.</i> <i>The conference will attract a large number of journalists.</i>
<b>And/or</b>	<b>And/or</b> can often be avoided; usually one or the other of these conjunctions is sufficient.  <i>See also: Punctuation, pp. 90–97.</i>

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Annex</b> should be used rather than “appendix”.
<b>Anyone and any one</b>	<b>Anyone</b> means “any person at all”. <b>Any one</b> means “a single person or thing of a group”.  <b>Anyone may attend the meeting.</b> <b>Any one statistician may represent the directorate.</b>
<b>Appraise and apprise</b>	<b>Appraise</b> means “to evaluate”. <b>Apprise</b> means “to inform”, and should be avoided.  <b>The committee will soon appraise the work of the task force.</b> <b>She will inform you of the findings.</b>
<b>Approve and approve of</b>	<b>Approve</b> means “to give official consent”. <b>Approve of</b> means “to regard favourably”.  <b>The manager approved the contract.</b> <b>The staff approved of their new offices.</b>
<b>Assure, ensure and insure</b>	<b>Assure</b> is used with reference to persons in the sense of “to set the mind at rest”. <b>Ensure</b> or <b>insure</b> are used with reference to things or events. Use <b>ensure</b> in the sense of “making sure or certain”. Use <b>insure</b> in the sense of “indemnifying against risk or loss”.  <b>The director assured the manager that he would take action.</b> <b>You need to ensure that the task is completed.</b> <b>The shipment is insured against loss or damage.</b>
<b>Autarchy, autarky, autocracy and autonomy</b>	<b>Autarchy</b> means “absolute sovereignty or despotism”. <b>Autarky</b> means “economic self-sufficiency”. <b>Autocracy</b> means “absolute government by one person”. <b>Autonomy</b> means “self-governance” or “independence”.
<b>Balance remainder (rest)</b>	<b>Remainder</b> is that which is left after something has been subtracted or used, and it is simpler to say “rest”. <b>Balance</b> has a similar meaning but should be used only when comparing monetary amounts.  <b>After these payments have been made, the balance will be substantially smaller.</b> <b>They took the rest of the boxes to the new office.</b>
<b>Biannual, biennial</b>	<b>Biennial</b> (meaning “once in two years” or “every other year”) and <b>biannual</b> (meaning “twice a year”) are frequently misused or misunderstood. Spell out what you mean.
<b>Comparatively and relatively</b>	<b>Comparatively</b> , like <b>relatively</b> , should be used only when a comparison is explicit.  ☺ <b>The inflation rate was 30% in Egypt, but was comparatively low in Libya.</b>  ☹ This year’s rainfall has been comparatively high. (It leaves the reader guessing: compared with when, where, what?)

<b>Comprise</b>	<p><b>Comprise</b> does the work of half a sentence if it is used correctly. Do not use it as a synonym for contain or include. It means “consist of”, “be made up of”. A body comprises all its component parts:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>The United States comprises the 48 continental states, Alaska and Hawaii.</b></p> <p><b>NOTE</b> &gt; “Is comprised of” is generally considered incorrect (besides, it is in the passive mode, which you should avoid).</p>
<b>Concerted</b>	<p><b>Concerted</b> means “by agreement” or “in unison”. One person or one country alone cannot make a concerted effort.</p>
<b>Consensus</b>	<p><b>Consensus</b> (note the spelling) means “shared opinion”, not “majority view”.</p>
<b>Constitute</b>	<p><b>Constitute</b> is used to mean the constituent parts of a body that make up the whole.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>The House of Commons and the House of Lords constitute the Parliament of the United Kingdom.</b></p> <p>Do not use “constitute” when “contain” or even “is” would be correct.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>This document contains the group’s report, which is the result of three years’ work.</b></p>
<b>Continual continuous, continued</b>	<p><b>Continual</b> means “happening frequently” but with breaks between occurrences. <b>Continuous</b> means “uninterrupted” or “incessant”. <b>Continued</b> means “lasting” or “extending” without interruption.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>His continual interjections were irritating.</b> <b>We witnessed football’s oldest continuous rivalry.</b> <b>They wished for her continued success.</b></p>
<b>Farther and further</b>	<p>Use <b>farther</b> to refer to physical distance and <b>further</b> to indicate additional degree, time or quantity.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>He can run farther than she can.</b> <b>Revise this document further.</b></p>
<b>Forego and forgo</b>	<p><b>Forego</b> means “precede”, while <b>forgo</b> means “to do without”.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>In the foregoing section, the publisher has forgone the usual paragraph numbering.</b></p>
<b>Foreword and forward</b>	<p>The <b>foreword</b> is a part of the front matter of a book.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>The bus moved forward.</b></p>
<b>Formally and formerly</b>	<p><b>Formally</b>, which means “in a formal way”, is often used incorrectly for <b>formerly</b>, which means “earlier, in the past”.</p>
<b>Historic and historical</b>	<p><b>Historic</b> means “famous” or “important in history”. <b>Historical</b> means “of, belonging to or referring to history”.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>The Conciergerie is a historic building.</b> <b>Ben-Hur is a historical novel.</b></p>

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Impact</b> is a noun and should not be used as a verb. In the sense of “effect”, it is not countable, and therefore has no plural.
<b>Implement</b>	<b>Implement</b> as a verb, is much overused; it should be restricted to the sense of “carry out, execute, accomplish” (a similar caveat applies to “implementation”).
<b>Imply and infer</b>	<b>To imply</b> is “to state indirectly, to suggest”. <b>To infer</b> is “to deduce”, “to draw a conclusion”.  They implied that they were the only organisation able to handle the task. Based on their comments, we inferred that they were heading toward bankruptcy.
<b>In regard to</b>	<b>In regard</b> to is the proper expression. “In regards to” is incorrect.
<b>Include</b>	<b>Include</b> does not mean “comprise”.  The countries supporting this policy include Denmark, Norway and Sweden means at least one other country supports it.  Hence, the phrase “including but not limited to” is redundant.
<b>Inter and intra</b>	<b>Inter</b> means “among, between, together”, as in “intercontinental” (among or between continents). <b>Intra</b> means “within, inside”, as in “intrastate” (within or inside a state).
<b>Literally</b>	<b>Literally</b> does not mean “in effect” or “virtually”. “He literally exploded” means that there were bits of him all over the walls, floor and ceiling. Avoid such hyperbole.
<b>Loan</b>	<b>Loan</b> as a verb, is disputed, particularly in the United Kingdom. It is safest to use it only as a noun. The preferred verb is “lend”.
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Methodology</b> is a body of methods or set of procedures used in a particular field or activity. Do not use it as a fancy synonym for “method”.
<b>Political</b>	<b>Political</b> as in “political issues”, is not the same as “policy issues”. OECD texts usually deal with policy.
<b>Presently</b>	<b>Presently</b> should be avoided, as in British English it is usually understood to mean “soon” rather than “now”. Do not use “the present” to mean “this”, as in “the present style guide”.
<b>Principal and principle</b>	<b>Principal</b> can be either an adjective or a noun. It generally means “chief” or “leading”. <b>Principle</b> is only a noun and has various abstract meanings.  The principal reason for the financial collapse was greed. These five principles are the most crucial for understanding the study.
<b>Quite, rather and somewhat</b>	These words are imprecise. Avoid them.

<b>Regardless</b>	<b>Irregardless</b> is incorrect; <b>regardless</b> is the correct expression.
<b>Regime</b>	<b>Regime</b> in the sense of “government” has a pejorative sense, being commonly associated with dictatorships. It should never be used to refer to the government of any country.
<b>Regular</b>	<b>Regular</b> does not mean “frequent” but rather “at regular intervals”. <b>Halley’s comet regularly approaches the Earth, appearing in the skies every 76 years.</b>
<b>Respectively, latter, former</b>	<b>Respectively, latter, former</b> should be avoided. They break the flow of the reader’s eye movement as the reader is obliged to look back in the sentence to see the connection between the words. ☹️ Food, fuel and housing prices rose 7%, 3% and 2%, respectively. Ms Francis and Mr Joya will attend the meeting. The former is a child health specialist. ☺️ <b>Food prices rose 7%, fuel prices 3% and housing 2%.</b> <b>Ms Francis and Mr Joya will attend the meeting. Ms Francis is a child health specialist.</b>
<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Scheme</b> to American ears carries the same negative connotation as a noun that it does as a verb. Avoid it, instead using “programme”, “project” or some other word that is neutral on both sides of the Atlantic.
<b>Slated</b>	<b>Slated</b> means “scheduled” to an American but “severely criticised” to a Briton. Avoid it.
<b>State</b>	<b>State</b> can be confusing in discussions involving countries with federal governments, such as the United States and Germany. Use it with care.
<b>Table</b>	<b>Table</b> is best avoided as a verb, since it means “to present something” (a proposal, legislation) in the United Kingdom, but “to take off the agenda” in the United States.

## A few tips on grammar and syntax

### Modifiers

**Dangling participles:** Edit dangling participial phrases, which confuse meaning.

☹️ Based on Public Law 928, the government adopted a regulation.

As the example stands, it says the government is based on PL 928. If a participial phrase comes at the beginning of a sentence, it must refer to the grammatical subject of the sentence. The example should read:

😊 **Acting on the basis of Public Law 928, the government adopted a regulation.**

Far better to get rid of the participle, at the same time making the sentence shorter and clearer:

😊 **The government adopted a regulation under Public Law 928.**

**Single-word modifiers:** Place a single-word modifier (**nearly, almost, merely, even, hardly, just, only**) near the word you intend it to describe. Notice how the placement of the word “only” conveys a different meaning in each of the following sentences:

**Only she stated that she would gather the data.**

**She only stated that she would gather the data.**

**She stated that only she would gather the data.**

**She stated that she would only gather the data.**

### Articles

All singular, countable nouns must take an article (**a, an, the**).

**The editorial team will assist you.** (You can count “team” [two teams, three teams] but it is singular in this case, so it must take an article.)

**Knowledge is power.** (You cannot count “knowledge” or “power”.)

### Subject-verb agreement

**Compound subjects:** Subjects joined by the word “and” form a compound subject. Use a plural verb unless the subjects represent a single idea or person.

**The director and the staff member were presenting their ideas differently.**

**Planning for the future and implementing those plans are crucial to success.**

**The guest speaker and new author, Ms Conway, is talking to the media.**

**Ham and cheese is the only sandwich remaining.**

**NOTE** > “Data” is a plural noun, e.g. “The data are available on line”.

**Intervening phrases:** Disregard intervening phrases when determining subject-verb agreement.

**A key factor, the institution's high salaries, is not being considered**  
("factor" is the subject, not "salaries").

**Her experience with other international organisations makes her highly qualified for the position** ("experience" is the subject, not "organisations").

**Numbers:** Use a singular verb with units of measurement such as money, time, distance, weight and quantity if the term is considered as a total amount.

**USD 2 000 is exempted for each dependent child.**

**More than 50 000 tonnes of coal was delivered.**

**Fractions, portions:** When a fraction or an expression such as a part or percentage is modified by a prepositional phrase, the noun or pronoun in the phrase usually determines whether the verb is singular or plural.

**Only two-thirds of the trade is reported.**

**Only two-thirds of total exports are reported.**

**One-third of the members are participants.**

**Part of the population lacks drinking water.**

**At least 50% of the countries have signed the agreement.**

**See also:** *Numbers*, pp. 86-88.

## Drafting checklist

All writing requires revision, and usually multiple revisions. Go through these steps:

### Step one

**Critically and objectively read the text**, placing yourself in the reader's position. Ask the following questions:

- Who am I writing this for?
- What am I trying to say?
- Have I said it?
- Have I clearly structured my report, organised and labelled my content?

*See also: Who are our readers? p. 10; Structuring your publication, pp. 24-27.*

### Step two

**Simplify the style and make the text tighter, more accessible and effective.**

- Are the titles and leads clear and succinct?
- Is every word meaningful and necessary?
- What can be deleted without loss of meaning or emphasis?
- Can I replace jargon with plain words?
- Will readers understand technical vocabulary?
- Could I use stronger action verbs?
- Am I using the active voice?
- Can I turn negative structures into positive ones?
- Can I shorten and vary sentence length?
- Are there too many lists or headings breaking up and complicating the text?
- Are the tables and figures useful? Are they properly sourced?
- Can I add cross-references and links to related or background material?
- Have I followed the OECD Style Guide?

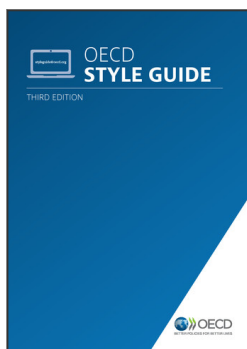
*See also: Organising your content, pp. 19-21; Titles and headings, pp. 22-23; Figure and table presentation, p. 30; Drafting tips and principles of style, pp. 34-39; Part II. Rules and conventions, pp. 52 ff.*

### Step three

**Do a final reading** for spelling and typographical consistency, and get a friend or colleague to read in addition to your PAC editor.

**NOTE** > The Microsoft Word™ grammar and spell check function can provide “readability” information. It tells you the average number of sentences per paragraph, the average number of words per sentence and the percentage of passive sentences.





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