

WRITING STYLE AND COPY-EDITING GUIDELINES



SMEX

تعزيز الحقوق الرقمية
Advancing Digital Rights

Writing Style and Copy-editing Guidelines

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Writing style

Active vs. Passive Voice

Most of the time be direct and use the active voice. “Mo told Jad” describes the event more concisely than “Jad was told by Mo.” Use the passive voice if necessary to focus on the recipient of an action instead of its performer.

Example: The human rights activist was arrested by the police.

The passive is used here to focus on the activist. Using the passive in a lead that involves legal processes, crimes, injuries, and death like these is particularly important to keep the affected person or persons as its focus.

American vs. British English

There are significant differences between American and British English spelling, usage, and punctuation. SMEX uses American English.

Jargon

Avoid it. Use words that most people can easily understand. You may have to think harder if you are not to use jargon, but you can still be precise. Technical terms should be used in their proper context; do not use them out of it. In many instances simple words can do the job of a more complex word: opt for “fast” instead of “exponential”, “border” instead of “frontier” and so on. If you find yourself tempted to write about internet governance or bandwidth throttling, you will have to explain what it is; with luck, you may even find it unnecessary to use the actual expression. Avoid, above all, the kind of jargon that tries either to dignify nonsense with seriousness, or to obscure the truth, or simply to confuse. Don’t assume that everyone will understand what you’re talking about.

Try not to use foreign words and phrases unless there is no English alternative. Use the language of everyday speech, not that of spokespersons, lawyers, or bureaucrats.

Short words

Use short and simple words instead of complex words. For example, use 'improve' instead of 'ameliorate;' 'skills' instead of 'proficiencies;' "use" instead of 'utilize.'

Unnecessary Words

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tells. Imagine that you have to pay for each word you use, the less the better for your pocket. Do not use five words if you can use three.

Many expressions in common use violate this principle:

the question as to whether	whether (the question whether)
there is no doubt but that	no doubt (doubtless, undoubtedly)
used for fuel purposes	used for fuel
he is a man who	he
in a hasty manner	hastily
this is a subject that this	subject
Her story is a strange one.	Her story is strange.
the reason why is that	because

Writing Habits

When in doubt, refer to George Orwell's six elementary rules ("Politics and the English Language," 1946) for clear and effective writing:

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Copy Editing Guidelines

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Unless an abbreviation or acronym is so familiar that it is used more often than the full form (e.g., BBC, CIA, FBI), or unless the full form would provide little illumination (e.g., AWACS, DNA) write the word in full on first appearance followed by its acronym in parenthesis: thus, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). If in doubt about its familiarity, explain what the organization is or does. Later in the article, use only the acronym.

If an abbreviation can be pronounced (e.g., EFTA, NATO, UNESCO), it does not generally require "the" beforehand. Other organizations, except companies, should usually be preceded by the (the BBC, the CIA, and the UNHCR).

Do not use scatterings of abbreviations and acronyms simply in order to cram more words in; you will end up irritating readers rather than informing them.

Do not use lower-case letters for roman numerals.

In headings, rubrics, cross-heads, footnotes, captions, tables, charts (including sources), use capitalization, with the first word of each sentence and proper nouns capitalized. For instance: The Life of a Mocking Bird.

Prepositions of four letters or more should be capitalized in titles: He Danced After the Flood

Use lower case for 'kg,' 'km,' 'lb' (never 'lbs'), 'mph' and other measures, and for 'i.e.,' and 'e.g.,' which should both be followed by commas.

Governments and ministries

The terms "government", "ministry" and "department" are not capitalized, unless they make part of an entire entity name such as the Government of Lebanon or the Ministry of Education.

Political parties and social movements

Always spell out the English translation/name of a party or movement on a first mention and follow it up with its acronym. If relevant or if the English translation does not accurately reflect the original name of the party or movement, follow it up with the name in Arabic. Also be aware of literal translation, some parties or movements are simply known by their original names. For example, Ennahdha, the main Islamist party in Tunisia, is not known as the Renaissance Party in English. So, always look up how a party or movement is known in English.

Do not assume that your readers already know or can tell from the name what a party or movement stands and aims for, so make sure to provide a brief explanation after the first mention.

Titles

Capitalize titles when used immediately before a name (Education Minister Abbas Halabi or Abbas Halabi, the education minister).

Ages

Before revealing someone's age, consider whether it's an important element of the story as this can be considered ageist and a violation of one's privacy.

Examples of stories where mentioning someone's age would be relevant include stories involving minors, seniors, crime, and prison sentences. Additionally, when mentioning or quoting someone without naming them, revealing their age along with other information can keep readers interested. Examples: the 25-year-old student, a 40-year-old protester, etc.

When mentioning someone's age, always use figures. If the age is used as an adjective or as a substitute for a noun, then it should be hyphenated. Don't use apostrophes when describing an age range. Examples: A 25-year-old researcher. The researcher is 21 years old. The researcher, 25, has a sibling, 20. The internship is for 18-year-olds. She is in her 20s.

Dashes

You can use em dashes (—) in pairs in the same way that parentheses are used, but not more than one pair per sentence and ideally not more than one pair per paragraph. Insert a space on either side of the em dash. To insert an em dash, press the Shift-Alt-hyphen (Mac) or the Alt-Ctrl-minus (Microsoft Word) keys simultaneously. You can e

Use an em dash to introduce an explanation, amplification, paraphrase, particularization, or correction of what immediately precedes it. Avoid using the em dash if a comma is more appropriate. It is typically used when the set statement contains punctuation that might over complicate the sentence, as in the following example:

In the early afternoon they left for lunch — a more formal gathering with politicians, media personalities, and business moguls — to be held in the garden ballroom of the Phoenicia hotel.

Use the em dash, — not -- or -, with a space on both sides.

Use en dashes (–) without spaces to convey a range (example: "2010-2012") or a relationship between two capitalized pronouns (example: "Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations").

Dates

Month Day Year: July 18, 2018

Dates without Year: Month Day e.g., June 18

Month Year: January 2022

Use a comma if a day of the week is included.

Example: *On Saturday, April 15, 2017, anti-government protests broke out across the country.*

For articles published within the same week of the event you're reporting on, days of the week are always preferable to tomorrow, yesterday, or today:

Example: *"The Iraqi government shut down the internet on Thursday," rather than "The Iraqi government shut down the internet yesterday."*

For events that took place earlier than the week of the article's publication date, opt for more specific dates (such as July 25 or February 23, 2020) instead of relative dates (last month, last week, etc.).

When mentioning dates of events that took or will take place in the same year of the article's publication date, it's not necessary to mention the year. If the year is different from the year of publication, mention it in the date.

When using the month-year format (January 2022), a comma is only needed when used in the beginning of the sentence.

Example: *In July 2021, Tunisia President Kais Saied suspended the parliament.*

Example: *Tunisia President Kais Saied suspended the parliament in July 2021.*

For entire decades and centuries, write down the entire year in numbers without apostrophes (e.g. 2010s, 1900s) or spell it out (e.g. nineties, nineteenth century).

Ellipses

The ellipsis is a series of dots (...) that indicates an intentional omission of a word, sentence, or whole section from a text or a quote.

Treat an ellipsis as a three-letter word consisting of three periods with no spaces in between. Spaces should only be inserted before or after the ellipsis as necessary to separate it from other words.

When condensing quotes, be careful not to alter the original meaning.

Headlines and subheadings

Headlines should be in all capitals except pronouns and conjunctions of four letters or fewer. The same applies to subheadings.

Never start an article with a subheading. A clear lede should always come first. At the end of an article, do not write "conclusion". It is enough to just wrap up your article with a strong concluding paragraph.

Italics

Do not use italics in news stories, even when referring to book titles and newspaper titles. See how you reference titles of works here.

Figures and Numbers

- Express in digits when above nine. Spell out numbers nine or below or if the number is at the beginning of a sentence. The same goes for ordinal numbers (fifth but 15th).
- Express a number nine or below numerically if it appears in relation to a number higher than nine (8 of the 23 electoral districts).
- Express all numbers as digits if in a series or when expressing a measurement. When there is a figure of more than three digits, insert commas: e.g., 1,000 instead of 1000. However, when a year date is being expressed do not use commas: e.g., 1982. For ages, use numbers only.
- For measurements, use the metric system.
- Use a period to indicate decimal amounts (e.g. 4.5 years, 0.5 liter, 20.5 euros).
- Use a comma as a thousands separator. Example: 200,500.02
- For figures starting with 1 million, write out the initial number followed by "million," "billion," "trillion," etc.
- No need to spell out percentages; i.e., "22 %" instead of "22 percent." If you start a sentence with a percentage, spell out the figure and "percent."

Example: *Seventy percent of eligible voters did not head to the polls.*

- Fractions should be hyphenated (one-half, three-quarters, etc) and, unless they are attached to whole numbers ($8\frac{1}{2}$, $29\frac{3}{4}$), spelled out in words, even when the figures are higher than 10: He gave a tenth of his salary to the church, a twentieth to his mistress and a thirtieth to his wife.

- Where the word 'to' is being used as part of a ratio, it is usually best to spell it out. Thus "they decided, by nine votes to two, to put the matter to the general assembly which voted, 27 to 19, to insist that the ratio of vodka to tomato juice in a Bloody Mary should be at least one to three, though the odds of this being so in most bars were put at no better than 11 to 4." Where a ratio is being used adjectivally, figures and hyphens may be used, but only if one of the figures is greater than ten: thus a 50-20 vote, a 19-9 vote. Otherwise, spell out the figures and use to: a two-to-one vote, a ten-to-one probability.

Money

- When you are writing about currencies, spell out the name of the currency followed by the amount in USD in parentheses.

Example: The activist was fined 3000 Tunisian dinars (USD 935).

- Use conversions sparingly and try to avoid using them in the lead of the story. If you do use conversions, only convert amounts that are current; specify that they are current if you need to. Further, make sure to use a trusted currency exchange website such as XE.com or Oanda.

- When writing the word dollars, always use the lowercase, but you should usually refer to dollars by using the dollar sign or USD followed by the figures (i.e \$500 USD 5 billion). For amounts greater than one million, use two decimal points (i.e \$4.25 million).

- For amounts greater than 999,999, write out the initial figure and follow it up with "million," "billion," "trillion," etc, (i.e 10 billion).

- Whether you opt for the dollar sign or USD for U.S. dollars, be consistent throughout your article.

- When referring to euros, do not use the € sign, but use EUR (EUR 200).

- Use the three-letter ISO 4217 codes for currencies without symbols and those with symbols that may not be familiar to readers.

- When writing about Lebanese currency, use L.L to denote Lebanese Lira (i.e 2000 L.L) or LBP, the three-letter code. Whatever code you choose, be consistent throughout the article.

Examples of ISO 4217 currency codes for some countries in the region:

Algerian Dinar: DZD

Bahrain Dinar: BHD

Egyptian Pound: EGP

Iraqi Dinar: IQD

Jordanian Dinar: JOD

Lebanese Pound: LBP

Saudi Riyal: SAR

Moroccan Dirham: MAD

Tunisian Dinar: TND

UAE Dirham: AED

Temperature

Always Celsius, no need to put the degrees symbol. If it is below zero, write out minus.

Time

Always use figures, except for the words “noon” and “midnight.” Also, use a colon to separate hours from minutes (i.e 11:15). Using a.m or p.m is preferred to using “o’clock” and you should spell a.m. and p.m. in lowercase letters with periods.

If you are writing about time sequences, you should write the number followed by the words (i.e 40 hours, 15 minutes, 23 seconds). You should also capitalize the full names of time zones and whenever possible, refer to time according to the local timezone of the country or area in which the event or events you report on occurred.

Capitalization

Avoid unnecessary capitals. You should capitalize proper nouns, proper names (i.e when referring to the Democratic Party, you capitalize both of the words), popular names (i.e the Southern Suburbs of Beirut), derivatives (i.e American, English, French, Christianity), the first word in sentences, the principal words in compositions, titles (i.e Mr., Mrs., Dr. etc.) and abbreviations in some cases.

Do not capitalize the word “internet.”

Do not capitalize “non-governmental organization.” Only the acronym, NGO, is capitalized.

Names of media outlets

Do not use italics, bold, or quotation marks for media or blogs. For names of media outlets in Arabic, use the original name (e.g. Mada Masr and 7iber). If relevant to the story, you can translate the name to English on first mention. Include the translation between parenthesis and in quotes.

Titles of Works (books, movies, television program titles, works of art, speeches and lectures, etc.)

Capitalize the principal words, including the prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters, in the titles of compositions. Only capitalize articles, prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters if they are the last words in a title. Put quotation marks around the names of all works except the Bible, the Quran and other holy books, and books that are primarily catalogs of reference material. Use double or single quotation marks but be consistent throughout your article. Always translate the title of foreign works into English unless they are more commonly known by their foreign names (i.e Sharaf and Amerikanly by Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim).

Punctuation

Commas

Use commas as an aid to understanding. Too many in one sentence can be confusing. 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.

Always include a comma before and at the end of a sequence of items unless one of the items includes another ‘and’ or ‘or.’ 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,’ and ‘He preferred his eggs with garlic powder, chili powder, or white pepper.’

Do not put commas after question-marks, even when they would be separated by quotation marks: “May I have a second helping?” he asked.

Commas, like all other forms of punctuation, are placed inside the quotation marks, not outside.

- *Commas with “since”*

When using “since” as a subordinating conjunction to mean “because,” a comma is only used if the preceding clause has a negative verb.

Example: *The parliament didn’t approve the law, since the vast majority of MPs opposed it.*

Example: *The activist fled the country since he was threatened with jail.*

When “since” is used as a preposition or an adverb to talk about time, a comma is not needed.

Example: *The activist has since lived in exile.*

- *Commas with “as well as”*

Most of the time, a comma should not be added before “as well as.” Add commas before and after “as well as” when the information you’re adding is less important.

Example: *Governments, as well as non-state actors, are responsible for disinformation campaigns.*

The above example implies that the role of non-state actors in disinformation is not as important as governments. If they are both equally involved in disinformation, then the commas should be removed.

When you use “as well as” to draw comparisons, never add a comma.

Example: *He does not speak Spanish as well as his sister does.*

- *Commas with “as”*

The rules about when to use a comma with “as” are the same as the rules for using commas with other subordinating conjunctions, including while, when and because.

A comma is required at the end of a clause that starts with “as.”

Example: *As the government intensified its crackdown, many journalists started practicing self-censorship.*

If the clause with “as” comes second, a comma is generally not required, however, sometimes it may be needed to clarify meaning.

Example: *Many journalists started practicing self-censorship as the government intensified its crackdown. >>> This could either mean while or because the government intensified its crackdown.*

Example: *Many journalists started practicing self-censorship, as the government intensified its crackdown. >>> This clearly means because the government intensified its crackdown.*

- Commas with “to”/ “in order to”

When using “to” or “in order to” to talk about purpose, do not follow it with a comma.

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.

Quotation marks

Use single quotation marks for a quote within a quote. Do not use quotation marks for word emphasis, only to quote someone or a publication such as an article, report, statements, etc.

The period and the comma always go within the quotation marks. The dash, semicolon, question mark and exclamation point go within the quotation marks when they apply to the quoted matter only. They go outside when they apply to the whole sentence.

Example: *“How can we hold platforms more accountable?” he asked the workshop attendees.*

Example: *Who said, “The Internet can empower groups whose aims are in fact antithetical to democracy”?*

Capitalize the first letter when the quote is a complete sentence or starts with one.

Example: *In “To Save Everything: Click Here,” Evgeny Morozov wrote that “The goal of privacy is not to protect some stable self from erosion but to create boundaries where this self can emerge, mutate, and stabilize.”*

Do not capitalize the quote when it is only a piece of a complete sentence.

Example: In *“To Save Everything: Click Here,”* Evgeny Morozov wrote that privacy’s goal is *“to create boundaries where this self can emerge, mutate, and stabilize.”*

Apostrophes

Use the normal possessive ending “s’ after singular words or names that end in ‘s’: caucus’s, Delors’s, St James’s, Jones’s, Shanks’s. Use it after plurals that do not end in ‘s’: children’s, Frenchmen’s, media’s. Use

Use the ending s’ on plurals that end in s—Danes’, bosses’, Joneses’—including plural names that take a singular verb, e.g., Reuters’, Barclays’, Stewarts & Lloyds’, Salomon Brothers’.

Although singular in other respects, the United States, the United Nations, the Philippines, etc., have a plural possessive apostrophe: e.g., ‘Who will be the United States’ next president?’

People’s = of (the) people.

Peoples’= of peoples.

The vulnerable part of the hero of the Trojan War is best described as an ‘Achilles’ heel.’

Do not put apostrophes into decades or centuries: the 1990s, the 2000s.

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. Thus, ‘They agreed on only three points: the ceasefire should be immediate; it should be internationally supervised, preferably by the AU; and a peace conference should be held, either in Geneva or in Ouagadougou.’

Colons

Colons are most commonly used to introduce a list or a series of items at the end of a sentence. After a colon, capitalize the first word if it’s a proper noun. If the list extends over a number of sentences, capitalize the first word that follows the colon.

Examples:

The government’s digital repression toolbox includes the following: Pegasus spyware, online harassment, draconian legislation, and arrests.

The government has been vicious in its crackdown: Security agencies hacked phones using Pegasus spyware. Pro-regime media launched disinformation campaigns on Facebook. Prosecutors started investigations against critics.

Colons are also used for emphasis and to introduce a different sentence.

Examples:

Governments in the region have become notorious for their use of one notorious surveillance tool: Pegasus. (Emphasis)

The government has learnt a valuable lesson: Shutting down the internet during exams does not prevent information leaks, but rather makes it harder for students to study and exchange information. (Introducing another sentence).

Etcetera

If "etc." is used in the middle of a sentence, it is followed by a comma. However, if the word "etc." appears at the end of a sentence then the period in "etc." serves as the final punctuation mark.

Hyphenation

Use hyphens to remove ambiguity from compound modifiers, which are two or more words working like an adjective to modify another word, usually a noun.

For example, "the kids resided in two parent homes" means that two homes served as residences, whereas if they resided in "two-parent homes," they each would live in a household headed by two parents.

For compound modifiers where the meaning is clear, there is no need to add hyphens. For example, "a fourth grade teacher," "a health care center," and "a chocolate chip cookie."

When using "well" to modify an adjective before a noun, hyphenate it, but do not if it follows the noun (For example, "she is a well-known activist" and "she is well known in the community.")

Spelling

Every word on every page must be spelled correctly according to American English. With spelling, trustworthy assistance is at hand, first in your computer's spell check or for more details in an unabridged dictionary and for quick reference in the collegiate and concise dictionaries.

Geographic references

MENA or Arab region?

Avoid the terms Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or Middle East and use instead

the Arab region or Arabic-speaking region. You can use North Africa to refer to areas stretching from the Atlantic shores of Mauritania in the west, to Egypt's Suez Canal.

Israel and Palestine

Although not officially recognized as a sovereign nation by the UN, we use Palestine or occupied Palestine. Refer to Israel in news coverage not relating to Palestine (e.g. Israeli company NSO Group is notorious for its Pegasus spyware) but when it comes to Palestinian-Israeli relations, use Israeli occupation (e.g. government of the Israeli occupation conducted airstrikes on Gaza). This is to acknowledge power imbalances between Israel and the Palestinians and the fact that the former is an occupier of Palestinian Territories.

Do not write “ Hamas-controlled Gaza ” to refer to Gaza as Israel controls its northern borders, as well as its territorial waters and airspace, while Egypt controls its southern borders.

Directions

In general, use lowercase for north, south, northeast, northern, etc., when they indicate compass directions (e.g. southeast Tunisia, in the north of Lebanon); capitalize these words when they designate regions (North Africa, Western Asia, Western Europe).

Avoid using terms such as the West or the East as these terms are not specific enough. Refer to specific regions instead such as the Americas and Western Europe.

Places

Use an established English name when available, so Gaza not “ Ghazza ” and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia instead of “ Saudia .”

E-expressions Guidelines

Except at the start of a sentence, the e- is lower case and hyphenated: e-business, e-commerce, e-reader, e-book. Email (no hyphen) is an exception to this rule.

Computer terms are also usually lower case: laptop, online, the net (and internet), the web, and website.

Cyber-terms follow the general rule for prefixes and do not use a hyphen: cyberattack, cyberbullying, cyberwar, cybersecurity. Exceptions: Cyber Monday and cyber as a separate modifier, e.g., cyber shopping.

Websites

When giving websites, do not include http://. Just www is enough: www.smex.org