

The following style guide is aimed at anyone producing content for the FutureLearn platform. With numerous authors, our goal is to keep the written material across the site as consistent as possible. The [Oxford English Dictionary](#) is our dictionary of choice and British spellings of common words are always preferred to American spellings.

A

Abbreviations

Unless an abbreviation or acronym is so familiar that it is used more often than the full form (eg BBC, CIA, UNESCO), or unless the full form would provide little illumination (eg DNA) write the words in full on first appearance, for example, World Wide Web Consortium (not W3C).

For names with initials, avoid points and spaces (eg JK Rowling and WH Smith).

When abbreviating a phrase, rather than a name or title, use lower case without points or spaces (eg, lbw, mph).

Academic language

Due to their specific meaning in academia, the following words should be avoided in any references to achievements, assessment or outcomes of study on FutureLearn.

- Award (except in reference to a [FutureLearn Award](#))
- Credit (except when discussing microcredentials, degrees, or other courses which lead to academic credit)
- Distinction
- Merit
- Module
- Pass
- Programme
- Qualification
- Unit

American vs British English

[[use British spelling; exception is "program" not "programme"]]

Ampersands (&)

Ampersands should not be used unless citing the name of a company or organisation that uses one, such as Marks & Spencer, or linking two or more authors within a bibliography. Category titles also use ampersands. Use the word ‘and’ in all other circumstances.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used primarily to indicate possession, or that letters are missing from a word. It's easy to misuse apostrophes. The most frequent errors are:

- confusing "its" (belonging to it) and "it's" (short for "it is" or "it has")
- inserting an apostrophe in plurals. For example, "DVDs" or "1990s" are correct; "DVD's" or "1990's" are wrong
- inserting an apostrophe before the S of a word (often a plural) that ends in S: "flies" not "fly's", "videos" not "video's"

Plural nouns that don't end in S use an apostrophe and S in the possessive: "children's games", "people's republic".

When you use the possessive of a word ending in S, both "Wales's stadium" and "Wales' stadium" are correct, and likewise "Charles's birthday" and "Charles' birthday". Be guided by the pronunciation — say it aloud and see what sounds correct. For example, you would say "Hedges'" not "Hedges's".

B

Bullet points

If the sentence before the bullets ends with a colon (like this one):

- start each point with a lower case letter (Word might try to autocorrect you)
- don't punctuate at the end of each line
- finish the last one with a full stop.

If the bullets are a self-contained list (ie there's no sentence ending in a colon before them) style them like the following example.

- Capital letter at the start of each one.
- And a full stop at the end of each one.

If your bullet points are all questions, start each point with a capital letter (even if you've got a colon), and finish each point with a question mark.

Brackets (parentheses)

Round brackets (parentheses) should be used for digressions, explanations or translations within sentences.

If the end of a sentence is within brackets, put the full stop outside the closing bracket. For example: I learned to recognise my strengths and weaknesses (how to play up the former and disguise the latter).

If a complete sentence is enclosed within brackets, put the full stop inside the closing bracket. For example:

(The word ‘propaganda’ today is used in the negative sense, but in the early 20th century it simply meant ‘information’.)

If the text within brackets follows a word that would normally be followed by a comma, place the comma after the closing bracket. For example:

Though she is still very young (only eight years old), she has an extensive knowledge of fossils.

Square brackets should be used for insertions in quotations — that is, an editor’s remark that is not part of the author’s original text or speech: "David Cameron said: ‘William [Hague] has my full support.’" If you cannot avoid using brackets within brackets, use square brackets for the internal set.

C

Capital letters

Only use capital letters for proper nouns and not to emphasise a word in body text.

Currency

Use your local currency as the standard currency. Remember that learners will be from all over the world, so consider including international conversions where appropriate. Abbreviate million to m and billion to bn, eg:

£50m

\$24bn

See also Numbers

D

Dates

Dates should always be written in the following format:

7 December 2011 (day month year, with no commas, and no ‘st’, ‘nd’, ‘rd’ or ‘th’).

See also Numbers

Dashes

There are two kinds of dash: en dash and em dash. The en dash (–) is slightly longer than a hyphen (-) and should be used when describing a range or span of numbers, eg 2012–2013.

The em dash (—) can be used in a variety of ways. It can be used similarly to commas or other punctuation to separate clauses, eg "The course has started—three months after it was supposed to—and it's progressing well." Where possible, avoid using dashes in this way; they aren't commonly used punctuation and could confuse people who are not fluent in English.

Direct speech

Please use double quotation marks for direct speech. Place punctuation inside direct quotation marks.

“Can we please take this meeting outside?”

“I knew I was going to enjoy this course.”

Use single quotation marks within a set of double quotation marks eg

“Shout ‘bingo’ as loud as you can,” said James.

See also Quotation marks

E

eg

means 'for example' and should be written without stops.

Exclamation marks

Avoid exclamation marks. They should only be used after an exclamation, eg:

Blimey! I can't believe how many exclamation marks there are in FutureLearn emails.

Take note of HW Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*:

Excessive use of exclamation marks in expository prose is a certain indication of an unpracticed writer or of one who wants to add a spurious dash of sensation to something unsensational.

Finally, if your joke needs an exclamation mark, it's not funny.

Ellipses

Ellipses are three stops that are often used to indicate a break in the text or a thought trailing off (eg “He wasn't sure if the course was worth it . . .”). Each stop should have a space either side of it, unless it is next to a quotation mark. Ellipses can also be used in quotations to omit unneeded material (eg “According to a Shakespeare scholar, ‘Shakespeare was the greatest linguist . . . and the most creative writer of the age’”).

Ellipses should not be used to indicate the reader should read on (eg "Check out our great courses . . .")

Emails

Write 'email' rather than 'e-mail'. [[See also information on course emails, how to write them, ...]]

F

Forums

FutureLearn has discussions where learners post comments, not forums, boards or message boards.

Full stops

Headlines and titles should not feature full stops. Nor should headers, unless they are made up of more than one sentence.

H

Headers

The names of steps should be written in sentence case, eg:

Separating soluble substances

Commerce in London, Stratford and Venice

A close reading of Twelfth Night

Hyphens

Adjectives formed from two or more words should be hyphenated, eg:

right-wing groups (but the right wing of the party)

70-year-old judge

state-of-the-union message

I

ie

means 'in other words' and should be written without stops.

Internet

'Internet' should be written without a capital letter unless it is at the beginning of a sentence.

The internet is a valuable resource for lifelong learning.

Internet use is on the rise among over-60s.

J

Job titles

Titles should only be capitalised when associated with a name. Otherwise, use lower case, eg:

Chief Executive George Smith drinks black coffee.

The chief executives of the two companies met before the merger took place.

K

L

Links

Links should briefly describe the URL they target, eg:

✓ [BBC news article about Somali piracy](#)

✓ There are some useful [articles about overfishing](#) on the BBC News website.

The visible link should not be a URL or an instruction:

✗ BBC news article about Somali piracy: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10349155>

✗ There are some useful articles about overfishing on the BBC News website. [Click here](#).

Include a full stop after the link if it forms the end of a sentence.

When linking out to additional resources to supplement course steps, use the ‘related link’ functionality, which creates links under the heading ‘See also’. Related links should be in the format:

Title: name of author: name of book or article [name of publication or website, eg ‘The Economist’ or ‘Amazon UK’]

M

MOOCs

FutureLearn uses the term ‘courses’ rather than ‘MOOCs’. This is because the term ‘MOOC’ is not widely known, except in certain corporate and academic contexts. In contrast, the meaning of ‘open online course’ is clear to any reader. Avoid using the term ‘MOOC’ in your course content and course emails.

N

Numbers

Within your copy, numbers under 11 should be spelled out: one, two, three, and so on. Use figures for 11 upwards.

first to tenth centuries

20th century, 21st century

20th-century ideas

in 100 years’ time

a 29-year-old man

a man in his 20s

20th anniversary

Course weeks and step numbers are a special case. These are written with figures when referring to a specific week or step, and the word ‘week’ or ‘step’ should be capitalised, eg:

Week 1, Week 4, Step 3.6, Step 5.2.

In all other contexts, the words ‘week’ and ‘step’ don’t need capital letters, eg:

last week, in this step.

Ordinal numbers under 11 should be spelled out, eg:

the third week, the second step.

See also Dates, Currency

O

online

Write 'online' rather than 'on-line'. Do not use a capital letter, except at the beginning of a sentence or in a title.

Oxford comma

Use the Oxford comma.

Harry bought apples, oranges, and bananas.

Learners want to be informed, engaged, and inspired on a course.

P

Podcast

A podcast is an audio series with regular instalments received by subscribers automatically. An audio step or a link to an audio file should not be referred to as a podcast.

Personal titles

Titles like Dr, Mr, and Mrs should be written without stops.

PS

Use 'PS' for trailing thoughts at the end of an email, after the signature. Use capitals, and do not use stops.

Percentages

Use figures and the percentage symbol, eg:

100%, 5%, 0.3%

Q

Quotation marks

Use single quotation marks if you are separating a word or phrase from the rest of the sentence, eg:

‘They’re’, ‘their’, and ‘there’ are easily confused because they’re homophones.

His new book is called ‘The Magic of Online Learning’.

See also Direct speech

S

Singular and plural

Treat collective nouns as singular, unless it confounds meaning. For example, ‘the team has’ rather than ‘the team have’.

For words ending in ‘o’ there are no hard-and-fast rules, though the principle is that with most words just add an ‘s’. There are exceptions. There are a few general patterns, too. If a word is a short version of a longer word, just add an ‘s’: memos, photos, demos. The same applies to words that clearly have their roots in another language, such as stilettos, calypsos, chinos, bistros, casinos. And where a word ends with two vowels just add an ‘s’, as in videos and cameos.

The best way of checking is to take the first version offered by the [Oxford English Dictionary](#). So we would use: avocados, banjos, flamingos, ghettos, manifestos, mementos. Those taking an ‘e’ include: buffaloes, cargoes, dominoes, echoes, embargoes, haloes, heroes, mangoes, mottoes, potatoes, tomatoes, torpedoes, vetoes, volcanoes, tornadoes and mosquitoes (though Tornados and Mosquitos when talking about the planes).

Students vs learners

Refer to people on the course as ‘learners’ rather than ‘students’. ‘Students’ is used for people on degrees only. Where possible, use ‘you’ to refer directly to the reader.

T

Tautologies

Avoid tautologies. Some common examples are:

advance warning

armed gunmen

universal panacea

she has given birth to a baby boy

mutual cooperation

fixed phone line

local resident

crew members

past history

exact replica

pre-conditions

pre-planned

Times

Use the 24-hour clock, eg 09:30, 14:00.

To make timings clear for international learners, give specific times for events in UK time using GMT, or GMT+1 during [British Summer Time](#).

You can join our Google Hangout on Monday 12 December at 20:00 GMT

We will be live streaming a panel discussion on Wednesday 7 May at 20:00 GMT+1

Titles

Use title case for titles, ie capital letters at the beginning of principal words. This applies to titles of FutureLearn courses as well as any titles mentioned in course text. Do not use capital letters for prepositions, articles or conjunctions unless they are the first word of the title. Do not use italics. For example: Start Writing Fiction; Shakespeare and his World; The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; Gone with the Wind.

U

Unlimited

Unlimited should be written with a capital letter, including when it is used to describe a group of learners.

Upgrade

A learner upgrades a course, rather than upgrading on a course.

V

W

Website

Write 'website' rather than 'web-site' or 'Website' (unless starting a sentence).

World wide web

'world wide web', rather than 'World Wide Web'.

Weeks

See Numbers

Y

You vs we

Address learners as 'you':

On this course, you will learn how the world was formed.

Z

Z vs S

When in doubt, favour the UK spelling of words and use s instead of z, eg customise, organisation. See also [American vs British English](#).