SUPRA writing style guide

Updated April 2022

Contents

[1. Using this style guide 3](#_Toc20389338)

[2. Tone and style of writing 4](#_Toc20389339)

[3. General guidelines 5](#_Toc20389340)

[4. Word list 9](#_Toc20389341)

[5. Plain English 12](#_Toc20389342)

1. Using this style guide

This guide outlines SUPRA’s ‘house style’, which is the style of writing and preferred spelling and punctuation to use in our publications. The purpose of having a house style is to make everything we write for SUPRA as clear, accessible and consistent as possible.

* This guide is a working document that will change and evolve over time. It’s maintained by the admin/pubs team. Email [admin@supra.usyd.edu.au](mailto:admin@supra.usyd.edu.au) if you would like to suggest additions or corrections.
* Part 4, the word list, is a list of words that we commonly use (and get confused about), for quick reference.
* We use Australian English. Use the Macquarie dictionary to check spelling and usage.
* When this guide refers to the ‘Style manual’ it means the Australian Government style manual – there is a copy at reception.
* Use this guide in conjunction with the SUPRA graphic style guide and SUPRA accessibility style guide when designing publications:

**SUPRA graphic style guide:** smb://fs2.shared.sydney.edu.au/supra/shared/Publications/Style guide – SUPRA/Graphic style guide/New Style guide/Style guide 2019 Folder/Style guide 2019 – final.pdf

**SUPRA accessibility style guide (draft):**  
smb://fs2.shared.sydney.edu.au/supra/shared/Publications/Style guide – SUPRA/Accessible publications guide.

2. Tone and style of writing

Use plain English when writing for SUPRA (see: 5. Plain English).

In general, this means:

* Write simple sentences.
* Avoid idiom.
* Avoid formal, pompous or archaic language, e.g., use ‘look’, not ‘peruse'; ‘build-up’, not ‘accretion'.
* Use pronouns (‘we’, ‘you’ etc.) as a first preference when talking about our services, e.g., ‘we can help you …’ rather than ‘SUPRA can help you …'.

3. General guidelines

Bullet lists and numbered lists

* All lists should have parallel structure – either all fragments or all sentences
* Use colon before list, if appropriate
* Only use numbered lists where appropriate, e.g. ‘Five tips to deal with this problem: 1. ...'
* Use 1. for numbered lists, not 1 or 1)
* Full sentence bullet lists start with a capital and each sentence should have a full stop
* Fragment bullet lists should start lower case and have no punctuation
* Numbered lists may sometimes include multiple sentences, in which case a full stop to end each sentence

Capitalisation

* Sentence case for headings and subheadings (and throughout copy, e.g. Style manual, not Style Manual)
* Full policy names capitalised
* Only use Faculty when referring to specific faculty/school
* Use the University or the Uni when referring to the University of Sydney specifically. When ambiguous, use full name e.g. the University of Sydney
* The Policy, when referring to a specific policy
* Job titles: capitalise full title, not role. e.g. Queer Officer, equity officer
* Don’t capitalise special consideration, academic appeals, progress review etc., with one exception: Show Good Cause

Compound noun hyphenation

* Hyphenate before noun, not after, i.e. they are a full-time student; they study full time
* Contact details
* Use this format for contact details (when writing about SUPRA or other organisations):
* SUPRA (hyperlink name if relevant – not bold)  
  9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday (if relevant)  
  Our address, Holme Building, Camperdown Campus  
  02 2222 2222  
  [admin@supra.usyd.edu.au](mailto:admin@supra.usyd.edu.au)

Dates and times

* Avoid writing in sentence
* Use 9am not 9 am of 9AM
* Use 9:30am not 9.30am
* Our opening hours, always write: 9am­ – 5pm, Monday to Friday (not 9am–5pm; not Monday – Friday)
* Use Thursday, 16 August 2019 (not Thursday the 16th of August, August 16th, August 16 etc.)

Ellipses

* Use space between word and ellipses, e.g. ‘… this is a great example ...'

Emphasis

* Use bold for emphasis, not italics or underlining. Avoid writing sentences that rely on emphasis to convey meaning
* Do not bold something that is hyperlinked

Full stops

* Use in Latin shortened forms: e.g.; i.e.; etc. (also e.g. but it is preferable to write ‘for example’ if you have space, especially on a webpage, to help with accessibility)
* No full stops at end of headings or subheadings
* No full stops in Usyd, Sydney Uni
* Refer to Style manual for more on full stops

Hyperlinks (to be expanded)

* Submitted copy should always include full hyperlink, i.e. http//… (for ease of creating links online)
* For hard copy: refer to convention in last edition of Survival Guide. Avoid mid-sentence hyperlinks
* For digital: embed hyperlink within sentence. Don't write out full hyperlink, unless necessary, e.g. when crediting an image. Refer to accessibility style guide for best practice

Indefinite and definite article before vowel and consonant sounds

* Use ‘an’ before a word, abbreviation or acronym that is pronounced with a vowel sound, ‘a’ for ones pronounced with a consonant sound: a union; an HDR student; an NGO
* Don’t use full stops between letters in an acronym, e.g. SUPRA not S.U.P.R.A

Italics

* Avoid italics in general
* Don’t use italics for emphasis – use bold
* Italicise phrases or words from other languages that are not in the Macquarie Dictionary, e.g. *in camera*

Numbers

* Use spaces in numbers with more than five digits, e.g. 10 000, not 10000 or 10,000
* Use numerals in digital copy
* In printed copy, use full word for numbers twenty or under, e.g. one, eleven, twenty; numerals for numbers 21 and over, e.g. 35, 40, 100
* Use word and numerals for very large numbers, e.g. 2.5 million
* Use both word and numeral if the number is very important, e.g. in written advice about a deadline: 'fifteen (15) working days'
* At the beginning of a sentence use words not numerals (or re-work your sentence), e.g. ‘One hundred years ago ...’, not ‘100 years ago ...’
* Use % symbol. Symbol should only be used with numerals, never words (not ‘one hundred %’). Use percent not per cent, if using words
* Centuries: use 'the 18th century'; avoid shortening century to ‘c.’ etc.; refer to Style manual
* Use 1990s for decades, not 90s, 90’s or 1990’s

Oxford comma

* Use when necessary to avoid ambiguity, refer to Style manual

Possessive apostrophes

* Use possessive apostrophes; take care with plural possessives. Refer to Style manual
* Possessive ending in S: ‘Chris’s room'
* Master's degree/Bachelor's degree

Quotation marks

* Refer to Style manual
* Punctuation always goes outside quotation marks
* Use single quotation marks; doubles within singles where necessary

Textual dashes

* Use spaced en dashes, not em dashes or hyphens, within sentences

Underlining

* Avoid underlining, except for hyperlinks. Use bold for emphasis

4. Word list

A

* appeals
* Academic Board
* academic honesty and plagiarism
* advice and advise – double check correct use
* advice – do not use the word advice when referring to legal information seminars or events
* among (not amongst)
* associate dean – (use capitals only if specific title of person mentioned, otherwise lower case (as with ‘the prime minister’)

B

* Bachelor’s degree

C

* The SUPRA Council
* the current SUPRA council
* Co-Vice President
* co-vice president
* Coordinator
* Co-Coordinator
* SUPRA Councillor (insert name)
* General Councillor
* councillor/s
* Councillor-elect (insert name)
* COVID-19 (not Covid-19, Covid 19, Covid, COVID)

D

* dean – (use capitals only if specific title of person mentioned, otherwise lower case (as with ‘the prime minister’)
* Disabilities Officer
* drop-in
* decision-maker; decision-making

E

* everyday and every day – double check correct use
* Equity Officer (insert name)
* Equity Officer-elect (insert name)
* equity officer/s
* e.g. (but it is preferable to write 'for example' if you have space, especially on a webpage, to help with accessibility)
* etc.
* Equity Election

F

* Full-time student; studies full time. Hyphenated before noun, not after
* Faculty, when referring to specific faculty, otherwise don’t capitalise
* face-to-face

G

H

* HDR; ‘an HDR student’, not ‘a HDR student’. But use lower case when spelled out in a sentence, higher degree by research, same as master’s degree etc.

I

* International Officer
* i.e.

J

K

L

M

* members
* maybe and may be – double check correct use
* Master’s of … [e.g]
* master's degree

N

* NB

O

* Office not offices ('our office is located …')
* OK not ok

P

* Part-time student. Hyphenated before noun, not after
* progress review or PR, no longer APR
* Policy, when referring to specific policy, otherwise don’t capitalise

Q

* Queer Officer

R

* Research Period 1 when referring to specific research period, otherwise don’t capitalise
* Research Integrity and Ethics and Research Integrity Advisors
* Registered Migration Agent/s (always capitalise)

S

* SAAO (not Saao or S.A.A.O)
* SAAO or caseworker, but be consistent within the document. Always write Student Advice and Advocacy Officer and explain what it is before abbreviating to SAAO
* Satellite Campus Officer
* Show Good Cause (not Show Cause, not show good cause)
* Semester 1 when referring to specific semester, otherwise don’t capitalise
* Stage 1 – for Show Good Cause
* Stage 2 – for Show Good Cause
* Stage 3 – for Show Good Cause
* Staying on Track (for Show Good Cause)
* similarity-detection software

T

* TV (not tv) for television
* Turnitin

U

* Usyd (not USYD or USyd)
* The University
* The University of Sydney
* university (when referring to other institutions, or generically)
* unit of study/uos
* unit coordinator
* UniKey

V

* Vice President

W

* Women's Officer (never Womens’ Officer)
* working days (not business days)
* while (not whilst)
* whom – refer to Style manual for correct use

5. Plain English

Plain English writing:

* is respectful of the reader
* is appropriate to the audience (who they are and what relationship you have with them)
* uses common, everyday language
* explains technical words
* attempts to interest readers and hold their attention.

Ref: The Principles of Pain English [accessed August 2019] https://www.plainenglish.com.au/about-plain-english

The five principles of plain English

1. Use an average sentence length of 15–20 words

* Outer limit of 30 words
* Use the occasional short sentence to add ‘punch'
* Say only one thing in a sentence
* If in doubt, use a full stop

2. Use everyday words

* ‘Despite’ instead of ‘notwithstanding', for example
* Do the ‘would I use this word at home?’ test

3. Use first and second person pronouns

* When referring to your reader and your organisation, use ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘you'

4. Use active sentences

* Put subject before verb, e.g. ‘ICT fixed the computer’, not ‘the computer was fixed by ICT'

5. Use verbs and adjectives, not nominalisations (or ‘zombie nouns')

* ‘Our organisation wants to optimise productivity’ not ‘optimisation of productivity is a goal of our organisation’; 'heating water causes is to evaporate’ not ‘heating water causes evaporation'

Ref: Field, J [2006]. Getting the message across. <https://students.shu.ac.uk/regulations/Plain_English.pdf> [accessed August 2019]

Passive versus active voice – the ‘by Richard Nixon’ test!

You can tell if you’re using the passive voice if you can add ‘by Richard Nixon’ to the end of a statement, for example:

* Mistakes were made (… by Richard Nixon).
* This form must be completed in full (… by Richard Nixon).
* No students will be seen after 2:30pm (… by Richard Nixon).

The passive voice tends to sound bureaucratic, indirect and impersonal. And, as in the case of Richard Nixon, it can be used to avoid taking responsibility for something.

In contrast, the active voice is clear, direct, and sounds more like it is being spoken by a real, accountable person. If you’re worried it makes things come across as too blunt, there are ways to soften it (see text in brackets):

* I made a mistake (I am sorry. What can I do to make it up?)
* Fill in this form (I’m happy to help; if you need me just ask.)
* We stop seeing students at 2:30pm (try to come at 1pm, to avoid missing out.)

The ‘by Richard Nixon’ test courtesy Penny from the Good Copy!

Some random tips for writing in plain English

* Write for your reader, not yourself. There is a power relationship between the writer and reader. Ask: am I on a power trip? Am I showing off how clever I am?
* Prefer short words to long ones.
* Be concise – if a word can be cut, cut it.
* Use everyday English – avoid jargon, legal terms, technical terms. If you do need to use technical language, explain what it means on the first instance.
* Avoid idiom – we’d be ‘happy’, not ‘over the moon’, to help.
* Use the active voice, unless it makes what you’re saying too blunt.
* Write shorter sentences (15–20 words).
* Write in a way that is clear, helpful, human and polite.
* Use headings, lists and tables to make reading easier.
* Keep the subject and verb close together.
* Limit paragraphs to one idea.
* Stick to your topic.
* State major points before going into detail.
* Use pronouns (I, you, we).
* Avoid nominalisation (‘she suggested’ not ‘she made a suggestion’).
* Use clear heading hierarchies.
* Read your document out loud.

These tips collected from all over the internet. Google ‘plain English’ for more!