

Aid Works Style Guide

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Prepared for: Staff and associates

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Aid Works



Aid Works Style Guide

1. Overview

Who we are

Aid Works is a social enterprise that offers project support and learning services to international organisations, and helps local and international aid workers reach their potential through training and e-learning. We design projects, develop monitoring systems, evaluate organisations' work, and provide training.

How we write

Our writing reflects our values:

- **Plain-speaking** – We write to be understood by all types of readers – clients, practitioners and the general public, native and non-native English speakers –and do our best to avoid jargon and misunderstanding.
- **Fair and balanced** – We give honest appraisals and consider positive as well as negative aspects.
- **Practical and forward-thinking** – We aren't academics and don't write think pieces. Drawing on lessons learnt, we make positive recommendations about what action to take.

What we write

Aid Works produces written work in a number of formats for different audiences, including:

- Reports for clients (trip, evaluation, inception);
- PowerPoint slides for debriefs and presentations;
- Online news articles and top tips blog posts for the general public;
- Factsheets for courses and project summaries;
- Training and workshop materials; and
- Tools and resources for aid workers.

We aim to use the same tone and speak with the same voice across all of these formats.

About this style guide

This guide is primarily intended as a reference tool for Aid Works staff and associates. It's a living document and open to change.

This overview falls into four main sections:

1. [Rules of thumb](#) – general guidelines and things to bear in mind.
2. [House style guide](#) – more specific questions of grammar and punctuation.
3. [List of alternative of words and phrases](#) – plain and simple.
4. [A-Z of terms and spellings](#) – including British vs US English, -ise/-yse endings.

2. Rules of thumb

Bear these in mind for any writing or presentations for Aid Works.

- **Use plain language** – Keeping it simple doesn't mean having to dumb down; it means communicating clearly and concisely. Assume that not all your readers are experts and that all your experts are pressed for time.
- **Avoid jargon** – Try not to use sector buzzwords. Define ambiguous terms if you need to use them (e.g. resilience, sustainability, narrative, space). Cut out junk phrases such as 'to dialogue', 'to operationalise' and 'going forward'.
- **Know your audience** – For example, it's OK to abbreviate 'will not', 'they would', 'it is' to 'won't', 'they'd', 'it's' and so on in informal writing, but avoid doing so in formal reports and presentations.
- **Frontload information** – To grab and hold readers' attention put your most important information at the front of sentences, put your most important sentences at the front of paragraphs and so on.
- **Shorter is better** – Keep words, sentences and paragraphs short. It makes it easier for readers to follow long reports, particularly if they are reading on a screen. Break up longer paragraphs with subheadings.
- **Use graphics** – Tables, diagrams and photos can illustrate and complement your text, and give your readers a break.
- **Make lists** – Lists are useful for summarising and condensing information. Use numbered lists to show sequence or hierarchy, otherwise use bullets. (See also LISTS in the [House style guide](#).)
- **Use active vs passive voice** – The active voice is usually more direct, easier to understand and uses fewer words. It also emphasises agency and humanises actions. For example, 'The government has taken action' vs 'Action has been taken by the government'; 'The challenges that people faced' vs 'The challenges that were being faced by people'.
- **Cut down on 'there is/there are'** – It varies your writing and uses fewer words. For example, 'Many NGOs work in the region' vs 'There are many NGOs working in the region'.
- **Use verbs instead of phrases** – Verbs are more direct and use fewer words. For example, 'reflects' vs 'is reflective of'; 'indicates' vs 'is indicative of'.
- **Check your use of tense** – Use simple perfect for (specific) completed actions in the past (**was/were**). Use present tense to describe (general) events that happen in the present (**is/are**). Use present perfect for actions that started in the past and continue in the present (**has been/have been**).
- **That defines, which describes** – 'that' provides essential information (e.g. 'We got into the car that was outside the hotel'); 'which' provides extra information after a comma ('We got into the car, which was outside the hotel').
- **Avoid over-capitalisation** – Using too many capital letters makes text look cluttered. For this reason also use acronyms sparingly. (Also see CAPITALISATION in the [House style guide](#).)
- **Use single spaces** – Don't use double spaces anywhere.
- **Split infinitives** – It's OK 'to boldly go' vs 'to go boldly' or 'boldly to go'.
- **Run the spellcheck** – It won't catch everything but might show up things you've missed: typos, repeated words, stray punctuation, unfinished thoughts.

3. House style guide

These are general rules, but may change for specific pieces of work depending on our clients' instructions.

ACRONYMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give their definition in full on first use – treat the main text, tables/charts and footnotes separately • Write out without full stops (e.g. UNICEF) • Using too many acronyms will confuse readers.
AGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'The five-year-old children are five years old. They are under-fives'.
CAPITALISATION	<p>Use capitals for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names of institutions (e.g. the Ministry of Health, Humanitarian Aid Commission) • When giving the full title of office holders with their name, (e.g. Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond), but subsequently 'the chancellor'. With lower-ranking officials give their full title with caps (e.g. Secretary of State for International Development Priti Patel), but afterwards the secretary, minister, etc. • Same rules apply to foreign governments, but opposition posts are all lower case (e.g. the shadow chancellor) • Use lower case for fields of study unless the area is the proper title of a department or programme or the word is always capitalised (e.g. 'She is a monitoring and evaluation specialist' and 'He is at the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation).
CHARTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number tables, figures, graphs and illustrations consecutively (e.g. Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, etc.) • If a chart is a copy, crop the heading out of the chart area and use a caption heading above the chart instead • Include the source below the chart area • Make sure to label axes on graphs and include units of measure, colour key, etc.
COMMAS	<p>Use a serial (Oxford) comma before the final 'and'/'or' to avoid ambiguity in lists. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2010 the country was exporting timber, fruit and vegetables, and animal feed <p>A comma is not necessary before the final 'and' in simple lists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The following year exports grew to include oil, gas and ethanol.
COLONS See also: SEMICOLONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow colons with a lower-case letter • Never follow with a dash • Use colons to introduce lists (bulleted, numbered and in running text).
CURRENCIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use British style (e.g. £99.00) and adapt as relevant (e.g. €100m, US\$100m, ₦1,000m) • For currencies without common symbols use lower case after the number (e.g. 100m rand, 100m rupees, 100m yuan) • Give a £ or US\$ equivalent (in brackets) for comparison.
DATES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the day/month/year format for dates, without commas (e.g. 11

	<p>January 2017)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An en-rule between dates indicates a period running across years (e.g. 2016–17) • An oblique stroke indicates a single financial or academic year comprising parts of two years (e.g. 2016/17) • Refer to centuries in full (e.g. the twenty-first century) • Decades have no apostrophe (e.g. the 1970s), and indicate a specific timespan; ‘the seventies’ connotes the social, cultural and political conditions of that time.
ELLIPSIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicate where words have been omitted from a direct quote with an ellipsis of three points, thus... (no space before, one after).
EN-DASH OR EN-RULE Note: MS Word shortcut: ctrl + Shift + - or ctrl + - on numeric keypad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use in pairs – preceded and followed by a space – in running text instead of brackets • Without spaces, use to indicate relationship (e.g. EU–Turkey relations; Uganda–Kenya border; Eldoret–Juba road; pp. 140–58; 1939–45) • Use in tables to indicate absence of data; don’t leave empty cells • Em-dashes—which are longer and don’t take spaces—are more common in US English.
FOOTNOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use footnotes for references and comments in the text • Add superscript numbers within text after punctuation, like so.¹ • Use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) instead of Roman (i, ii, iii, etc.) • We use endnotes when clients ask us to or for proposals with page limits.
GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use lower case for compass points (e.g. southeast Europe), but significant capitals when part of a name (e.g. Middle East, Central Asia) • Use upper case also for development, political or philosophical groupings (e.g. the West, the Global South).
FULL STOPS OR POINTS See also: UNITS OF MEASURE	<p>Use for e.g., etc., i.e.</p> <p>Don’t use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In abbreviations for names of organisations/companies, etc. (e.g. UN – United Nations; WHO – World Health Organization; OUP – Oxford University Press; Washington DC) • In qualifications (e.g. BSc, DPhil, PhD) • After titles that end in the final letter of the abbreviation (e.g. Mr, Dr, Lt) – but use for titles that are cut off in the middle (e.g. Prof., Brig.-Gen.).
HEADINGS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use minimal capitalisation and give acronyms in full • No full stop, colon, dash or hyphen at the end.
HYPHENATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to minimise use, except where the hyphen assists reading (e.g. re-cover or recover – note different meaning; note also cooperate, rewrite, but re-edit) • You don’t need to hyphenate adverbs ending in -ly (e.g. a rapidly changing situation, ethnically based divisions, etc.).
INTERNET ADDRESSES (URLS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where a URL starts with ‘www.’ you can omit the prefix ‘http://’ and ‘https://’ (e.g. http://www.aidworks.org.uk) • If the address normally omits ‘www.’, you should include the prefix

	(e.g. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com).
ITALICS See also: LONG DIRECT SPEECH QUOTES	<p>Use for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis, clarity or common convention • Titles of published works (books, journals, newspapers, online articles, plays, films, etc.) • Editorial terms such as <i>et al.</i> and <i>ibid.</i> • Non-English words and phrases (see below) <p>Even for non-British proper names don't use italics for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations such as political parties, ministries, commercial firms, research projects/programmes, networks or social movements • Naturalised words and loanwords (e.g. cafe, elite, debacle, jihad) • Names of sacred texts (e.g. the Qur'an, the Bible).
LISTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use bullet points for lists of separate elements without any sequence or hierarchy • Use numbered lists for structured, consecutive points • Where lists are used running on within the body text, enclose the numbers/letters in brackets for clarity, thus: (1); and (2), etc. • Use an initial capital and full stop after the introductory sentence if bullet point is a whole sentence • If not a whole sentence, use a semicolon after each bullet and end the last with a full stop • In tables, only use a full stop at the end.
NON-ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES See also: ITALICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use italics in the text and give the translation on first use (e.g. '<i>zakat</i>, a compulsory form of donation') • However, when referring to a named organisation use roman (e.g. Médecins Sans Frontières).
NUMBERS See also: CURRENCIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write out one to nine then use numerals for 10 and up • Use a comma to indicate thousands (e.g. 12,000) • Use million and billion to talk about people and animals, but abbreviate to m and bn for inanimate objects • In fractions, hyphenate one-quarter, two-thirds, three-fifths; but just use half – avoid mixing fractions and decimals • Don't start sentences with numerals – write the number in full or reorder the sentence.
PER CENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only use the symbol (%) in tables, graphs or figures • Write out 'per cent' in full in text, with the number always in figures even if between one and ten, (e.g. 7 per cent).
PUNCTUATION See also: COMMAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use less rather than more (e.g. Dr not Dr.) • Don't use apostrophes in plurals (e.g. 100's is incorrect).
QUOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use either a comma or a colon before direct speech • Use 'single quote marks' as standard, but "double" for quotes within quotes (within main body of text) • Put punctuation outside the speech marks, unless it is included in the original text • Reproduce quotes using the exact words of the original; put any additional editorial/author comments put into square brackets, with [sic] denoting a known error of fact or oddity of spelling

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cite the source in round brackets following the quote • Short quotes under 40 words should be enclosed in single quote marks and run on within the body text • Long quotes over 40 words should be separated from the body text by adding a line space before and after, and indenting the quote on the left margin only – any quotes within this should be in ‘single’ inverted commas • Long direct speech quotes: if a long quote entirely consists of direct speech (e.g from a focus group discussion or interview rather than a quote from a published work) use italics to indicate this.
REFERENCES	<p>Basic format, in footnotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other, A.N. (Year) ‘Chapter title’, <i>Title of Book</i>, City: Publisher’s name in full • Other, A.N. (Year) ‘Journal article’, <i>Title of Journal</i> Vol: p. 100, pp. 132–54 • Organisation (Year) <i>Report title</i>, URL (accessed Day Month Year) • Interview with A.N. Other, Place, Month Year. • Focus group discussions with care givers, Month Year.
SEMICOLONS	Use them to separate items in a list in running text, but otherwise try to avoid using semicolons in sentences. Use a full stop instead.
SINGULAR VS PLURAL	Treat a government, country, party, organisation or company as a singular noun (e.g. ‘The United Nations <u>is</u> the first organisation...’).
SPELLING	Unless the client requests otherwise, use British (United Kingdom) English and ‘-ise/-yse’ endings rather than ‘-ize/-yze’. The exception is when keeping an organisation’s name in the original spelling (e.g. World Health Organization).
STROKE (/)	Oblique stroke/forward slash – don’t use a space on either side (e.g. ‘and/or’).
TIMES	Set as 9.00am and 4.30pm
UNITS OF MEASURE	Write without full stops and without a space between numbers and letters (e.g. 80bn, 50kg, 10km). Avoid mixing imperial and metric.

4. List of alternative words and phrases

The table below gives a selection of ‘simple’ alternative words and phrases. The Plain English Campaign has a comprehensive [A–Z of alternative words](#).

Instead of:	Use:
a variety of	various
acquire	get
ameliorate	improve
approximately	about
assistance	help
by virtue of the fact	because
commence	start
demonstrate	show
end result	result
in order to	to
in spite of	despite
in spite of the fact that	although
in the event that	if
including, but not limited to	including
magnitude	size
manufacture	make
numerous	many
operationalise	start
permit	let
persons	people
possess	has
purchase	buy
request	ask
terminate	end
trigger	prompt
utilise	use
violate	break
with the aim of	to
with the exception of	except

5. A-Z of terms and spellings

For general points of spelling, grammar and usage consult Oxford Dictionaries (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>) or The Economist Style Guide (www.economist.com/styleguide/introduction).

A

& – write out in full as and, unless part of the official name of an organisation (e.g. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation)

Aid Works – two words

aid work/-er – two words (see also: FIELDWORK/-ER)

affect – to have an effect on; ‘to effect’ means to bring about or make happen

advise (verb), **advice** (noun)

adviser – not ~~advisor~~, unless that’s how it appears in somebody’s official job title and you are referring to them directly; but it will always be **an adviser**

aim to – you can probably leave this out; likewise **help to** and **serve to**; with the aim of = to

agree – you agree **on, to** or **about** something; you don’t just agree it

amid – instead of amidst

among – instead of amongst

analyse – not ~~analyze~~

annex (verb), **annexe** (noun)

appendix – subsidiary matter in books/research papers, **appendices** plural. (Note: **appendixes** refers to body part in plural)

approximately – prefer ‘around’ or ‘about’

as such – no need to use

authored – wrote

B

beneficiaries – prefer **affected people/population**

between – takes ‘and’ (e.g. ‘**between** 2010 **and** 2014’; but ‘during 2010–14’)

biannual means twice a year; **biennial** means once every two years

C

capacity building – two words; but hyphenated when used as an adjective (e.g. capacity-building programme)

caregiver, caregiving – one word

chair – instead of chairman, chairwoman, chairperson; no full stop

childcare – one word

civil service – lower case

civil society organisation – not hyphenated, three words

centre on, not ~~around~~ (see also: FOCUS)

community – try to avoid unless you mean a group of people who live together in the same location, in similar circumstances, or share the same religion or ethnicity. Alternatives: business community = businesspeople; intelligence community = intelligence services; donor community = donors; international community = countries/aid agencies

community-based organisation – hyphenated, two words

A group **comprises** members or is **composed of** members (not ~~comprised of~~)

cooperate, coordinate – no hyphen

D

DFID – all caps, not ~~DfID~~

data – use as a singular; **data set** two words and **database** one word

decision making – two words, but hyphenated as an adjective (e.g. decision-making powers)

developing countries – lower case

diarrhoea – not ~~diarrhea~~

different from – not different ~~than~~

disabled people – not ‘~~the~~ disabled’

DISEASES/MEDICAL CONDITIONS – lower case for malaria, tuberculosis (TB), etc.; but Ebola, Zika. For *E coli* (and similar): italics and space between, no full stop after shortened word

E

effectively – if you mean ‘actually’ use **in effect**

e.g. – use **for example** in running text, **e.g.** in brackets and tables

presidential or general **election**; legislative or parliamentary **elections**

et al. – italics and full stop after al only

etc. – use **and so on** or **and so forth** in running text, **etc.** in brackets and tables

F

famous/-ly – if something really is famous you won’t have to say so (see also: ICONIC)

fallout is radioactive or refers to consequences; a **falling out** is an argument

Use **fewer** for numbers of individual items or people; but **less** for measured quantities or proportions (e.g. fewer than eight villages; less than 800 tonnes of maize)

fieldwork/-er – one word, no hyphen (see also: AID WORKER)

focus on (not ~~around~~); note the spelling of **focused**, **focusing** (with one 's')

follow up – no hyphen when used as a verb (e.g. 'We will follow up with you next week'); but hyphenated as an adjective (e.g. 'I have planned a follow-up meeting')

foreword – not ~~forward~~, for a book/report prelim

former refers to the first of two things; **latter** refers to the last of two things – if possible avoid using them and refer to what you mean directly

forwards – rather than forward (see also: TOWARDS, GOING FORWARD)

full-time – hyphenated

fundraiser(-ing) – one word, no hyphen

G

going forward – do not use. Where else would you be going? If at all necessary, use 'in future'/'in the future'

government – lower-case 'g'

grassroots – one word

H

healthcare – one word

HIV virus is a tautology, don't add virus after. HIV in caps, also AIDS

home in on – not ~~hone~~ in on; to hone means to sharpen

homogeneous means of the same kind or nature; **homogenous** means similar because of common descent

however – follow with a comma when it means 'but' (e.g. However, the risk was small). No comma when it means 'regardless' (e.g. However small the risk)

I

iconic – if something really is iconic, you won't need to say so (see also: FAMOUS/-LY)

i.e. – use **in other words** in running text

ill health – two words but **wellbeing** one word; **ill-being** hyphenated

to impact – prefer to affect, or to have an impact on

importantly/interestingly – avoid starting sentences with these words; it might suggest that everything else is unimportant or uninteresting

internet – lower case 'i'; but **World Wide Web**

into one word; but **on to**, two words

issue – try to be more specific. If it means 'problem', say so

L

last means final; for preceding use **past** (e.g. 'in the past year') or **most recent**

learnt – instead of 'learned' (for past tense of learn)

license (verb), **licence** (noun)

like – in the sense of 'for example' use **such as**

likely – use 'probably' or write '**is/are likely to**' vs '~~will likely~~'; also **unlikely** vs **likely not**

logframe – one word

login – login name = noun; log in = verb; also log on; log out; log off = verbs

long-standing – hyphenated

loose means not firmly fixed; **lose** means the opposite of win or to not have

M

media – plural (but **social media**, singular)

Middle East – not ~~Mid-East~~

moot means arguable, doubtful or open to debate. Not to be confused with 'mute' (e.g. 'mute point' is incorrect)

multinational, multicultural; but **multi-stakeholder**

N

nation-building – hyphenated

non-governmental organisation – two words, first word hyphenated

'**the number**' is, '**a number**' are

O

ongoing – one word, no hyphen

P

p. page, **pp.** pages

part-time – hyphenated

peacemaker (-ing) and **peacekeepers (-ing)** one word; but **peace-building** hyphenated

peer – an equal, not a contemporary, colleague or counterpart; but **peer-to-peer** hyphenated

per cent two words, **percentage** one word

policymakers, policymaking – one word. Note **foreign-policy maker (-ing)**

postgraduate – one word

practice (noun), **to practise** (verb)

programme – not ~~program~~; but '**computer program**'

provide support with – either **provide with** or **support**; no need for both

R

re-classified, **re-designated**, **re-use**; but **reinvent**, **restructure**

realise – not ~~realize~~; in the sense of to become aware, otherwise use **achieve**

remains/remain – is/are

S

same-sex – hyphenated

scale – hyphenate when used as an adjective, so: a **large-scale** development is developed on a **large scale** (see also: TERM)

scaling-up – hyphenated

seasons – not capitalised; also, give the actual months referred to, in brackets – seasons and seasonal events (e.g. dry season, rainy season) may have different meanings to readers depending on where they are from

since – limit use to describe time (e.g. ‘since 2010’, ‘since the 1990s’, ‘since her time in office’, etc.); prefer **because** as a conjunction

sociocultural, **socioeconomic**, etc. – one word

software – capitalise names of software packages (e.g. Access, Excel, PowerPoint, Skype)

stakeholder – one word

state-building – one word

sub-Saharan – lower-case ‘sub-’

supply-side – hyphenated

T

term – only hyphenate when used as an adjective so: plans for the **short, medium and long term are short-, medium- and long-term** plans. Also: **short-to-medium** or **medium-to-long** term. The same applies to **hand** (first, second, etc.) and **scale** (small, medium, large)

third party (noun), **third-party** service (adjective)

third world – prefer **developing countries**

time frame – two words

tonne – not ~~ton~~

towards – not ~~toward~~

traditionally – prefer **historically** unless specifically referring to cultural practice

U

underway – one word

university – lower case unless used as part of a name (e.g. University of Sheffield)

UK – United Kingdom on first mention; political unit of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (not Isle of Man and the Channel Islands)

US – United States on first mention then US thereafter (not USA or America)

US place names – no punctuation between city and state (e.g. Berkeley CA, Washington DC; but just 'New York')

utilise – prefer **use** unless you really mean 'to make useful' (NOT to make use of)

V

versus or **vs** – no full stop, not italic

W

wellbeing – one word; but **ill health** two words

while – instead of whilst

worldwide – one word; but World Wide Web

Y

youth – prefer **young people**, unless using as an adjective