

Style Guide for Government Communications

Companion document to the Communications Reference Manual



Communications

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Introduction

This style guide is intended for use by all Provincial Government communicators. It is a companion document to the Communications Reference Manual. It provides the standard to which all government publications including annual reports, strategic plans, activity plans, discussion papers associated with consultations, strategy documents and position frameworks should be crafted to maintain consistency across all government departments. It is also full of helpful tips, solutions to common confusions, and simple strategies to keep your writing clear, interesting and professional.

Canadian Press (CP) Style

For the most part, Provincial Government communicators follow CP style. Editions of the *Canadian Press Stylebook* and *Canadian Press Caps and Spelling* guide are available within every department's Communications Division.

Exceptions to CP Style

There are some exceptions to CP style when used for Provincial Government communications. Those exceptions – and many other helpful tips – can be found in this manual.

Notes on Writing Well

Use the active voice.

Always aim for active sentence constructions. The active voice is usually more direct and lively than the passive:

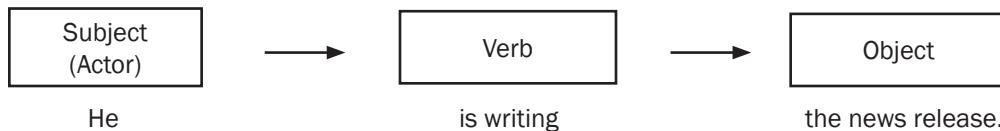
He is writing the news release.

...is much better than

The news release is being written by him.

The second sentence is written in the passive voice. As a result, it is weaker and less direct. Passive sentence constructions require more words to make the same point less effectively.

Active sentences are structured with the actor first (as the subject), then the verb, then the object of the action.



Put statements in positive form.

Make definite assertions.

| | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| She is not very often here. | She is usually out. |
| She did not think that bargaining was much use. | She thought bargaining useless. |

Whenever possible, express a negative in positive form with a more appropriate word choice.

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| not correct | incorrect or wrong |
| not dangerous | safe |
| did not acknowledge | ignored |
| did not maintain | neglected |

Omit needless words.

"If I'd had more time to write, I would've written less." - Mark Twain

Be concise. Comb sentences for unnecessary words, paragraphs for unnecessary sentences. This does not mean every sentence should be short or lacking detail; rather, that every word serve a purpose.

Some common wordy expressions*:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| the question as to whether | whether (the question whether) |
| there is no doubt but that | no doubt (doubtless) |
| used for fuel purposes | used for fuel |
| he is a man who | he |
| in a hasty manner | hastily |
| this is a subject which | this subject |
| His story is a strange one. | His story is strange. |

*Example from *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. (1918).

As you can see, only a moment's consideration is needed to replace several unnecessary words with a single, more direct choice. Some words can be useless, and need only be removed to tighten a sentence and shorten the overall word count. Often, words like *that* or *which* can be omitted.

| | |
|------------------------|------------|
| she was a person that | she |
| he said that | he said |
| this is an issue which | this issue |

Use good form.

Pay attention to your words. Make choices based on practicality and established rules of usage.

Some tips:

- **Join two-word adjectives with a hyphen.**

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| In the long term, we expect ... | the long-term care facility |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|

In the example on the right, the words *long-term* collectively form an adjective to describe the care facility.

- **Use that and which correctly.** Deciding between these two words often causes confusion. Generally:
 - o *That* is used when a clause is essential to the noun it defines. Write *the show that opened at the Arts and Culture Centre last week*;
 - o *Which* is used when a clause gives a reason or adds a new element. Write *The show, which only cost \$1,000 to produce, is a classic example of creative budgeting*.
 - o *Which* clauses often require a comma; *that* clauses do not.
- **Use punctuation correctly.** When properly applied, punctuation can be a useful tool. As a rule, keep punctuation as simple as possible.
 - o Use the semicolon (;) to join two closely-related independent clauses. An independent clause is a clause that can stand alone as its own complete sentence.
 - o The dash (—) joins an independent clause and a dependent clause that are closely related. For more information on how to use the dash properly, refer to the corresponding CP Style Guide section.
 - o Place apostrophes correctly when forming the possessive. Do not use apostrophes unnecessarily. If something happened in the 1980s, do not write that it happened in the 1980's. Omit the apostrophe from this usage; the possessive of the 1980s is not being formed. However, if you are referring to the 1980's big hair style, the possessive is being formed and an apostrophe is required.

Write for your reader.

Determine your target audience and ensure you are writing to that audience.

Some tips:

- **Use plain language.** The most effective news release can be understood by anyone.
- **Avoid complex words.** Opt for their simpler substitutes:

| | |
|------------|-----------------------------|
| amalgamate | combine; merge; join; unite |
| procure | get; obtain |

| | |
|-----------|---|
| reiterate | repeat; restate; say again |
| mitigate | lessen the effect of; control |
| harmonize | together; make consistent |
| leverage | influence; assist effort |
| synergize | to work together/combine efforts successfully |

- **Avoid jargon.** Many terms second nature to you are foreign and confusing to the general public:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| revenue stream | money; income |
| capital costs | initial costs; initial investment costs |
| delegation | representatives; spokespersons |
| infrastructure | roads, bridges, sewers, water lines, etc. (be specific) |
| cost neutral | pays for itself; free of cost |

Our Style

Capitalization

These capitalization rules apply to all Provincial Government publications. This includes news releases, annual reports, strategic plans, consultation plans, and any other forms of published communication.

Important CP style points:

- **Capitalize all proper nouns/names, trade names, government departments and agencies of government, names of associations, companies, clubs, religions, languages, nations, races, places, and addresses.** The House of Assembly. The Premier. Newfoundland and Labrador. First Nations. Catholicism. The French language.
- **Do not capitalize:**
 - Geographical indicators functioning as adjectives (western Newfoundland, eastern Canada);
 - Words such as *region*, *area*, or *city* unless part of a formal name (Corner Brook-Humber Valley region, Labrador City);
 - Other common words that stand alone (department, federal, communications, oceans).

CP style exceptions:

- **Write headlines in title case / capitalize.** Nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and first and last words are always capitalized. Prepositions, articles and conjunctions are lower cased (Smoking Banned in Restaurants, New Search and Rescue Facility in the Works, Wage Rates Pivotal in Postal-Bill Debate).
- **Capitalize:**
 - All government department and agency names, provincial and federal (Department of Transportation and Works, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Department of Fisheries and Oceans);
 - The *Provincial Government*; and the *Federal Government*

- o All professional titles (Chief Information Officer, Assistant Secretary to Cabinet, Communications Specialist);
- o The *Prime Minister* and *Premier* when they stand alone;

Spelling

Important CP style points:

- **Use Canadian spelling.** The list of proper Canadian spellings is exhaustive. When in doubt, do a little research. Generally:
 - o Spell words like *honourable*, *labour*, *colour* and *neighbour* with an *our*; however, spell *honorary* and *laborious* without it;
 - o Spell *traveller* with two *ls*;
 - o Spell *centre*, *metre*, and *kilometre* with an *re*, except where the American version occurs in a proper name (The Kennedy Space Center).
- **Spell out numbers below 10.** Write one to nine as such (do not spell out decimals – write 7.4, 9.2, etc.).
- **Spell out any number that begins a sentence.** Write *Five hundred guests attended the event to witness more than 20 performances over three days.*
- **Place commas within numbers 1,000 and higher.** Write 2,500, 250,000, or 3,000,000.
- **Spell per cent as two words.** Do not write *percent* and do not use the % symbol (unless expressing percentages in a table).
- **Do not suffix dates.** Write *January 23*, not *January 23rd*. Suffixes are acceptable when enumerating (Write *25th Annual Farmer's Festival*).
- **Express a fiscal year in the format 2011-12.**
- **Express monetary figures as follows:**
 - o All are written out fully when beginning a sentence (Thirty thousand dollars will be granted to the association.);
 - o Otherwise, simply place the dollar sign before the figure (Write \$30,000. Do not write *dollars* after the figure.);
 - o When expressing figures in the millions and higher, write \$10 million, \$2.4 billion, etc.

Use of abbreviations and acronyms

- **For the most part, do not abbreviate.** Write *January 31*, not *Jan. 31st*; however, write *Dr. John Smith*, not *Doctor John Smith*.
- **Avoid the use of acronyms.** Use them to avoid cumbersome repetition only. Some guidelines:
 - Clearly spell out the subject of the acronym on first reference, followed by the acronym in parenthesis. Write *the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA)*. The acronym *ACOA* may then be used as a less cumbersome substitute for the remainder of the piece;
 - If the subject of an acronym does not reappear in the piece, do not follow the subject with its acronym in parenthesis.
 - It is generally acceptable to use acronyms that are familiar to ordinary readers, such as *VOCM*, *CBC*, or *NATO*.
 - Especially avoid the use of acronyms in quotations.

Some important CP style points:

- Omit periods unless an acronym is geographical, as in *B.C.*
- Always use an acronym for *Member of the House of Assembly*. Write *MHA*.

CP style exceptions:

- Unless written in a headline, do not use an acronym for *Newfoundland and Labrador*. Spell it out.
- Do not use an ampersand in place of the word *and* in the body of a news release, unless the ampersand is part of a proper name. Write *Research & Development Corporation*, but do not write *Newfoundland & Labrador*.

Professional and Courtesy Titles

- **Use professional titles for the Premier and ministers correctly.** Some guidelines:
 - Begin first references to the Premier and ministers with *the Honourable*, followed by names and then appropriate professional titles. Write *the Honourable Jane Smith, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador*; or, *the Honourable John Doe, Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture*.
 - For all references to the Premier or ministers thereafter, simply use the professional title followed by the surname. Write *Premier Smith*; or, *Minister Doe*.

| First Reference | Second Reference |
|---|--|
| The Honourable Jane Smith, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, announced Tuesday... | "It is a sound investment for the future of this province's health care system," said Premier Smith. |

- **Use courtesy titles only when appropriate.** CP style omits the use of common courtesy titles such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, and *Ms.*; however, Provincial Government communications materials do not.
 - o For anyone referenced who is not a minister or the Premier, begin the first reference with names followed by the professional title. Write *John Doe, Executive Director of The Universe Inc.*.
 - o Upon second reference, simply the courtesy title and the surname will do. Write *Mr. Doe*.

| First Reference | Second Reference |
|---|--|
| John Doe, Executive Director of The Universe Inc., spoke in favour of the decision. | Mr. Doe believes this is an issue that affects all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. |

- **Place ministerial titles in the correct order.** If a minister is being quoted on an issue whose district is involved, but whose department is uninvolved, present both her professional titles as follows: *The Honourable Jane Doe, Minister of Child, Youth and Family Services and MHA of Trinity-Bay de Verde*.

Italics

- **Italicize proper names of all Provincial Government acts.** Write the *Environmental Protection Act*.
- **Italicize the titles of major works, as well as umbrella frameworks and strategies.** Do not italicize the names of sub-programs or initiatives. Italicize the *Provincial Healthy Aging Policy Framework*, but do not italicize any of its sub-programs, such as the Age-Friendly Newfoundland and Labrador Grants Program.

Common Errors

- **Use of flowery language.** Do not attempt to make a sentence more attractive using more complicated (and almost always unnecessary) words or expressions. Use plain language and write to be understood. This rule applies to even the most imaginative works of fiction; it applies even more so for communications professionals.
- **Use of jargon.** The general public is largely unfamiliar with the multitude of jargonized terms, acronyms, and turns of phrase second nature to Provincial Government communicators.

For further information on avoiding the use of flowery language and / or jargon, refer to the CP Style Guide section on the use of plain language.

- **Proofing errors.** Thoroughly proofread all communications materials. Most errors – whether grammatical, factual or typographic – can be avoided with a simple proofread. Depending on a document's size and complexity, at least two proofs are necessary. More may be reasonable. It is also a good idea to ask someone who is not familiar with the subject to do a proof as they will be looking at it with fresh eyes.
- **Excessive quoting.** Use direct quotations sparingly. Quotations cannot tell a story by themselves; pair them with concise, paraphrased information to add credibility and immediacy.
- **Excessive information.** Provide the information readers will require to understand your message in an economical way. Prioritize secondary information, and include some nice-to-know facts only if there is room. Do not confuse your message with information overload. If there is an excessive amount of truly relevant information, consider a backgrounder.
- **Point of view.** Use the first person only when quoting. Do not write *our province* unless relaying someone's exact words. Write "Our province's natural resources sector is doing better than ever," said the Premier. Do not write, "The Premier says that our province is doing better than ever."
- **Passive language.** Passive sentence constructions require more words to make the same point less effectively. In short, passive communication is poor communication. See "Use the active voice" on page 3.
- **Inconsistencies.** Be consistent. Inconsistencies appear unprofessional and can confuse your readers. Maintain standards of format, writing style and usage. When in doubt, reference this manual, the *Canadian Press Stylebook* or the *Canadian Press Caps and Spelling* guide.

Commonly Misused Words

| | |
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| Accept Except | <p><i>Accept</i> is a verb meaning to receive.</p> <p><i>Except</i> is usually a preposition meaning excluding.</p> |
| Accident Mishap | <p>An <i>accident</i> can be lucky or unlucky.</p> <p>A <i>mishap</i> is an unfortunate, but minor accident. Disasters, catastrophes and calamities are not mishaps.</p> |
| Addition Edition | <p><i>Addition</i> means something is added.</p> <p><i>Edition</i> refers to a particular version of a publication.</p> |
| Affect Effect | <p><i>Effect</i>, the noun, means the result of.</p> <p>Less commonly, <i>effect</i>, the verb, is used to mean to bring to pass, as in to effect a change. <i>Effect</i>, the verb, may also refer to feigning or pretending, as in <i>effect indifference at the poker table</i>.</p> <p><i>Affect</i>, the verb, means to influence or change.</p> <p>Less commonly, <i>affect</i>, the noun, has technical meanings in psychology, music, and aesthetic theory: an emotion or subjectively experienced feeling, as in symptoms include weight loss and negative affect.</p> |
| Allegedly Reportedly Reputedly | <p><i>Allegedly</i> indicates the making of a claim or expressing of an opinion—nothing has been verified or backed up.</p> <p><i>Reportedly</i> is used when something is in writing or widely known.</p> <p><i>Reputedly</i> means <i>generally supposed to be</i>, and can refer to a warranted or unwarranted reputation.</p> |
| Allusion Illusion | <p>An <i>allusion</i> is an indirect reference.</p> <p>An <i>illusion</i> is a misconception or false impression.</p> |
| A lot | <p>Written as <u>two words</u>. A <i>lot</i>.</p> |

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| Alternate Alternative | <p><i>Alternate</i> means one after the other or every other. An <i>alternate</i> is also a substitute.</p> <p><i>Alternative</i> refers to one or the other (a choice).</p> |
| Among Between | <p><i>Among</i> is used for more than two persons. Do not use the strictly British version <i>amongst</i>.</p> <p><i>Between</i> refers to two persons.</p> |
| Anxious Eager | <p><i>Anxious</i> means worried or distressed.</p> <p><i>Eager</i> means feeling or showing keen desire.</p> <p>You may be anxious to visit your mother-in-law, but you are eager to eat her turkey dinner.</p> |
| Assume Presume | <p><i>Assume</i> means to suppose to be true, especially without proof.</p> <p><i>Presume</i> means to take for granted as being true in the absence of proof to the contrary.</p> |
| Assure Ensure Insure | <p><i>Assure</i> means to give confidence.</p> <p><i>Ensure</i> is used for guarantee.</p> <p><i>Insure</i> refers to insurance.</p> |
| Can May | <p><i>Can</i> means able.</p> <p><i>May</i> indicates possibility.</p> |
| Capital Capitol | <p><i>Capital</i> refers to upper-case letters, certain cities, money/property or excellence.</p> <p><i>Capitol</i> is a building where lawmakers meet.</p> |
| Climactic Climatic | <p><i>Climactic</i> is derived from <i>climax</i>, the point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events.</p> <p><i>Climatic</i> is derived from <i>climate</i>; it refers to meteorological conditions.</p> |
| Common Mutual | <p><i>Common</i> means shared by all or many.</p> <p><i>Mutual</i> means reciprocal.</p> <p>It's <i>common</i> knowledge that respect is <i>mutual</i>.</p> |
| Compliment Complement | <p><i>Compliment</i> means praise.</p> <p><i>Complement</i> means add to, enhance, or complete a set.</p> |

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| Comprise Compose | <p>Several items <i>comprise</i> the whole.</p> <p>It is incorrect to write that the whole is <i>comprised of</i> several items; it is <i>composed of</i> several items.</p> |
| Confident Confidant | <p><i>Confident</i>, the adjective, means <i>self-assured</i>.</p> <p><i>Confidant</i>, the noun, is a trusted individual.</p> |
| Consecutive Successive | <p><i>Consecutive</i> refers to an uninterrupted succession.</p> <p><i>Successive</i> only requires a regular sequence.</p> <p>January, March, June and October are successive, but they are not consecutive.</p> <p>March, April, May and June are successive and consecutive.</p> |
| Dependant Dependent | <p><i>Dependant</i>, the noun, is a person you claim on your income tax.</p> <p><i>Dependent</i> is the adjectival form. Your dependants are <i>dependent</i> upon you.</p> |
| Diffuse Defuse | <p>To <i>diffuse</i> is to disperse. <i>Diffuse</i> can also be used as an adjective, meaning <i>not concentrated</i>.</p> <p>To <i>defuse</i>, literally, is to remove the fuse from a bomb. In colloquial phrase, to <i>defuse</i> is to stabilize a volatile situation.</p> |
| Disburse Disperse | <p><i>Disburse</i> means to give out, especially money.</p> <p><i>Disperse</i> means to scatter.</p> |
| Discreet Discrete | <p><i>Discreet</i> means circumspect or under the radar.</p> <p><i>Discrete</i> means having separate parts, as opposed to contiguous.</p> |
| Disinterested Uninterested | <p><i>Disinterested</i> implies impartiality or neutrality—you're not affected by the situation.</p> <p><i>Uninterested</i> means not interested—you don't care about the situation.</p> |
| Economic Economical | <p><i>Economic</i> refers to income and expenditures or to wealth and material needs.</p> <p><i>Economical</i> means thrifty, as in with time, money, or words.</p> |
| E.g. I.e. | <p><i>Es gratia</i> (e.g.) means for example.</p> <p><i>Id est</i> (i.e.) means that is. It's used to clarify using simpler words.</p> |

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| Elicit Illicit | <i>Elicit</i> is a verb meaning to bring out or to evoke. <i>Illicit</i> is an adjective meaning unlawful or crude. |
| Elude Allude | <i>Elude</i> means to avoid or escape. <i>Allude</i> means to refer to indirectly. |
| Envelop Envelope | <i>Envelop</i> , the verb, means to surround or wrap up. An <i>Envelope</i> holds your pay stub. |
| Exacerbate Exasperate | <i>Exacerbate</i> means to make worse. <i>Exasperate</i> means to irritate or provoke to a high degree. |
| Farther Further | <i>Farther</i> refers to distance <i>Further</i> means to a greater degree or extent. If this is not clear, call the Communications Branch to discuss it <i>further</i> . |
| Forego Forgo | <i>Forego</i> means to precede or go before. <i>Forgo</i> means to give up |
| Historic Historical | <i>Historic</i> involves something of history-making consequence. <i>Historical</i> is concerned with or contained in history. |
| Imminent Eminent | <i>Imminent</i> means something is about to occur any second. <i>Eminent</i> refers to something that is famous or well-known. |
| Imply Infer | To <i>imply</i> is to point to a conclusion indirectly. To <i>infer</i> is to piece together a conclusion based on available evidence. |
| Incomprehensive Incomprehensible | <i>Incomprehensive</i> means incomplete or not able to understand. <i>Incomprehensible</i> means cannot be understood. |
| Irregardless | This is not a word. Use <i>regardless</i> . |
| Irritate Aggravate | <i>Irritate</i> is a stronger version of <i>annoy</i> . <i>Aggravate</i> is used when an existing situation is made worse. |

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| Its It's | <p><i>Its</i> is a possessive pronoun.</p> <p><i>It's</i> is a contraction of <i>it is</i>.</p> |
| People Persons | <p>Use <i>people</i> in societal or political terms.</p> <p>Use <i>persons</i> when referring to numbers. Avoid its use.</p> <p>A lot of people will be affected by the decisions made at the meeting. Fourteen persons sat on the board.</p> |
| Practical Practicable | <p><i>Practical</i> means realistic, sensible or workable.</p> <p><i>Practicable</i> means feasible or capable of being used.</p> |
| Presently Currently | <p><i>Presently</i> means soon.</p> <p><i>Currently</i> means now.</p> |
| Principle Principal | <p><i>Principle</i> refers to an ideal or law.</p> <p><i>Principal</i> refers to the head of a school or a sum of money.</p> |
| Recur Reoccur | <p><i>Recur</i> is what an event or experience does when it repeats at regular intervals, often in a pattern.</p> <p><i>Reoccur</i> implies a one-time repetition.</p> |
| Stationery Stationary | <p><i>Stationery</i>, the noun, is printing material.</p> <p><i>Stationary</i>, the adjective, means <i>in one place</i>.</p> |
| Than Then | <p><i>Than</i> indicates a comparison.</p> <p><i>Then</i> means <i>next in order or time</i>.</p> |
| That Which | <p><i>That</i> is used when a clause is essential to the noun it defines. Write <i>the show <u>that</u> opened at the Arts and Culture Centre last week</i>;</p> <p><i>Which</i> is used when a clause gives a reason or adds a new element. Write <i>The show, <u>which</u> only cost \$1,000 to produce, is a classic example of creative budgeting</i>.</p> <p><i>Which</i> clauses often require a comma; <i>that</i> clauses do not.</p> |

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| Transitory Transient | <p>Both mean <i>short-lived</i> or <i>fleeting</i>.</p> <p><i>Transitory</i> is applied to events and situations.</p> <p><i>Transient</i> is applied to people.</p> |
| Unique | <p><i>Unique</i> means one of a kind; therefore, no superlatives are needed.</p> <p><i>Very unique, really unique, and most unique</i> are inherently incorrect.</p> |
| Whom Who | <p><i>Whom</i> refers to the object receiving the action. Use <i>whom</i> when it stands for him, her or them. <i>Whom</i> did you send? I sent him.</p> <p><i>Who</i> refers to the subject of a sentence that carries out an action. Use <i>who</i> when it stands for he, she or they. <i>Who</i> is there? She is there.</p> |
| Whose Who's | <p><i>Whose</i> is a possessive form indicating ownership.</p> <p><i>Who's</i> is a contraction for <i>who is</i>.</p> <p>Whose office is at the end of the hallway? Who's coming to the meeting?</p> |

