

Channel 4 Online - Copy Style Guide

Introduction

Channel 4 has a constantly evolving presence. Content that extends the core business online is hosted on Channel4.com, E4.com and a growing number of third-party websites and next-generation devices.

The copy that supports this huge amount of diverse content can, and should, vary enormously in tone. However, it's important that all writers, producers and editors follow a consistent house style to reinforce and reflect the strong overall identity of the '4' brand.

Writers are encouraged to show their individual flair and creativity, but they should be accomplished enough to do so within the guidelines below. (And if they really want to break rules, they should at least know what rules they're breaking.)

As with any style guide, this document is a work in progress, and subject to change. This means it's worth revisiting from time to time, and suggestions for amendments or corrections are always welcome (email rjeffrey@channel4.co.uk and gveale@channel4.co.uk).

The guide has been adapted from the *Channel 4 Programme Support House Style* and *Writing for the Web* documents. It follows existing Channel 4 house style where possible, but attempts to adapt these guidelines where online user behaviour differs significantly from that of 'traditional' readers.

To this end, the guide also draws from web accessibility editorial guidelines, individual site guides and the Press Site style guide. There are also links to further reading on accessibility guidelines, SEO optimisation and writing for the web.

Overwhelmingly, the message from these different sources is largely the same. Keep it short. Keep it sweet.

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Overview

- Use English rather than US spelling (*-ise*, not *-ize*; *colour*, not *color*; *travelling* not *traveling*)
- In most cases, grammar should follow *Fowler's Modern English Usage*
- Always check that names of people and places are accurate, that dates are correct and that hyperlinks work (and link to suitable content)
- Use the simplest and clearest language appropriate for the content
- Avoid unnecessarily complex sentences. Use short lines and paragraphs.
- Avoid text-heavy pages. Use pictures and symbols in addition to text.
- Avoid putting too much information on any one page. Don't have more than three pages worth of content as you scroll down.

A or An

In general, words beginning with consonants are preceded by 'a' (a bat, a cat, a dog) and words starting with vowels by 'an' (an ant, an elk, an owl).

However, usage - without exception - is determined by pronunciation, not spelling. With the letter 'h', use 'an' before a silent 'h' (an hour) but 'a' before a pronounced 'h' (a historian). Similarly, it is 'a' union (not 'an' union) because of the 'yu' consonant sound.

With abbreviations, you are again guided by pronunciation:

She was an LSE student (because of the 'el' vowel sound)
He was a UN observer (because of the 'yu' consonant sound)

Abbreviations and Contractions

Do not use full stops in abbreviations.

GP
PhD
DSS
JR Hartley
James T Kirk

Therefore, do not use full stops after personal titles. For instance, write Dr David Starkey rather than Dr. David Starkey. (But *never* write Dr Gillian McKeith.)

In acronyms pronounced as a word, use only an initial capital (Bafta, Nato).

Avoid capital letters altogether in acronyms that have become everyday words, such as scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) and sim (subscriber identity/identification module).

An exception to the above is PIN (personal identification number). Common usage dictates that this takes all caps - but avoid the unnecessary repetition of 'number' after 'PIN'.

In an acronym where each letter is pronounced, such as BBC, UK, or VAT, use capital letters for the whole thing.

Abbreviations that are not very widely understood should be written out in full when first used, followed by the abbreviation in brackets. For second and subsequent uses, use just the abbreviation:

Channel 4 has fallen foul of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) over its recent axing of The Hoobs. The CPBF is demanding action to bring back this groundbreaking show.

Avoid using Latin abbreviations, such as *ie*, *eg*, *etc*, and so on.

Alt-tags

Always provide alt-tags for images.

Always reference the title of the programme first in the alt-tag.

You do *not* need to describe the action taking place in an image.

If the image is of a well-known character, the alt-tag should also reference the character (rather than the actor).

Example 1

An image of Frank Gallagher (played by David Threlfall) riding a scooter in Shameless:

Shameless: Frank Gallagher

If the image is of a well-known personality, the image should reference this person as well as the programme.

Example 2

An image of Davina McCall presenting The Million Pound Drop:

The Million Pound Drop: Davina McCall

If the title of the programme contains the personality's name, you need *not* reference it twice.

Example 3

An image of Russell Brand from the programme Russell Brand's Ponderland:

Russell Brand's Ponderland

The alt-tag of an image of someone not generally in the public eye, for instance a contributor in a documentary, should only reference the title of the programme. This rule also applies to images of minor or unknown characters in dramas.

Example 4

An image of a child featured in the Dispatches investigation Britain's Witch Children:

Dispatches: Britain's Witch Children

A final exception is alt-tags for film images. For films, where the actor is often better known than the character being portrayed, the alt-tag should reference the actor, the character and the film. (If the image is of a minor or unknown character, the alt-tag should only reference the film title, as in Example 4.)

Example 5

An image of Michael Caine driving a mini in The Italian Job:

The Italian Job: Michael Caine as Charlie Croker

Ampersands (&)

An ampersand (&) can be used in headings and sub-headings (Buying & Selling).

It can also be used when it appears as part of a programme name or other title (Will & Grace, Marks & Spencer).

However, do not use the ampersand to denote *and* in general text.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes follow normal usage, outlined here. They have two main purposes:

1) Apostrophes indicate letters omitted from contractions (shortened words or two words joined together):

It's Me or the Dog

The apostrophe is placed where the letters have been removed. In the above example, *It Is* became *It's*. (Other examples: *does not* becomes *doesn't*; *I will* becomes *I'll*.)

These sort of contractions should be used freely on the web, because they save space, but as a note of caution, please don't overuse them. Avoid the most clumsy contractions, such as *must've*, *when'll*, *she'd've* - particularly in headlines, where they appear over-familiar or, worse, unintelligible.

2) Apostrophes demonstrate possession:

Hugh's Chicken Run

To indicate possession to a singular noun, add 's. In the above example, the Chicken Run belongs to Hugh.

If the noun is plural or ends in an s already, simply adding an apostrophe is sufficient:

The dogs' balls (the balls belonging to several dogs)

The boss' bull (the bull belonging to the boss)

Jones' bile (the bile belonging to Jones)

Plural nouns that do not end in s take an apostrophe and s in the possessive:

Children's homes

People's choice

Women's football

Use apostrophes in phrases such as *six months' time* where the time period (six months) modifies a noun (time), but not in phrases such as *six months pregnant* where the time period (six months) modifies an adjective (pregnant).

Apostrophes are more commonly overused than underused. They are not required in:

- Dates (1960s, not 1960's) and numbers (1000s, not 1000's) See **Dates**
- Plurals of abbreviations (MPs, not MP's, CDs not CD's)

- Personal pronouns indicating possession (his, your, its). On this point, *whose* is the possessive of *who*, and never means *who is* or *who has*. Conversely, *you're* always means *you are* and is not the possessive of you, and *it's* always means *it is* and is not the possessive of *it*.

However, when their omission would be ugly and confusing, apostrophes are required:

- Letters (*p's* and *q's*)
- Specific cases (such as *do's* and *don'ts*)

As or Since?

As is causal, *since* is temporal.

You understand this *as* you've just read about it. You have understood this *since* you read about it a few seconds ago.

Bias and Libel

All writers, editors and producers should be familiar with the Independent Producers Handbook, in particular the sections on Channel 4's Compliance Procedures, the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and Media Law. Particular attention should be paid to the referral-up process.

<http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/>

For more information, see **Legal and Compliance**. Big Brother writers and editors should refer to the Interactive Team Editorial Bible.

Big Brother

Refer to the show producers as 'Big Brother' to remain consistent with On Air mentions. The umbrella term 'Big Brother' stands for any communication with the producers - over nominations, setting tasks, rule-breaking etc. Always refer to Big Brother's Little Brother as BBLB and Big Brother's Big Mouth as BBBM.

Brackets (Parentheses)

Round brackets (or parentheses) contain material that could be omitted without altering the meaning of a sentence. (If an entire sentence is written in parentheses the full stop is included within the brackets.)

'Square brackets,' he added hastily, 'are used in direct quotes to indicate that an interpolation [a note from the writer] has been added to provide essential information.'

Bullet Points

Bullet points are useful to break up text. The clarity that they can provide as an alternative to densely packed paragraphs is especially useful on the web.

Introduce them with a colon, and, as with captions:

- No full stop is needed at the end of a single line
- If more than one sentence is involved, please punctuate fully. In such cases, there should be a full-stop at the end of each sentence.
- There is no need to add a full stop to end the final bullet point of a list, unless it has more than one sentence (see above)

Capital Letters (Uppercase)

Words should not be written out entirely in capital letters; this includes headings and subheadings (see **Headings**). A sentence or group of words written in ALL CAPS is cumbersome to read for most people - it can be impossible for web users who rely heavily on recognising word shapes.

An exception to the above rule would be an acronym where each letter is pronounced, such as BBC, UK, or VAT (see **Abbreviations and Contractions**).

In acronyms pronounced as a word, use only an initial capital (Bafta, Nato).

Use initial capitals for proper names:

In the UK, the prime minister is appointed by the monarch, and Prime Minister David Cameron is no exception.

Also, use initial capitals for the Earth and the Universe, but only when the reference is astronomical.

Avoid initial capitals for *black*, *deaf* and in similar uses.

If in doubt, use lower case. The exceptions are:

- Adjectives derived from a name (Christian, Homeric)
- Recognised geo-political entities (the Third World, the West, Western civilisation)

- Historical eras (the Renaissance, the Enlightenment)
- Brand names (but be wary of exceptions such as easyJet and eBay)
- Single letters in expressions (A-list, G-spot, T-Shirt, U-boat)
- Titles of TV programmes, films, books, articles, essays, poems, songs and so on. These have a capital for the first word and every subsequent important word. (For a full explanation, see **Title Case**.)

Although newspaper and magazine titles are capitalised, do not capitalise the definite article that precedes them (the Guardian, the Fortean Times).

Captions

There should be no punctuation at the end of image captions. The exception is when more than one sentence is used in the caption, in which case there should be a full-stop at the end of *each* sentence (see also **Bullet Points**).

Catch Up

Although it would make sense to hyphenate this phrase when referring to the service, rather than the activity, we have dropped the hyphen to avoid confusion.

We now have a catch up service on the iPad, for instance, where you can catch up on last night's TV. Not catch-up, or even catchup. When writing as a heading, capitalise both words - *Catch Up*.

Channel 4

Channel 4 is always preferable to C4, but on the web C4 is acceptable - in TV listings, for instance. The '4' in Channel 4 is always numerical, unless you are referring to the Channel Four Television Corporation (see **Names**).

Channel4.com

When referring to the website, write Channel4.com with a capital C, rather than c4.com, C4.com, channel4.com or any other variation.

If you have to shorten it, for Twitter or Facebook for example, use C4.com, with the capital 'C'.

Cliché

Avoid clichés like the plague. And don't use unnecessary introductory words or phrases. These include, but are not restricted to:

At the end of the day
When all is said and done
There is a sense in which
In the final analysis
Of course
Obviously
Basically
In terms of

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns tend to take a singular verb and pronoun. For example:

The government has failed to defend its role.

In cases where it makes better sense to identify the members of a collective noun by using the plural, please do:

The government are keeping their noses clean.

In one particular instance - sports teams - the members of each collective noun are always thought of as a number of individuals:

West Ham have failed to defend their goal again.
England are now certain to retain the Ashes.

Please note both Channel 4 and Channel4.com act as collective nouns and so take a singular verb and pronoun.

Compass Points

In general, compass points are lower case. Use a capital letter only if it is part of an officially recognised place name:

north London, but *North* Korea

the *west* of England, but the *West* Country

Compliance

All writers, editors and producers should be familiar with the Independent Producers Handbook. In particular, the sections on Channel 4's Compliance Procedures, Ofcom Broadcasting Code and Media Law. Particular attention should be paid to the referral-up process.

<http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/>

For more information, see **Legal and Compliance**.

Curly and Straight Quotes

Curly quotes should not be used in web copy as some browsers cannot read them. Also, they mutate when put into some content management systems, such as Teamsite and CGS.

It is worth using Microsoft Word to check for spelling errors, bearing in mind that this is not going to pick-up all problems. You can use the F7 button, or find 'Spelling and Grammar' under the 'Tools' menu.

It's best to avoid cutting and pasting directly from Word into content management systems such as Teamsite and CGS, because copy may contain characters that are non-compliant. Instead, cut and paste your copy into a text editor such as Notepad and then into your CMS.

Curly quotes can be disabled in Word: click on Tools/Auto Correct/Auto Format As You Type, then uncheck the box marked "*straight quotes*" with "*smart quotes*".

Dangling Participles / Misplaced Modifiers

Avoid dangling participles and misplaced modifiers (despite their occasional comic value).

A dangling participle is a participial phrase that is not placed directly next to the noun it modifies. It appears to modify the noun nearest to it, resulting in confusion.

Crossing the road, a tree fell on my head.

It seems unlikely the writer intended the tree to be crossing the road, but this is how the sentence reads.

A misplaced modifier is a general term for any phrase or word that is not located properly in relation to the word(s) it modifies.

Aged only seven, her dad died.

The implied extreme youth of the father detracts from the intended meaning of this sentence. For the same reason, take care when using words such as *almost, even, hardly, nearly, often* and *only*.

He nearly ran the whole way home.

Speed-walking, perhaps? Sloppy use of participles can also lead to confusion between subject and object of a sentence, as in this example from the website:

A female pig has been rearing three tiger cubs after being abandoned by their mother.

The above sentence suggests the pig, rather than the cubs, has been abandoned, which is (almost certainly) not the case.

Dashes

Although short comments and lists within a sentence are often introduced by a colon, this can look fussy. It's fine to use a dash instead to make things neater – a sentence often flows better like this.

However, don't overuse dashes. Keep sentences short instead.

A standard dash (-) is found directly to the right of the zero key on the top row of a standard keyboard. For Channel4.com web copy, it is acceptable to use this for all occasions, regardless of whether they require an en dash, em dash, hyphen or minus.

Dates and Years

1989-93 or 1991-3
From 1989 to 1993
The 1960s

If you abbreviate a decade, omit the apostrophe (swinging 60s, not '60s).

If writing the decade as a word, use lower case (seventies, eighties), but numbers (70s, 80s) are always preferable online.

In general, do not hyphenate centuries: third century, 21st century. However, do hyphenate if adjectival: 21st-century boy.

AD goes before the date (AD 300), BC goes after (400 BC). Both go after the century: 20th century AD, fourth century BC.

For a specific date, use: day month year (no commas).

Saturday 1 January 2000

Days of the Week

Where necessary, please abbreviate days of the week to their first three letters, except for Thursday, where we use four:

Mon Tue Wed Thur Fri Sat Sun

Disability and Illness

Avoid designating people by their disability or illness alone: 'disabled people' not 'the disabled'; 'blind people' or 'deaf people', not 'the deaf' or 'the blind'; 'people with mental health issues', not 'mentally ill'; 'people with learning difficulties' rather than 'mentally handicapped'.

Do not refer to someone as 'wheelchair bound' or 'in a wheelchair' - the expression 'uses a wheelchair' is preferable.

With illness, avoid phrases such as 'suffering from' and 'afflicted by' - use 'person who has' or 'person with' instead.

Don't define anyone by their medical condition - don't use phrases such as 'a Down's syndrome baby'.

Editorial Integrity

Channel 4's editorial integrity is essential to its reputation, which is in turn essential to its success.

Please ensure that you clearly attribute product placement and sponsored or other commercial content.

Any pieces written with a commercial agenda should be clearly marked as such (for example, as 'Advertorial').

Clear signals also need to be given if the user is being directed to a new destination where they will have to pay for content, such as Film4oD.com.

There are, legitimately, times when it is mutually beneficial for Channel4.com to publish content by a third-party that is connected to a service that this third party provide. However, take great care in these instances that publishing this content could not in any way jeopardise the Channel's reputation for editorial independence.

Providing a link to a service provider's website is one thing; writing a glowing review of a DVD from the 50-disc collection that a distributor has sent you is perhaps another.

Before publishing any content, all writers, producers and editors should have read the Channel 4 guides found here. Remember: if in doubt, refer up.

[Code of Conduct](#)

[Editorial Protocol](#)

<http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/>

Ellipsis

An ellipsis (...) has two uses. It is always represented by three points, but the spacing around it depends on the context.

1) An ellipsis can indicate that something has been left unsaid, leaving an implication (of a joke or threat, for example) hanging in the air. In this case, treat it like a punctuation mark such as a comma, with no space before and one space after it.

If you finish a sentence with an ellipsis, no full stop is necessary to show the sentence is over:

The sentence can just tail off, like this... A capital letter marks the beginning of the new sentence.

You can, however, use a punctuation mark such as an exclamation point or question mark in conjunction with an ellipsis. In such cases, again leave a single space before the following sentence:

Can I just let the sentence tail off...? Yes I can.

Similarly, you can use an ellipsis expressively in the middle of a sentence, with the result being an implication or resonant pause rather than a tailing-off.

Stop or I'll shoot... myself.

Expressive use of ellipses can be effective, but they should not be overused. And they often are... As with the exclamation mark, do all you can to get your point across without having to use one.

2) An ellipsis can also indicate that material has been omitted from the middle of a direct quotation. If so, treat the three dots as a three-letter word, with single spaces preceding and following it:

According to Oscar Wilde: 'A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal ... is absolutely fatal.' (Omitting 'of it' from the quotation.)

Foreign Words

Avoid unless really necessary. Don't use Latin terms such as *a priori* and *inter alia*. It's clearer if the meaning is expressed in English. All foreign language terms you do use should appear in italics followed by a translation in brackets.

The exceptions are foreign words and phrases that have common usage in English (such as *sauté*, *zeitgeist*, *debut*, *lasagne* and *vice versa*) and Latin names for diseases, which need neither italicising nor translating.

Gender

It is not acceptable to use *his* to refer to men and women. Instead, use *his or her*, or change the sentence structure to avoid the issue:

A doctor should always take the interests of *his or her* patients into account.

Doctors should always take the interests of their patients into account.

Use *humanity* and *humankind*, not *mankind*. Telephones are *staffed*, not *manned*.

Do not use diminutives. Use *actor*, *author*, *poet* - not *actress*, *authoress*, *poetess*.

Gender was originally a grammatical term. There is no point saying that someone's gender is male when you mean their sex.

Headings

These should never be written solely in capital letters. Neither should the start of every word be capitalised. Use title case for headings, as in the below example. (For a full explanation, see **Title Case**.)

- USE TITLE CASE FOR HEADINGS (Incorrect)
- Use Title Case For Headings (Incorrect)
- Use Title Case for Headings (Correct)

Housemates

Use an initial capital letter 'H' for the Big Brother House, but not for 'housemates'. When referring to the housemates use their first names or nicknames. Be careful when describing the housemates not to label them with anything that could be construed as negative in some way (unless your name is Charlie Brooker).

Hyphens

In general, avoid overuse. Often, a more elegant solution is to use one word: 'shortlist', 'hardcore', 'landmine' and 'makeover' are examples of de-hyphenated words. Do not use hyphens in 'self build' or 'first time buyers'.

Do not use hyphens in conjunction with adverbs ending in 'ly', for example in such phrases as 'fiercely contested goal' or 'warmly received speech'.

When to use hyphens:

- After prefixes ('sub-committee', 'vice-admiral')
- In fractions ('two-thirds', 'three-quarters')
- With ages in such compounds as four-year-old boy (adjective) and four-year-old (noun - when the 'boy' is implied). But leave out the hyphens when age is expressed thus: 'The boy was four years old.'
- Where a prefix is followed by a proper name ('pro-Palestinian', 'anti-Bolshevik')
- In compound adjectives ('his heavy-knit jumper', 'stand-up comedian', 'catch-up service')
- With short and common adverbs ('well-established', 'much-needed')
- To avoid ambiguity. For example, to distinguish between a 'hard-pressed editor' and a 'hard, pressed editor', or 're-sent' and 'resent' (see **Re or Re-**).

Keywords

A guide to SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) writing best practice is beyond the scope of this document. Suffice to say, simply loading up your page with keywords is no longer the way to go. Search engine algorithms have evolved to regard what users think about a site's content, and how they describe it in links, as a more important indicator of quality and relevance than the number of keywords crammed into each page.

The good news for writers is that this more sophisticated approach means concentrating on creating well-written, concise and compelling content is the best way to achieve good SEO.

For more on SEO in general and keywords in particular, read Steve Johnston's 50 Ways to Make Google Love Your Site, and visit these recommended links:

www.quickstartseo.com/10-golden-rules-of-seo-copywriting/

www.copyblogger.com/seo-copywriting/

Legal and Compliance

With regard to issues such as fairness and balance, libel and bias, swearing, adult themes, controversial and sensitive issues, violence and dangerous acts, Channel 4 is subject to Ofcom Broadcasting Code rules and the main areas of law that apply to the making and broadcast of programmes.

For detailed explanation of our legal and compliance obligations, please refer to the Independent Producers Handbook.

<http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/>

Quoting from the introduction to this document:

‘To be effective, the compliance process must include ALL staff involved in the making and broadcasting of programmes and programme material such as trails, press information and marketing.’

The ‘material’ referred to in the above sentence clearly includes programme support content created for Channel4.com. Please read the Handbook in full.

Like or Such As?

Like excludes, and *such as* includes.

‘Herbs *like* rosemary and thyme’ means herbs other than rosemary and thyme, but similar to them. If you want to include rosemary and thyme, say ‘Herbs *such as* rosemary and thyme’.

By far the most common error is to use *like* when *such as* is intended.

Links

Place links into your copy bearing in mind the following constraints of usability and accessibility:

- The text must be legible and selectable
- It must clear that the text is a link (links must be self-evident)
- For all links, text should be in a different colour to other text, and underline when moused over. Links taking users off the site should be clearly labelled as external links.
- The text must clearly say where the link will lead. So, don't use 'click here', for example.
- Do not use the same wording for links that go to different pages

A link is easier to read at the beginning or end of a sentence, rather than somewhere in the middle:

Find out more about Bill in our [True Blood Character Profiles](#)

[True Blood Character Profiles](#) - read about the residents of Bon Temps

May Have or Might Have?

May have suggests the possibility somehow remains open; *might have* suggests something is no longer a possibility.

That absurd West Ham ruling *may* have changed the face of football.

But this is only a possibility; we'll have to wait and see. By implication, it may not have done.

If Berbatov had stayed at Tottenham, they *might* not have had their worst start to a season since 1912.

But he didn't, and they have. Case closed.

Measurements

Use metric measures for such things as distance, speed, temperature, area and weight. (If necessary/desirable follow them with the equivalents in imperial in brackets.) The only exceptions are figures of speech, such as 'he was miles away'.

In general, spell out measurements when they first occur in your text. Then switch to the abbreviation; for example, kilometres on first use, then km.

Don't leave a space between the number and its measurement: 4kph, 6cm, 250g, 25C.

Misspellings and Misuses

For a list of common errors and Channel 4 preferences, see **Appendix A**. For a list of commonly confused words and phrases see **Appendix B**.

Modern Terms

'Modern' words are singular, in lower case and unhyphenated - web, internet, email, text, website

Months

Where necessary, abbreviate all months to their first three letters, with the three exceptions below:

Jan Feb Mar Apr May **June July** Aug **Sept** Oct Nov Dec

Names

Always check titles and names of people and places are accurate. This is particularly important with our own television programmes (How Clean Is Your House?) and 'talent' associated with the Channel (Kevin McCloud, not Kevin Macleod; Gordon Ramsay, not Gordon Ramsey).

Channel 4 is always preferable to C4, but on the web C4 is acceptable, particularly where space is in short supply, on TV listings for instance. The '4' in Channel 4 is always numerical, unless you are referring to the Channel Four Television Corporation.

It's Film4, not Film Four. There should be no space between the '4' and the preceding word in Film4 and More4, or between the '4' and the subsequent word in 4Music.

In a similar vein, no spaces in E4, T4, 4Food, 4Homes, 4Car, 4Talent, 4Producers and 4Radio.

It is also acceptable to reference 'magazine' sites by their url:

Here at Channel4.com/food we enjoy writing about tasty snacks.

Naming and File Saving Conventions

It's important that everyone follows the same naming and file saving conventions. Please discuss within the team the best way to do this.

Numbers

Numbers one to nine should be written as words.

Numbers 10 to 999,999 should be in figures (use commas to break up 5 digit numbers and above).

For larger numbers, use m / bn or million / billion. Use m / bn / tn for sums of money or inanimate objects, use million / billion / trillion for humans or animals. (A billion is a thousand million.)

One to nine
10 to 999,999
1000 but 10,000 or 100,000
£3m
5bn stars
3 million homeowners
5 billion sheep

Exceptions:

- When referring to a TV series. In this case, capitalise the word 'series' and follow with figure (Series 6 of Shameless). The same goes for 'Episode 3', and 'Week 7' (for reality shows such as Big Brother or Shipwrecked).
- Where numbers are used in tables, or with measurements and percentages (9cm, 3%, and so on)
- Widely used phrases ('a thousand things to do')
- On the web only, headlines and subheadings (This Week's Top 5 Films)

Don't start a sentence with numbers if you can avoid it. If you have to start with a number, then write it out in full.

Never use words and figures together. Write either 'nine and ten' or, better, '9 and 10'. In these cases, using the figures is usually preferable.

Do not use Roman numerals unless they are part of a name.

Other number related examples:

0.75
£20 (not £20.00)

% (not 'per cent')
17th century

Paragraph Length

In general, blocks of text are harder to read on a computer screen than on the page. Therefore, avoid unnecessarily complex sentences and use short paragraphs.

Try to keep sentences to a maximum of 25 words or so.

Break up your text with paragraph breaks more frequently than you would for a printed document. It makes it easier to read (see **Writing for the Web**).

A paragraph of between two and four sentences is ideal, and don't be afraid to use one-sentence paragraphs.

Quotation Marks / Quotations

Use single quotation marks for reported or direct speech or quotations from other works. Speech or quotations within single quotes should have double quotation marks. Introduce speech with commas, but quotations with colons.

'I don't know what I'm doing!' shouted Russ. He then fell over.

Lucy said, 'Russ shouted: "I don't know what I'm doing!" and fell over.'

For long quotations from written material, especially poetry, make sure you follow the exact spacing, indenting, spelling and punctuation of the original.

Racial Terminology

Avoid defining someone by their racial origin or skin colour.

The words black and Asian should not be used as nouns, but as adjectives: black people rather than 'blacks'; an Asian man rather than 'an Asian'.

And always properly consider whether it is appropriate and necessary to refer to someone's racial origin or skin colour in the first place. Do not use any derogatory or offensive terms to describe a person's race.

- Half-caste is not an acceptable term. If anything, use 'mixed race'.
- Native American, not Indian (unless 'Cowboys and Indians')
- Scottish, Irish, and Welsh people are not English
- Scots are people, scotch is whisky

- Great Britain consists of England, Scotland, and Wales
- Great Britain plus Northern Ireland is the United Kingdom

Re or Re- ?

Use re- (with hyphen) when followed by 'e' or 'u' (not pronounced as 'yu').

re-examine, re-urgue

Use re (no hyphen) when followed by 'a', 'i', 'o' or 'u' (pronounced as 'yu'), or any consonant.

reanimate, reiterate, reorders, reunion, reabuild

However, use a hyphen to avoid possible confusion with another word.

re-cover/recover, re-form/reform

Sensitivity

Remember there is no watershed on the web, what you write can be read by anyone, of any age, at any time, in any part of the world.

If you are writing about a sensitive matter and have any doubts over how to proceed, please follow the referral up procedure. For more information, see **Legal and Compliance**.

Sentence Case

Alongside title case, sentence case is also used throughout the site - particularly for subheadings.

Sentence case follows the normal rules of a sentence in the English language. Specifically, capital letters are used for the first letter of the first word; proper nouns; and appropriate abbreviations. All other words are lower case, and full stops are omitted in headings and subheadings.

It's acceptable to use both title case and sentence case on the same page, for subheadings and headings / programme titles respectively, for instance. But striking inconsistencies arise when title case and sentence case are used randomly for the same type of heading/title on any one page/site - often with title case being used incorrectly.

When title case *is* used for whatever reason, it should adhere to title case guidelines. (See **Title Case**.)

Sexuality

Note: sexuality is the condition of being characterised or distinguished by sex, gender is the condition of being male or female.

Always question whether indicating someone's sexual orientation is relevant or necessary.

And be wary of defining someone by their sexuality. Words such as 'gay', 'homosexual' and 'bisexual' should only ever be used as adjectives. There are 'gay men', 'bisexual women' and so on, but not 'gays' or 'a bisexual', for example.

An exception to this is 'lesbian' (originally a noun); it is acceptable to use 'lesbian' and 'lesbians' as nouns. However, be careful not to use the phrase 'gays and lesbians' (see above) - instead use 'gay men and lesbians'.

Transsexuals consider themselves to be trapped in the body of a member of the opposite sex. They can be pre-op, still living as their birth sex, or post-op, where they have undergone surgery to change sex. Transvestites dress as a member of the opposite sex. Take care not to confuse these two words.

A character's sexuality may be an integral part of a storyline - in a comedy such as *Will & Grace*, for instance. Nevertheless, take care how you - a writer removed from this context - refer to the character in question.

Regardless of how they behave or speak, you are not free to refer to them without considering how your use of language may impact on a reader who does not share your knowledge of the show, familiarity with the character, sexual attitudes or sense of humour.

Site

Both 'site' and 'website' are acceptable, but not 'web site'.

Slang

Slang, like swearing, is usually most effective when rarely used.

Spacing

Always use single spaces after commas and full-stops.

Spelling

Follow English not American conventions (use *-ise*, not *-ize*; *travelled*, not *traveled*).

Do not rely on your spellchecker. Their not infallible...

If in doubt, refer to *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

See **Appendix A** for some common spelling mistakes.

Swearing

For the most part, handling language that is potentially offensive is a question of common sense. A swear word's capacity to offend or cause upset may be affected in part by context. In particular, swearing is usually deemed less offensive in comedic settings.

However, the written word often has a deeper resonance than spoken language. It is, quite literally, there in black and white - and great care should be taken when using swear words for comic effect, even when writing about a show featuring characters who regularly use such language.

It is also possible you might not be as funny as the writers of the programme. (Or even as funny as you think you are...)

All writers, editors and producers should be familiar with the Independent Producers Handbook, in particular the sections on Channel 4's Compliance Procedures, Ofcom Broadcasting Code and Media Law. Particular attention should be paid to the referral-up process.

<http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/>

For more information, see **Legal and Compliance**. Big Brother writers and editors should refer to the Interactive Team Editorial Bible.

Subheadings

Use either sentence case or title case for subheadings. They should never be written completely in capital letters.

The choice of case for subheadings should remain consistent - do not veer between the two styles. (See **Sentence Case** and **Title Case**.)

Tense

Use the present tense for programme guides or synopses - and also for clip synopses, alt-tags, picture titles and captions. (Future or past tenses date stamp a programme in a way that is generally unhelpful; the present tense is not only simpler in terms of consistency, but far more compelling.)

That / Which

In brief: *that* defines, *which* informs:

This is the house *that* Jack built.

This house, *which* Jack built, is overpriced.

Note that with these sentences, the first remains grammatical without *that* but the second does not without *which*.

As in these examples, *which* is almost always preceded by a comma, whereas *that* never is.

Time

No gap between number and am or pm (3am, 5pm). No need to use pm twice for a length of time (as in 3.30-6pm), but when am and pm are used, this should be denoted (3am-6.30pm).

Write *daytime* (one word), but *night-time* (hyphenated).

Titles

Titles of books, essays and documents should be in *italics* (apart from the Old Testament and New Testament).

Titles of poems, songs and short stories should be in single quotation marks, with no italics.

Films and television programmes should be written in roman rather than italics, and without any quotation marks. And avoid using **bold** to indicate titles of films or television programmes as bold typeface online often indicates links.

All titles for films, programmes and clips should use title case (see below).

Title Case

There is no definitive version of title case; its precise make-up is a matter of house style across different publications.

As a result, different versions of the same title can easily be found:

Come Dine with Me (correct for Channel4.com)

Come Dine With Me (incorrect, though widely used, on Channel4.com)

When using title case, please stick to the following rules.

Capitalise all words *except* for the following:

a, an, and, at, by, for, from, in, of, on, or, the, to, with

However, watch carefully for the following exceptions:

-Capitalise the first and last words, regardless of what they are

A Cook's Tour of Spain

-Capitalise the first word after a colon, regardless of what it is

Dispatches: The Food Crisis

-Capitalise prepositions that are part of a verb phrase

Checking In to Airport Chaos

Capitalise the second word in compound words if it is a noun or proper adjective or the words have equal weight

Cross-Reference

Sub-Committee

But, do not capitalise the second word if it is another part of speech or a participle modifying the first word

How-to

Take-off

-If a title references another title words should be capitalised as they were in the original. For example, the programme featuring highlights from The Word is titled as follows:

Best of The Word

Common Errors

Do not make the common mistake of putting all 'the little words' in lower case. Do capitalise 'to be' and its various tenses (My Name Is Earl).

If you need help, try searching for the single word or phrase in question - no matter how small - in The Internet Movie Database, at: www.imdb.com.

Even if no exact match is found, the result will soon point you in the right direction:

My Name Is Joe
Less Than Perfect
The Hand That Rocks the Cradle
Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead

If still in doubt, please check with rjeffrey@channel4.co.uk and gveale@channel4.co.uk.

It may occasionally be necessary to copy a title format determined by the production company:

3 Minute Wonder
8 Out of 10 Cats

TX Times

In general:

Channel / Day / Time (with no punctuation)

More4 Wednesday 8pm

If the TX is more than seven days:

Channel / Weekday / Date / Month, / Time

Channel 4 Tuesday 16 August, 9pm (please note the comma)

For TV listings and landing pages, this information can be compressed:

M4 Wed 8pm

C4 Tue 16 Aug, 9pm

Website

Both 'site' and 'website' are acceptable.

Who or Whom?

In strict grammatical terms, the distinction between *who* and *whom* is clear: *who* is the subject form of the pronoun, and *whom* is the object form:

The boy, who was guilty as sin, was caught red-handed.

The boy, whom I had long suspected, was caught red-handed.

If in doubt, substitute the personal pronoun *he/him* or *she/her* for *who/whom*. If *he* or *she* gives the correct form, use *who*. If *him* or *her* is correct, use *whom*. Therefore, for the above examples:

The boy, ___ was guilty as sin, was caught red-handed. (He was guilty = *who*.)

The boy, ___ I had long suspected, was caught red-handed. (I had long suspected him = *whom*.)

However, *whom* has all but disappeared from spoken English, and is fast disappearing from written English too. Even if *whom* is grammatically correct, stylistically it can appear pompous and fussy.

If in any doubt about usage or tone, use *who* rather than *whom*, or restructure the sentence.

Writing for the Web

Sound guidance for many types of writing: less is more. For online non-fiction, this is certainly good advice. (See **Paragraph Length**.)

Most people read web pages differently to the printed page. They tend to scan web pages, rather than reading every word, often reading less than 25% of the words on the page.

They also read web pages more slowly - on average 25 to 50% slower than printed text. Therefore:

- Language should be clear and concise
- Sentences and paragraphs should be short and to the point
- Break up the text with bullet points, images and subheadings

Load the conclusion of stories and articles into the first paragraph. Use the following paragraphs to expand on this opening (a writing technique known as the 'inverted pyramid'). For instance:

Maxwell was told to stop swearing this morning by Big Brother.

This is not the best way of setting the scene in an introductory paragraph. The example below is much better:

Maxwell has been given a secret mission to stop swearing and win himself some much-needed underpants.

This tells the whole story in one sentence.

Conclusion

None of this is new. George Orwell covered much the same ground in 1946 in his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous

Appendix A

Common errors and Channel 4 preferences:

adaptation
not adaption

admissible, inadmissible
not -able

all right
not alright

ambience
not ambiance

amid
not amidst

among
not amongst

any more
not anymore

cabby
not cabbie (but cabbies)

caviar
not caviare

chocoholic
not chocaholic

comprise
not 'comprise of'

consult
not 'consult with'

convener
not convenor

convertible
not -able

cooperate
not co-operate

desiccated
not dessicated

discernible
not discernable

disfranchise
not disenfranchise

distributor
not distributer

dreamed
not dreamt

earned
not earnt

enclose
not inclose

en route

not on route

espresso
not expresso

extrovert
not extravert

first
not firstly
(When making a series of points write 'first', 'second' rather than 'firstly',
'secondly' etc. Spell these out up to 'ninth', then use 10th, 11th, and so on.)

glamorous
not glamourous

guttural
not guttural

homeowner
not home owner

humour and humourless	BUT	humorous
not humor or humorles		not humourous

immune to
not immune from

impostor
not imposter

indispensable
not indispensable

inoculate
not innoculate

iridescent
not irridescnt

no one
not no-one

nosy
not noseey

occurred
not occured

OK

not okay

on to
not onto

plebeian
not plebian

propeller
not propellor

protester
not protestor

Qur'an
not Koran

racked (with guilt)
not wracked

restaurateur
not restauranteur

seize
not sieze

shoo-in
not shoe-in

shortlist
not short list

-size
not -sized (eg bite-size, family-size *not* bite-sized, family-sized etc)

skilful
not skillful

spicy
not spicey

swap
not swop

T-shirt
not tee-shirt

uncharted
not unchartered

verruca
not verucca

veranda
not verandah

wagon
not waggon

while
not whilst

Appendix B

Commonly confused words and phrases:

abstruse/obtuse

The first means needlessly complex, the second means dull or stupid.

affect/effect

In general, when you affect (verb) a situation, you have an effect (noun) on it. (Occasionally, effect is used as a verb, meaning to create, as in 'I effected a change' - but this is far less common.)

appraise/apprise

Appraise is to estimate worth, apprise is to inform.

canvas/canvass

A tent (or painting) is made from canvas, to canvass (verb) is to solicit votes.

ensor/censure

To censor is to prevent publication, to censure is to criticise severely.

complementary/complimentary

Things that go together well are described as complementary, praise or gifts are complimentary.

continual/continuous

Continual describes an action that is repeated: 'My wife continually tells me to get a better job'. Continuous refers to actions that are uninterrupted: 'My neighbour plays music continuously from dusk till dawn'.

chords/cords

You can damage your vocal cords attempting to sing musical chords.

defuse/diffuse

You defuse (render harmless) a bomb, you diffuse (spread) good will.

dependant/dependent

Your children, as your dependants, are dependent on you.

deprecate/depreciate

To deprecate is to express disapproval, to depreciate is to reduce in value or esteem.

discreet/discrete

In an attempt to be discreet, they got discrete rooms. (Discreet means 'circumspect' - discrete means 'separate'.)

disinterested/uninterested

The first means impartial, the second means unengaged.

ensure/insure

The first means make certain, the second means guard against risk.

every day/everyday

If something happens every day it becomes an everyday occurrence.

fewer/less

Fewer (smaller numbers) cups of coffee means less (smaller quantity) caffeine.

flaunt/flout

You flaunt your wealth, but you flout the law.

forbear/forebear

The first means to abstain, the second means ancestor.

founder/flounder

If already sunk, you've foundered. If struggling to stay afloat, you're floundering.

hangar/hanger

The first houses aircraft, the second supports clothes.

impracticable/impractical

If something is impracticable it is impossible, it cannot be done. If something is impractical, it is possible in theory but extremely unlikely to succeed.

infer/imply

To infer is to deduce or conclude, to imply is to hint or suggest.

into/in to

I went into a room, but I called in to complain.

loathe/loth

To loathe is to detest; to be loth is to be unwilling.

no doubt/no question

There is no doubt these two phrases mean the opposite. There is no question they mean the same thing.

practice/practise

Practice (noun) makes perfect, but you should practise (verb) what you preach.

prevaricate/procrastinate

To prevaricate is to speak or act falsely with intent to deceive. To procrastinate is to delay or put something off.

principal/principle

It should be your principal (first in importance) objective to stick to this principle (standard of conduct).

program/programme

A piece of computer software is a program; for anything else, use programme.

prophecy/prophesy

The first is the noun, the second is the verb.

remuneration/renumeration

Remuneration means payment (not, please note, repayment). Renumeration is not in fact a word. (If it was, it might mean recounting.)

spelled/spelt

She spelled it out, saying: 'It is spelt like this.'

spoiled/spoilt

She spoiled (verb) him. He was a spoilt (adjective) brat.

stationery/stationary

The writing materials (stationery) are immobile (stationary).

Appendix C

For more articles on writing in general - and writing for the web in particular - visit these recommended links:

<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html#errors>

<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>

<http://www.e-gineer.com/v1/articles/web-writing-for-many-interest-levels.htm>

<http://www.copyblogger.com/>

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/>

<http://www.tp4.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/~ub/HTML/englishgrammar.html>