A simple style guide

Academia and AI are trying to make us worse writers on purpose. Rules about writing style can be complicated and hard to remember. That's why I've made some simple ones that are easy to remember. They may not be optimal or comprehensive, but they're simple.

For those who learn best by example:

> At 14:30 EST on 2022-03-09, James Mueller decided to finally write down the simplest, clearest, easiest set of writing rules he could think of. This guide is the result.

General mechanics

- **Vocab**. ~~Utilize~~ Use the shortest, easiest word that will do.
- **Caps**. Capitalize *only* the first word of the sentence, and proper names (you know, names and titles of people, places, companies, and works of art). Even in headlines and other non-sentences, like the headline "General mechanics" above.
- **Letters**. Sometimes there are groups of letters that aren't words, like acronyms or single letters. Capitalize them, to distinguish them from words, and punctuate normally. My name starts with J. My Scrabble hand is literally all Es. I prefer GIFs to APNGs. Did you go to the ATM?
- **Unusual acronyms**. If you want to use an Acronym People Might Not Know (APMNK), spell it out with initial caps (ugh) the first time you use it, followed by the acronym in parentheses, so on later uses of the APMNK you can just use the acronym.
- **Plurals**. Use a lowercase S, no apostrophe. We robbed 6 ATMs.
- **Possessives**. Use a lowercase S, with apostrophe. That money was the ATM's.
- **Contractions**. Use them if you'd like, but sparingly, because they look weird. If you've put more than one apostrophe in a word, ~~I'dn't've~~ I wouldn't have.
- **Split infinitives**. If you know what this means, it's OK to just split them. If you don't know, don't worry about it. It's a Latin concept that there's no need to suddenly learn about.

- **Self-reference**: Talk about yourself as `me` or `I`, unless you're talking on behalf of a group, in which case, use `us` or `we`. Don't refer to yourself or your company in the third person.

Punctuation

- **Commas**. Use them wherever you want, and don't worry about having too many. You should especially use them between list items, even the last two items of the list.
- **Fancy punctuation**. The simplest rule about fancy punctuation, like the en dash `[–]`, em dash `[—]`, semicolon `[;]`, ampersand `[&]`, or even the practical parenthesis `[()]`, is to just not use them. If you can use a period, comma, or word instead, as is nearly always the case, just do that. If you can't, then consider restructuring the sentence.
- **Spacing**. Only put one space after your punctuation, not two. Modern typefaces are designed to have extra space built in after the period, improving legibility.
- **Legal punctuation**. Unless you will be punished for the omission, do not use legal punctuation like ™, ®, or ©. The subtext of these characters is, "if ***you*** use this word, I will sue you." A simple rule is, don't preemptively threaten to sue your audience. Similarly, the subtext of * is, "The sentence you have just read is so misleading that I am legally obliged to tell you the truth below." Instead, try simply telling the truth.

Digitalisms

- **Hyperlinks**. Anchor the link on the noun that says what the link links to.
  - **Good**: Followers of our `guide` experience increased consistency and reduced anxiety.

  Consider adding a verb that represents what the action of clicking will do.
  - **Good**: For some easy rules, `check out our guide` to simple writing.

  Don't make the link itself the topic of the link text. That's just extra text you don't need.
  - **No good**: To read our guide on simple writing, `click here`.
  - **Gooder**: ~~*To*~~ `Read our guide` on simple writing.~~*, click here.*~~
- **Hashtags**. The simplest rule about hashtags, is just don't.
  - If you absolutely must, such as to plug in to live events, then capitalize each word, since they can be long and difficult to parse. `#ElectionWatch2048`.
- **URLs**. Drop the `https://www.` part, and make it all lowercase, like `jamesmueller.xyz` or `docs.google.com`, because that's how it looks in your browser's address bar.
- **Filenames**. Write normally.
  - Don't randomly replace spaces with underscores `[_]` or whatever.

    - Write file types in lowercase.
    - If you have a date in the name, put it first, so your versions will be in order.
    - `2022-03-14 The simplest style guide.pdf`.

- **Emojis**. Use them as interstitial emotive punctuation 💯 or one-character replies 👍. Don't use them as in-sentence word replacements, like `I got caught by the 🐷 while stealing 💵 from the 🏧.`

Numbers

- **General.** Represent numbers with a mix of numerals and symbols, like `1`, `$12.75`, `$16`, `69%`, `9,867`, or `0220-0022`.
    - Use as few numerals as will do. Generally, `$16` is best, `$16.00` is fine but unnecessary, and `$16.000000000000` is gonna be legitimately confusing.
    - Divide quantities at the thousand mark using commas, like `4,000` or `40,000,000`.
    - Hyphenate non-quantities, like account numbers, in a way that makes them easy to read and remember, like `8675-3091`.
- **Sets**. If you have to use one number to modify another, spell out the smaller number, like `I stole twenty $100 bills from the ATM.`
- **Ordinals**, like `first`, are words rather than numbers, so spell them out.
- **Time**. Use 4-digit, 24-hour time with a colon in the middle, like `00:00`, `08:10`, `16:20`, or `22:17`, so you never have to specify AM or PM. If you aren't sure of your reader's time zone, specify one, like `22:17 EST`.
- **Dates**. The simplest rule for dates is to follow YYYY-MM-DD format, like `2022-03-14`. Why is that so simple? Because it's the only format where alphabetical ordering, like in file names, will also consistently result in chronological ordering.
- **Phone numbers**. This rule would be really complicated to articulate if you didn't already know it, but you do. Phone numbers look like `+1 (212) 867-5309`

Design

- **Typefaces**. Use at most two: this doc has Arial for guidance and Roboto Mono for exhibits.

- **Colors**. Just use black and white, and blue (or your brand color) for hyperlinks, unless you're doing something fundamentally unsimple like highlighting good and bad examples in a style guide.
- **Sizes**. Use at the absolute most three different text sizes: titles big, section headers medium-big, and text normal. Keep it to two if possible.
- **Emphasis**. Use bolding *or* italics *or* underline *or* color, but not ***more than one at once.***

Conclusion

The simplest rule about rules is to follow them if they make sense, and break them if you think you have a good reason. If you want your writing to be something other than simple (say you're writing in academia and want your writing to be *opaque* and *intimidating* to awe your peers, or you're a trademark lawyer and you actually *do* want to preemptively threaten to sue your readers), that's cool too, and would be a fine reason to break one or more of the rules in this guide.

Thanks for reading,

James Mueller

Next steps

- For more on the science of simple word use, read this absolute banger (PDF).
- Looking for word usage guidance? I've got a bit of that, too.
- Want to contribute? Take a survey about writing.