Style guides

When a magazine or newspaper talks about "style" it is not referring to the elegance of the writing, but to the conventions that it uses to ensure that the words are internally consistent. For example, you do not want something like a company or a research organisation to wobble between being a singular or plural entity.

Most publications have their own *stylebook*, a number of these are now available online (and are listed below). They are an invaluable resource for any writer who is looking to raise the quality of their work. The important issues to bear in mind are the style rules that are common between different publications. However, if you write regularly for one outlet you will pick up extra brownie points from your editors if you attempt to follow *House Style*, which is where you stick closely to the specific rules of that publication.

The points below are largely a collection of peeves from ABSW members. These are not the final words on style but merely a guide to what we have found annoying. Feel free to add your own pet style points.

Anyone seriously looking to improve their writing style would do well to download and study a style guide from a major news organisation.

Numbers and Symbols

Should you write "we have seven members" or "we have 7 members"?

The general rule is that up to ten, or rather 10, you use words, while anything bigger than 10 gets numerals.

Numbers sometimes come with units, or as percentages. You need to be consistent with these too. As in a lot of style things, there is no right or wrong, just consistent and inconsistent. So make up your mind on "percent" or "per cent" or "%" and then stick to what you've picked.

Plural and Singular

Do you write "the MRC have issued a press release"? Or should it be "the MRC has issued a press release"?

The important thing is to be consistent. Don't use one style in one paragraph, or for one organisation, and another in the next paragraph or for a different organisation.

In general, organisations, companies and so on are better treated as singular entities.

Capitalisation

Capital letters sometimes end up in strange places. In crossheads, for example. As in other style issues, the most important thing is to be consistent.

If you are writing a series of heading in a report, don't mix initial caps and mixed case.

Organisations and people will often refer to themselves by using capital letters. The government, for example, will often call itself the Government in reports. Where possible, lower case is better. But there are times when capitals are appropriate, in Labour Government, for example.

As always, be consistent. Don't change between capitals and lower case within an article or document.

Other Style Guides

Many publications have their own internal style guides. A good one is that is widely used appears The Guardian Style Guide which advises:

"Refer to Collins English Dictionary (8th edition, 2006) for guidance on anything that does not appear in the style guide." Collins is widely used for this purpose.

See also the BBC News Style Guide and The Economist Style Guide