BragIt

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COMPANY STYLE GUIDE

A BragIt production

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Foreword

For most purposes, the books *Full Marks—Advice on punctuation for scientific and technical writing*, and *Good Style*, by John Kirkman provide excellent guidance. The books cover usage in both American English and British English; there are also plenty of examples and quotations from other style guides such as: *The Chicago Manual of Style*; *The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors; Mind the Stop* (Carey); *Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford; Webster's Standard American Style Manual*; *The Random House Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*; *How to Write Metric* (Metrication Board); and several others.

There are significant differences between American and British English, which may be confusing to those who are not totally accustomed to a certain usage. Remember that many engineers, also in the US, come from, or are educated in, other countries in Europe, Asia or other parts of the world. If we target an international market, we should aim at a usage that is both modern and acceptable in different parts of the world—a usage that really can be considered *international*, even though the formally accepted company language is British English. Also, there are many cases where it is merely a matter of choice of style. In the latter cases, it is important to adopt a set of rules and a style, and try to be consistent; all style guides emphasize the importance of consistency, to adopt a set of rules or guides and stick to them consistently. They also emphasize the importance of clarity and being totally unambiguous; in technical contexts, this is of course very important—much more important than the issue of American or British English.

This guide lists some common style constructs that we should try to consistently use. Rather than just list a set of rules, this guide lists references and rationales *why* a certain usage is advocated. This will provide a better understanding, and it may also answer questions that may arise as a result of having heard of other conventions or having read other sources, such as your old English schoolbook.

1 Capitalization

1.1 *Capitalization of titles and headings*

There is a wide variation of acceptable conventions for the capitalization of titles and headings. The most important point is to establish a usage and then adhere to that consistently. First, I quote some references that elaborate on conventions, and after that I present our guideline.

1.1.1 *The Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications*

Many books and help topics now capitalize only the first word of chapter titles and other headings; design guidelines are less formal than in the past. The following guidelines represent traditional title capitalization standards. They are especially useful in answering questions about capitalization of adverbs, prepositions, verbal phrases, and the like. If your design does not use traditional capitalization, follow your design guidelines.

- Capitalize all nouns, verbs (including *is* and other forms of *to be*), adverbs (including *than* and *when*), adjectives (including *this* and *that*), and pronouns (including *its*).
- Always capitalize the first and last words, regardless of their part of speech ("The Text to Look For").
- Capitalize prepositions that are part of a verb phrase ("Backing Up Your Disk").
- Do not capitalize articles (*a*, *an*, *the*) unless an article is the first word in the title.
- Do not capitalize coordinate conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *or*).
- Do not capitalize prepositions of four or fewer letters.
- Do not capitalize *to* in an infinitive phrase ("How to Format Your Hard Disk").
- Capitalize the second word in compound words if it is a noun or proper adjective or the words have equal weight ("Cross-Reference", "Pre-Microsoft Software", "Read/Write Access", "Run-Time"). Do not capitalize the second word if it is another part of speech or a participle modifying the first word ("How-to", "Take-off").

Capitalize interface and program terms that ordinarily would not be capitalized, unless they are case-sensitive ("The fdisk Command"). Follow the traditional use of keywords and other special terms in programming languages ("The print Function", "Using the EVEN and ALIGN Directives").

- In table column headings, capitalize only the first word of each column heading.

1.1.2 *The Chicago Manual of Style*

In regular title capitalization, also known as headline style, capitalize the first and last words and all nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and subordinating conjunctions (*if*, *because*, *as*, *that*, *before*, *after*, *when*, etc.). Lowercase articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, *nor*), and prepositions, regardless of length, unless they are the first or last word of the title. Lowercase the *to* infinitive.

1.1.3 *The Technical Communicators' Forum*

http://www.tc-forum.org/

In addition to quoting the above sources, they also add:

- Capitalize the first word following a colon.

But: From the discussions and input from various sources, the trend seems to be going away from capitalization, and only use an initial capital for the first word of a title or heading.

They also emphasize: "There are many modern style guides and they are much more liberal than the traditional ones: you can make your own decision what you can do, what you want to do—but once you have, stick to it!"

1.1.4 *Our capitalization guideline*

For titles and main headings, follow the above guidelines from the *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications*, and the *Chicago Manual of Style*, with the addition of this rule: *capitalize the first word following a colon*.

For subheadings of lower rank, use an initial capital only for the first word of the heading.

1.2 *Capitalization for signalling proper nouns or adjectives*

Our guideline on capitalization for signalling proper nouns or adjectives should basically follow the recommendations in the book *Full Marks—Advice on punctuation for scientific and technical writing* by John Kirkman. The following summarizes the most important points and adds some clarifications:

Use initial capitals to signal proper nouns or adjectives, and words derived from proper nouns. (A *proper noun* is the name of a specific person, a place, a country, a month, a day, a holiday, a journal title). Use initial capitals for trade names. Reserve the use of capitalization for proper nouns (names) or specific titles of persons or entities.

Avoid the temptation to use capitals when you are using a term in a general way!

Write: "…the smoothing algorithm uses four waveform samples…"
Do *not* write: "… the Smoothing Algorithm uses four waveform samples …", even if the smoothing is done by a module labelled "Smoothing Algorithm".

Furthermore, since technical texts in general are proliferated with capital letters, we should be very cautious with capitals in the body of texts. Our guideline concerning this is as follows:

If a term, expression or title can be interpreted in a general way, without ambiguity or confusion, we should do so and consequently use lower case letters. Only if it is necessary to refer to a specific named entity or title should we capitalize the initial letters.

Rule of thumb: if you can say "*a* <thing>" or "*the* <thing>", then <thing> is generally *not* a proper noun, and therefore we should use lower case letters.

This means that if we refer to a person who has had a certain job, such as *sales manager* or *project leader*, we should use that expression as the job function rather than a specific title, and consequently use lower case letters for it. If this job function is the present assignment, however, we may sometimes refer to this expression as the specific title of the person, and consequently write: Sales Manager.

2   Periods, Colons, Semicolons, Commas, and Lists

2.1   *Periods — full stops*

Period is the American English term for the British term *full stop*. In the following, I only use the term *period*. They are used for various purposes, such as decimal points and sometimes with abbreviations. See the corresponding usage below.

2.2   *Decimals and grouping of numbers*

Decimal signs: Although the international standard ISO 31-0 says that a comma is the preferred decimal sign, a period on the line is also accepted by the standard. (*on the line* means that it is positioned as a normal period). If the company language is English, and since both British and American conventional practice is to use a period as the decimal sign, our norm should also be to use a period for that purpose.

Grouping: Although the conventional American practice is, or has been, to use a comma to group digits (making groups of three digits), American authorities recommend that, for scientific work and texts that are to be distributed internationally, one should *not* use a comma to group digits. The international standard ISO 31-0 is unequivocal about how numbers should be set: "To facilitate the reading of numbers with many digits, these may be separated into suitable groups, preferably of three, counting from the decimal sign towards the left and the right; the groups should be separated by a small space but never a comma, a point or by other means." The guide *How to Write Metric* (Metrication Board) recommends that:

- four digits should be written without a space, unless they form a part of a tabulation;
- five or more digits, on either side of the decimal marker, should be grouped in blocks three, divided by single spaces.

The exception being writing sums of money in commercial contexts to prevent the possibility of fraudulently inserting digits in the space.

We should follow the above rules from the *How to Write Metric*. Whenever possible, the space symbol to group numbers should be a **thin space**. If your word processor or spread sheet does not support *thin space*, then use a regular space.

2.3   *Periods in (after) abbreviations*

American English writers use periods after abbreviations more frequently than is common in British English usage. In writing abbreviations, British English practice is to use periods only after true abbreviations (truncations), in which the end of the word is removed. When an abbreviation is formed by the removal of the interior of the word, no period is used. Traditional (old style) American English practice is to put a period after true abbreviations *and* after words from which the interior has been removed. Examples: AE convention: Ph.D., Mr., a.m., e.g., i.e., U.S.A. BE convention: PhD, Mr, am, eg, ie, USA. Note that in BE style, "Dr." and "Dr" mean different things: "Dr." for *Drive*, and "Dr" for *Doctor*. AE conventions have no means to distinguish the two.

But the *Chicago Manual of Style* acknowledges that: "The trend now is strongly away from the use of periods with all kinds of abbreviations that have carried them in the past. In our view, this is to the good …"

Webster's Standard American Style Manual also recognizes: "… the contemporary styling of abbreviations is to a large extent inconsistent and arbitrary."

We need to adopt a modern practice that is reasonably acceptable in various parts of the world, reasonably consistent, and easy to read. Since, in addition to the trend being strongly away from periods after abbreviations, the sequence '*period space*' usually signals the end of the sentence; such usage inside a sentence obstructs the identification of the text into sentence chunks. The BE usage has the merit of being relatively consistent and unambiguous, at the price of some sequences of '*period space*' inside sentences. However, also with this method, there are some peculiar inconsistencies, such as writing `Fig.` for *Figure*, but `Figs` for *Figures*. In such cases, there would be no ambiguity at all in omitting the periods totally! In other cases, there are abbreviations that have become so common that people don't think about whether it is a truncation or removal of the interior of the word. Also in these cases, to write without the period is by far the best.

The summarized pros and cons has led to the following simple guidelines:

- Generally, don't use periods at all with abbreviations, unless there is a risk of ambiguity; otherwise, in case of ambiguity or loss of clarity, follow the British style (write Prof, PhD, MSc, …).
- For lower case abbreviations formed from the first letter of each word, if at all used, you *may* put a period *between* the letters, but not after. Example: 'e.g this phrase'. But preferably, don't use such abbreviations at all!
- Capitalized abbreviations *never* take periods (write USA, MTBF, …).
- Acronyms *never* take periods (write ASCII, RAM, …).
- Units *never* take periods (write cm, kg, V, mA, GHz, …).

But: The use of abbreviations should be minimized! For acronyms, preferably use small caps to make them less obtrusive, such as ASCII, RAM.
Surveys clearly show that readers prefer styles with few abbreviations, that is, where words are written in full.

2.4 *Colons and lists*

2.4.1 *Colons to introduce vertical lists*

The usage differ slightly between British English and American English. We should primarily use the American style (see *The Chicago Manual of Style*), which says: "An invoicing colon (a colon introducing a list of items to follow) should normally be preceded by a complete sentence." But, where appropriate, you may depart from this rule (and in British English it is common that the colon does not terminate a complete sentence).

If the colon does not terminate a complete sentence, and the following items in the vertical list should be read as a continuous part of a complete sentence, then each item should begin with a lower case letter and be separated by semicolons, except for the last item which should end in a period. Beware, however, that such constructions can feel a bit heavy, since you are asking the reader to absorb all the listed information as a thought begun before the colon. For an example, see the bullet list in Section 2.2.

In most cases, the readability is at its best when each item in the vertical list starts with a capital letter. If the items themselves are complete sentences, or multiline items, they should each end in a period. If the items are short "bullet style" phrases, they should not end in periods or any other punctuation symbol. For an example of a longish bullet list, see Section 2.3. For an example of a short bullet list, see Chapter 4.

2.4.2 *Colons to introduce lists in continuous text*

An invoicing colon in continuous text may or may not be preceded by a complete sentence, and the items to follow should normally begin with lower case letters. The items should be separated by semicolons if the item phrases are relatively long; otherwise, a comma may suffice for one-word items or very short phrases.

2.4.3 *Colons within a sentence, separating clauses*

A colon in a continuous sentence may introduce supplementary, enlarging or antithetical information. It may also mark an introduction, and indicate that what follows it—whether a clause, a phrase, or even a single word—is linked with some element that precedes it. The element after the colon may explain, illustrate or amplify the previous element. If, however, the linkage between the elements is weak, or there is not such a strong "direction" from the element preceding the colon to the element following the colon, they may be better linked by a semicolon.

Usually, the first word after a colon should begin with a lower case letter, but if the text after the colon is a complete sentence (especially if it is a long sentence), you may start the first word with a capital letter.

2.5 *Semicolons or commas in lists? Comma before the final 'and'*

Commas

Some "children's schoolbook" may have taught you this simple list construction: "Ann, please go buy some bread, butter and milk."
If your lists are that simple, use that construction; that is, use a comma between the items and omit the comma before the last *and*. In technical writing, however, we seldom have such simple items in lists. We should follow modern practice as supported by *The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors, Mind the Stop* (Carey)*, Hart's Rules,* and *Full Stop* (Kirkman), which means: supply a comma before the final **and**, to ensure that the itemization is always absolutely clear, such as in this example:

"… office equipment consists of a photocopier, a typewriter, a word processor, a printer, and three filing cabinets, …"

Semicolons

When the items of a list consist of longer clauses, especially when the clauses themselves could benefit from a comma inside the clause, use semicolons to separate the items. This is always the best way to eliminate any form of ambiguity as to the interpretation of how long an item is.

2.6 *Commas*

Commas after "preliminaries" and similar constructs

Always put a comma after preliminaries such as: 'however', 'in addition', 'furthermore'.

Usually, put a comma after the clauses 'that is', 'for example' and 'for instance'. An exception to this rule may be when you want a colon after these clauses.

Commas after 'which'

The word 'which' is used both to start a comment and to start a definition. It is very important to get the message right by clearly indicating which usage you intend. Use this mnemonic:

*C*ommenting clauses need a *c*omma, *d*efining clauses *d*on't.

In addition, it is a *very* good habit to always use 'that' for defining clauses, whereas you use 'which' for commenting clauses.

3 Quotes, Emphasis, Terms, Labels, Titles, Strings

There are many "schools" on how to mark quotations, emphases etcetera. The difficulty lies in being reasonably consistent. The following summarizes what should be our guideline.

3.1 Direct quotation, or using words in a "special way"

Quotation

In American English, using a pair of double quotation marks is the most common way to set off a direct quotation, while British English writers often use a pair of single quotes for this (which they call "inverted commas").

Our guideline is to use double quotes. When you need to mark a quotation or a string within a quotation, use a pair of single quotes.

To set off an entire paragraph as a quotation, you may need to emphasize more strongly that the whole paragraph is a quotation; in this case, preferably set the paragraph indented in a slightly smaller type, with or without italics. The reason for such strong marking is that a pair of quotes enclosing an entire paragraph are difficult to see in the sense that they are easily "forgotten", which may lead the reader totally wrong. A paragraph in italics usually conveys the connotation of a quotation or something that is set aside or that it speaks *about* something.

Using words in a special way:

Use double quotes to enclose a word or a phrase that is used in a special way, such as not really meaning that word in the normal way but in some transferred meaning, or being ironic, or with a certain overtone.

3.2 Emphasis

For emphasizing words or phrases within sentences, or even a whole sentence, use italics, or in a structured environment: use the *Emphasis* element. For strong emphasis, use slightly thicker italic, or in a structured environment: use the **Strong** element. For very strong emphasis, such as warnings, you may use **bold** or a red color, or in a structured environment you can use the Important element.

3.3 Designating terms, labels, phrases, titles

Use italics to set off new terms, labels, phrases or events, or in a structured environment: use the *Designation* element.

When referring to titles of books or other publications, use italics. When referring to chapters within the referred publication, use double quotes. For reference to a chapter or section within the current document, use italics. In a structured environment: use the *Phrase* element.

3.4 Strings, commands

Use either a monospaced font or a pair of single straight quotes (') to enclose a string of characters to be used, meant, or entered in precisely that way, but without intending it to be a quotation from somewhere or a designated term, label or title. Examples are computer commands. In a structured environment, use the String element (such as `command`).

For references to menu entries, such as: file > new > document, use a pair of single straight quotes ('file > new > document'), or a special font. In a structured environment, use the Item element (example: file > new > document). The same practice can also be used for file references.

4   Dashes, Hyphens

Types of dashes
- Em-dash: —
- En-dash: –
- Hyphen is not a dash, but for comparison, it looks like this: -

4.1   *Dashes*

Em-dash   Use a pair of em-dashes—the long dash as seen above—to set off heavy parenthetic "asides". It can also be used to precede the explanation of a concept, like in this example: Elegant documents use acronyms set in *small caps*—capital letters in a size that matches the lower case letters. Use a single em-dash to add a phrase or clause to a statement, especially to create a pause before a final "punch" or emphatic statement at the end—that creates a strong effect.

Usually, there is no space on either side of the em-dash, but conventions vary, and the best is to use a thin space on either side of the dash. The FrameMaker templates have a variable called *Dash* that is an em-dash with a thin space on either side—elegant and very easy to insert by simply:
ctrl-0 and then just hit D and return.

En-dash   Use en-dash to indicate a span or a link, such as "pages 54–66". There shall be no space on either side of the dash.

4.2   *Hyphens*

See the separate document *To Hyphen or Not to Hyphen* for recommendations on hyphenation. That document also has a table with many words that should or should not be hyphenated.