City of Coquitlam
Style Guide

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Introduction

Among the various elements that distinguish a professional-quality publication are the excellence of its content and writing, and a readability level appropriate to its intended readers. General readers, however, may overlook another element, known as its style. While more subtle than other elements, *style* is equally important to the success of the publication.

The style of a publication refers to the detailed set of rules and guidelines that determines how language is used within it, to be grammatically correct, internally consistent and in accordance with a recognized standard of English usage. Style embraces proper grammar and spelling, but goes further to recognize, as do even the most conservative guardians of English, that many such rules are not absolute and indeed allow for choices among several acceptable options. A publication's style spells out *which* choice the editors have made in each case.

Style may also deal with issues that are not strictly grammatical. These may include making the publication easier to read – the treatment of numbers within text, for instance. Or it may reflect the publication's (or organization's) philosophy in its written material – avoiding stereotypic language, for example.

This style guide aims to be all these things and more, and in doing so serve as a standard reference work for the writing and editing of all City of Coquitlam publications.

It is expected that virtually all government publications and printed material will follow its style – that's the point of a common style, after all – and that the few that follow other variants do so in a limited fashion, for clear and understandable reasons.

Certainly, this guide should encourage greater consistency in government publications. It is equally important, however, that it serve as a helpful resource for writers and editors, and encourage them to be more vigilant of style issues and consistency within their publications.

Like all spoken languages, English is constantly evolving, and so the editors expect this guide to change over time as well. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Companion Resources

This guide should be used to complement three editing reference works well-known in Canada: Canadian Press[1] *Caps and Spelling, the CP Stylebook: A Guide for Writers and Editors, and the Concise Oxford Dictionary.*

"CP style" is the most widely used standard for newspapers and magazines across Canada, and many writers and editors working in advertising, public relations and corporate communications have adopted it as well. Its rules are quite comprehensive, and its style decisions carefully thought out and explained. CP style is the base for City of Coquitlam style, and in the main we follow CP's spelling and usage rules. However, the government style varies from CP in many instances, and these exceptions make up much of this guide.

CP Caps and Spelling is chiefly an alphabetical list of words, spelled and capitalized according to CP style. It is an indispensable reference for tricky spellings, hyphenations and the like. It also includes some general guidelines on capitalization, abbreviations, place names and numbers, and a section providing "plain word" alternatives to "$64,000 words." *Caps and Spelling* is updated periodically to include new problem words or style changes.

The *CP Stylebook* is a detailed explanation of CP's editing and usage rules on matters ranging from punctuation and spelling to non-sexist language. It has been recently reorganized to make it more useful to the general user, and now includes a section on subtle distinctions between commonly used words. It also is updated occasionally, and stands as one of the most comprehensive and authoritative guides available.

CP style has some limitations, however. Its rules are not completely comprehensive, nor could they be. A more serious problem for Canadian organizations is that CP follows "American" spellings of certain words. As well, it is designed primarily for CP employees and newspaper editors, and does not deal with other types of publications or printed material, such as ads, brochures or news releases.

CP recognizes the *Oxford English Dictionary* as its authority, with specific exceptions noted. The most obvious perhaps is dropping the "u" in most "-our" words. CP specifically refers editors to the *Concise Oxford* for spelling issues not addressed in *Caps and Spelling.*

CP's recognition of Oxford makes it a natural choice as the preferred "default" dictionary for the City of Coquitlam. The Oxford has some limitations of its own (for instance, some more traditional "English" spellings), but so far appears superior to any so-called Canadian dictionaries.

How to use this style guide

Our first advice to those using this guide is to fully understand CP. We therefore encourage you to read (or re-read) the following sections of the *CP stylebook* thoroughly: Some Useful Tools, pages 169-248; and certain sections of Some Technical Guides, pages 249-328. (You might also refer to Chapter V of this Style Guide, pages 11-17).

When you face a spelling or usage question, you should first check the City of Coquitlam style guide. If this doesn't answer your query, refer to CP. If CP has no answer, refer to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary.* (If you still have no luck, consult the reference works cited in the Bibliography, or the editors of this guide.)

The remainder of this guide is divided into six chapters. These chapters discuss:

- general guidelines for avoiding stereotypic language
- basic tips for effective writing within government
- guidelines for news releases and newsletters
- common style and grammatical stumbling blocks
- useful reference books on style and usage

Chapter I: City of Coquitlam Style

While CP is the standard style for all government publications and print materials, there are several exceptions that are common to most government materials. These include so-called Canadian spelling of certain words, the capitalization of government department names and some unique cases (Note: News releases are an exception to these exceptions as they generally follow CP style, see Chapter IV.)

The general rationale for a special City of Coquitlam style is that it reflects traditional common usage within the municipal government and within Coquitlam, and our unique national approach to language. However, we believe, in the interests of simplicity and consistency, style exceptions should be kept to a minimum.

Spelling and Capitalization (see Appendix A)

Department/Division Names

Capitalize the names of all government departments and divisions when referred to in full, i.e., Development and Planning (department), Community Planning (division), Engineering and Public Works (department). Avoid referring to departments by less than their full names (the planning department, engineering etc.). Also prefer the proper department names i.e., Parks, Recreation and Culture Services (not Parks and Recreation). When there are departments with two words (Planning and Development, Engineering and Public Works), the symbol "&" should not be used, prefer "and".

Acronyms

Avoid acronyms that are not familiar to your readership. Programs and departments may be abbreviated to acronyms on second reference, though for greater clarity the first reference should be followed by the acronym in brackets, that is, Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan (NECAP). Use discretion in introducing new or confusing acronyms that are unlikely to gain much currency. In second reference, **do not capitalize words like program or initiative**, even if they derive from the proper name of a program or "initiative".

Bullet-point lists

Within any booklet-type publication and in most other publications, bulleted list should be treated consistently in terms of their design and typography. **Within a specific list, bulleted items should be punctuated consistently.** That is, they should all be either:

(a) complete sentences or paragraphs, (b) sentence fragments that depend on and complete the sentence setting up the bullet-point list, as in this current example, or (c) short phrases with no verb that *do not* complete the preceding sentence.

Type (a) bullet-points are punctuated and capitalized as if they were regular body text (i.e., initial letter upper case and final period).

For an example, see use of bullets under the *Italics and boldface* section (although the use of the boldface initial word is rare).

Type (b) bullets are treated as follows: lower-case initial letters, semi-colons (and the second-to-last bullet would include "and" and "or" after the semi-colon).
Example: These chapters discuss:

- basic tips for effective writing within government;
- common style and grammatical stumbling blocks;
- guidelines for news releases and newsletters; and
- useful reference books on style and usage.

Type (c) bullets – provided they are all more or less uniformly short – begin with a lower-case letter and have *no* ending punctuation.
Example: You can enjoy Coquitlam's cultural and recreational activities.

- ballet
- theatre
- multicultural events
- golf
- cross-country skiing

Italics and boldface

Se italics sparingly and only in the following cases:

- **Emphasis:** use italics, not boldface, to stress regular words in text. But you may use boldface in a newsletter to highlight names of people or organizations, for example. Keep typefaces changes to a minimum.
- **Titles:** use italics for titles of books, reports, legislation, newspapers and magazines, and works of art (including films). Use quotation marks for chapters of books, articles within periodicals, television programs and musical compositions. (Note: for italicization of periodical titles, follow CP rules with regard to capitalization. That is, do not italicize the article "the" when the place name is included in the title, and with periodicals only italicize the "magazine" if it is actually part of the full name. So, write the *TriCity News, Western Living* magazine, but *the New Yorker).*
- **Foreign phrases** (including Latin and ancient Greek): In most publications, such phrases should be avoided. If used, they should be italicized. Phrases that have become anglicized (for example, pot-pourri) should not be italicized. When in doubt, consult the *Concise Oxford* and use your own judgment.

In general, italics replace underlined type in publications.

Chapter II: Bias-free Language

Use language that is free of any kind of stereotyping of people based on some characteristic, such as their sex, race or ethnic group, religion, physical or mental disability, or age. CP's *Stylebook* provides some useful general guidelines for avoiding sexism and racism in published material, discussing both content issues and specific words to use or avoid (see pp. 19 – 24).

Several other style guides *(The Canadian Style, Editing Canadian English)* discuss how to avoid stereotyping. More recently, separate guides on the topic have been produced as well (see Bibliography).

Writers and editors should be sensitive to how their use of language affects their various readers. Perhaps the best way to become more sensitive is to read the various reference works on the topic included in the Bibliography.

Here are some suggestions to avoiding stereotypes while also avoiding stilted or unnatural language.

Common problems

He/she constructions

The preferred way to avoid the non-sexist but clumsy construction *he/she, himself/herself*, etc., in a generic reference is simply to make the reference plural. Rather than writing: "Each applicant must bring samples of his/her work," you write "Applicants must bring samples of *their* work." Of course, this isn't always possible, and it does create less concrete and specific writing.

Another option that should offend neither readers nor stylists is to alternate the sex used in generic examples. That is, you might write: "The teacher must make notes immediately after class in his notebook," and later in the same piece write "Each teacher must adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of her students." This would have the same effect as alternating among different races of people in generic graphic illustrations.

A further, if more ambitious, alternative is to use real, live examples to explain a government policy or program. This approach is most effective in newsletters or in feature articles distributed to the media. Depending on the topic, the writer/editor may want to choose a subject whose sex (or minority status) goes against the stereotype. This approach can both work against stereotyping and provide a stronger communications piece.

Chapter III: Writing for Government – Dos and Don'ts

<u>Dos</u>
- ***Use the active voice*** *(The dog bit the man*, not *the man was bitten by the dog*). It makes sentences livelier, shorter and avoids confusion or vagueness about who did what.

- ***Prefer short, common words*** to longer, more impressive ones. The purpose of writing is to communicate, not to show off your vocabulary. Even a highly educated audience will read and retain short words faster.

- ***Make every word count***. Write as concisely as possible, avoiding unnecessary words and wordy expressions.

- ***Prefer concrete terms to the abstract***. Use words that refer to particular, tangible objects and events. Use examples, preferably familiar ones, to explain points.

- ***Vary sentence length***: Long sentences are usually hard to read, so avoid writing too many of them. However, a paragraph of short, choppy sentences is rarely any better.   Alternating between short and long is a good rule of thumb, although finding your natural rhythm takes practice.
To find the ideal length for each sentence, try reading it aloud – if you're gasping for breath, it's probably too long. On the other hand, if you're stumbling over words within a paragraph, maybe the sentences are too short. Another useful guide is to write sentences that express one simple, complete thought – no more, no less.

- ***Keep paragraphs short***. How short depends on the type of publication, but generally the rule is a paragraph should only discuss one idea or topic.

- ***Put people in your writing***. In most government writing, you can make your prose less formal and more and more accessible by using examples or taking the "If you do this, this will happen…" approach.

<u>Don'ts</u>

- ***Don't use jargon*** in the place of everyday phrases. Look for simple words to translate buzz words and government-ese into plain English. For instance: don't write *the new initiative will enhance and develop activities to generate economic growth,* write *the new project will help create jobs and wealth.*

- ***Avoid words that end in –ize*** and don't invent new ones.

- ***Avoid clichés*** like the plague. If you can't come up with fresh, creative ways of expressing your ideas, just say what you have to say in simple, clear and concise phrases.

- ***Don't use nouns as verbs*** *(as in Let's dialogue).*

- ***Don't over-use trendy or tired expressions*** (like dialogue, even as a noun). Look for new ways of saying the same thing, using common everyday words.

- ***Don't cut out words for the sake of brevity alone***. Unless you face tight space constraints, use examples or explanations to help the reader.

- ***Don't use negative constructions*** when the positive is more clear and direct. For example, don't write *Don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions*, write *Please contact us if you have questions.*

<u>Further reading</u>

"Plain Words", pages 161-174, *CP Caps and Spelling*

"Government jargon", page 214, *CP Stylebook*

Chapter IV: Common Style Questions and Grammatical Errors

Writers and editors tend to trip over the same style points and make common grammatical and usage mistakes. The following compilation represents some of the editors' favourites, as well as some we would like to see eradicated from City of Coquitlam publications. Again, it is far from exhaustive, and we welcome your comments and suggestions.

<u>Awhile, a while</u>

Awhile (one word) is an adverb, properly used in "...and stood *awhile* in thought." As two words, the proper usage would be "and stood for *a while* in thought." Beware this linguistic jabberwock whenever you take your verbal sword in hand.

<u>Between, Among</u>

Generally, use *between* with two people or things, and *among* with more than two. However, there are exceptions when the action or relationship between/among three or more objects is understood as "dual" at any given time. So it's more proper to write "Many barriers block trade *between* Canada's 10 provinces," since only two partners trade at any given time (While we're on the topic, don't use *amongst* – it sounds archaic.)

<u>Commas</u>

The comma may well be the least understood punctuation mark in English. Several reference works offer useful explanations of the use of commas. We encourage all writers and editors to become fully versed in these rules, and add one of our own: **wherever a comma is optional but would make the passage easier to read, use it.** We also paraphrase some excellent general and specific points that Theodore Bernstein makes:

(1) A misplaced comma, besides being ungrammatical, can change the meaning of a sentence. So learn to use it properly.

(2) In a series, the last comma before the conjunction "and" or "or") is unnecessary and should be omitted. It should only be included if the items in the series are phrases or include the word "and", and/or if omitting the final comma would make the sentence harder to read.

Authorities as venerable as H.W. Fowler (*Modern English Usage*, 193x) have made the case for dropping it on the basis that each comma in a series replaces "and", and therefore the last one would be redundant. (The editors have made a

style decision in this case; books and other materials that include the comma are not wrong, but simply follow other styles. Some grammar textbooks urge that the comma be included to avoid any possible ambiguity or inconsistency.)

(3) **Commas are not optional in phrases such as: "... Tom and his wife, Jane."** Some newspapers drop the comma (wrongly), apparently judging the phrase to be the same as "...his friend Bob." Not so – taking out the comma makes the reference restrictive or defining. This is, you seem to be defining *which* wife you are referring to: his wife *Jane*, and not his wife *Alice.* The comma, then, is mandatory with names such as husband and wife; a little more tricky with son, daughter, brother and sister (depends how many there are): and perhaps not needed at all with descriptions like "friend" (unless the poor soul has only one friend, which is one more than the editors have).

Comprise, Include

Comprise and *include* are close in meaning, but have a subtle difference in usage. *Comprise* usually indicates *all* the elements or items of a package are mentioned, while *include* suggests some may be left out. Also, the proper construction using comprise is: "A hockey team *comprises* a goal tender, two defensemen ..." **not** "A hockey team *is comprised of* ..." or "A goal tender, two defensemen ... *comprise* a hockey team.

Different (from)

Things are generally *different from* others, not different *than others.* (Recall the root form: "differ from."). However, as Bernstein suggests, exceptions may be made when a clause follows the *from*, and using *from* would make the sentence clumsy.

Disinterested

Disinterested means having nothing to gain from – therefore, impartial. It does *not* mean not interested or indifferent.

Etc. e.g. i.e. N.B.

Avoid these short-hand forms, as plain English alternatives exist. (For example or for instance for *e.g.;* that is for *i.e.*; and Please Note for *N.B.*, although use the last sparingly.) There are also plain English alternatives for *etc.* (and so on, and the like); however, in good writing they are no better and may suggest laziness or ignorance on the part of the writer. Write the sentence so as to avoid the need for any such term.

Everyday, every day

Everyday (one word) is an adjective, as in "*everyday* activities." *Every day* (two words) is an adjective-noun combination, as in "She goes to work *every day*."

Fortuitous, Fortunate

Fortuitous means by coincidence or by chance; *fortunate* means lucky. You could say an event was both fortuitous and fortunate without engaging in redundancy. Luckily, most writers know the difference.

Hopefully

Hopefully, few City of Coquitlam writers will use this word in the form we just did. Avoid it.

Imply, Infer

Imply means to suggest or say indirectly; infer means to draw a conclusion. While we are implying writers tend to confuse these words, you mustn't infer we think any less of you because of it.

In regard to

This bureaucratic phrase should certainly be avoided, but if you must use it don't write *in regards to* or with *regards to*. Proper usage calls for: *in regard to, with regard to*, or *as regards*.

Its, it's

Confusing *its* (possessive) with *its* (contraction of *it is*) is still a common error, even in City of Coquitlam publications.

Less and fewer
Use less to refer to the quantity of things that are not measured or counted precisely, and *fewer* with things that are counted. Thus, we may have *less happiness* than our parents had, but they had *fewer* bathrooms. Some exceptions are money and weight (both use *less*).

Like, Such as

User either like or such as in comparison. The difference between the terms is too slight to warrant a distinction in usage.

Likely, Probably

In the interest of avoiding repetition, some writers alternate between *probably* and *likely*, using either as an adverb. While the intention is commendable, the practice is usually wrong. The best usage suggests *likely* should be used chiefly as an adjective ("a *likely* story"), and only as an adverb in such phrases as "He was more *likely* to go than I was." Obviously, *probably* couldn't be used in either of these examples. And *likely* should not be used in phrases such as: "The government will likely introduce legislation to prohibit bungee jumping." Probably should be used in this case.

May, Might

In most cases, there in only the slightest difference in meaning between *may* and *might*; that is, *might* seems to suggest more doubt. However, when used as a past conditional, *may* is used when some uncertainty exists, and *might* when it does not. That is, write "There *may* have been 43 separate gunmen involved indirectly in the JFK assassination," and write "If the team had worked harder, they *might* have won" (but they didn't).

More than, over

In the sense of *in excess of*, use either term ("He made *over/more* than $1 million a year.")

Nauseated, nauseous

Nothing makes editors as ill as misuse of words like these. Nauseated means feeling sick to the stomach; nauseous means causing you to be sick to the stomach.

Now, presently

Through the simple inertia of usage, *presently* has been accepted as meaning *now* (even Oxford includes it as a second meaning). It properly means *shortly*, or *soon*. We recommend using now in most cases; if you need another word for variety, use *currently, today*, etc.

Orient, orientate

Orient, of course, is the correct verb; *orientate* is a new coinage apparently arrived at by writers who were familiar with *orientation* and didn't realize there was already a perfectly good root word.

Parameter(s), paradigm, etc.

Avoid these words on principle because they are more often used to impress that to clarify. Moreover, since few writers use them correctly, they tend to confuse and irritate readers (not to mention editors).

Playwright, playwriting

Playwright (the noun) is the person who "makes" plays, as a wheelwright makes wheels. Playwriting (the verb) refers to the process of writing plays. Avoid this miscue.

<u>Proved, proven</u>

Use proved as a verb, whether in active or passive voice (that is, "The test *proved* you did it" and "Their case has not been *proved*"). But use *proven* in adjectival form ("Political debates area *proven* cure for insomnia.")

<u>Quality</u>

Urged on by omni-present advertising copy, more writer use *quality* to mean *high* quality or *good* quality, as in "The company sells only quality merchandise." We say this is ad-copy jargon, not the best usage – quality can be high or low, good or bad, and the writer should specify which it is.

<u>Split Infinitives</u>

Grammarians have long railed against using split infinitives in any situation. CP, however, and most modern style authorities say there are too many cases where sticking to this rule produces clumsy sentences. Our advice, then, is to carefully choose your grammatical battles and to only split when it reads and sounds better.

<u>That, which</u>

Use *that* for defining clauses and *which* chiefly for non-defining clauses. Also avoid using *that* as a pronoun altogether by using the "ing" construction, as in: "She is director of the program (that relates to) relating to seedbeds."

As pronouns, *that* and *which* are not interchangeable. Properly, *that* is used to introduce a defining or essential clause ("He didn't like the speech that I wrote today), while *which* introduces a non-defining or non-essential clause ("He didn't like my last speech, which I wrote today").

One helpful way to keep the rules straight about that and which – and the use of commas with them – is to remove the that/which clause and see if the sentence still makes complete sense. If it does, then the clause is non-defining and simply supplies additional information: *which* should be used. If it doesn't, then the clause is defining and *that* is called for. (Also, notice that a properly used *that* may be omitted from the sentence, while the *which* in a which-clause can't be.)

Once you understand this rule, you will notice that many writers use *which* when *that* is the better word. This is not technically wrong, but unnecessary and a false formality. On the other hand, hardly anyone uses *that* when *which* is called for (for instance, "He didn't like my first speech, *that* I wrote yesterday"). This is not only ungrammatical but also looks and sounds wrong – and so rarely happens.

<u>Use(d) to</u>

Avoid this idiomatic expression (as in "I used to go to school every day by dogsled."), preferring other ways to express the same idea ("I went to school every day by dogsled). Berstein also reminds us that when *used* to is written in combination with "did", as in "I didn't use to mind the cold dog sled ride."), the "d) is dropped in *use to*.

<u>When, Where</u>

It's becoming more common for writers to substitute *when* or *where* for complete phrases as in, "Politics is where the foxes guard the chicken coop." The problem is politics is not a place, so *where* is not appropriate. "The Legislature is where I work" or "Childhood is *when* we believe in Santa Claus and that adults are wise," on the other hand, are completely acceptable.

<u>Whether (or not)</u>

In the expression *whether or not*, the "or not" may often be dropped. (As in, *Nobody knows whether or not he is alive*). CP says it should be retained when an alternative is emphasized. Bernstein suggests trying to replace the *whether* with *if*. If you can, then the "or not" probably isn't needed.

<u>Would have/would have</u>

Watch for this grammatical slip-up that is becoming common in conversation. The construction "If I would have known, I would have been there" is plainly wrong. It should be "If I *had* known (or "*Had* I known"), I would have been there." (Perhaps the confusion stems from the contraction form – I'd, he'd, etc. – which can mean "I would" or "I had".)

APPENDIX A

General Spelling and Capitalization Exceptions
(as of February 1994)
behaviour (and all similar –our words in which the "u" is not pronounced, and which CP spells –or)
City wide – no hyphen for general usage, when referencing the Official Citywide Community plan it's all one word (Citywide).
Clean up - no hyphen
Curbside – all one word, no space
college degrees upper case, i.e., Bachelor of Arts (BA) (?)
country-wide
day care (hyphen?)
defence, -se (just –ce for all forms?)
deluxe
disfranchise (disenfranchise?)
glamour
grassroots
Halloween (-e'en?)
hitchhike (hyphen?)
honour, honourable (but honorary)
license, -se (just –ce for all forms?)
long-time
odour
one-time
practice, -se (just –ce?)
seat belt (one word, hyphen?)