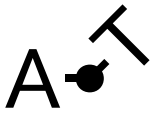


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• Style Guide for Contributors

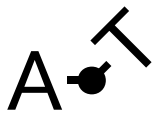
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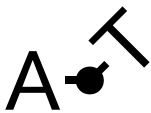


## Introduction

This style guide is intended for people who contribute content to the *About Time* newspaper.

It uses material from existing style guides and other resources and focuses on accessible, inclusive and clear language.





## Accessible and Inclusive Language

Nearly half of Australian adults have a relatively low level of literacy and the average reading level of incarcerated people is Year 9 level. It is important that the articles in *About Time* are easy to read and understand.

### Fundamentals

- Write in plain language. This helps all users and is essential for some.
- Avoid (or explain) unusual words, phrases and idioms.
- Expand acronyms and abbreviations on their first use (e.g. *VACCHO*). No need to expand well-known abbreviations (e.g. *MP*, *COVID-19*).
- Avoid using double negatives (e.g. *He didn't find a reason to not approve the proposal*).
- Avoid using overly long sentences.
- Eliminate unnecessary words.
- Use the active voice (e.g. *The government passed a law*) and not the passive voice (e.g. *A law was passed by the government*).

### Clear and direct language

Avoid using words that are unnecessary or confusing. Don't use "lived experience" where "experience" means the same thing. If you are talking about someone who has been in prison, use "person who has been in prison" rather than, for example, "justice-impacted person" or "person with lived experience of incarceration". See the examples on the following page for further guidance.

### Person-centred language

Person-centred language is important because it helps break down negative stereotypes.

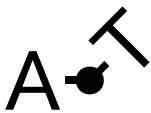
Being mindful of our language is not about being "politically correct". At *About Time* it's simply about understanding how the words we choose can influence the way power and resources are shared with people whose lives have been impacted by the criminal justice system.

This means we use language that is:

- **person first**, indicating people are not defined by their convictions or what happened to them
- **affirming of people's agency**, choices and preferences
- **strengths based**, focusing on the person's strengths, skills and passions
- **recovery oriented**, shifting emphasis from pathology and suffering to resilience and healing.

### Examples of person-centred language

✓	incarcerated person person who is incarcerated person in prison / jail / custody
✗	prisoner, inmate, criminal, felon, convict
✓	person who has been charged / sentenced / convicted of a crime
✗	offender
✓	person without documentation resident without legal permission undocumented person
✗	illegal immigrant illegal / undocumented alien visa over-stayer
✓	sex worker person involved in sex work
✗	prostitute
✓	person living with a mental health condition
✗	crazy, mental, insane, psycho, mentally ill, emotionally disturbed
✓	person with experience of / person who has been diagnosed with ...
✗	person who is schizophrenic / is bipolar / has PTSD
✓	person who uses / injects substances
✗	drug user / abuser
✓	person who is experiencing drug / alcohol dependence person with a dependence on drugs / alcohol
✗	addict, junkie, druggie, alcoholic



# Punctuation

When writing for *About Time*, use correct, minimal punctuation and remove unnecessary punctuation. Only use punctuation that makes the sentence grammatically correct and the meaning clear.

Break up long sentences with lots of clauses into shorter sentences with fewer clauses to make the writing more readable and accessible to a wider audience.

## Commas

Do not use the Oxford/serial comma (no comma after second-last item in a list unless one of the items contains “and”).

✓	They ate bananas, oranges and apples.
✓	The conference had sessions on climate change, renewable energy, and law and policy. (“law and policy” is one item here)
✗	They ate bananas, oranges, and apples.

Use commas to separate three or more items in a list. Do not use a comma between just two items.

✓	They ate bananas, oranges and apples.
✓	They ate bananas and oranges.
✗	They ate bananas, and oranges.

Use a comma between two independent clauses (complete sentences) if the second one begins with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

✓	She went to the park, but he didn’t want to go.
✓	You can belong to this group, or you can belong to that group.

When two clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) and the second clause is *not* a complete sentence, do *not* use a comma.

✗	She went to the park, but didn’t have a good time.
---	--

Use a comma before “including” (unless there is only one item after “including”).

✓	There were four charges, including murder and aggravated robbery.
---	---

## Semicolons

*Only* use semicolons to separate items in a list if one or more of those items contain internal commas.

✓	They picked up strawberries; flowers, which came in small bunches; avocados; and hot and cold drinks.
---	---

## Colons

Use colons to separate two independent clauses (complete sentences).

✓	She spent a year in India: there was some travel and some chaos.
---	--

## Dashes

A hyphen (-) is half the size of an en dash (–), which is half the size of an em dash (—). In Australia, we use hyphens, unspaced en dashes and spaced en dashes.

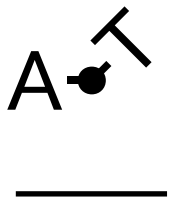
Use hyphens for compound words:

✓	He made last-minute plans and a life-changing decision.
---	---

Use unspaced en dash (which means “to”) to connect a range of numbers. (Do not use a hyphen).

✓	2004–2010
✓	60–65 kilometres
✓	12 November–31 December 2024
✗	30-31 August





Use a spaced en dash for parenthetical emphasis. En dashes can be used instead of commas to set off a non-essential clause, creating a slightly stronger break in the sentence. Limit to one or two per sentence and avoid using too many in one paragraph.

✓	They were like sponges – they were just so eager to learn and soak up this education and the words.
✓	She was – despite her inexperience – willing to give it a go.

En dashes can also be used to avoid confusion if a non-essential clause contains internal commas.

✓	Four of the team members – John, Andrew, Blake and Tom – were running late.
---	---

**How to create an “en dash” in a GoogleDoc**  
**PC: Alt and 0150**  
**Mac: Option and - (minus)**

### Parentheses

Use parentheses to include extra (non-essential) information without breaking the flow for the reader. When you use parentheses, there are no spaces between the words contained within and the brackets themselves.

✓	She brought her dog (a very excitable golden retriever) to the picnic.
---	--

### Brackets

Brackets are used mainly in formal writing for clarifications, editorial insertions or modifications within quotes.

✓	He said, “I can’t wait to visit [Paris] next summer!” (Inserting clarification)
✓	The study found that “participants showed increased focus [after consuming caffeine].” (Adding missing words for clarity)
✓	She wrote, “Their performance was [almost] flawless.” (Editorial modification)

### Full stops

Only ever put one space after a full stop. In the days of typewriters, we used two spaces. This is now outdated.

### Quotation marks

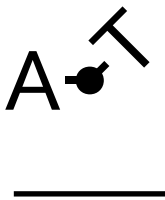
Use double quotation marks for everything so there is consistency across the publication, including things people said and “scare quotes”, which are used only for nicknames, irony and unfamiliar terms.

✓	She said, “It’s important for mental health and community connections.”
✓	The first person to attend was Annie “Sparky” Barton.
✓	We had a “no-frills” breakfast.

When you are editing an article where a person’s quotation spans more than one paragraph, insert opening quotation marks for each paragraph but only insert a closing quotation mark at the very end of their quote:

✓	“It’s incredibly important,” Vansetten told About Time. “Prison is essentially just day after day of chronic boredom, and having access to books is really important.”
✓	“It can give people a sense of meaning in life, it can help with rehabilitation and help them to avoid substance abuse and mental health issues.”
✓	“It puts you on a really positive path, and on top of that it can help people have a sense of agency over their own rehabilitation and express themselves when they come across issues.”

✓	If a quote is “part of a sentence, the full stop goes after the final quote mark”.
✓	“If a quote is a complete sentence, the full stop goes before the final quote mark.”



Use single quotation marks for quotes within quotes, and group quotation marks together if they both end at the same time.



“Mark said, ‘I don’t want to go back.’”

If you are quoting from another source, make sure you always put everything the person said or wrote in quotation marks to ensure you are properly attributing them.

### Italics

Italic type draws attention to convey meaning. Use italic type sparingly as when overused it reduces the impact of emphasis, can look unprofessional and can affect readability and accessibility.

Punctuation after italicised words are *not* in italics.



The *Titanic*’s journey was ill fated.  
(Note: the apostrophe and “s” are not italicised.)

Use italics for the titles of a published work (newspaper, magazine, book, song, movie, TV show, theatre production, album, artwork or exhibition).



The book club read Mirian Margoyles’s autobiography, *This Much is True*.

Italicise foreign words that are not in the dictionary (but not names).



She ordered a *pain au chocolat* with her coffee.



The prison reminded her of La Santé Prison in Paris.

### Bullet-point lists

Lists can be a good way to break up information and make it easier to read.

When listing more than three items in a sentence, consider breaking the sentence into a fragment list.

#### Fragment list

Fragment lists should have a:

- lead-in sentence (followed by a colon)
- list of fragments, each marked by a bullet and starting with a lowercase letter
- full stop at the end of the list.

**Note:** Do not put a semicolon at the end of each item and do not put “; and” after the second-last item.

If you are not breaking up a paragraph or a sentence, consider a stand-alone list, which will have a heading without a colon.

#### Stand-alone list

Rules for stand-alone lists

- Use a heading, not a lead-in
- Start each list item with a capital letter
- Don’t add full stops to the end of any of the list items (even the last item)

### Abbreviations

Generally, do not use full stops in abbreviations of terms (spell out in full for first use only in each article).



He was from an ACT soccer team.



Dr Joan Smith



The VACCHO offered support.



Mr. Smith was from the U.S.A.

Do not use full stops in abbreviations except for the abbreviated Latin terms, such as e.g., i.e., and etc. (only use these terms sparingly and never in the main text of an article: only use in brackets).



He enjoyed fine dining  
(e.g. nice wine, expensive steaks).

### Apostrophes

Apostrophes to show possession when the name ends in “s”.

Put an “s” at the end if you would pronounce the word with the “s” at the end. Otherwise, do not put an “s” at the end.



James’s bag



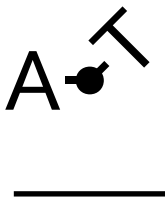
James’ bag



Marcos’s regime



Marcos’ regime



There is no apostrophe in a plural. (If you add “s” to a word to show it is plural, do not add an apostrophe.)

✓	I ate three bananas.
✗	I ate three banana’s.

✓	We had two working bees.
✗	We had two working bee’s.

Add “s” to make a plural shortened form (not apostrophe and “s”).

✓	MPs
✗	MP’s

✓	CDs
✗	CD’s

✓	1970s
✗	1970’s

### Ellipses

An ellipsis is three full stops ... in a row. Ellipses (plural) are used to show part of a quote has been omitted. (Be very careful when omitting part of a quote so that you do not change the author’s intended meaning.) Put a space either side of an ellipsis, like below.

✓	“It’s just a healthier experience ... you’re much more connected.”
---	--

If there is a full stop in the original quote before the omitted text, include that full stop before the ellipsis.

**Original text:** The experiment was a success.  
The results were beyond our expectations.

**Edited text:** The experiment was a success. ...  
beyond our expectations.

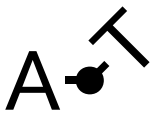
The full stop from the original sentence remains before the ellipsis, indicating that a full sentence ended before the omitted text.

### “and/or”

Using “and/or” is often best avoided because it can be ambiguous, clunky and unnecessary. When writers use it they are trying to cover both options, but can confuse readers, especially in formal writing. Instead, using “and” or “or” separately – depending on the intended meaning – improves clarity. Using precise wording avoids confusion and makes your writing more professional and readable.

✗	“Visitors must submit a list of contacts and/or family members.” (Does this mean one, the other, or both?)
✓	“Visitors must submit a list of contacts or a list of family members.” (If only one is required.)
✓	“Visitors must submit both a list of contacts and a list of family members.” (If both are required.)





## Grammar and Spelling

### Mentioning “About Time”

In the context below, as an official part of the name, you can capitalise and and italicise “National”, “Prison” and “Newspaper”.



*About Time: Australia’s National Prison Newspaper.*

In the context below, as a description rather than an official subtitle, “national”, “prison” and “newspaper” should not be capitalised or italicised.



*About Time* is Australia’s national prison newspaper.

### Capitalisation

Follow the standard rules of capitalisation: lowercase for all common nouns, only capitalise proper nouns. Check the (free) Oxford Dictionary if unsure.

#### Common nouns:

police  
government  
prime minister  
the former prime minister, Julia Gillard

#### Proper nouns:

Premier Allen  
Victoria Police  
Australian Government  
Prime Minister Albanese [while he is in office]  
Minister Smith

### Compound adjectives

When two words form an adjective before a noun, they are hyphenated to make it clear for the reader that both words are modifying the noun that follows (they are not hyphenated if they come after the noun).



There is an ever-growing need for better rehabilitation programs in prisons.



The need for these programs is ever growing.

We don’t need a hyphen after “-ly” adverbs because the “-ly” adverb already clearly modifies the adjective that follows.



The incarceration of minors is an increasingly important issue.

### “Gaol” or “jail”?

Prioritise using the term “prison”.

### Australian spelling

Use correct Australian spelling whenever possible. To check any word, use the (free) Oxford Dictionary (good idea to bookmark this for later).

learnt (not “learned” = US)  
spelt (not “spelled” = US)  
burnt (not “burned” = US)  
towards (not “toward” = US)

### Outdated words to avoid

whilst (use “while”)  
amongst (use “among”)  
amidst (use “amid”)

### “Fewer” vs “less” and “number” vs “amount”

If a noun that follows an adjective can be counted, use “fewer” or “number”.



There were fewer than 10 cars on the road.



There was less rain than predicted.



He had less luck than he had hoped for.



There is an extremely large number of cars on the road.

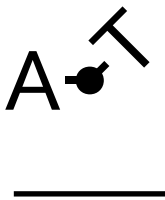
If a noun that follows an adjective is uncountable or needs to be measured, use “less” or “amount”.



There is less traffic today than usual.



There is a huge amount of rain expected.



“and me” vs “and I”



“Hannah and I went to the market.”



“Hannah and me went to the market.”

(Remove the other person to check: “I went to the market.”)



“The teacher gave Hannah and me extra homework.”



“The teacher gave Hannah and I extra homework.”

(Remove the other person to check: “The teacher gave me extra homework.”)

Please note: “and I’s” is never correct. “I’s” is not a word. The correct word is “my” or “mine”, depending on the context.

### Avoiding awkward clauses

Try to make the language as clear as possible. Avoid sentences styled like this:



A former resident of Brooklyn, Mrs Jones is survived by three daughters and five grandchildren.



Originally from Melbourne, James loved to travel.



A passionate lover of the arts, Lauren is experienced in multiple creative practices.

These are fairly common types of sentences, but they are not grammatically correct. They have been turned inside out and would never be spoken like this. Use these examples instead:



Mrs Jones is a former resident of Brooklyn who is survived by three daughters and five grandchildren.



James, originally from Melbourne, loved to travel.



Lauren is a passionate lover of the arts and experienced in multiple creative practices.



## Tools and References

- [Australian Government Style Manual](#)
- [Community Restorative Centre Language Guide](#)
- [Oxford English Dictionary](#)
- [Prison Journalism Project – Language Around Incarceration](#)