

Style Guide

Thanks to Emily
Johnston at
Editwest

The work of Multnomah County affects the lives of everyone who lives here and is vital to the County’s most vulnerable citizens. The annual Budget is a place where the County gets to describe its work – and the basis for important funding decisions and a way to keep citizens informed about our services. Departments are responsible for writing a number of important narratives in the Budget, including Program Offers, Department Narratives, and Division Narratives. What follows are general instructions for style, punctuation, grammar, and related considerations for composing these narratives.

Things to Avoid

- **Avoid unnecessary wordiness or repetition. Be specific but brief.** It doesn’t sound more impressive to use more words: for example, that the administration of a division “oversees, provides guidance to, administers, and manages the division”. These verbs all mean approximately the same thing, so choose one of them.
- **Avoid jargon.** While specialists understand the difference between *emergent literacy behaviors* and *reading*, the former phrase is ungainly and unnecessary. Generally, a simple overview is best: *the program helps children learn to read*. If a program is devoted solely to pre-reading skills, one can say so, of course, but it’s best to do so with detail rather than jargon: for example, *the program focuses on encouraging the skills that lead to reading*.
- **Avoid overly general phrases.** For example, “promote positive change”. Be specific; is the program offering anger management classes to offenders, or encouraging children to stay in school, or working with poor pregnant women to improve their diets? Say so! These are important things!
- **Avoid hyperbole.** The County’s economic troubles may have many dramatic results, but highly dramatic language is out of place in the budget. Details and facts can speak quite persuasively about the condition of the community, and are best left unembellished.

Grammar and Punctuation

All of the basic rules of grammar and punctuation are designed to make life easier for the reader. If a sentence is properly punctuated, the reader can understand what parts of it are attached to what other parts, and the whole is absorbed fairly smoothly. Punctuation can be likened to road signs; if you want to stay on Route 36 and you come to a junction of five roads, then if one has an arrow, you take it almost without thinking, but if it’s not there, you are forced to stop and examine the roads to see which one is likeliest to be correct. It’s this kind of confusion, however momentary, that disrupts the flow of language and obscures meaning.

Parallel Structure

Punctuation also attempts to replicate the sound of spoken language, with its almost unnoticed pauses and emphases. Often, if you hear a sentence in your head, and place commas where you hear small pauses, like these ones, you'll be on the right track. Semicolons are a bit more subtle. They often link two thoughts that could be wholly separate sentences, but that are intimately connected; oftentimes the section after the semicolon helps to explain the one before.

When creating a list (whether bulleted or in a regular sentence), it's important for the sake of clarity and ease of reading that all parts of it have the same form. Thus, the division will work to:

- improve access to healthcare,
- lock up all the bad guys,
- turn bad guys into decent guys, and
- save the world.

This is clear, if ambitious; all the verbs have the same form. But this is less so:

The division

- improves access to healthcare;
- to lock up all the bad guys
- turning bad guys into good guys,
- is saving the world.

Check to see that each list item logically flows from the beginning of the sentence (that's the portion that begins "The division").

You *may* use semicolons or commas or even periods to set off list items, but you don't have to. If you *do*, though, you must be consistent. In the first example above, the use of commas shows clearly that this is a sentence that could appear on the page without bullets; that's why there's an *and* after "guys". You could also have a bulleted list in which each bullet is a full sentence; again, the only rule is that there must be logic and consistency.

Generally speaking, you should only use semicolons in a list when there are commas within the items of the list—again; this is a matter of emphasizing what goes with what. *"The division will improve access to healthcare, including dental care; lock up all the bad guys, bad gals, and rotten kids; turn bad guys into decent guys; and save the world."*

In that sentence, the commas emphasize that "including dental care" goes with improving access to healthcare, and "bad gals, and rotten kids" go with the bad guys. If there were only commas in this list, no semicolons, the

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

reader would have to make more of an effort to distinguish the shape of the list and the meaning therein. The semicolons say helpfully *here's another list item* and point you back to the main road after your small detour.

For the sake of clarity, it's extremely important to order your sentences in a way that makes clear who is doing what.

"Eating the entrails of a small deer, the campers saw the lion, and ran."

Well, perhaps the campers did eat a small deer, but it's unlikely.

"Working with offenders to improve their job-hunting skills, the law requires that these programs be evidence-based."

This sentence is even messier, because nothing acts as an anchor for *working with offenders to improve their job-hunting skills* (that's why this modifier would be said to be *dangling*); *the law* is clearly not what the clause modifies, but the phrase *these programs* seems too far away. Reworking the sentence just a little bit fixes this:

*"Working with offenders to improve their job-hunting skills, **the staff** uses evidence-based techniques that satisfy federal law."*

Strange and Ornery Details

About commas in a series: in life, you may choose whether you want to have a comma after the second-to-last item in a series (the one before the word "and"). You can say *beans, apples, and carrots*. Or you can say *beans, apples and carrots*. Either one of these is perfectly correct. Some highly regarded sources choose one, some choose the other. For the purposes of the budget, please use a comma prior to the "and" in a list: *beans, apples, and carrots*.

Capitalization: when it comes to states and counties, this is a sticky one, and again, reliable sources have differing opinions. In newspapers, for example, you will probably never see *County-funded*. In government publications, however, you usually will. As the budget is a government publication, please observe this rule: whenever you are using the word county as a shorthand for "the government of Multnomah County", capitalize it. Ditto for state being shorthand for "the government of the State of Oregon". Thus:

- a program run by MC is a County program,
- funding we receive from Oregon is State funding, and
- State jobs are reasonably secure jobs, with good benefits

but

- programs are often countywide,

- we live in the state of Oregon, and
- unemployment in the state is nonetheless high.

Federal is the trickiest; it needs the capital much less, because it's more specific—it *always* refers to the government, rather than a geographical area. Many publications capitalize it simply for consistency with the above distinctions (i.e., it's shorthand for "the government of the United States of America"); many don't, because there's nothing it might be confused with.

Hyphens: this may be the stickiest area of all, because language changes, and hyphens sometimes represent language in transition. First, it's important to remember the function of various parts of speech. An adjective, for example, modifies a noun. (What kind of bus? A *yellow* bus.) An adverb can modify a verb (*run quickly*), **but it can also** modify an adjective; e.g., a *federally funded* program. In that phrase, *funded* is an adjective describing the program, and *federally* explains *how* it was funded, just as *quickly* describes *how* someone runs.

The confusion can arise because there are some words for which we don't have appropriate adverbs—*stately*, although an excellent word, is an adjective, and has nothing to do with states. In these cases, we often use hyphens to clarify, because we have to use a non-adverb (a noun, adjective, or even preposition) in a way that makes it function as an adverb (i.e., modifying an adjective, telling us the *how* of that adjective). Thus, in the phrase *state-funded programs*, we are using a noun, *state*, to modify the adjective *funded*; we use the hyphen to clarify what is being modified, *funded* rather than *program*—this might not be a state-run program, after all. Essentially, the hyphen helps us lump things together—a yellow-bellied sapsucker isn't yellow all around; only its belly is yellow. Similarly, even the quickest of readings won't make us think that a high-maintenance worker is a maintenance worker using illegal substances. The goal, as with all punctuation, is clarity; make things easy on the reader.

Some phrases with hyphens (or even without) become so much a part of the language that the hyphen drops away. *To-day* used to be the correct spelling of *today*. *Health care* is now *healthcare*. Because the use of hyphens is so variable, you will often have a choice as to whether to use one or not. But *do not use a hyphen with an adverb, as this is wholly unnecessary*. Well funded, highly regarded, and federally mandated are all perfectly clear without hyphens, and to use one would be incorrect, because *well*, *highly*, and *federally* are all adverbs, and there is no confusion about what they modify.

Spaces after a Period: don't date yourself! No one under 30 has ever even *heard* of using two spaces after a period. This is a relic from the days of

"If you have a big enough dictionary, just about everything is a word."

~Dave Barry

typewriters. Computers use something called kerning to ensure that there is enough space between words, and a single space after a period has been the standard for well over a decade.

Ensure, Insure, Assure: please use *ensure* when you want to say that you will make sure that something will happen. *Insure* is for insurance companies, and *assure* is best used in the same way that *reassure* is—i.e., you assure *someone*. *Assure* *can* be used as a synonym for *ensure*, and for legal documents it often is, but for general use, *ensure* is a better choice.

Numbers: again, this is an area where the rules are fairly random. Generally speaking, in non-scientific texts, one spells out numbers less than ten, and uses numerals for 10 or more. One exception to this rule is that numbers that begin a sentence should be spelled out, for example:

Fifty-one girls were served by the program in 2003.

Another exception is it's more common to say 3% rather than three percent or three %.