TUC
Changing the world of work for good

Writing for the TUC

How to write confidently in our tone of voice and house style

Version 1.0
April 2019

Welcome to this short guide about writing for the TUC

It is one of three short guides to help you communicate well using our new brand, and sits alongside the *TUC Brand Handbook* and *Managing the TUC Brand*.

In 2017, we decided to refresh our brand. Our language, look and feel had inevitably dated. We needed to update how we communicate to better appeal to the trade union members and potential members of the future, and to better persuade the targets of our lobbying and campaigning.

As trade unionists, our words do a lot of work for us. They have to convey why we campaign for change, and how we feel about what's happening in the world of work. We use words as powerful tools to win arguments. We use them to capture strong human emotions about justice and respect in the workplace. And we use words to win people over to our side.

What we say, and how we say it, gets across the personality of a unique organisation – the TUC.

So, please keep this guide handy, and refer to it often. I hope you find it useful.

Best wishes

Frances O'Grady
TUC General Secretary

Contents

This handbook has five sections:

Everyone at the TUC who writes as part of their job is expected to try to follow our guidelines on tone of voice and house style. So whatever you are writing – be it a press release, a policy statement, the week's lunch menu or an email to a colleague – please think about how you can communicate better for the TUC.

This isn't an exhaustive guide so please get in touch with **brand@tuc.org.uk** with more detailed questions.

For a quick spelling and grammar check, try **grammarly.com**
And if you'd like to get tips on how to improve a specific piece of writing and reduce its reading age, try **hemingwayapp.com**

SECTION 1

The TUC's tone of voice

(This is an extract from the *TUC Brand Handbook*)

Our voice

We aim to speak and write in everyday *Daily Mirror* language, avoiding a dry reporting style. We want to be approachable and easy to understand, and tell the stories of working people. We are us – never me or them.

Our tone

We can be passionate and hard-hitting but never stuffy, hectoring or preachy. We want working people to feel supported, that we're on their side and will fight for their rights.

Different audiences

We write all kinds of communications – from detailed policy reports and serious HR letters to emotive, hard-hitting adverts and light-hearted social media campaigns. So, our tone of voice must be consistent but flexible in its intensity. Committee papers will be more sober than policy reports, which in turn will be more sober than adverts or social media.

Using vivid language

We use vivid language and emotion to bring our concerns to life – especially when we're talking about why things need to change.

Putting working people at the centre

We speak through the lens of what working people need from the government, from employers and from unions.

Being true to our values

We are professional, inclusive, and respectful. We state facts and achievements plainly and without exaggeration.

SECTION 2

Audiences and platforms

We all write differently for different audiences – and knowing what works for a particular platform or medium can help your writing be more effective.

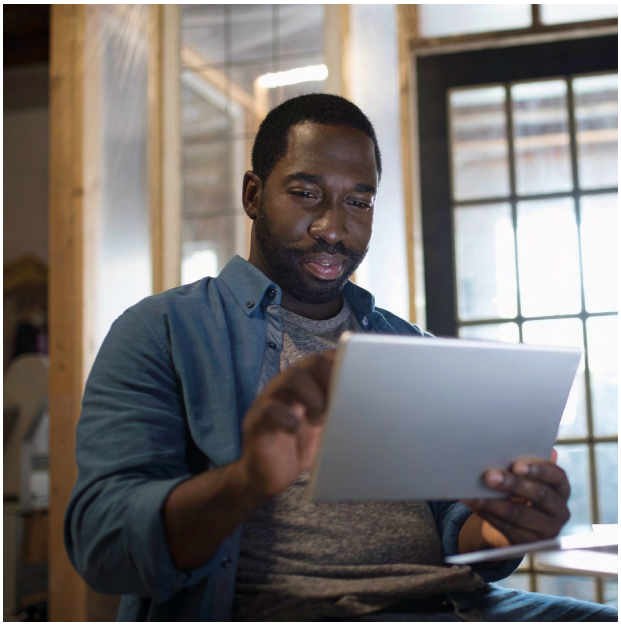
Writing blogs

An effective blog must catch the reader's attention in the first paragraph. So put your most important argument right at the top. Keep your paragraphs short throughout, limiting yourself to one point per paragraph. Blogs should ideally be 400–500 words and shouldn't exceed 800 words.

When writing your blog, use conversational English – as though you're chatting to a friend about your work. Our most widely-read blogs are rapid responses to the news of the day, so whenever possible find a topical 'hook' for your argument.

Writing individual emails

Saying what you mean is particularly important in emails. When you hedge, imply or ask the reader to read between the lines, you are opening up potential for misunderstanding. Be direct and confident. If your message is nuanced then explain why and outline options clearly.



Writing mass or marketing emails or newsletters

The best way to craft single topic mass emails is to start with a succinct 'value proposition' that tells the reader what your offer/action does (not what it is), and why it benefits them. You should then give supporting information and use images to help convince readers of the benefits of clicking through. Finally, you should give the reader a prominent call to action that makes it clear what they should do next.

If you are writing a newsletter, make sure it isn't just a long list of events. Instead, write short news paragraphs that are two or three sentences long and group your subject matter under headings. Invite readers to read more by clicking on links to more information on our website.

Writing web pages

Effective webpages use search engine optimisation (SEO) to drive traffic. This means identifying the key words your target audience is likely to search for and including those in your text. For example, **Brexit** or **how to join a union.**

Use clear sub-headings and short paragraphs on your webpage, as people are likely to scan rather than read every word. And include links to any reports, news articles or websites you mention. This will also boost your page's search engine rating.

Writing reports

Make sure you structure your report so that a reader can get the gist of your key messages quickly. Start with a quick summary, followed by a full summary that might include a short list of recommendations. Then finally move to a longer discussion of your findings. Notes on the Word templates will remind you about this.

Please try to avoid jargon where you can. There is a place for technical language, but it must be explained at the first use, to make sure all of your readers understand your meaning. Please still use our *Daily Mirror* tone of voice in reports: the *Daily Mirror* tackles many complex issues but still does so in language and a tone of voice that is simple, clear and friendly.

Writing formal letters, agendas, papers and minutes

The TUC's tone of voice and style guidelines apply to formal communications as well as campaigning or policy communications. Please consider whether you need to change how you write for these purposes. The TUC's formal documents can appear stilted or old-fashioned, particularly if they overuse the passive voice. We should instead use the TUC's *Daily Mirror* style, which is simple, clear and friendly.

SECTION 3

Improving your writing

FIVE TIPS TO PLAN YOUR WRITING BETTER

1. Know your goal

Everything you write should have a goal. Otherwise why are you writing it?

So ask yourself from the outset:

- What do I want people to do? (Either to take action or to think differently)
- Why do I want them to do it?
- Why should they want to do it?

Your goal influences what you ask people to do.

2. Know your audience

It may be counter-intuitive but to reach the widest audience it's best to write with one individual in mind. That way, you're not writing in a vacuum. Picture your reader engaging with your words. Write to them as you would speak to them. If your message resonates it'll be remembered.

Try the 'bait the hook' technique with a start that is directed right at what the reader wants to know. In social, blogs or in presentations add a bit of humour near the start if you can. Writing with a real person in mind humanises your message.

3. Know your main message

Always be clear about your single most important message. This clarity of thought keeps you focused as you write. And clear thinking, well expressed, stays in the readers' memory longer.

Before you start, produce a sentence that sums up your message. Keep it as a reminder that you can refer to as you write, to keep you on track. For example: *Show why zero-hours contracts should be banned.*

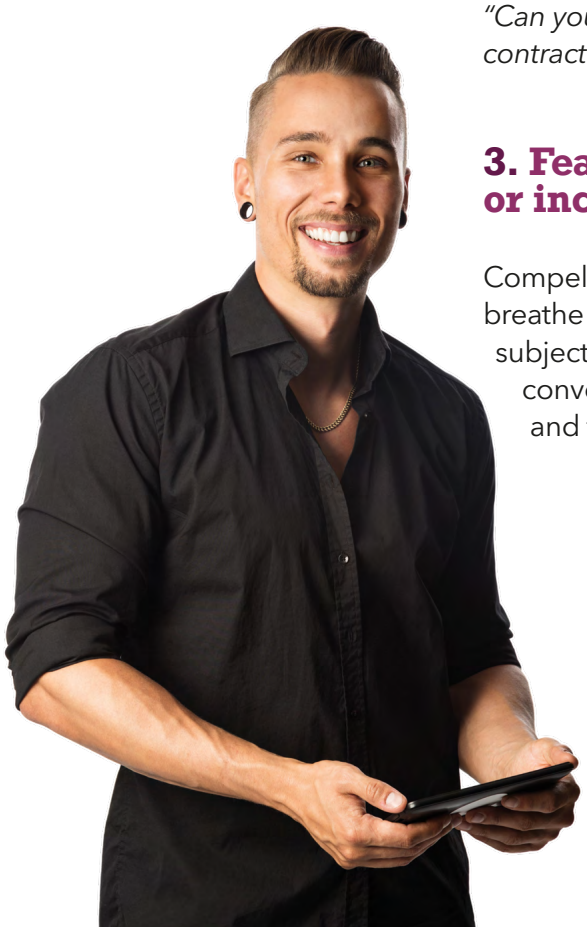
4. Understand how your audience will read it

We've all heard about decreasing attention spans and information overload. Expect most of your audience to skim-read what you've written first and not to go any further. So write an at-a-glance summary of your story with your main message, one or two key facts and a strong call to action. Try placing that at the start of longer pieces.

5. Use the word 'you'

When a writer uses **you,** it moves them into the reader's mind and experience. Your reader benefits too because the word **you** pulls them in and engages them on a personal level. There's a direct correlation between reader response rates and the number of times **you** is used. **You** also tends to restrain writers from using overly fussy language.

This works even for technical and policy documents. Occasionally addressing the reader as you, even if only to help them navigate to other parts of the document, reminds them there is human-to-human contact.



FIVE TIPS TO GROUND YOUR WRITING IN REAL LIFE

1. Ask 'How?'

If you have a lot to say and a lot of different topics to examine, **how** lets you go through them all. For example:

"How to check if your workplace treats disabled people equally."

Notice it's also more positive as a statement than a question.

2. Ask questions

Why? Every now and again, asking a rhetorical **why?** re-engages the reader. For example:

"Why does the government want to do this? Because…"

Questions are also a simple way to get your reader into someone else's shoes. For example:

"Can you imagine what it feels like to have your contract terminated with no notice?"

3. Feature a real person or incident

Compelling testimonials or case studies breathe life into a story. So, interview your subject and get their story. Write it up in real conversational language, keeping it short and to the point.

4. Repetition builds momentum

This is a handy rhetorical device that keeps readers interested. For example:

"Some people have never even heard of a union. Some people say unions just want workers to go on strike. Some say they're irrelevant and a thing of the past. Yet some people are very glad we exist – and here's why."

5. Use a time sequence

A time sequence helps you deliver your story effectively and your reader to digest it quickly. It gives a sense of progression. And readers like stories with a beginning, middle and an end. Consider using phrases such as:

"When Sam first thought about becoming a union rep…"

"After some months…"

"One incident stands out…"

"A final thought…"

FIVE TIPS TO MAKE SURE YOUR WRITING IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE

1. Write plainly, as if you were speaking

You're writing for the TUC. Our values demand that our writing is as accessible and clear as possible. We should avoid jargon and formal vocabulary. That will make us sound much more genuine too. Compare these examples:

"As a consequence of my behaviour no-one attempted to implement my ideas."

"Because of my behaviour no-one tried out my ideas."

And these:

"I purchased a sandwich for lunch and ate it in the park adjacent to the office, prior to my going home."

"I bought a sandwich for lunch, ate it in the park next to the office, and then went home."

2. Use contractions

Adopting a conversational tone means there's nothing wrong with **there's, I'm** and **we're**. It's also easier to read.

3. Keep sentences short

Find a long sentence in an article and then read it aloud. Where you struggle for breath will be the point where you struggle for meaning too. Short sentences demand clarity of thought from the writer, which in turn benefits the reader. Keep revisiting what you're saying and shortening it:

- Aim for short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Avoid lots of sub-clauses.
- Eight-word sentences are the easiest to understand; longer than 32 is hard.

4. Keep your text flowing

Your primary concern is accessible communication and to keep your thoughts flowing. So, unless you know your audience won't like it, it's OK to start sentences (and paragraphs) with **and, but** and **so.** Because it's vital you keep your reader on track.

And smooth connections keep your reader hooked, so try to use these link words and phrases:

"At the same time…"

"For example…"

"Even so…"

"This includes…"

"Did you realise…"

"Not only…"

"After all…"

"Two final points…"

5. Use words and images together

Readers take in visual items such as pictures, boxed copy, diagrams and pull quotes well before text. So introduce visual content to your writing.

FIVE TIPS TO MAKE YOUR WRITING MORE LIVELY

1. Avoid using passive verbs

In general, it's good to say who does what. That introduces less distance between you and the reader. But passive verbs can be useful if you want to avoid taking the blame, want to depersonalise something, or if you don't know who took the action. For example:
"The victim was struck with a crowbar."

Compare these two messages:

"The TUC has reserved the room for Tuesday afternoon's meeting. I have also booked you a parking space and will send you the agenda." (Active verbs)

"The room has now been reserved for Tuesday afternoon's meeting. A parking space has been booked for you and the agenda details will be notified to you." (Passive verbs)

2. Start the sentence with the main verb

The reader is more quickly able to spot the point of the sentence if the main verb is near the start. For example:

"It is difficult to understand what the employer has done in all those negotiations, which used up so much time and resources."
(At the beginning)

"What the employer has done in all those negotiations, using up all those resources, and after all this time, is difficult to understand."
(At the end)

3. Use metaphors, but don't mix them

Metaphors are words or expressions that mean something different from their literal definition. For example:

"Love is a battlefield."

Do use them in your writing to make it more vivid, but don't mix them. For example:

"When you open that Pandora's box, you will find it full of Trojan horses."

4. Leave academic writing at university

Words like **however, thus, therefore** and **moreover** help when you deliberately want the reader to think about the twists and turns of an argument. At the TUC, though, we usually want to argue why something needs to change for working people. We are not trying to see both sides of an argument. So we use these words sparingly or not at all.

5. Show, don't tell

Avoid reinforcing your arguments with words such as **obviously**. It is better to make something clear by stating it simply in the first place.

FIVE TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING AFTER DRAFTING IT

1. Check it's clear

Have you written it as plainly and straightforwardly as you could? Have you said what you mean?

2. Is it conversational?

Does it flow? The easiest way to check is to read it out loud. If you start to struggle, try to make the sentences shorter and more lively.

3. Make it honest

Does it sound defensive, false or disengaged?

4. Does it engage you, the writer?

If it reads as if you were on auto-pilot when you wrote it, who'll want to read it? Buddy up with a colleague to ask for help and another pair of eyes.

5. Does it sound like one human being talking to another?

Rein in the formal language and rewrite anything that smacks of jargon.

SECTION 4

Grammar and punctuation: five common stumbles

1. Commas

Use commas to indicate breaks, emphasis, or to help the reader breathe. The test is always whether adding a comma will make the meaning clearer. For example:

"The driver was able to escape from the car before it sank and swam to the riverbank."
(No comma)

"The driver was able to escape from the car before it sank, and swam to the riverbank."
(Comma)

2. Colons, semi-colons, brackets and dashes

Colons

What comes after the colon (the reason) explains what goes before. For example:

"I don't like cats: I am allergic to them."

However, if you are not providing a reason it's much better to use a full stop than a colon.

Colons also announce the start of lists and direct quotes. For example:

"There are three main political parties: Labour, Conservative and the Liberal Democrats."

Colons are also used to separate the title and subtitle of a publication. For example:

Working Women: a TUC Education workbook for all trade unionists

Semi-colons

Semi-colons add another idea that reinforces the first. For example:

"The old building had disappeared; in its place stood a new block of flats."

But using a full stop can be much better and helps prevent long sentences.

Semi colons are also useful to remove ambiguity in lists. For example:

"Our students come from towns and cities as diverse as Los Angeles, California; Boston, Massachusetts; and Nashville, Tennessee."

Dashes

Dashes are used to interject something, much as you would in conversation. If you use them, make sure they are proper ones (press Ctrl and the numeric minus sign) with spaces either side. For example:

"Of course we'll sign the agreement – as long as it's in our favour."

Brackets (parentheses)

Brackets provide optional additional information and often add an apologetic note. For example:

"We'll sign the agreement (assuming it's in our favour?)."

They are best avoided.

3. Inverted commas

Single quote marks, also known as inverted commas or scare quotes, may be used to enclose well-known phrases or technical terms. But using inverted commas can imply that something is not what it says it is – like adding a note of disbelief to what you're saying. If that is your intention, say so. If not, don't use them. For example:

"Some workers on zero-hours contracts are 'victims' of unscrupulous employers."

4. That or which

In general, **that** is used to narrow a category or identify something that is being talked about. For example:

"Cats that are kept indoors tend to be discontented."

In this example, the writer is talking about only those cats who are kept indoors – it's narrower than the category of all cats.

Which is used to tell us something extra about someone or something. For example:

"Cats, which tend to be independent creatures, hate to be kept indoors."

This writer is talking about *all* cats.

> **TIP:** If you can put a comma in front of **that,** then it should be a **which.**

5. Is that hyphenated?

The hyphen, properly used, makes for easier reading and helps the writer. First, it is often used to join together two words into a compound adjective in front of a noun, to avoid any ambiguity: extra-marital sex is not the same as extra marital sex; three hour-long sessions are different to three-hour long sessions. Second, it can help with deciphering. Some words (shell-like and de-ice) would be impossible without hyphens.

We deal with common uses of the hyphen in Section 5 on pages 16–17.

SECTION 5

TUC house style

Addressing the reader

Where possible, include some first-person reporting ("we") to help humanise an issue and establish a connection between the TUC and the reader.

The present tense will be natural for most advice and guidance and gives immediacy to case studies.

A community of readers will respond more warmly if you address them as "you". Especially when you want them to join in or take action. For example:

"You can help us now by…"

Rather than:

"Reps should…"

Abbreviations

No full stops between letters in upper case or lower case. For example:

BALPA, BBC, EU, TUC, p15, eg and ie

State the name in full followed by its acronym or initialism in brackets. For example:

European Union (EU)

Use only the acronym or initialism after that.

Most TUC-affiliated unions' names are initialisms. For example:

FBU, RCM, TSSA

Others are often pronounced phonetically as single words (acronyms) and tend to use just an initial capital letter. For example:

Napo, Usdaw

Names that are not abbreviations but recognisable words also tend to use just an initial capital letter. For example:

Community, Prospect, Unite

The exception is *UNISON,* whose house style is to use all capitals.

For a complete list of unions' abbreviations and their full names see pages 44–90 of the TUC Directory.

Apostrophes (possessive)

For union names, check the TUC Directory. Only four include apostrophes and they are the Musicians' Union, the Professional Footballers' Association, the Transport and Salaried Staffs' Association and the Writers' Guild.

Frances's name takes an apostrophe and s (so not Frances').

Active voice

The active voice makes your writing more vigorous and you should use it widely.

"The members took action to…"

is clearly better than:

"Action was taken by the members to…"

The passive can be used in formal reporting where the object of the action or situation is regarded as more significant than the doer.

"Forty members were recruited by the rep."

or where the doer's identity is unimportant:

"The committee was shown a report."

Bulleted lists

Make sure each bulleted-list item starts with the same part of speech (eg noun, verb) and that they are all either fragments or complete sentences.

For fragments of sentences use an initial lower-case letter and do not punctuate, apart from ending the final line with a full stop. For example:

Unions are calling for:
- *fair pay*
- *decent jobs*
- *rights at work.*

For items that are full sentences, use an initial capital and end each with a full stop. For example:

I make the following recommendations:
- *Unions should survey their members.*
- *Reps must be clear on the legal position.*

Don't mix both styles in the same list.

Capital letters

Stick to lower case for all nouns that aren't proper nouns or names:

The trade union movement, trade union, apprenticeships, learning centre, shop steward, the committee, the north of England, the south-east, health and safety representatives, union learning rep, further education.

Note that the following should also be in lowercase:

The cabinet, general election, the government, government ministers, parliament, the prime minister, a bill, a white paper.*

*Unless we are referring to a specific one, for example the Trade Union Bill.

Avoid capitalising job titles:

"Frances O'Grady, the general secretary of the TUC, was speaking at a conference on…"

Except when used in front of a person's name:

"TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady said she hoped that there would be progress on..."

Document headings

Titles, chapter headings, subheadings, table and box headings take sentence style, where only the first word has an initial cap.

For names of campaigns use headline style, where the initial letters of the main words are capitalised. Do not put any quote marks round the name. For example:

Britain Still Needs A Pay Rise

Contractions

These abbreviations are fine and part of our tone of voice:

we've instead of we have
we'd instead of we would or we had
you'll instead of you will

Definite article

Use **the** in front of any organisation name you spell out in full. For example:

"In 2018, we celebrate 150 years since the founding of the Trades Union Congress."

The same rule applies to most initialisms (where you sound out the individual letters). For example:

"The TUC is the voice of Britain at work."

Emphasis

Please use bold and italics sparingly – usually only for titles and headings. We do not use underlining as it makes text harder to read. Please do not use ALL CAPITALS for emphasis – it reads like someone is shouting. These rules may of course be ignored in urgent campaigning communications – for example to indicate a call to action.

Hyphenation

Hyphenate an adjective and a noun in front of another noun:

"A two-day course"

but not after it:

"The course lasts two days."

Use the same rule for an adjective or adverb plus a participle:

"The low-paid workers are suffering"

but not after the noun:

"The job is low paid"

Most and least are exceptions:

"The most efficient way" and *"The least skilled workers"*

Never hyphenate adverbs ending -ly plus participle (before or after):

"A highly paid job" or *"the job is highly paid"*

Numbers and fractions written in full should be hyphenated:

"Forty-five" and *"one-third"*

Note how we hyphenate here:

"14- to 18-year-olds"

but not here:

"The child is five years old"

Numbers

One to nine

These should be written in full. For example:

"There are three people working in reception."

But use figures for money, millions and units of measurement. For example:

"£4m was cut from the £5bn social care budget."

"Last year, 2 million jobs were lost."

"A 3 per cent decrease in spending."

Note that the abbreviations **bn** (billion) and **m** (million) are used for money.

10 and above

These should be expressed as figures. For example:

"The rep met the 14 members of the committee last week."

Using numbers at the start of sentences is an exception:

"Fourteen committee members met the rep last week."

Dates

- *12 December 2005*
- *1993–95 or 1993–1995* (note the use of dashes between years and not hyphens)
- *'90s*
- *Twenty-first century*

Times

12-hour clock notation uses a full stop to separate hours and minutes, followed by 'am' or 'pm'. For example:

6.15pm to 8pm or *6.15pm–8pm*

24-hour clock notation uses a colon. For example:

18:15 to 20:00 or *18:15–20:00*

Institutions, authorities, bodies such as unions

These are singular. So is the TUC.

For example:

"The TUC has six regional offices."

However, **staff, management** and other small groups of humans are plural.

Pronouns

We refer to ourselves as **we** and **us** in the first person, once the reader knows who we are.

When the gender of the person in a narrative (or their preferred personal pronoun) is not known, use **they, their** or **them.**

Quotation marks

Use single quotes (inverted commas) sparingly and only to convey the sense of 'so-called' or 'known as'. Use double quotes for reporting any words, terms or sentences that readers will recognise have actually been spoken, or for written extracts. Introduce these with a colon or a comma.

References

When you reference articles, press releases, blog titles, titles of web pages and chapters, use headline style and put double quotes around the title. When you reference titles of TUC reports and guides, and any other journals or publications, use headline style but then lower case for subheadings after colons or dashes. The whole title should then be italicised. For example:

"What are My Rights?" was in *Beat Bullying at Work: a guide for reps*

Endnotes and footnotes

Follow this system:

Author surname>initial>publishing year in brackets>full stop>title of article (with initial caps and double quotes)>title of publication (in italics)>name of publisher.

For example:

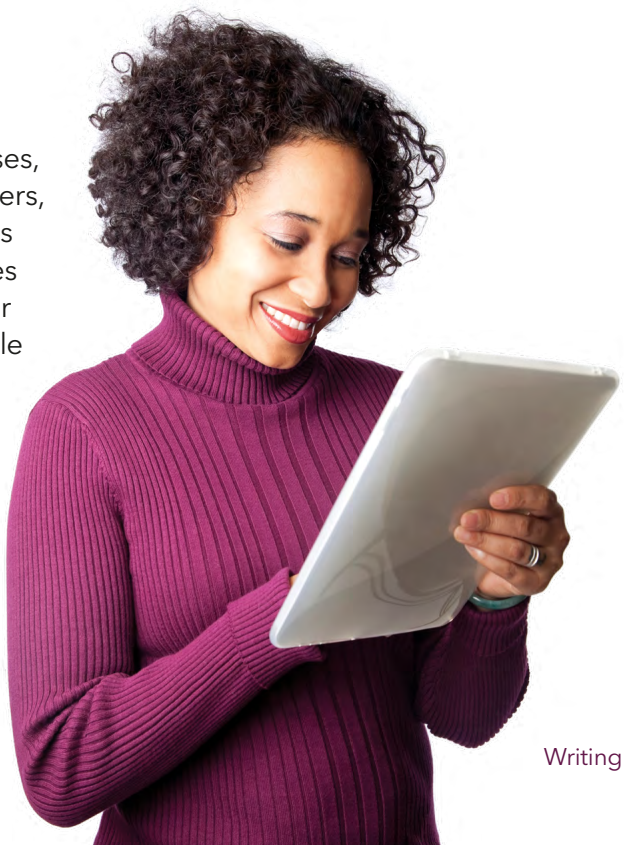
Bradshaw, J. (2012). "Does Cash or Services Have the Biggest Impact on Child Poverty?" *Journal of Economics,* Smith Institute

Links

For web addresses, omit the **http://** from those that include **www.** Remember that links are frequently updated and so become obsolete very quickly. Shorten links to PDFs using bitlys or similar, or give the name of the doc and homepage address.

Spacing

One space only after a full stop.



SOME COMMON POINTS

acknowledgement not acknowledgment

among not amongst

anymore = any longer
any more = additional

BAME no, see below
BME yes, see below
Black and minority ethnic (BME) workers
note the description, abbreviation and the capital for Black

based on not based upon

biannual = twice a year
biennial = every two years

benefited not benefitted

cannot not can not

childcare one word

continual = constantly, frequently occurring
continuous = unbroken, uninterrupted

cooperate no hyphen

coordinate no hyphen

compare to liken to, find similarities

compare with find differences between

Convention cap when referring to legal entities

the courts lower case

disconnect it's a verb not a noun

eNote no hyphen and cap 'N'

employment tribunal (lower case)

email no hyphen

enquire ask; inquiry is a formal investigation

fewer smaller in number; **less** smaller in quantity: fewer supporters, less support

full-time (adjective/adverb) always hyphenated, whether before or after the noun or verb (same applies to part-time, short-term and long-term)

focused not focussed

government lower case

healthcare one word

ill health (noun) no hyphen

job seeker two words not one

Jobcentre Plus

judgement = a practical or moral deduction
judgment = a judge's or court's formal ruling

last/past:
In the last year = in the final year
In the past year = in the previous year

the law lower case

learned/learnt
I have learned a lot
That is learnt behaviour

licence (noun) **license** (verb)

lifelong no hyphen

like/such as
Use like to indicate similarity
Use such as to introduce examples

living wage (lower case) real living wage or voluntary living wage, used to refer to the voluntary higher rate of national minimum wage advocated by the **Living Wage Foundation** (capped)

minister, prime minister lower case unless given as part of a title

mid-life not midlife

more than not over for numbers of things or people

national insurance lower case (as are most specific welfare benefits and payments)

national living wage (lower case) used to refer to the government's higher national minimum wage for over-25s

national minimum wage (lower case) used to refer to the level that applies to everyone in work

no one has (none have)

one in five has (not have)

on-screen hyphenated

opt out (verb); the **opt-out** (noun)

or rather than a slash when offering a choice

organise not -ize (applies to most other -ise and -isation)

part-time see full-time

per cent for reports but use **%** in press releases, graphics, social, blogs and other short reads online

practice (noun) **practise** (verb)

principle = a truth or moral
principal = chief or main

Regulation (cap when referring to legal entities)

sanction (verb) permit, allow; also to punish

sanction (noun) penalty

spelt/spelled: "She spelled it out for him" but "The word was spelt like that"

task it's a noun not a verb

the state as long as the context is obvious

state pension lower case

targeted not targetted

toward not towards

trade union
trades union council
(or more commonly **trades council)**
Trades Union Congress

underpaid, underrated, underemployed (no hyphens, as with most similar 'under' and 'over' verbs; but **under-represented**)

unionlearn lower case

universal credit lower case

wellbeing no hyphen

while not whilst

within just use 'in'

who not whom

work/life balance (forward slash not hyphen)

zero-hours not zero-hour

Compiled with help from
Katie Bleach, Abby Waldman,
Grammarly.com and the
Chicago Manual of Style.

Published by
Trades Union Congress
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS

tuc.org.uk
brand@tuc.org.uk

Design: TUC
Photography: © Getty Images

TUC
Changing the world
of work for good