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NOTES ON PUNCTUATION
References are to *Getting Your English Right*, Tapir, Trondheim 2001

APOSTROPHE (')
(refer to *Getting Your English Right*, pages 19, 93)

Use an apostrophe to indicate the possessive form of nouns:

> *... The group's proposals were discussed at length ...* (singular group)

> *... The groups' proposals were discussed at length ...*
> (plural groups)

Always use an apostrophe and an **s** to mark a possessive. Beware of the ambiguity created by the omission of both:

> *... this connects to Contractor terminating equipment ...*
> (intended meaning: the Contractor's terminating equipment)

If the noun you wish to make a possessive already ends with an **s**, you have the option of adding just an apostrophe or an apostrophe and an **s**:

> EITHER *... to one of the chassis' galvanized upper arms ...*
> OR *... to one of the chassis's galvanized upper arms ...*

Preferably re-write the statement to remove the awkward grouping of letters:

> *... to one of the galvanized upper arms of the chassis ...*

Just a reminder: **its** is the possessive form of **it**. No apostrophe is needed. **It's** is a contracted form of **it is**. See advice below concerning the use of contractions in formal English

Usually, form plurals of letters, numbers, symbols, acronyms, or words you are discussing as entities, by simply adding a small **s**:

> *... found more difficulty with a single A than with the four Bs ...*
> *... failed to recognize that 2665 contained two 6s ...*

It is especially important to distinguish clearly whether acronyms are plurals, possessives, or both:

> *... are connected to the CPUs that have a ...*
> *... are connected to the CPU's processors by ...*

Apostrophes are correctly used to form contractions like don't, shan't, what's, and it's. Contractions are not suitable for formal writing in business, industry and research. Only use contractions in informal writing, such as hand-written internal memoranda.

CAPITAL LETTERS
(refer to *Getting Your English Right*, pages 39, 93, 142)

Beginning a sentence. Use a capital letter at the beginning of the first word to signal the beginning of a sentence.

Proper nouns or adjectives. Use initial capitals (capitals for the initial letters of words, but not throughout the words) 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):

> *... the volt is named after Count AllessandroVolta ...*
> *... the Darwinian theory of evolution ...*
> *... discovered in Boston in January 1864*
> *... manufactured in France ...*

Use capitals throughout for acronyms or for words used as commands in computing documents:

> *... belong to NATO and therefore ...*
> *... use the SAVE command to ...*

If you wish to use the plural form of an acronym, add the "s" in lower case:

> WRITE: *CPUs*
> NOT: *CPUS or CPU's*

Typical Norwegian error:

> *De and Dem are never You and Your in mid-sentence.*

COLON (:)
(refer to *Getting Your English Right,* page 45)

Use a colon to indicate that material is to follow. The material that follows may be a summary, a list, a complete sentence, a question or a quotation:

> *... Three factors play a major role: time, money and manpower.*

If you wish to show that the items in your list are in a sequence or hierarchy, use numbers:

> *1. ....*
> *2. ....*
> *3. ....*

or letters:

> *a) ....*
>   *b) ....*
> *c) ....*

If you wish to show that the items in your list are separate and parallel, but in no significant order or hierarchy, use "bullets":

> • *...........*
> • *...........*
> • *...........*

or dashes:

> - *..........*
> - *..........*
> - *..........*

Division of a sentence:

Use colon as a stop within a sentence.

The colon, when used within a sentence, is a "lighter" stop than a full stop, and joins two

statements that are grammatically independent but logically closely related. Usually, the material after the colon is supplementary or reinforcing. Begin the clause following the colon with a lower-case letter, not a capital letter:

> *... Take care when using this solvent: it may dissolve certain synthetic materials ...*

COMMA (,)
(refer to *Getting Your English Right*, pages 46, 209)

Use a comma to mark the boundary of a "preliminary" unit at the start of a sentence.
Frequently, we begin sentences with a single word, a link word or a longer word-group to indicate time, place, manner, reason, or other information relevant to the main statement that is to follow:

> *... Tomorrow, ...*
> *... Immediately, ...*
> *... Before reacting, ...*

When you are speaking, you help your listeners by signalling the boundary of such preliminary units with a change in intonation and a pause. (Try reading that sentence - and this sentence - aloud. You will hear the changes of tone and timing.) When you are writing, give your readers similar help by signalling the boundary of preliminary units with commas.

Omission of commas in preliminary positions is one of the commonest ways to confuse your readers.
MEANT   *... Frequently, adjusted prices for new cars need to be watched*
WROTE   *... Frequently adjusted prices for new cars need to be watched.*

Parenthetic information:
Use commas to enclose parenthetic words, phrases and clauses (parenthetic information means explanatory or qualifying information added to a sentence as an extra comment):
The number of new female computer science students, as we hoped, has risen dramatically.

When deciding whether or not to put a comma before a clause, you may find it useful to compare the following examples and remember that:

> **Commenting clauses need a comma, defining clauses do not.**

Funding will be allocated to the new ring road project, which is a major traffic bottleneck on the E6.
(this is a commenting clause: it shows why the ring road has the most pressing need for funds)

Funding will be allocated to the new ring road project which is to the north of the city.
(this is a defining clause that indicates which project we are considering. No comma is required.)

The presence or absence of a comma before a relative pronoun signals to your reader what you mean: *The authorities should keep the centre clear of cars, which will lead to noise and*

pollution.
This is a commenting clause and needs a comma as it applies to all cars.
If a defining clause is used and there is no comma, it is understood that this ban applies to only certain types of cars: *The authorities should keep the centre clear of cars which will lead to noise and pollution.*

Adjectives in a series
Use commas to separate two or more adjectives in a series, when you want each to qualify the final noun separately: *a rapid, quantifiable, temperature increase.*
Using commas emphasizes that each adjective separately qualifies the noun *increase*.

Comma before <u>and</u> and other conjunctions
The basic rule is to use commas in a list of items and insert "and" before the final item:
Our office equipment consists of a photocopier, a fax, three PCs, a printer and six filing cabinets.

However, this form of punctuation leads to trouble if the final item in the list contains "and":
The fax has the following function messages: error, out of paper, repeat and send and receive.

The solution is to use a comma before the final and, to ensure that the meaning is always absolutely clear:
The fax has the following function messages: error, out of paper, repeat, and send and receive.

Numbers
In general, do NOT use a comma to indicate thousands or millions when you are writing numbers.

WRITE: *3000   30 000   30 000 000*
NOT: *3,000   30,000   30,000,000*

These rules should be applied consistently on both sides of the decimal marker:
WRITE: *54 321.123*
NOT: *54,321.123*

By not using the comma in English you do not risk confusing English and Norwegian customs. A price of
NOK 15 000 per km. only has one meaning.

The latest Norwegian standard recommends omitting the stop in thousands, millions etc. and recommends the use of a space, as in English.

EXCLAMATION MARK (!)
(refer to *Getting Your English Right*, page 77)

Generally, an exclamation mark is used to express astonishment or surprise. In scientific and technical writing, you are unlikely to find many appropriate occasions to use one. But it can sometimes be used to reinforce a warning:
... note that cyanide gas can cause severe poisoning.
Always avoid inhaling the gas!

Marking the end of a sentence

The principal use of the full stop is to signal the end of a sentence.

Marking titles, abbreviations and acronyms

Do NOT use full stops: after titles, headings and sub-headings;

after units: WRITE: *cm, in, kg, Hz,*
              NOT: *cm., in., kg., Hz.*

within capitalized abbreviations or acronyms:
              WRITE: *VDU, USA, NATO*
              NOT: *V.D.U. U.S.A. N.A.T.O.*

Use full stops between letters if you form and use lower-case abbreviations:
              ... the e.s.r. spectrum (electron-spin-resonance spectrum)

In general, however, lower-case abbreviations are not used in scientific and technical writing.

Use full stops after abbreviations formed by cutting off the end of a word, such as:
              No.   Nos.   Fig.   Figs.   Sun.

In correspondence, a useful rule is to use a full stop after an abbreviation of a personal title, except (in BE) when the abbreviation contains the first and last letters of the abbreviated word, examples:

              Dr, Mr, Mrs, Co., Ltd.
              NOT: *Dear Mr. Jones (in BE)*

Full stop as a decimal marker

In Britain and the USA, a full stop is the conventional decimal marker. The marker is usually on the line (6.5). In many other countries, a comma is used (6,50 g).
This can be an expensive misunderstanding:
The services of 6 specialized engineers from XYZ consultants to
perform the above contract specification are available at a total of
NOK 750.000 per month.
              (This means NOK 750 per month, cheap at the price?)

The hyphen is a joining signal (as distinct from a dash, which is a separator). Its main use is usually to link two or more words together to form a compound adjective to describe the following noun.

> *.. is made of plastic-coated metal ...*
> *... uses a state-of-the-art solutions ...*
> *... a trial-and-error technique*

But note that if these are reversed, there are no hyphens:

> *... these solutions are state of the art.*

When the number or colour is intended as a part of a compound, a hyphen is vital:

> *... two-part polyurethane compounds ...*
> *... an unaffected silver-backed plate ...*

Use "suspended" hyphens to create compounds in which two or more adjectives or numbers are attached to one or other word:

> WRITE:*... 20-, 80-, and 100-ml containers ...*
> NOT: *... 20, 80, and 100 ml containers ...*

Use hyphens to create compounds that could be confused with other words spelt similarly, but with different meaning:

> *re-form : reform*
> *re-collect : recollect*
> *re-cover : recover*

Use hyphens to create compounds in which misleading or awkward combination of consonants would be formed by joining the words, particularly if there are two similar consonants.

> *de-stabilize*
> *animal-like*
> *water-repellent*

Hyphenation and capitalization

Hyphenation shows that two words belong together. Consider *a Third World War* (all the world at war) and *a Third-World War* (a war only in the Third World). A simple rule is that when compounds like *high-pressure, low-cost, real-time, cost-effective, state-of the-art* are followed by a noun, they need a hyphen. On the other hand, adverbs ending in –ly in the same position do not need a hyphen as it is clear that they are linked. Example: *environmentally friendly solutions*. Note that if *high-pressure, low-cost, real-time* etc. are placed after a noun, there will be no hyphenation: Example: D*rilling at High Pressure/Low Cost. Monitoring in Real Time.*

Note that only some words in the titles of books, reports and similar publications are capitalized. Let us consider what to do when there are hyphenated words in such a title. The general rule is to only capitalize the first element in the hyphenated phrase:
"Low-pressurized Aircraft Design"
"Near-critical Values"

This general rule also works when the second element in a hyphenated phrase modifies the first word or both elements are parts of the same word:
"Moscow's English-speaking Community"

"Assessment of Hydropower-based Energy Trading"
"Measures to Stop E-mail Abuse"

There are a couple of exceptions to this general rule:
1) Capitalize both the first and second elements in a hyphenated phrase in a title when they have equal force:
"Vapour-Liquid Compounds"
"Regional-National Legislation"

2) Capitalize the second element in a hyphenated compound in a title when it is a noun or proper adjective:
"Non-American Election Principles"
"Anti-Christian Thinking"

INVERTED COMMAS

Inverted commas are used in three ways in English:
1. Enclosing direct quotations:
  ... the standard states: "Upper-case letters in diagrams should be at least 1.6 mm high"...

2. Indicating an 'unusual' use of a word or phrase
Use inverted commas to emphasize that a word or phrase is unusual, or is being used in a special or noteworthy way in the text you are writing:
  Bill Gates was rather embarrassed when his Windows 98 crashed, resulting in the infamous "blue screen".

3. To enclose the title of a book, article or recording:
Apart from "The New Fowler's"…

Two differences between BE and AE:
First, the typographical signs are different. In BE ' …' or "..." are used. In AE, they use << ...>>.
Second, they are called quotation marks in AE, not inverted commas.

BRACKETS (PARANTHESES)
(refer to *Getting Your English Right*, page 31)

Variations in terminology:
There are variations of terminology used to discuss this topic. Most differences are between usage in British English and in American English.

In Britain, the term brackets is normally used for (...), square brackets for square variations [....]

In the USA, (...) are parentheses, square brackets are brackets.

One solution is to use parentheses for (...), and square brackets for [...].

Enclosing parenthetic remarks

The principal use of parentheses is to mark the boundaries of an 'aside' or extra remark within a statement. (Parenthesis comes from the Greek word meaning 'word or words added within or beside your main thesis'.

WRITE: *... the glass content of this material is low (10 % by weight)*
            for this application ...

NOT: *... the glass content of this material is low, (10 % by weight),*

            for this application ...

Explaining acronyms

Use parentheses to enclose explanations of acronyms formed from groups of words, if you are going to use the acronyms throughout your text:

        ... the decision was taken to use finite element modelling (FEM).
        Two research units working in FEM have been ...

QUESTION MARK (?)

Indicating the end of a direct question

The principal use of a question mark is to indicate the end of a direct question. Direct questions are particularly effective in documents that hold a 'dialogue' with
readers: *... Does the software install in 10 seconds?*
        - Yes: .....
        - No: .....

Expressing doubt

A question mark can also be used to express doubt in lab. notes:

        ... results suggest that these phases are normal (?) and that ...
        ... requires an increase of 40 % (or more) before ...

However, in scientific and technical writing, it is better to use words such as *perhaps* or *possibly*, or re-word the statement completely.

SEMI-COLON (;)

Coordinating related statements within a sentence

Use a semi-colon to link statements that are grammatically independent but are too closely related in meaning to separated by a full stop.

The semi-colon is a heavier stop than a comma, but lighter than a full stop. It is a coordinating mark, and can often be used instead of a coordinating conjunction like and or but:

... in the first 11.0 km of transport, there is a time lag; then, the flow settles to steady velocity ...

Separating main items in a list

Separate the main ideas in a row of commas by semi-colons:

Aurby, 1995, pp. 10-11; Jones, 1998, pp. 211-213;

SLASH (/)

Signalling 'or'

The slash (sometimes called slant, solidus, oblique or virgule) signifies an alternative, 'or', NOT 'from-to':

... the prices at finished/non-finished levels ...

... The model may need tuning and/or revision ...

Signalling 'per'

Use a slash to show when a unit for a physical quantity is divided by a unit for another physical quantity:

... m/s = metre(s) per second ...
... rev/min = revolutions per minute ...