

# Style Guide



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
FACULTY OF MEDICINE

# Style Guide

FOR THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE

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## Introduction

In a world full of information, it's not enough to write well. To communicate effectively, you have to be short, precise and memorable. That's especially true if you want to translate complex academic research into something that will interest the media.

That's why the Office of Strategic Communications and External Relations (OSCER) has put together this communications guide for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

This guide covers such topics as academic writing, developing stories, writing clearly and developing positive working relationships with media.

This is your resource — one designed with your needs in mind — as we help you better communicate your work and its importance.



**Lloyd Rang**  
Executive Director  
OSCER

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## Writing in the University: An Overview

### What is Academic Writing?

Academic writing — like journalistic writing, or government writing — is a style of writing that has evolved to convey a certain kind of information to a particular audience. It's neither better nor worse than other styles — just different.

That style has several hallmarks:

- Uses long sentences
- Has a complex sentence structure
- Conveys complex information
- Uses passive voice
- Is aimed at an academic audience

Academic writing is about writing in a particular style for a group of people who also write in that style. When we use academic language where it doesn't belong — such as writing for external audiences — some of its weaknesses become clear.

In 1946, George Orwell identified the problem and the solution to academic writing when he wrote: “[Academic] English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and can be avoided if one is willing to take the trouble.”

Orwell says some of the academic writing's bad habits include:

**Zombie Metaphors:** Academic writing often contains archaic metaphors. For example: to “ride roughshod” literally means to ride a horse with spiked (and more deadly) horseshoes into battle. Few of us know this, so the metaphor is dead, even as the words live on. Other examples include “grist for the mill,” “toeing the line,” “running the gauntlet” and so on.

**Convuluted Verbs:** Orwell calls these “verbal false limbs.” These are verbs that are so wordy, they become imprecise — like “render inoperative” instead of “break,” or “take effect” rather than “happen” or “in accordance with” instead of “by” or “implement” rather than the far-simpler “do.”

**Expensive Nouns:** Similarly, academic language is about choosing complex, less precise nouns over more compact choices. So we see “jurisdictions” rather than “places” or “legislation” rather than “law.” This is also true for conjunctions (“in addition to” rather than “and”) prepositions (“adjacent to” rather than “next”) adverbs (“with regards to” rather than “about”) and so on.

**Passive Voice:** Passive voice — which eliminates the “do-er” of the action — instantly weakens a sentence. So we might read “the bomb was dropped” rather than “he dropped the bomb.” Or “the answer was given” rather than “she gave the answer.”

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## Why Academic Writing?

Academic writing evolved because the subjects it tackles are complex, difficult and hard to explain using conventional language. For people who deal in complex ideas, it can be challenging to convey important ideas and discoveries with simple words.

But sometimes, academic writing is difficult to understand because the writer lacks the time, the inclination or the skill to make the writing active, interesting or effective.

Bad habits in academic writing begin at the undergraduate level. Early on, we're taught to write to a certain word-length. And so, to make the essay the "right size," undergraduates stretch a single idea to fit the word length. If we're not careful, that habit stays with us through graduate school and beyond.

More recently, an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* summed it up this way:

*"The message [to academics] is that you have to write like others in the field. You must use multisyllabic words, complex phrasing, and sentences that go on for days because that is how you show you are smart. If you're too clear, if your sentences are too simple, your peers won't take you seriously."*

A second reason academic writing often fails to communicate effectively is by design. If your prose is clear and your arguments are easy to follow, readers can more easily dispute your conclusions. Academic language allows us to "hide" from critics.

A third reason for poor academic writing is that it often follows the logic of discovery rather than a more natural narrative logic. Researchers will lay out how they arrived at a conclusion in sequence, without first stating the importance (or the "why") of what they are doing, which serves to ground a reader and give context.

And some academic writing is weak because the author doesn't care about the audience.

Instead of asking: what do I want to say? A good writer will ask: what is the best, most efficient way of presenting this information so that the reader can clearly understand it?

The solution, thankfully, is a simple one: start with the reader's needs.

That means — almost always — being concise.

As William Strunk put it:

*"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."*

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## When to Use Academic Writing

If the document you are producing has an exclusively academic audience — like a journal article, a letter to departmental chairs, or an internal bulletin — you **MUST** write in an academic style.

If you are communicating with an educated external audience, a different kind of writing is called for. That means working hard to translate academic language into something more accessible. It does not mean “dumbing it down” — just adopting another style.

For documents like strategic plans — which are internal “academic” documents, but need to be easily understood by the people carrying them out — a hybrid style might be needed.

## Clear Writing

When we’re communicating what’s happening inside the university with people outside the university, we’re writing for people who are familiar with academia, but no longer communicate in an academic mode. These are intelligent, educated people who read the Economist, or the New York Times, or Harry Potter — not necessarily the New England Journal of Medicine.

They need to access information quickly and easily. They need clear writing. This guide will give you many of the tools you need to write clearly.

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## Faculty of Medicine Style

The University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine Style Guide is designed for Faculty employees who are communicating with external audiences. It sets out rules for style and best writing practices to improve communications clarity and consistency. It is produced by the Office of Strategy, Communications and External Relations (OSCER).

OSCER recommends following the guidelines set out in the [Canadian Press Stylebook and Caps and Spelling](#) (CP), as well as the [Canadian Oxford Dictionary](#) (Oxford) for spelling.

This Style Guide provides information on style and writing conventions that are unique to the Faculty/University and that differ from CP guidelines.

There will be special cases (such as advertising, advancement, letter-writing or marketing) where you may need some flexibility around rules. Please [email](#) OSCER if you have questions.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

### University and Faculty

You should use University of Toronto on first reference. On second reference, use “U of T” (NOT “the U of T”) or use “the university” (lowercase).

When referring to the Faculty of Medicine, use “Faculty of Medicine” on first reference, and “the Faculty” (uppercase) on second reference. This is to distinguish it from professors, who are collectively referred to as “the faculty” (lowercase).

For departments or institutes, list the full department name on first reference, followed by the acronym in parentheses (no periods). On second reference, use the acronym or use “the department/institute” (lowercase).

For example:

- Institute of Biomaterials and Biomedical Engineering (IBBME)
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Postgraduate Medical Education (PGME)

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## **Affiliations**

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Always list a faculty member's affiliations, usually in the second reference. Provide the person's full title (if they hold a name Chair, this should replace their academic rank).

Begin by listing the department where they hold their primary appointment. Divisions should only be included if it's an important part of the story. Include significant secondary or cross-appointments. Conclude by noting any hospital affiliations. For example:

"Hawker is the Sir John and Lady Eaton Professor and Chair of the Department Medicine and a Senior Scientist at the Women's College Research Institute."

**(or)**

"Jaakkimainen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Community and Family Medicine and Associate Scientist at the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre."

## **Titles/Honorifics**

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CP Style is to refer to all academic appointments simply as "professor" to avoid lengthy distinctions around appointment types. In external, public documents, OSCER recommends following this style.

Do not abbreviate Professor to "Prof."

"Professor" is capitalized when it appears before the person's name.

Do not include periods in title acronyms that appear in uppercase only.

— *VP, CEO, CFO*

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## Tips on using acronyms

**Note:** There are general guidelines, not rules. There may be some exceptions.

- If shortening a longer phrase or name, do not use periods unless it is a location or person. *Eg: CPD instead of C.P.D.*
- Use all capitals unless you are shortening a word or if the phrase has a popularly accepted short form. *Eg: AIDS and Dr. are both correct.*
- Use only lower case letters for measurement units. Do not use periods for measurement units. *Eg: 5km run, 2ml of solution.*
- Do not use an apostrophe when pluralizing an acronym. *Eg: Drs. and CVs are both correct.*
- If the acronym is not used in common language, spell it out in the first instance. *Eg: Since CBC is familiar to Canadian readers, it does not need to be spelled out in the first instance. However, Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or MRI, does need to be spelled out in the first instance.*
- Generally, acronyms do not require an article. However, if the acronym is acting as an adjective, an article may be required. In this case, treat the acronym like a word. *Eg: He specializes in ENT. John Smith is an ENT doctor.*

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## Some common acronyms used in the Faculty of Medicine

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<b>BA</b>	Bachelor of Arts
<b>BSc</b>	Bachelor of Science
<b>CaRMS</b>	Canadian Resident Matching Service
<b>CCBR</b>	Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research
<b>CFI</b>	Canada Foundation for Innovation
<b>CIHR</b>	Canadian Institutes of Health Research
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>DC (DisCo)</b>	Discovery Commons
<b>DFCM</b>	Department of Family and Community Medicine
<b>DLSPH</b>	Dalla Lana School of Public Health
<b>DUA</b>	Division of University Advancement
<b>GLSE</b>	Graduate and Life Sciences Education
<b>IBBME</b>	Institute of Biomaterials and Biomedical Engineering
<b>IHPME</b>	Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation
<b>IMS</b>	Institute of Medical Science
<b>IPE/C</b>	Interprofessional Education/Care
<b>LMP</b>	Laboratory Medicine and Pathobiology
<b>MA</b>	Master of Arts
<b>MBP</b>	Medical Biophysics
<b>MD</b>	Medical Doctor
<b>MRT(R)</b>	Medical Radiation Technologist — Radiography
<b>MRT(T)</b>	Medical Radiation Technologist — Radiation Therapy
<b>MRT(N)</b>	Medical Radiation Technologist — Nuclear Medicine
<b>MRT(MR)</b>	Medical Radiation Technologist — Magnetic Resonance
<b>MSc</b>	Master of Science
<b>MHSc</b>	Master of Health Science
<b>NSERC</b>	Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
<b>OIME</b>	Office of Integrated Medical Education
<b>OSCER</b>	Office of Strategy, Communications and External Relations
<b>PGME</b>	Postgraduate Medical Education
<b>PhD</b>	Doctor of Philosophy
<b>RCPSC</b>	Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
<b>RSI</b>	Rehabilitation Sciences Institute
<b>SGS</b>	School of Graduate Studies
<b>TAHSN</b>	Toronto Academic Health Science Network
<b>UHN</b>	University Health Network
<b>UME</b>	Undergraduate Medical Education
<b>U of T</b>	University of Toronto
<b>UT DRO</b>	University of Toronto, Department of Radiation Oncology

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## Caps, Numbers, Punctuation

### Capitalization

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- CP Style outlines a basic rule for capitalization:
  - You should capitalize all proper names [proper nouns], the names of departments and agencies of national and provincial governments, trade names, names of associations, companies, clubs, religions, languages, races, places, addresses. Otherwise, lowercase is favoured where a reasonable option exists.
- Names of educational institutions are in title case. *Eg: University of Toronto, York University, Saint Clements School.*
- Names of departments and faculties within educational institutions are in title case. *Eg: University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine reported that 300 students will be taking part in the celebrations. Dr. John Smith from the Department of Nutritional Sciences has been studying this for five years. (CP Style exception)*
- Names of courses are in lower case. *Eg: The master of health sciences program begins with a research methods course.*
- Formal titles are in title case when preceding names, and lowercase in all other cases. *Eg: Premier Kathleen Wynne is going to be in Toronto next week. The premier is going to speak to the group.*
- Formal titles are used with the last name alone. *Eg: Dr. Smith, Professor Chan.*
- Job descriptions and occupational titles are in lower case, even when preceding names. *Eg: The occupational therapist was busy with a patient. Radiation oncologist Dr. Liu has been overseeing this project.*
- In politics, the names of national legislative bodies are in title case. The names of provincial and municipal groups are in lower case. *Eg: The House of Commons and Toronto city council.*
- Titles of publications and other intellectual property are in title case.
- Degree names are in lower case, but degree abbreviations are in title case. *Eg: A master of arts is the same as MA degree. If you already have a master's degree, you can apply for a PhD.*
- Unless the word “the” is part of the proper title, do not capitalize it. *Eg: The faculty members will be contacted by the University of Toronto.*
- Government department titles should be in title case. *Eg: World Health Organization, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.*

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## Capitalization (Continued)

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- Titles of local or provincial councils and committees should be lowercase. *Eg: Ontario legislature, the taskforce, the transportation committee.*
- In the names of journals, magazines, and newspapers, capitalize the words “the” and “magazine” only if it is in the official name. *Eg: Her article will be published in The Lancet. According to a study discussed in the Toronto Star, Canadian children are not getting enough sleep. Three of our doctors were featured in Toronto Life magazine’s March issue.*

## Numbers

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- As outlined in CP Style, spell out numbers below 10, and use figures for 10 and above. *Eg: five books, 30 students.*
- Spell out numbers at the start of a sentence, whether they are above or below 10. *Eg: Three hundred students volunteered for this week’s orientation activities.*
- Do not spell out numbers when used in medical terms. *Eg: Tie2 pathways.*
- For all other rules, see CP Style.

## Punctuation

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The following guidelines are additions to CP Style.

- When pluralizing a word in capitals, do not use an apostrophe. *Eg: We are still collecting RSVPs.*
- Punctuation marks that end a sentence that ends in parentheses follow the closing parenthesis. *Eg: The President declared a holiday in July (President’s Holiday).*
- If a sentence ends with a quotation, the closing punctuation mark precedes the closing quotation mark. *Eg: Dr. Smith explains, “This is a ground-breaking discovery by our researchers.”*
- No serial/oxford comma. *Eg: “Tigers, lions and bears” NOT “Tigers, lions, and bears.”*

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## That versus Who

You should use “who” with nouns or pronouns referring to people and “that” for objects. *Eg: “Undergrads who study” NOT “Undergrads that study.”*

## Writing Instructions

Address the reader directly using a personal pronoun.

*Eg: “You should use a pencil” NOT “Applicants will use a pencil.”*

## Contractions

Where possible, use contractions. This makes writing sound friendlier and is easier to read.

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## Inclusive Language

At the University of Toronto, we strive to be an equitable and inclusive community, rich with diversity, protecting the human rights of all persons, and based upon understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of every person.

### University of Toronto Governing Council

Statement on Equity, Diversity, and Excellence

December 2006

- Titles that identify the subject’s sex, gender, or marital status should not be used. This includes Mr., Ms., Mrs., Miss., etc.
  - In a series where some individuals have occupational titles and others don’t, it is better to use academic titles for everyone. *Eg: Dr. Smith, Dr. Liu, Dr. Han and Miss Kate Shaw will be speaking at the conference.*
- Preferred sentence: Professors John Smith, Jackie Liu, George Han and Kate Shaw will be speaking at the conference.
- Occupational titles should be gender-neutral. Eg: firefighter, mail carrier, police officer, chair person, etc.
- Pronouns, when possible, should be either plural or alternate pronouns. *Eg: If a student needs to reach the T.A. at any time, he/she should send an email to ta@utoronto.ca.*
- If anybody needs to contact the T.A., they can reach them by email.
- Avoid words that compare or connote value. *Eg: Temp: She is the new temp. Disabled: Mark is the only disabled employee in this office.*
- Avoid words that indicate race, unless it is important to the context.  
Eg: Avoid sentences like “Half of the class is from a minority background.”
- Instead, list the different countries where the students are from.
- Avoid words that connote sexual identity. *Eg: gay, lesbian, homosexual, etc.*

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## Tips and Principles of Good Writing

### Have something to say

Why is the story important? What impact could this news have on health in particular and society in general?

### Write for your audience

Science and medical writers need be keenly aware of their audience. We need to make sure that an educated general public can understand our often complex stories.

- Understand your audience’s expertise and interests and modify your language and tone accordingly.
- Make your writing conversational and use “we” and “you.”

### Show the impact

How does this research relate to past discoveries? How can a discovery be applied to human health? When could a discovery be translated into treatment?

### Show the human angle to the story

Write about people and relate the news to the reader’s life:

- “As we age, many of us will develop complex conditions. For instance, we may find ourselves facing diabetes, mobility issues due to arthritis and heart disease at the same time.” — *Pippa Wyson*
- “It’s a parent’s nightmare. A previously healthy teenager dies suddenly while playing soccer.” — *Jennifer Kerr*

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## Organize your information

- Use inverted pyramid writing style
- Present main point first
- Use headings and sub-headings (fewer than six words — use keywords for SEO)
- Limit each sentence to one thought
- Use short paragraphs (approximately three sentences)
- Group related information
- Use bullets, numbered lists and info graphics

## Use the active not the passive voice

### Active voice:

The active voice is clear, concise and direct. The reader knows who or what is performing the action.

*“A new study suggests that elevated levels of a specific brain protein may explain why so many women experience depression during perimenopause.” — Helen Branswell*

### Passive voice:

The passive voice is indirect, weak and creates ambiguity. Traditionally, researchers and clinicians have used a passive writing style because it is considered to be impersonal and objective.

*“A new study suggests that the depression so many women experience during perimenopause is caused by elevated levels of a specific brain protein.”*

## Where possible, eliminate qualifying words

Avoid using words such as rather, little and very. They complicate the sentence and add little to the meaning.

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## Be specific

- “By 2016, for the first time, there will be more seniors in Ontario than children. By 2036, the number of seniors in the province will have more than doubled from 2 million in 2012 to almost 4.2 million.” — *Pippa Wyson*

## Quotes

Quotes add life to the story. Paraphrase quotes that simply provide information and use more descriptive ones to create interest and further insight:

- “As the population continues to grow, we’re bumping up against wildlife, and it happens to carry some nasty viruses we’ve never seen before,” said Professor McGeer.
- “We can identify and track existing and emerging strains of TB and this powerful technology can be applied to any type of infectious disease,” said Professor Jamieson. “Eighty-five per cent of our TB cases in Ontario are foreign-born, so this system will allow us to have a global impact.”
- “It’s sort of like a symphony orchestra,” says Dr. Michael Pollanen, motioning to the gleaming, empty garage, imagining a team of dedicated forensic scientists, pathologists, police and other staff who will soon work together there to solve complex crimes and sudden deaths.

## Use metaphors, analogies and similes

There are varying opinions about the use of metaphors, analogies and similes. The general consensus is that, used sparingly, a metaphor, analogy or simile can do the heavy lifting to explain a complex idea.

- DNA code is comparable to a three-billion letter long set of instructions on how a cell should operate. In this analogy, the majority of cancers are caused by words that are misspelled, added or deleted or entire book chapters that are added or deleted.

## Narrative and Numbers

People remember stories. Narrative gives context and motive, and facts and figures support that narrative to make a persuasive case.

Often, though, we do it the other way around: we list facts and figures to make our arguments, and forget the narrative. Both are necessary for persuasion.

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## Writing for the Web

The same principles for good writing apply to the web, but unlike print, users often have more difficulty reading onscreen. As a result, content for the web must be shorter and easily scannable.

Keep article headlines short and straightforward to increase SEO (avoid clever headlines and sub-headings).

### Create scannable content

- Put most important information first
- Write 300 to 400 words per web page
- Use conversational tone for webpages
- Use keywords for search engine optimization
- Use more subheadings, bullets and lists
- Keep content short and concise
- Break up information into easily digestible sections
- Create hyperlinks that are descriptive — instead of “click here” use “See photos here”
- Make in-page links a maximum of four words and navigation bar links a maximum of two
- Use a call to action on webpages — what do you want users to do next?

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## Clear Writing Equivalents

### A

aid in → help

aims to → will or would

allows → lets

annual basis → annually, yearly

### B

best and brightest → best

best practices → properly, well

### C

centres around → centres on

collaborative/collaboration → together

commence → start, begin

currently → redundant in the present tense

### D

designed to → will, would

disseminate → hand out, spread

### F

first and foremost → first

first ever → first

### G

go/going forward → soon,

### H

historic → important

### I

implement → to do

in house → here

individuals → people

innovation → invention, discovery, breakthrough

issues around → issues

iterative → repeated

### J

jurisdictions → places

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## L

learners → students

learnings → lessons

## N

novel → new

## O

on an annual basis → annually

outside the box → new

## P

Purchase → buy

put in place → create

## R

regarding → about

reiterate → repeat

## T

take action → act

take leadership → lead

thus → so

## U

Utilize → use

## W

with regards to → about

with respect to → about