

Language style guide

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Introduction

The way we talk and the language we choose says a lot about who we are.

That's why we've put together these guidelines. So that whenever we talk about and write for RCOT, we do so in a consistent way that shows we're from the same organisation. Writing with a shared voice will also help to strengthen our brand and show members, the profession and the world at large that we're action-driven, supportive and accessible.

That's not to say our tone of voice won't shift – just as when we talk to different people we might choose slightly different language. But these guidelines form a basis from which we can all create a unified voice.

Please familiarise yourself with these guidelines and refer to them as necessary – whether you are writing an email, learning resource, research paper, application form or a tweet. You might also need to share them with our volunteers, the RCOT Publications Group and people you commission to work with us, including writers, editors, proofreaders, designers and public affairs agencies.

The information in this guide sits alongside our brand book.

Our tone of voice

Our tone of voice principles convey who we are and what we stand for. Keep them in mind whenever you write for RCOT. As well as helping us make consistent language choices, they also help us to communicate the positivity and humanity at the heart of occupational therapy.

You can read more about our tone of voice principles and see examples of how to use them in our brand book.

Our tone of voice principles are:

Human & personal

Occupational therapy doesn't consider bodies or minds in isolation. We see people and how they exist in their own worlds. That makes occupational therapy much more human-centred than other health professions. And we want to celebrate the life-changing impact of our work.

Active & dynamic

Occupational therapy is about doing. The more active and dynamic we make our language, the closer we bring it to the real-life experiences of occupational therapists and the people they work with. Use the active voice wherever possible.

Open & accessible

We want our profession to be as open as possible – we want more people to read about it, understand it and value it. To achieve that we use natural, everyday language and make our writing concise and simple.

How we talk about RCOT

To show we're a unified organisation, we need to follow these few rules:

- In the first instance we refer to ourselves as the 'Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT)' and then on as 'RCOT'. (See the exception of the 'about us' descriptors below).
- In emails and other regular communications, such as newsletters, to members who are familiar with the organisation, we just use 'RCOT'.
- When speaking, we say 'R-C-O-T' (not 'R-COT' or 'the RCOT').
- We refer to RCOT as singular. For example, 'RCOT is launching a new campaign'.
- We no longer refer to RCOT as 'the College' or 'the Royal College'.
- RCOT can also be referred to as 'we', to make us more connected with our reader. For example, 'Today we publish our new report'. Once you've established RCOT as the subject, it's good to switch to 'we' or 'us'.
- We also refer to 'we' or 'us' when talking about the professional community of occupational therapy or a campaign and wanting members to 'join us'.

RCOT descriptors

These descriptors are a consistent way to talk about ourselves, particularly to those who don't know us yet. This is our 'about us' text.

- **Short (for a social media bio or an email footer)**
RCOT is the organisation that champions occupational therapy.
- **Medium (for a presentation or a poster)**
We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We champion occupational therapy. We're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs – for our members, for the people they support, and for society as a whole.
- **Long (for a report or a press release)**
We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We've championed the profession and the people behind it for over 80 years, and today, we are thriving with over 35,000 members*. Then and now, we're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs. For our members, for the people they support, and for society as a whole.

* This will be updated with latest figure.

British Association of Occupational Therapists (BAOT)

- Use this in full the first time it's used, with the abbreviation in brackets, then use the abbreviation.
- We describe BAOT as the professional body representing the diverse and thriving community of occupational therapy staff across the UK.
- RCOT is a wholly owned subsidiary of BAOT and acts on behalf of all its members. We set the professional and educational standards for the occupational therapy profession and represent and champion the profession at national and international levels.

- In most regular member communications we only refer to RCOT. We refer to BAOT in relation to governance, such as Council papers and elections, or union activities.

RCOT branches

These refer to the 13 geographical regions/regional groups and 10 Specialist Sections (focusing on different specialist areas of practice).

- **Regions**

We refer to regions, regional or local groups. When naming RCOT regions, we use the format: 'Northern and Yorkshire region'.

We exclude the word 'region' to avoid repetition and on publication covers and other collateral, such as event banners.

- **Specialist Sections**

When naming Specialist Sections, we use the format: 'Specialist Section – Older People'.

Where appropriate, such as on the website or in Specialist Section member handbooks, and when referred to multiple times, we can use abbreviations such as 'RCOT SS – Mental Health'.

Take care to use an en dash (–) and not a hyphen (-). See page 10 for more information about en dashes.

As with regions, on publication covers and other collateral where appropriate, we can exclude the words 'Specialist Section' and only use the specialist area such as 'Independent Practice' or 'Older People' (see the brand book for examples).

RCOT members

- We use lower case for the word 'member' and member categories such as 'professional member' and 'associate member'.
- We also use lower case for 'Council member'.

RCOT teams and groups

- We use capitals for the team name/department and a lower case 't' in 'team'. For example, 'Membership team', 'Professional Practice team'.
- The exception is 'Senior Leadership Team' (SLT).
- We use capitals for 'Council', 'Board', 'Committee', 'RCOT Publications Group', 'Guideline Development Group' and 'Library'.

There is more on [capitals vs lower case](#).

How we talk about occupational therapy and the people we help

Occupational therapy and occupational therapist

- Use lower case in most cases. Exceptions include organisation names and job titles.
- We regularly use 'OT' in social media, in hashtags or other marketing materials where space counts.
- We can use 'OT' in other contexts, where appropriate, if talking to members or others familiar with the profession which also helps make our communication more concise. When talking with people less familiar with the profession, always use 'occupational therapy' and 'occupational therapist' in full to start with before referring to 'OT'.
- OT can refer either to 'occupational therapy' (as in OT Week) or 'occupational therapist(s)' (as in WFOT) – this should be obvious from the context.
- The plural 'OTs' only refers to occupational therapists. Note there is no apostrophe.

Social model language

We use language that fits the [social model of disability](#) (not the medical model). That means using phrases such as 'children's services' instead of 'paediatrics', and 'work' instead of 'vocational rehabilitation'. The exception would be reports or strategies where more formal terms may be appropriate.

We never refer to people as 'the disabled', 'the blind', 'the deaf'. We say, 'disabled people', 'blind people' or 'deaf people'. Avoid using terms such as 'hearing impaired' which can be viewed as negative.

People will have different preferences, so if appropriate when talking with an individual take a personalised language approach and ask the person what they prefer.

People accessing occupational therapy

We refer to 'people' accessing services and not 'patients' or 'service users'.

Be careful not to use language that portrays people as victims such as 'suffering from Parkinson's disease' or 'confined to a wheelchair'. Instead, say a person 'has Parkinson's' or 'is a wheelchair user'.

There is more on [inclusive language](#).

A–Z editorial style guide

Here are general guidelines to make sure all our communications are consistent.

Abbreviations and acronyms

- Use capitals without full stops. For example, NHS, UK, WFOT, WHO.
- Unless widely understood (like CPD, UK or FAQs), write out the words in full the first time you use them, with the abbreviation in brackets. For example, 'Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)'. You don't need to put the abbreviation in brackets if only using a term once.
- When written out in full, only use capitals if the abbreviation stands for an organisation or name. For example, 'higher education institution (HEI)' but 'Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)'.

Addresses

- Format as below, without commas or semi-colons:
Royal College of Occupational Therapists
106–114 Borough High Street
London SE1 1LB

We don't include Southwark. If there isn't enough space for 'Street' in full then use 'St' without a comma or full stop.

And or &

- Use 'and' unless part of a standard phrase or brand such as 'Marks & Spencer'.
- We commonly use '&' in social media to save on the number of characters, for example, in a tweet.
- We can also use '&' in headings or titles – as for our tone of voice principles in the brand book and this guide ('Active & dynamic').

Apostrophes

- Remember that apostrophes are used to show possession. For example, 'the member's details' are the details of one member, while 'the members' details' are the details of all members.

See also 'Contractions' and 'Its or it's' later in this section.

Bold

- Use bold in headings.
- In body copy, use bold sparingly to emphasise information within main sections of writing. For example, '**Let us know by 10 June 2022**' could be in bold to make it stand out from the body of an email or letter.

Bullets

- Use bullets to break up long lists and make it easier for the reader to understand.
- Bullets that are full sentences (or long fragments as in this section) start with a capital letter and end with a full stop (like this one).
- When bullets are fragments that follow on from an introductory phrase, they:
 - are introduced with a colon
 - don't have a semi-colon at the end of each bullet
 - begin with a lower case and end with a full stop after the last bullet.
- When lists are a mixture of the two, or they are mixed within a document, for consistency you can use full sentence style for all if it applies to some.

Capitals vs lower case

- We use lower case as much as possible – and that includes in headings and RCOT publication titles.
- We use capital letters at the start of sentences and for proper nouns (such as 'Scotland'), names (such as universities and government departments) and RCOT job titles. There are some RCOT specific exceptions:
 - event titles ('RCOT Annual Conference', 'Talk Cancer' workshop).
 - campaign names ('Small Change, Big Impact')
 - grant names ('RCOT Research Foundation Grants')

Please note that, when used generically, the words 'campaign', 'grant', 'event' and 'programme' are lower case. For example: 'You have until June to apply for a grant.'

- Use lower case for diseases, conditions or syndromes. For example, autism, dementia and diabetes. Only use capitals if the disease, condition or syndrome is named after a person. Examples include Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Down's syndrome.

Charity and company numbers

- If legally required, such as on a letterhead or website, use the phrasing:

'The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (or RCOT) is a registered charity in England and Wales (275119) and in Scotland (SCO39573) and a company registered in England (No.134734). VAT Reg. No. 242 7829 47.'

We don't need to include this information on all our material.

Contractions

- We use contractions in our writing (for example, 'we've', 'they'll', 'it's') as they sound more natural and conversational. For more formal writing, such as policies and research, use them sparingly. It may be appropriate to use a combination in a document to make it easier to read.

Dates and years

- For dates, use 'Monday 9 November 2021' (not Monday 9th November 2021 or Monday 9 Nov 21 or Monday the 9 of November 2021).
- For years, use '2020–2021' (no space, en dash) without 'from' as it's implied.
- For decades, use '1990s' without an apostrophe (unless referring to, for example, 'a 1990's report').
- Use 'the 21st century' (not '21st-century' unless used as an adjective, for example '21st-century rehabilitation').
- We say 'membership year 2021/22' (not '2021–22').

Double spacing

- We don't use double spacing in between sentences. In long documents, you can use search and replace to identify and resolve double spacing.

e.g.

- Avoid using e.g. as it can be hard for screen reading software. Use 'for example' unless space is an issue, such as on social media or on a presentation slide.

Em dashes (—), en dashes (–) and hyphens (-)

- Use hyphens and dashes sparingly and rewrite any sections that include too many.
- Use hyphens in and between words ('long-term goals').
- Don't use floating hyphens ('full and part-time' rather than 'full- and part-time').
- An en dash is a long dash, approximately the length of the letter 'n'. Use en dashes to break up sentences. You can use them as you would a comma, but to give more emphasis. For example: 'Excellent occupational therapy is available in many places throughout the world – but not everywhere.'
- Use en dashes (without spaces) to show a number or range. For example, 'London–Brighton', '30–40' or '9.30–11.00am'.
- We don't use em dashes (long dashes, approximately the length of the letter 'm').
- Use the hyphen key on your keyboard for hyphens.
- For an en dash, you can choose it from the Insert>Symbol menu (special characters>en dash).

Email addresses

- Use lower case for RCOT emails. For example, 'jane.smith@rcot.co.uk' and 'professional.enquiries@rcot.co.uk'.

Forward slashes

- Never put a space either side of a forward slash. For example, 'and/or' not 'and / or'.

Full stops

- We don't include full stops at the end of abbreviations (where the last letter is the actual last letter of the word). For example, 'Dr John Smith' rather than 'Dr. John Smith'.

i.e.

- Avoid using 'i.e.' as it's hard for screen reading software. Use 'such as' instead. The exception is in tables where space might be an issue.

Italics

- We only use italics for the titles of books, journals, reports, newspapers and magazines, films, exhibitions, radio and TV shows, plays and albums.
- We don't use italics for emphasis. Use bold where appropriate.

Its or it's

- 'Its' means 'belonging to it', while 'it's' means 'it is'. For example: 'The organisation shared its results' vs 'It's time to share the results'.

Job titles

- When talking about a specific person, RCOT job titles are capitalised. For example, 'Assistant Director – Professional Practice'.
- Use lower case if you're not referring to a specific person, but to a general role. For example: 'Please ask your manager to approve this.'
- We can include 'RCOT' in the job title to highlight RCOT's involvement or to differentiate from non RCOT participants in a publication, meeting or event. For example, in a member email promoting an event with external speakers we may say: 'Steve Ford, RCOT Chief Executive, will be chairing an international panel of speakers'.

Numbers

- Write numbers one to nine in words – unless you're writing for social media, in which case always use figures. This also applies to 'first, second, third'.
- Write numbers from 10 onwards in figures ('15 awards', 'over 150 attendees').
- The exception to the above is where there's a mixture of numbers and figures within a sentence or paragraph, a document or table, in which case only use figures. For example, '9 out of 10 people' and 'children aged 9–12'. Use words for a vague reference such as 'hundreds of people'.
- Use commas as separators in numbers from 1,000 upwards.
- Don't start a sentence with a numeral: spell it out or rewrite the sentence ('Twelve members of staff...').
- Write out fractions in full, unless attached to whole numbers ('three-quarters' or $\frac{3}{4}$).
- Generally, use decimals rather than fractions, unless simple (for example, 'half').

- Use the symbol ‘%’ rather than ‘per cent’ (two words) and without a space (‘10%’) In more formal reports, you can use ‘per cent’ if appropriate, notably at the beginning of a sentence. For example, ‘Ten per cent of respondents’.
- For measurements and currency don’t use spaces (‘10cm, £100’).
- For high numbers, use ‘million’ and ‘billion’ in full with a space before (‘\$10 million’). Exceptions are on social media, in PowerPoint presentations or tables where space may be limited. In these cases, use ‘£10m’, for example.

Oxford commas

- We avoid using Oxford commas. We’d say, ‘The patient spoke to the nurse, the occupational therapist and the doctor’ not ‘The patient spoke to the nurse, the occupational therapist, and the doctor’.
- Only use Oxford commas when they’re needed for clarity including in complex sentences with multiple uses of ‘and’. The following sentences, for example, mean something different depending on whether you include the final comma or not.

With one comma, this sentence could mean that Tim and Jo are colleagues:
‘I went to a meeting with my RCOT colleagues, Tim and Jo.’

With an Oxford comma, it’s clear that it means colleagues plus Tim and Jo:
‘I went to a meeting with my RCOT colleagues, Tim, and Jo.’

Phone numbers

- The usual format is as below:
020 3141 4600
07961 416345
- If working with an international organisation or audience, add the international dialling code as follows:
+44 (0)20 3141 4600

Referencing

- For referencing, use the following formats for books and journals:

Book

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2019) *Learning and development standards for pre-registration education*. London: RCOT.

Journal article

Maylor ME (2002) The rationale behind pressure-reducing equipment: 2. *British Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 9(9), 344–349.

For more details and examples, see the full RCOT Library referencing guidelines

Signing off

- This will vary depending on the context. But generally, avoid overly formal sign offs, such as 'Yours sincerely' and 'Yours faithfully'. Instead use phrases such as 'Best wishes' or 'With thanks'. Use sentence case.

Spelling

- Check your spelling carefully – spell check doesn't know everything.
- Use UK spelling, not American unless referring to publications or research in American English. Make sure your spell check is set to English (UK) and look out for words ending in:
 - -ise or -ize ('organise' not 'organize')
 - -re or -er ('centre' not 'center')
 - -our not -or ('colour' not 'color')
 - and words with double vowels ('paediatric' not 'pediatric').

Times

- We use am and pm. For example, '9.30am' or '5.30pm'.
- An exception is if we're working with an international organisation, in which case we may have to use the 24-hour clock. For example, 'the meetings are at 09:30 and 14:00' rather than '9.30am and 2pm'. Please note colon for 24-hour clock.
- For a time range, use an en dash without a space. For example, '9.30am–12.30pm'. There's no need to repeat am or pm if both times are before or after midday, such as '9:30–11:30am', and no need to add 'from'. Use '9–11.30am', rather than '9.00–11.30am'.

Quotations

- Use single quotation marks to show a quotation, with double quotation marks for anything quoted within it. For example: 'John said that since working with an occupational therapist he was feeling "much more confident" and would recommend it to others.'
- Use square brackets '[xxx]' when adding in words to a quotation to help it make sense. This makes it obvious which words have been added. For example: 'We had hundreds of entries for the [Skills for Care Accolades 2020] awards.'

Underline

- We don't underline copy as it can be mistaken for a link.

Words to watch

This section includes some commonly used words or phrases to look out for. This is not a definitive list and we'll be reviewing and building on this list to make sure our writing stays relevant and consistent across RCOT.

Caregiver

- One word. Not 'care giver' or 'care-giver'.

COVID/COVID-19

- Not 'Covid' or 'Covid-19'. We refer to the 'COVID pandemic' or 'the pandemic'.

Clinical forums

- While 'clinical fora' is technically correct, we use 'clinical forums' as it's less formal.

Data

- 'Data' is the plural of 'datum' which isn't commonly used. You can use a singular or plural verb after data depending on context ('the data is' or 'the data are') For an academic audience plural may be more appropriate.

Direct Debit

- 'Direct Debit' (as used by banks and other financial institutions) and not 'direct debit'.

Focused

- Use 'focused' which is the more common and accepted spelling in the UK than 'focussed'.

Government

- We work with the governments in each of the four nations, so we need to be mindful of language and style. (See also the Inclusivity section on page 19).
- Use an upper case 'G' when talking about the current (or specific past) administration. When using 'Government' make sure that it is clear which nation or nations are covered. For example, 'The UK Government introduced a new bill.' Or, 'The Welsh Government has announced additional funding.'
- Use a lower case 'g' if talking about the government in general or as an adjective. For example, 'a government announcement' or 'the rules of government'.
- Don't just talk about 'the government' but use the plural 'governments' to make sure we reflect the four nations. For example: 'We're calling on the governments in each UK nation to increase funding for community rehabilitation.'

Healthcare

- One word, no hyphen.

Long Covid

- Not 'long Covid', 'Long COVID' or 'Long-Covid'.

Long-term conditions

- Hyphenate 'long-term' when used as an adjective. (But not when using phrases such as 'in the long term' or 'many of these conditions are long term'.)

Multidisciplinary

- One word, no hyphen.

Nations

- See section on inclusivity – there are words to watch to make sure we are using inclusive language and not causing offence.

NHS trust and health board

- Not 'NHS Trust' unless referring to a specific one, in which case use the full name. For example, 'Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust'.
- In Wales they have 'health boards' not 'NHS trusts'. For example, 'Cardiff and Vale University Health Board' or 'Powys Teaching Health Board'.

Practice vs practise

- 'Practice' is the noun and 'practise' is the verb. For example, 'a thriving occupational therapy practice' vs 'practising occupational therapy for years'. In American English, 'practice' is used for both the noun and verb.

Wellbeing

- One word, no hyphen.

Inclusivity

The section covers the main principles of inclusive language as well as some specific considerations for the four nations. More detailed guidance on inclusivity will follow.

- Understand how people describe themselves and use your language accordingly. If unsure, just ask the person or group of people. That includes asking for their preferred use of pronoun (he/she/they). Don't guess or assume.
- Every language has its own idioms and expressions, but we should avoid using them. They may not mean the same to everyone and some phrases may even cause offence. 'Sold down the river' and 'nitty gritty', for example, have or potentially have their origins in the slave trade.
- Inclusive language considerations across the four nations:
 - Avoid causing offence by referring only to England or the 'capital' unless necessary.
 - Be aware of Welsh language legislation and check when using words such as 'independence' or 'separation' in a Celtic context. For example, never say 'occupational therapists support independence' without using the word 'people'. Instead say, 'occupational therapists help people to be independent'.
 - Avoid using the term 'commissioning' for health and social care services as it's not appropriate in all nations and can have a negative association with privatisation. In Scotland they don't have 'commissioners' in the same way as other nations. Instead, for example, they have service planners and managers.
 - Be mindful of using 'integration' and 'integrated services' as this has a different meaning in Scotland where they have integrated teams for health and social care governance.
 - When talking about national leaders don't refer to 'prime ministers' in general for all nations as some, such as Scotland, have a 'first minister'.
 - Don't talk about flags or use flags to represent Northern Ireland as this can be contentious. Steer away from politics and topics relating to a 'united Ireland' or referring generally to 'Ireland' and the 'Irish'. When talking about people don't say 'the Northern Irish' which can also be contentious but use 'the people of Northern Ireland'.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms wherever possible, particularly if they relate to a technical area of expertise, as they may exclude those who do not have specialised knowledge. If unavoidable in the context of your writing or speaking, include the full word or phrase first or provide a short explanation.
- Understand where to use terms for 'mental health conditions. Terms like 'OCD' and 'ADHD' are descriptors of real mental health conditions. Don't use them as metaphors for everyday behaviours.
- Avoid phrases like 'able-bodied' or 'hard of hearing', when speaking about disability. Also, a person's diversity (race, religion, gender etc) should only be mentioned if it is relevant. Put the person first and always before their descriptor.
- Be aware how and where you use the term 'normal' and the implication that anything that falls outside is 'abnormal'. Terms like 'non-white' could suggest that those who are white are the norm and everyone else is a deviation.
- Use gender neutral words where possible. For example, words like 'chairman' and 'guys' are not gender neutral. Use words like 'chair', 'people' or 'team'.

Resources

You may also find the following resources helpful:

- RCOT brand book
- [Plain English Campaign](#)
- [A-Z of alternative words](#)
- [The Guardian and Observer style guide](#)
- New Hart's Rules
- New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors