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Grammar, punctuation and writing style

In this section:

Active and passive voice

Traditionally the passive voice has been used by scientists and medical professionals on the basis that what happened was considered to be more important than who did it. However, use of the passive has declined, and Cochrane reviews should use the active voice where possible, as it is generally more accessible and a clearer way of defining responsibilities and relationships.

Active voice (preferred)	Passive voice (avoid)
Two authors extracted data.	Data were extracted by two authors.
The editor will provide feedback.	Feedback will be provided by the editor.

Most sentences need to be written in the active voice. In situations where the identity of the subject is not important, and where the focus of the message is paramount, it is appropriate to use a passive construction. For example: 'The vitreous, retina and other internal structures in the eye can be viewed through a specialized microscope.'

Adjectives as nouns

Avoid using adjectives as nouns when they are not used as nouns by a general readership.

A statement such as 'There is growing evidence of the impact of overweight on the incidence of diabetes' could be changed to 'There is growing evidence of the impact of being overweight on the incidence of diabetes'.

And/or

Avoid using 'and/or' as it is not explicit. Try rephrasing the sentence; for example, 'fever and/or headache ...' to 'fever or headache, or both ...'. 'And/or' may be acceptable where rephrasing would make the reading cumbersome; for example, 'fever and/or headache and/or nausea ...'.

Compared to/compared with

There are different views about the usage and specific meanings of 'compared with' and 'compared to', but they may be used interchangeably in Cochrane reviews.

Prefixes

General guidance on the use of prefixes

Prefix	Guidance	Example
anti-	Use a hyphen with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• letters;• names;• words beginning with 'i';• two-word compounds (or more) used as adjectives.	anti-HBs, anti-Bitis-Echis-Naja serum, anti-icteric, anti-gas gangrene serum
co-	A hyphen can be used as an aid to reading if the following word starts with a	co-ordinate, co-author, co-exist, co-intervention

Prefix	Guidance	Example
	vowel. Do not insert a hyphen into well-established words. See examples.	comorbidity, coincidence, coalesce, coercion
inter-	Use a hyphen for compounds that are not used commonly. Otherwise, do not use a hyphen, even if the following word starts with 'r'.	inter-group, international, interrelate
intra-	Use a hyphen if following word starts with 'a'.	intra-abdominal, intra-acinar
meta-	Use a hyphen if following word starts with a vowel.	meta-analysis, metastasis
micro-	Either joined to the word it modifies or uses a hyphen (it does not stand alone)	microbiology, microcirculation, microfilaria, micro-organism (UK spelling), microorganism (US spelling)
mid-	Use a hyphen for all words that have 'mid-' as a prefix, except for common words that are never hyphenated (e.g. midnight).	mid-urethral, mid-term, mid-treatment midnight, midwife
mini-	Either joined to the word it modifies or uses a hyphen (it does not stand alone)	minitracheostomy, mini-mental state examination
multi-	Either joined to the word it modifies or uses a hyphen (it does not stand alone)	multicentre, multi-agency
non-	Hyphenate if 'non' qualifies more than one word. Use of hyphen is optional if 'non' qualifies only one word. Do not use a hyphen with Latin phrases. Note: Latin phrases should be avoided where possible.	non-insulin dependent, non-profit making non-smoker, nonviolent materia non medica, non sequitur
post-	Either joined to the word it modifies or uses a hyphen if the following word starts with 't' (it does not stand alone)	postgraduate, postorbital, postoperative, post-treatment
pre-	A hyphen is normally used when the following word starts with 'e' or 'i'. Established combinations are generally one word (except when the word begins with an 'e' or an 'i'). In other combinations, the hyphen is not necessary but is freely used if the compound is one made for the occasion (might be better to rephrase), or if any peculiarity in its form might prevent its	pre-eclampsia, pre-embryo, pre-exist, pre-exposure, pre-install, pre-industrial prearranged, prenatal, preoccupy, preschool, pre-empt pre-medication, pre-tax, pre-war

Prefix	Guidance	Example
	elements from being instantly recognized.	
re-	Use a hyphen if the following word starts with 'e'. Rephrase when there would be confusion with another word.	re-edit, re-educate, re-establish, re-enter, re-enlist re-cover (cover again) and recover (get better)
self-	All compound words with 'self' as a prefix should be hyphenated.	self-limited self-confidence
semi-	Use a hyphen if the following word starts with 'i'.	semi-independent, semicolon
sub-	Use a hyphen if the following word starts with 'b'.	sub-basal, sub-breed (note: sub-Saharan is one exception)
un-	Words starting with 'un-' are generally one word. Rephrase or use a hyphen when there would be confusion with another word.	unnoticeable, unopened, unpaid, unpick unionized (with a union) and un-ionized (without ions)

Punctuation

General guidance on the use of punctuation

Symbol	Guidance	Example
Brackets/parentheses	UK English: use round brackets throughout for nested brackets. US English: use round brackets followed by square brackets for nested brackets.	UK English: The standardized mean difference was -0.02 (95% confidence interval (CI) -0.13 to 0.08). US English: The standardized mean difference was -0.02 (95% confidence interval [CI] -0.13 to 0.08).
	Square brackets may be used in chemical formulae, mathematical formulae, edits to quotations, or to indicate an error in the original version of quotation.	$pH = -\log_{10} [H^+]$... as Jones said, "there are very few people who are resistant to [morphine]." (where morphine replaces 'this medication' to ensure contextual accuracy) Smith says "students tend to overlook there [sic] health".
Colon	Follow a colon with a lower-case letter unless the following word has to start with an upper-case letter, specifically, a proper noun or an acronym.	Review topic: cancer Review topic: HIV/AIDS Location: London Location: local hospital
Comma	Use of a comma before 'and' and 'or' in	I have read Cochrane Reviews about

Symbol	Guidance	Example
	lists is optional, but be consistent.	malaria, tuberculosis, and vaccines. I have read Cochrane Reviews about malaria, tuberculosis and vaccines.
	Use commas before 'and', 'or', and 'but' in two-phrase sentences (when these words join the two main clauses).	The reviews are written here, but they are available internationally. The reviews are sent here by post, or they are sent here electronically.
Dash	There should be one space either side of a dash.	The reviews are sent here by post – or electronically – and then processed.
Full stop	Use one space (not two) after the full stop. Note: when the publishers format Cochrane reviews, one space is allocated after each full stop. This means if you use two spaces, they will be reduced to one.	
Hyphen	Hyphens are used to link word compounds with two or more words used as adjectives, such as 'six-week interval' and 'four-dose regimen'. Be aware that hyphens can sometimes change the meaning of a word, such as 'unionized' (with a union) and 'un-ionized' (without ions).	There was a six-week interval between doses.
Period	See full stop advice above.	
Quotation marks	Use double quotation marks for quoting dialogue and when quoting text from a written source. No other formatting is required for quotations (do not use italics).	In the study “12 participants experienced adverse effects” (Goodwin 1998).
	Use single quotation marks in all other instances.	The 'standard' approach is to count only major events.

Simple and accessible English

In this section: [General guidance](#) | [Words and expressions to avoid](#) | [Plain language summaries](#) | [Additional resources](#)

General guidance

Cochrane reviews should be written in clear, simple English so that they can be understood by the broad and international readership of Cochrane. Simplicity and clarity are vital to readability. Someone with a basic sense of the topic, who may not necessarily be an expert in the area, should find Cochrane reviews easy to read and understand. Some explanation of terms and concepts is likely to be helpful, and may be essential.

Complex or ambiguous expressions should be avoided or reformulated to promote readability (see examples below). Where a simple English phrase can be used, do not use non-English expressions; for example, use 'conversely', 'inversely', or 'the other way round', rather than 'vice versa'.

Words and expressions to avoid

This table lists selected examples of complex expressions to avoid, and acceptable reformulations

Avoid	Preferred
herein	in
the majority of	most
in the majority of instances	usually
ab initio	from the start
as per	according to
per	by
e.g. Results not reported per intervention group	e.g. Results not reported by intervention group
There has been a close to two-fold increase in the incidence of infection.	The number of infections nearly doubled.
not only do	also
in the vast majority of the trials	in most trials
There was a loss of participants, with the main reason being death of the patient.	There was a loss of participants mainly due to deaths.
There were eight studies that compared different types of antibiotics.	Eight studies compared different types of antibiotics.
The analysis showed there may be a reduction in...	There may be a reduction in...

Plain language summaries

A Cochrane [Plain language summary](#) is a standalone summary of a Cochrane review written in plain English. It briefly describes the key question and findings of the review. It is clearly set out, uses words and sentence structures that are easy to understand and avoids technical terms and jargon. A clear, simple summary written in plain language helps people to understand complex health evidence. Cochrane plain language summaries are freely available on cochrane.org and in the Cochrane Library in a range of languages. The aim is that anyone looking for information about the key points of a Cochrane review can read and understand them. See the [Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions](#) for guidance and the plain language summary template.

Additional resources

The following sections of the Style Manual provide further guidance on ways to promote simple and accessible English:

- [Active and passive voice](#)
- [Adjectives as nouns](#)
- [Tautology](#)
- [Verbs: single or plural](#)

In addition, many other resources provide examples of how to restructure sentences that may help authors promote plain English and improve readability. Examples include the [Plain English Campaign](#) or [Wikipedia's list of plain English words or phrases](#).

Tautology

Avoid tautology, that is "the saying of the same thing twice over in different words" (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998).

Examples of tautology

Tautology	No tautology
We excluded trials of children with a history of headaches in	We excluded trials of children with a history of headaches.

Tautology	No tautology
the past.	
UK pressure ulcer prevalence estimates specifically for community settings have reported rates of 0.77 per 1000 adults in a UK urban area.	Pressure ulcer prevalence estimates specifically for community settings have reported rates of 0.77 per 1000 adults in a UK urban area.
Resource use (when presented as mean values with standard deviation) including measures of resource use, such as number of dressing changes, number of nurse visits, length of hospital stay, need for other interventions.	Resource use (when presented as mean values with standard deviation) including measures such as number of dressing changes, number of nurse visits, length of hospital stay, need for other interventions.
Statistical heterogeneity was described by Chi^2 6.41; P value 0.27; I^2 22%; indicating low statistical heterogeneity.	Statistical heterogeneity was low ($\text{Chi}^2 = 6.41$; $P = 0.27$; $I^2 = 22\%$).

Tense

Write things you plan on doing in the future tense (such as in a protocol for a Cochrane review), and things you have already done in the past tense (such as in a Cochrane review).

In reviews in which few or no trials are included, where not all the methods outlined in the protocol could be used, use the conditional in as simple a form as possible to make it clear what was planned but not executed.

Upper-case letters

In text and headings, use sentence case (first letter upper-case and subsequent letters lower-case, except for proper nouns and abbreviations).

This table lists exceptions, where upper-case letters should be used:

Section	Usage	Further information
Book titles and journal titles (but not book chapter titles or journal article titles)	Write in full using title case (all major words start with an upper-case letter)	References: reference fields
Some bibliographic databases	The preferred format for the following databases is all upper-case letters: MEDLINE, CENTRAL, OLDMEDLINE, and CINAHL (not CINHAL). Some databases use a mixture of lower-case and upper-case letters, for example, Embase (not EMBASE), PsycLIT (not PsychLIT) and PsycINFO (not PsychINFO).	Search methods
Abbreviations	Use upper-case letters to explain the abbreviation or acronym only if required by the abbreviated term, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A MeaSurement Tool to Assess systematic Reviews (AMSTAR) • a QUality Assessment tool for Diagnostic Accuracy Studies (QUADAS) • Template for Intervention Description and Replication (TIDieR) 	Formatting of abbreviations
Pharmaceutical drug names	Pharmaceutical drug brand names, if used, should be written with a capital letter, but international standard drug	Names and common terms: names

	names should not be capitalized.	
Organism names	Names of organisms are given in the form <i>Genus species</i> (e.g. <i>Plasmodium falciparum</i> , <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>). The genus name starts with an upper-case letter, and the species name is all lower case. Both are italicized. Once an organism's name has been stated in full, use the abbreviated form thereafter. For the abbreviated form use the initial letter of the genus followed by the species name (e.g. <i>P falciparum</i> , <i>S aureus</i>).	Names and common terms: names Formatting: character formatting and typography
P value	Use an upper-case 'P' (not italic), and do not add a hyphen between the 'P' and the value	Numbers, statistics and units: statistical and mathematical presentation

Verbs: single or plural

Group nouns can use either a single or plural form of the verb, but the choice should be consistent within each Cochrane review or document; for example, 'the government has ...' or 'the government have ...'.

In Cochrane reviews, 'data' should always be treated as a plural noun, taking a plural verb (e.g. 'the data are ...', not 'the data is ...'). There is some debate about whether data can take the singular form of the verb when it is referring to a body of information rather than the actual numbers. In those cases, consider using a different word, such as 'information' or 'findings'.

'Errata', 'media', 'strata', and 'criteria' are plural nouns and take plural verbs. The singular forms of these words are 'erratum', 'medium', 'stratum', and 'criterion', which take singular verbs.