

## FEEDBACK 31 REPORT

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*This is the first AS FEEDBACK survey to be carried out online, in keeping with the new format for the magazine. Being online, it could ask a lot more questions than on a single printed page, and we were able to pose a total of 35, all issues of variable punctuation, grammar, editorial setting and number style, which are pertinent to the next (7<sup>th</sup>) edition of the Australian Government Style Manual. .*

*The [FEEDBACK 31](#) questionnaire was posted with Australian Style 16:1 (April 2009) on the Macquarie University website. It was great to receive responses from over 210 online readers of AS who took time to do the FEEDBACK 31 survey, and we're very grateful to all of you. This report summarises the most striking results in relation to issues in punctuation and the space settings of certain quantities, where everyday usage seems to diverge from the recommendations of the current (6<sup>th</sup>) edition of the Style Manual, published in 2002. Some of the responses suggest the need to fine-tune and/or the Manual's recommendations, especially in relation to the type of publication (whether the text is an official government document or a publication for a general Australian readership). The Manual is certainly used by many editors outside the circle of government.*

### **1. Quotation marks: single or double quote marks as the default system**

The majority of respondents (63%) endorsed *double quote marks* to set off the quotation in the sentence: *The premier replied: "I will fix the state's transport problems"*.

Asked whether their practice would depend on the type of text, e.g. whether it was fiction or nonfiction, the majority (c. 60%) said no, and for many the issue was simply that double quotes mark serve to indicate quoted speech in any kind of text. For some, single quotes then marked 'highlighted items'. This was the chief rationalisation for using double (and single) quotes – except where one or other was mandated by the employer or a particular style guide.

The majority preference indicated in this 2009 survey is at variance with the *Style Manual's* current recommendation (2002:112) to use single quotes in government publications. The *Style Manual* does recognise that double quotes are widely used in Australia (they are the norm in newspapers and magazines, and well-used in online documents).

### **2. Unspaced em rule/dash or spaced en rule/dash**

The majority of respondents (61%) endorsed the use of *spaced en dashes* for the parenthesis in the sentences like:

*The premier thought – but had only one minute to consider – that it could not be fixed overnight*

Among respondents aged 45–64, the endorsement for *spaced ens* rather than *unspaced ems* ran much higher (74%). The survey respondents' overall preference run counter to the *Style Manual's* recommendation (pp106-7) to use unspaced em dashes, and it does not discuss the use of spaced ens as an alternative. Among the many who endorsed use the spaced en rule, its virtue is that the spacing around each dash puts visual separation between the last word before the parenthetical break and the first word after it. Some respondents commented on the fact that it is "less crowded" and "easier to read". Meanwhile the unspaced em rule seems to make too emphatic a connection (like a giant

hyphen) between the two unrelated words on either side. The unspaced em was still endorsed by some for aesthetic reasons: that it was “tidier” and “looked better”. Yet from both sides of this fence, some respondents indicated that they actually made use of a third option, that of using a pair of *spaced ems* to mark a parenthesis, which is the default in some software packages.

These findings suggest the need to revisit the *Manual's* current recommendation on the use of unspaced ems in parentheses, and to allow for the spaced ems and/or spaced ems which come with some editing and design software packages.

### **3. Types of bullets for second and third level divisions in a list**

Respondents were asked whether for the second level in a bulleted list they would use unfilled bullets (with filled bullets as the first level). This is in keeping with the default system in Microsoft Word. Only 43% said that they would do so, and the rest indicated that they had other practices. Asked about the third level, and whether they would then use square bullets for the third level, only 39% said that they would do so. Some indicated that they would use dashes or spaced hyphens (or diamonds/arrowheads) at this level of the hierarchy. Others responded with the comment that they would resist going to a third level of bullets, and would rather redesign the list.

The current *Style Manual* shows (pp143, 145) the use of dashes for the second level of the hierarchy, but the topic is not discussed.

### **4 Punctuation of individual items in bulleted lists**

In standalone bulleted lists of short items (no more than 2 words long), no punctuation is required according to the current *Style Manual* (2002:144). However some additional punctuation may be desirable in bulleted lists which are integrated with the text and consist of longer items,. Presented with a list of items consisting of 4-8 words, a small majority of respondents (55%) said that they would use a final full stop (i.e. minimal punctuation only), which is in line with the *Manual's* “middle-path” recommendations (2002:142-3), though not a resounding endorsement of it. The argument that such lists need “sentence punctuation” loses something of its force once the items are listed vertically on separate lines.

Only 26% of survey respondents endorsed the use of semicolons to mark off each item in such a list. Semicolons have traditionally been used in lists of items in official and legal documents, but this practice is no longer widely supported. Although the current *Manual* mentions the use of semicolons in lists (p.142), it does not illustrate or use the practice itself. The developing use of bullets as an initial punctuation device for items in lists makes final punctuation less crucial.

**5. Per cent: to be spaced or set solid?** Readers were asked whether they would now set the expression *per cent* as a single word, and a majority of 59% said that they would.... This trend is in line with recent evidence from Australian sources on the internet, where the ratio of the solid to spaced forms is about 2:1 (*Cambridge Guide to Australian English Usage* 2007:608). The trend towards using *percent* is well advanced in both American and British English. It reflects the fact that *percent* functions rather like single unit of measurement, especially when used with an accompanying numeral, rather than a phrase as it was in Latin. In English it is then quite natural to set it solid.

6a ***Morning times of day shown with am: spaced or set solid with numeral?*** A largish majority of respondents (63%) said that they would set *am* solid with the numeral representing the time of day, as in *10am*. This runs counter to the recommendation of the 6<sup>th</sup> ed of the *Style Manual* (2002:172), that there should be a space between the numeral and the abbreviation, as there is between numerals and SI units (p.184). It seems that Australian writers and editors don't necessarily find a parallel between the abbreviations for times of day and the expression of SI quantities.

7. ***Australian dollars sign: should it be A\$ or \$A?*** A majority of respondents (57%) endorsed *A*, in keeping with Reserve Bank's recommendation and that of the *Style Manual* (2002:175). However a significant minority voted for *\$A*, which is often found in financial reporting. A third abbreviation *AUD* is the international (ISO) standard, but little used in local media.

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