

Word Division Guide

A **word division** occurs when a single word is split across two lines, with a hyphen marking the break. This is done when a word won't fit in the space available at the end of a line.

As a proofreader, you will not be responsible for typesetting page proofs, so you will not create the word breaks therein. But you will need to check them. There are no universal guidelines on this, but the following conventions apply in most cases.

1. Word divisions should occur between syllables

Pronunciation is the primary guide to where a word division should fall (i.e. it needs to be in the place where the break reads most fluidly so as not to interrupt the flow of the writing). Most word breaks therefore fall between syllables (e.g. *inci-dent* or *in-cident*, *not inc-ident*).

In the image below, you can see correct and incorrect examples of word divisions.

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In addition, because of the above, single-syllable words are never split across two lines.

2. Use prefixes and suffixes as natural break points

Prefixes and suffixes provide natural break points in a word. As such, adding a word division after a prefix or before a suffix is often the best option. Similarly, if a word already contains a hyphen, this should be used as a natural word break if splitting it across lines.

Mr Bubble's House of Fun, a circus troupe that has toured across Europe, is protesting the anti-clown sentiment that the people of Harrogate have allegedly inspired in the wake of "Clowngate". Their chosen form of pro-test? Performing 24 hours a day outside Town Hall.

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3. The hyphen always goes at the end of the first line

Make sure that the hyphen in a word division is always at the end of the first line, not the beginning of the next one (i.e. before the break, not after it).

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4. Letter numbers (two before, three after)

When adding a word division, the typographer should ensure there are at least *two* letters before the hyphen on the first line and at least *three* letters after the break on the second line.

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5. Don't split proper nouns

Proper nouns and proper adjectives (i.e. words that start with a capital and relate to a unique being or thing, such as a person's name) should not be divided.

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6. Be aware of ambiguity

Look out for potential ambiguities when dividing words, such as when both parts of a word break are words in themselves. For example, for hopefully obvious reasons, you would want to make sure the word *therapist* was divided as *therap-ist*, not *the-rapist*.

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7. Avoid word divisions across pages

Most style guides suggest avoiding word divisions at the end of a page (i.e. word breaks where the second part of the divided word will appear on the next page).

Setting aside the deaths and massive destruction caused across the country, we are left with with two major ques-

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tions: Looking back at the Harrogate Clown Wars, what can we learn from the incident? And how can we prevent similar issues from occurring in the future?

8. Avoid word divisions in headings and subheadings

As a rule, it is best to avoid word breaks in headings and subheadings.

Chapter Two: Understanding the Role of Coulrophobia in the Harrogate Clown Wars

The number of coulrophobia sufferers – the medical term for people with a fear of clowns – had trebled since the start of the century, even before the events now known as the “Harrogate Clown Wars” unfolded. Since this incident, some reports claim that one in four people fear clowns.¹

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Style guides and word division

Different publishers have different rules for how to format word divisions in a typeset text. And while these will usually involve most of the guidelines above, this is not always the case (e.g. the *Chicago Manual of Style* permits word breaks across pages on occasion).

As with most things in proofreading, then, the key rules for word division are:

- Make sure to **check your client's style guide or style sheet** for information on word divisions, then use this to guide your corrections (if it does not mention word divisions, you may want to ask your client if they have any preferences).
- **Keep clarity and pronunciation in mind.** A word division is always problematic if it makes something ambiguous or harder to read, so these should always be flagged.

If you do these, you should be able to proofread page proofs more effectively.